

August 20, 2011

Roanoke City Library

WHERE IDEAS COME FROM (AND WHAT TO DO WITH THEM).

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The big question.

WHERE DO IDEAS COME FROM?

THE SMART*** ANSWERS

- ✘ “There’s this store in downtown Schenectady that sells ideas for a buck apiece...”
 - + Stephen King
- ✘ “Pete Atkins”
 - + Neil Gaiman



THE REAL ANSWER(S)

- ✘ “I make them up. Out of my head.”
 - + Neil Gaiman
- ✘ "The best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas and throw the bad ones away."
 - + Linus Pauling
(Nobel Prize winning chemist)



Coming up with the ideas.

BUT HOW DO YOU GET STARTED?

WRITE ABOUT THINGS THAT....

- ✘ Matter to you.
- ✘ Fascinate you.
- ✘ Bewilder you.
- ✘ Piss you off.
- ✘ Make you laugh (or cry).
- ✘ Entertain you.

SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

- × Your own life
- × People you know
- × Books
- × Movies
- × Art
- × Documentaries
- × History
- × News
- × Magazines
- × Web
- × Conversations
- × Dreams
- × Technology
- × Current events
- × Photographs
- × ETC.

THINGS TO TRY IF YOU GET STUCK

- ✘ Start an idea file or box.
- ✘ Try free writing.
- ✘ Use writing prompts (online and books).
- ✘ Look at photos.
- ✘ Pick random words from a dictionary.
- ✘ Revisit your sources of inspiration
- ✘ Put ideas together.



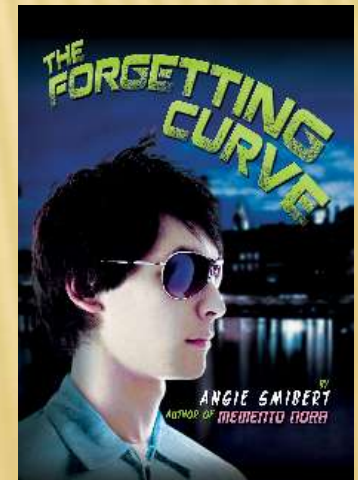
THE IDEA FILE / BOX

- ✗ Notes
 - + Story ideas
 - + Characters
 - + Settings
 - + Research
- ✗ Magazine / web articles
- ✗ Bookmarks (read-it-later Firefox plug-in)
- ✗ Pictures, etc.



MEMENTO NORA & FORGETTING CURVE

- ✘ Main idea—pill that makes you forget—inspired by research, magazine clippings, etc.
- ✘ History—both personal and public—also inspired parts of it.
 - + 9/11—Brother and friends who survived it.
 - + Bipolar stepsister
- ✘ Documentaries—The Corporation, Unconstitutional, Affluenza, etc.
 - + (btw, check out free documentaries online: <http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/>)



EXERCISE 1: IDEAS FROM RANDOM WORDS

- × Thief
- × Save
- × Lycanthrope (werewolf)
- × Frost
- × Voiceless
- × Loki (Norse trickster god)
- × Dalmatian
- × Brother
- × Elven
- × Ring
- × Sword
- × Fort
- × Casablanca
- × Japan
- × Mountain
- × Haunted
- × London
- × Journey
- × Vega (star)
- × Remnant
- × Gold
- × Chopsticks
- × Ocelot
- × Secret
- × Magic
- × Allowance

Pick 3 or more words from the previous list. What images do those words inspire? What story ideas come to mind? Jot down those ideas. Don't edit yourself. This is brainstorming.

For example, you might pick:
Thief, London, Ring

Your story ideas might be:

A pickpocket steals an enchanted fairy ring in Victorian London.

Jewel thief is accused of stealing a priceless ring from Kate Middleton.

Girl finds a ring on the Tube that makes her invisible and she becomes a thief.

1.

2.

3.

DIRECTIONS FOR EXERCISE 1

Pick one the following photos that intrigues you. What's happening in the picture? Does it give you a story idea? If so, jot it down.

For instance, this one makes me think of an order headless assassin monks who turn to stone during the day.



EXERCISE 2: STORY IDEAS FROM PHOTOS



STORY IDEA



STORY IDEA



STORY IDEA



STORY IDEA



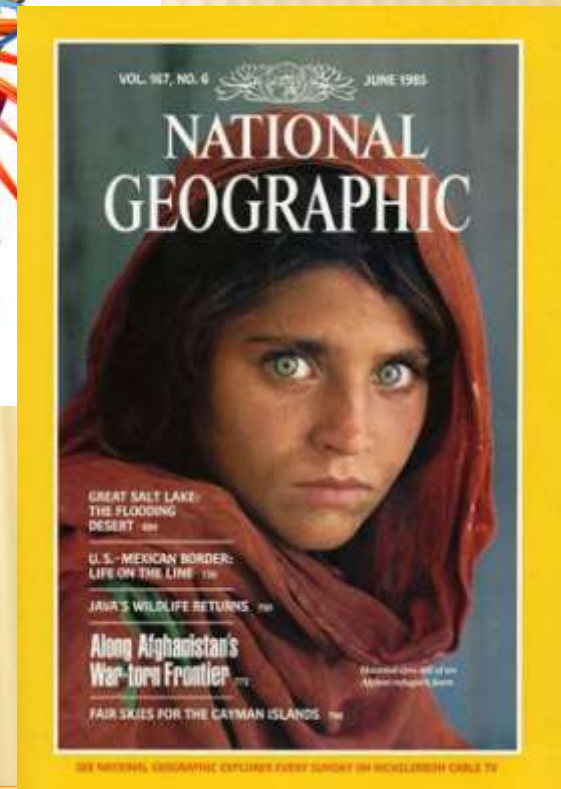
STORY IDEA



STORY IDEA

Grab a magazine, flip through it until something piques your interest. Jot down a story idea.

For instance, an article about facial expressions might give you an idea like this: What if everyone suddenly became permanently expressionless—as if we had a Botox plague?



EXERCISE 3: STORY IDEAS FROM MAGAZINES

Now that you have your idea...

HOW DO YOU MAKE IT INTO A STORY?

WHAT IS A (GOOD) STORY?

- ✘ People you care about doing something interesting in a fascinating place—all of which makes you want to find out what happens next.



SETTING

- ✘ The world your characters live in—and where the story takes place.
- ✘ Examples:
 - + The back alleys of London in 1899.
 - + A farm in modern day Utah.
 - + A thriving Mars colony in 2311.
 - + The Kingdom of Poosh on world ruled by sorcerers.



BACKSTORY

- ✘ What happened before the story starts.
- ✘ History
 - + World
 - + Character
- ✘ World-building
 - + Science fiction: sticks to laws of physics and biology
 - + Fantasy: sticks to your own rules



CHARACTERS

- ✘ Protagonist (aka, the hero/heroine)
 - + Main character (This is his/her story.)
 - + Usually grows or changes by the end.
 - + Doesn't have to be good.
- ✘ Antagonist (aka, the villain)
 - + Doesn't have to be bad.
 - + But if he/she is check out Peter's Evil Overlord List:
<http://www.evilovertlord.com/lists/overlord.html>
 - + Doesn't have to be a person.
- ✘ Sidekicks
- ✘ Other players



CONFLICT

- ✘ Something has to go wrong (or it's a really boring story). **A problem needs to be solved.**
- ✘ Protag has to struggle with something either:
 - + Internal—overcoming fear, growing up, etc.
 - + External—another person, the elements, society.
 - + Both (which makes it more interesting)
- ✘ Example:
 - + Neo (Matrix) struggles against the Agents (external) and his own self doubt (internal).

PLOT

- ✘ Steps your story takes to tell itself:
 - + Beginning:
 - ✘ Introduce girl and world.
 - ✘ Girl steps into bear trap. (Bear trap = conflict = problem)
 - + Middle:
 - ✘ Girl tries everything to get out of said trap.
 - + End:
 - ✘ Girl gets out of trap (and limps home).

PLOT VS. STORY

- ✘ Story isn't the same thing as plot. You could have many different stories with the same basic plot:
 - + A: spoiled rich girl gets lost in the woods after her car breaks down.
 - + B: girl is escaping civilization after a plague turns everyone into zombies.
 - + C: girl is hiking cross country to save the family farm.

This is the hard part. And the fun part.

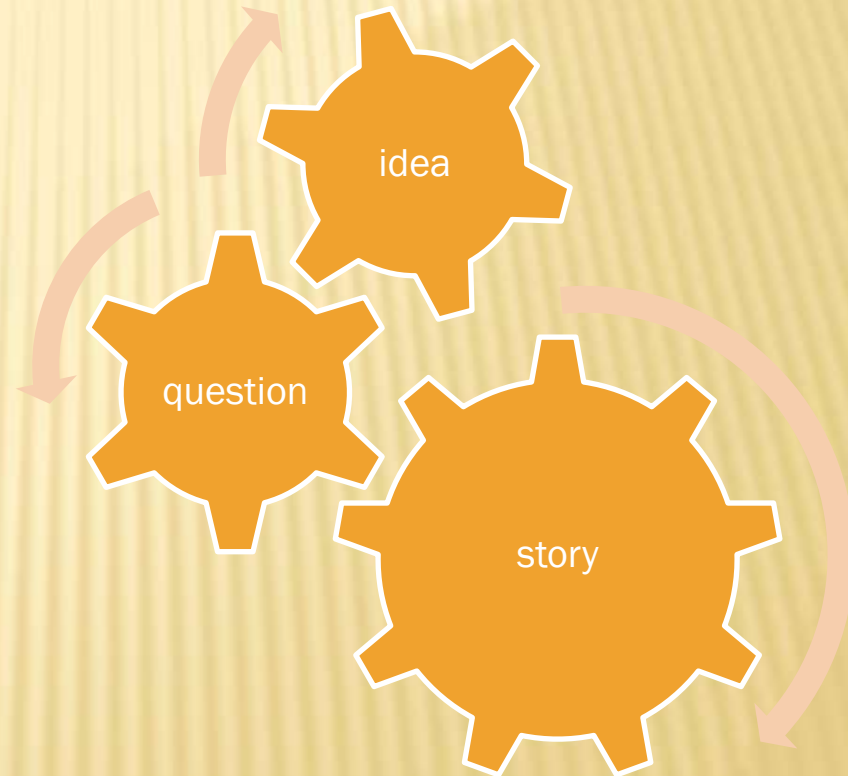
HOW DO YOU DEVELOP YOUR IDEA INTO A GOOD STORY?

Take those story pieces and

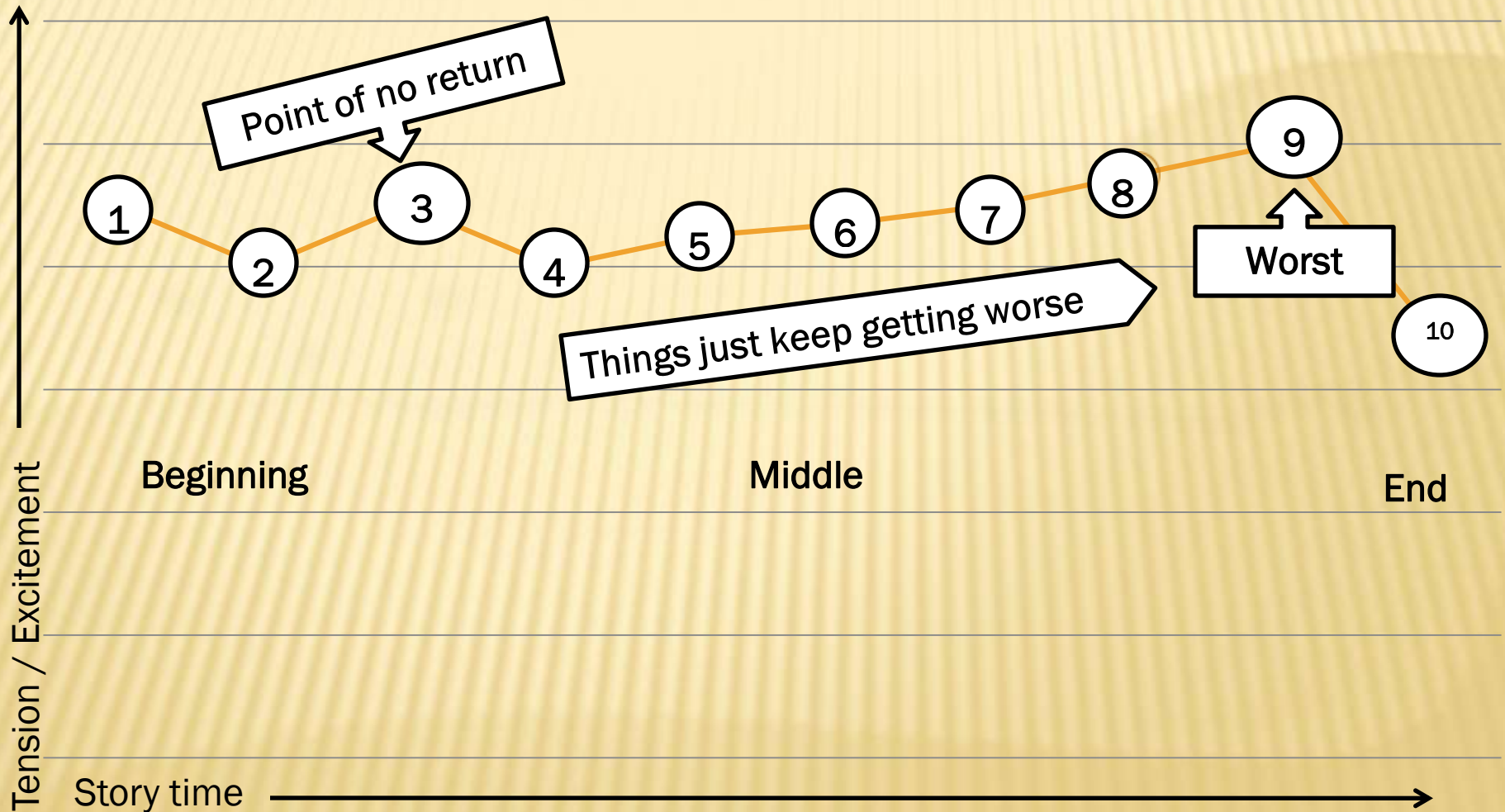
ASK YOURSELF A LOT OF QUESTIONS.

EXERCISE 3: STORY DEVELOPMENT

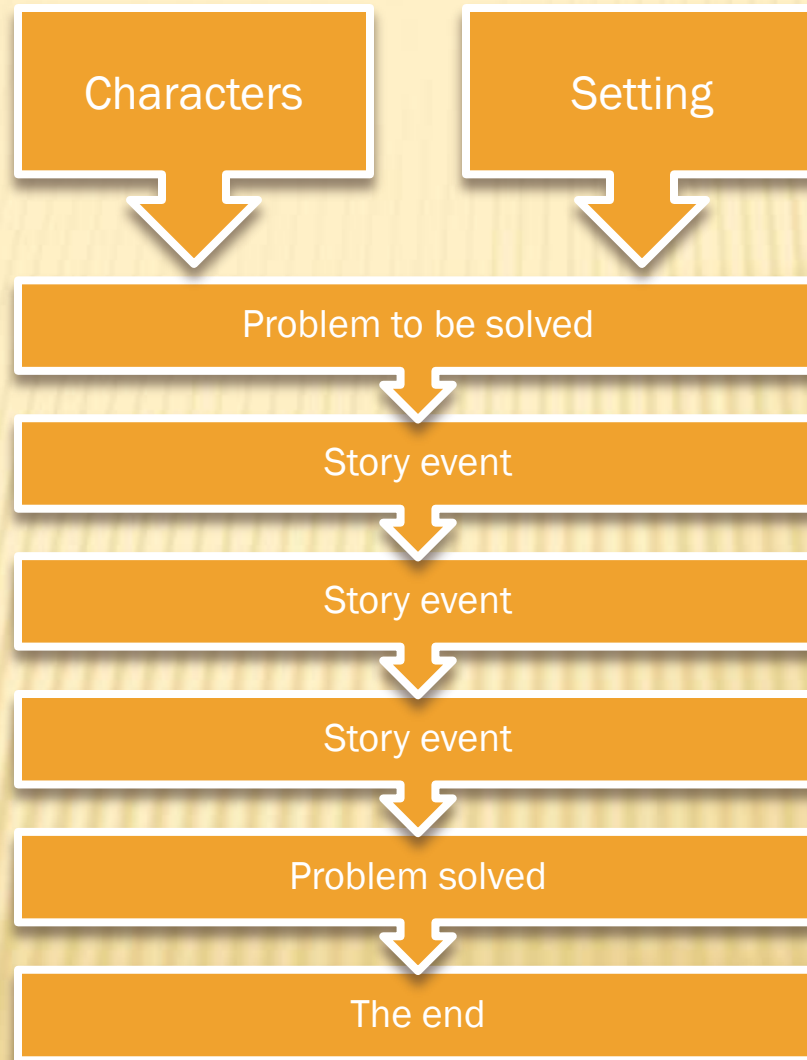
- ✘ Pick one of your ideas from Exercise 1-3
- ✘ Characters
 - + Who's your least likely hero?
 - + What does she want?
 - + Who or what is trying to stop her? Why?
 - + How does she change during the story?
- ✘ Setting
 - + Where and when does your story take place?
 - + How does your setting limit (or empower) your hero?
- ✘ Back story
 - + What happened before this story begins?
 - + What' are your characters' histories?
- ✘ Conflict
 - + What's the "bear trap" your hero faces?
 - + How does she get out? (Remember, don't make it too easy.)
- ✘ Plot
 - + What steps does your story need to take to tell itself?



BONUS: BASIC STORY MODEL



BONUS: STORY MAP



BONUS: A FEW GOOD WRITING BOOKS

- ✘ How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy by Orson Scott Card
- ✘ On Writing by Stephen King
- ✘ Beginnings, Middles, and Ends by Nancy Kress
- ✘ Novel & Short Story Writer's Market
 - + Published yearly by Writer's Digest Books
 - + Lists submission info for books, magazines, and agents.