Novel Writing 101: the first draft

Section: A   **Week:** 1   **Topic:** Story Ideation: Premise, Genre, And Character

Story Ideation Worksheet

Crafting a story should be both an act of love and a purging. Lose yourself in a narrative of your own creation while unapologetically sacrificing parts of yourself to the world for consumption. It is an offering of the things that distinguish you from others: your beliefs, your experiences, your hurt, your love, your dreams, and your fears. By unearthing those hidden, shameful, or cherished parts of yourself, you allow readers to hold up a mirror and discover fragments of themselves in return.

– Angie Caedis

When brainstorm ideas for a story, it's important to take note of each and every idea that comes to mind, no matter how silly, complicated, or "over-done" it might seem. You might have a fleeting idea for a book about a woman who lives under water and is forced to come ashore, but doubt might convince you to scrap the idea for being too simple or already done *(isn't that The Little Mermaid?)*. However, delving a little further can transform the idea from lifeless to thrilling…

What if the woman is living in an underwater city, rich in culture and politics. What if she's banished from her world and must find another way to survive… above land?

What if the woman is a siren who lures sailors to their deaths, until, one day, she tries to ensnare a demigod who captures her instead?

When it comes to brainstorming, every idea can be worthwhile. You simply need to give yourself the chance to dig deeper and uncover a story you're excited to tell.

In the following pages, you'll be asked to reflect, brainstorm, and ideate on three things:

- *Premise*
- *Genre*
- *Character*

As you wander through the possibilities each section brings, take note of which ideas draw you like a magnet. Don't worry about what seems marketable or trendy. This isn't about what you *should* write, but what you *have* to write. What idea sets your soul on fire? What idea demands to be shouted from rooftops? At the end of the day, an idea is only as great as what it becomes. If you're not excited about what you're writing, there's a good chance you'll never see it to the finish line.

Premise: the primary plot or storyline of a literary work, television show, etc.

Your premise is the backbone of your story. It is the ground you will build your foundation on and the concept that will help carry your story forward. It should be easily stated in one sentence, giving the general or overarching storyline of your novel—without spoiling the entire plot. Think of it as an elevator pitch or a teaser. It's the quick and dirty explanation you give to a stranger behind you in line for coffee or when convincing your friend to add yet another book to their TBR.

Examples:

A woman finds herself in the middle of a global invasion with nothing but the clothes on her back and an unwelcome alliance with someone she swore to forget.

After finding a dragon egg in the middle of the forest, a young girl is thrust into a foreign kingdom's thrall of politics and superstition as a century's old prophecy declares her a threat to the one true heir.

Three estranged friends journey across the country to attend a funeral, forced to face their grief amidst old grudges and feelings they fought for too long.

Use the following questions to start brainstorming what kind of story you'd like to write:

What type of stories are you drawn to? What interests you? What holds your curiosity?

Is there an idea that's been stuck in your head for years?

Do you have a fascination with a certain time period, fictitious event, or moral quandary?

Do you believe in happy endings? Is evil born or created? Why are we here?

What beliefs do you hold strong to? What do you wish was different about the world?

What do you fear? What do you wish desperately for?

What keeps you up at night? What makes you tick?

How do you want to be remembered?

Premise: the primary plot or storyline of a literary work, television show, etc.

Please use the below space to brainstorm premise ideas. Be as detailed or brief as you'd like:

(Remember: this is merely an exercise to help you find the singular premise statement that will inform the rest of the course. You don't need to figure it all out now. Use this time to be as creative, out of the box, and self-indulgent as possible…)

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Genre: a category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content

If your premise is the backbone, your genre is the species of your story. It holds you to certain truths while informing the reader what to expect. Genre is one of those things that can take a story idea and turn it on its head. It allows you to think outside of the box while delivering on core elements readers come to know and love.

A comprehensive list of fiction genres:

- Action & Adventure
- Comedy
- Contemporary
- Crime & Mystery
- Dystopian
- Fantasy
- Historical
- Horror
- Literary
- Romance
- Satire
- Science Fiction
- Speculative
- Thriller & Suspense
- Western

Let's take one of our example premises and see how genre can affect the story.

Examples:

Three estranged friends journey across the country to attend a funeral, forced to face their grief amidst old grudges and feelings they fought for too long.

Romance genre twist: *Two of the friends were the reason for the entire group's falling out after their secret relationship shattered both their hearts. Still concealing the truth from the third friend fifteen years later, is a 34-hour road trip long enough to change things?*

Horror genre twist: *In the middle of the road trip to the funeral, the car breaks down amidst a remote stretch of cornfields. Stranded overnight, they'll have to put grievances aside as they're faced with what comes out of the corn.*

Comedy genre twist: *The drive across the country is anything but ordinary as the trio is waylaid by a traveling circus who needs their help to get to California.*

Genre: a category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content

"genre," *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/genre

Pick 2-3 of the premise ideas you brainstormed in the previous section and apply different genre twists to them. Explore as many or as few genres as you'd like.

(Use this exercise to explore any and all twists that certain genres may introduce to potential premises. You don't need to commit to anything right now; you're simply letting your mind run wild with the possibilities.)

Premise Idea #1: _____

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_____ genre twist: _____

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_____ genre twist: _____

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_____ genre twist: _____

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Premise Idea #2: _____

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_____ genre twist: _____

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_____ genre twist: _____

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Premise Idea #3: _____

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_____ genre twist: _____

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_____ genre twist: _____

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Character: a representation of an individual personality in a fictional or dramatic work

Character is crucial to your story. Each individual personality in your story should be just that—a unique perspective that helps readers view your narrative from all sides. Well-written characters help make your story more real. They allow readers to transcend the page and place themselves in someone else's shoes.

Use the following questions to start brainstorming what kind of characters you'd like in your story:

How would the circumstances of the story affect someone's personality? What kind of person would be stuck in this situation?

What has this person been through in life? Has something tragic happened to them? Something lucky?

What kind of people does this person attract? How does their personality, trauma, or circumstances affect their relationships?

Do they have past mistakes they need to make up for? Do they have trauma they're clinging to? Are they the type of person to own up to mistakes? Or would they pretend they've done no wrong?

How does this person treat other people? How might this change throughout the story?

Would you be friends with this person? Why or why not?

Let's take one of our examples of premise + genre to see how different characters can impact a story.

Examples:

Premise: *Three estranged friends journey across the country to attend a funeral, forced to face their grief amidst old grudges and feelings they fought for too long.* **Genre:** *This is a horror novel where their car breaks on the way to the funeral. Stranded overnight, they'll have to put grievances aside as they're faced with what comes out of the cornfield.*

Character Brainstorm #1: *What if one of the three friends is the type who puts on a tough guy act and barrels into danger thinking it's nothing he can't handle? He could immediately head straight into the corn when creepy things begin happening, thinking he can scare off whatever "animal" they've glimpsed. This could force the other two to follow, putting themselves in danger, and ultimately having to save the first guy. This could help repair their fractured relationship by showing character 1 that his friends have his back, no matter what.*

Character Brainstorm #2: *What if two of the friends left their hometown while the other stayed put after high school? That character never forgave their friends for leaving them behind and building new lives away from them, and the two others look down on character 1 for not making something of themselves. Though, as they've faced with this monster, it's character 1's knowledge and ability to win over the locals that ensures they all make it home alive. This could teach the two other characters that life isn't all about money and status, but community.*

Character: a representation of an individual personality in a fictional or dramatic work

Pick 1-2 of the premise + genre combinations you brainstormed in the previous section and determine what kind of characters would help move the story forward. Experiment with different personalities, circumstances, and attributes.

(This is the time to think about what makes people tick, how someone might act in difficult situations, and what flaws might help or hinder a cause. Remember: people are often made memorable by their quirks and faults, and a perfect character can be a boring one.)

Premise + Genre Combo #1:

Premise: _____

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_____ **Genre:** _____

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Character Brainstorm #1: _____

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Character Brainstorm #2: _____

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Premise + Genre Combo #1: (cont'd)

Character Brainstorm #3: _____

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Character Brainstorm #4: _____

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Premise + Genre Combo #2:

Premise: _____

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_____ **Genre:** _____

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Character Brainstorm #1: _____

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Character Brainstorm #2: _____

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Character Brainstorm #3: _____

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Character Brainstorm #4: _____

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Character Brainstorm #5: _____

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Final Ideation: Finalizing Your Story's Path

Now that you've spent some time brainstorming what type of stories interest you, it's time to settle on the singular idea that you'll develop over the next 20 weeks. Don't rush yourself. If you need time to tinker with additional narratives or want to start from scratch, honor that. Work through the previous sections as many times as you need to select an idea you feel excited about. You'll need to nurture this project through the first draft process. Choose wisely—but don't take it *too* seriously. Though writing a novel is hard work, it's also supposed to be fun.

Utilize the below to finalize the premise statement for your story, as well as briefly outlining how genre and character affects and molds that storyline. This will be the basis for everything that takes shape over the next 20 weeks.

Premise: _____

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Genre: _____

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Character: _____

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