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Creative Writing – where to find fresh ideas

By Stephanie Cage

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"I've got to prepare a talk tonight. I think I'll just pop over to the idea store for some fresh concepts."

"I'll do some work on the novel, then. Could you get me a bag of inspiration while you're over there? Oh, on second thoughts, why not stop by Sarah's first? She might have some spare."

What a pity it doesn't work that way. There's no one ready-made source of great ideas. They don't just arrive to order, oven-fresh and neatly packaged, from Ideas-to-go. Yet, at some point, each of us will need to summon up ideas for a talk or a piece of writing, perhaps under pressure of a deadline.

So what can we do to help the process along?

Know how you work best. For some people, ideas bubble up while they're taking a shower or washing the dishes, for others they shape up best on a jog or on the daily drive to work. Some people like to kick ideas around with a few like-minded friends, while others work best alone and in silence. Some find that time pressure results in their best ideas, while for others it induces panic and blankness.

Keep track of what gets your creative juices flowing and take advantage of it.

Relax. Creativity guru Jurgen Wolf (whose site www.brainstormnet.com is a treasure trove of creative ideas) suggests sleeping on the problem whenever possible. Just before going to sleep, and just after waking, are among the most fertile periods for developing new ideas, so take advantage of this by keeping a pen and pad on the bedside table. If you don't have time to sleep on it, put your feet up and a favourite CD on (many people find classical music, especially Bach and Mozart, very effective).

Start from your own experience. Look at your education, your career and your hobbies and interests. Nobody else has had quite the same experiences as you, and other people will be interested in hearing about new topics. Even activities they share, such as parenting, or working life, can still provide interesting material when looked at from your own unique angle, especially if your experiences of them have been amusing or educational.

Look out for issues you feel strongly about. Most people have a few topics that act like a red rag to a bull – if you don't know what yours are, just ask your friends! Or flick through a paper and watch out for news that makes you want to grab your pen and dash off a letter to the editor. Any topic you feel strongly about will make for powerful and sincere writing, and even if you only know a little about the subject, you can always do some research to fill in the gaps.

Stimulate your imagination with something different. I first encountered this technique in a book by Edward de Bono, and it's surprisingly effective for something so simple. Take a word, picture or object at random – from a dictionary, newspaper, or magazine, or even just the first thing that catches your eye when you look up from the page – and find ways to apply it to the problem at hand.

Brainstorm ideas related to your topic. There are few things more demoralising than carefully crafting a talk or article only to discover that it's half the length it should have been and you've run out of material. Start by jotting down any ideas, facts and anecdotes related to the topic, then roughly plan the structure of your talk. Spider diagrams or mind maps are excellent for helping to organise your material (If you haven't used them before, or if you'd like to know more about them, Tony Buzan's *The Mind Map Book* explains in detail how they work).

Fill the gaps. If you're talking about a subject you're already familiar with, you will probably have most of the information you need, although you might still want to check the odd detail in a reference book or with someone else who knows the subject. If you're researching a subject that's newer to you, you may need to visit the library or search the internet for more information. You may also need to seek out stories or quotations to illustrate some of the points you are making, and as well as dictionaries of quotations, there are a number of web sites which can help you do this. For example, The Internet Movie Database is full of film trivia and quotes, and lyricserver.com can help you track down relevant song lyrics.

Get a head start. Now you know you can come up with great ideas at short notice, but why not make life a little easier by getting a head start for next time? Keep these techniques in mind and you'll be amazed how many of the things that happen to you can spark off ideas for your next talk. Keep a notebook and jot them all down, and next time you come to prepare a talk you'll have your own idea store to pick from.

Stephanie Cage is a UK-based author of fiction and poetry, as well as several business reports. Read more of her work at www.stephaniecage.co.uk.

How to Raise Creative Kids

By Susan Stump

"Where did he come up with that?" Kids often amaze us with their imaginative ideas, and we should give ourselves a pat on the back for playing a role in this development. Innovative thinking is essential for success in school and in life, and it's our job as parents to nurture our kids' innate desire to be creative. Inventive play fosters original thinking, an asset when children are confronted with new

situations. By providing activities that use their creativity and imaginations, we are giving our children an important tool to deal with life down the road.

Give them ideas.

Children come up with things to do on their own, but we also need to provide them with new ideas of interesting activities. Think back to what you did as a kid. Did you write a diary, create elaborate puppet shows, or sing and dance for relatives? Share ideas from your own childhood experiences. Offer creative writing ideas like writing an episode for a favorite television show or writing a new ending to a favorite story. Craft projects offer another outlet for inspiring imaginations. Craft kits, especially those from Curiosity Kits and ALEX, offer a wide variety of unusual and fun projects. They've brought us a long way from the sock puppets of our youth. These manufacturers offer ideas and supplies to make such things as scrapbooks, powerballs, soaps, candy, sun catchers, dolls, planes, dinosaurs, jewelry treasures, and lots of decorative items. Kids can gather ideas from the instructions, and then give the projects their own unique touches.

Keep ideas fresh.

Pick up any parenting magazine and you'll find lots of ideas to get those creative juices flowing in your kids. Search the web and check out craft stores. Keep a journal or file for magazine clippings and ideas as you find them. Stockpile so that you'll know how to answer the whiny "I'm bored" call from your kids.

Give them freedom.

Once you've given your kids some suggestions and supplies, step back and see which they choose and where they go with them. This unstructured play time gives kids an opportunity to stretch their creative muscles. Watch as they incorporate your ideas and branch out on their own.

Set an example.

Chances are, if you are a creative person, your child will be too. You display creativity in your everyday activities like when you reason with a disgruntled child, change lyrics to songs, and maybe even do some interpretive dancing to entertain a toddler. Your children see your silliness and it rubs off on them. You surely use creativity to juggle your and your family's schedules. It's a great idea to point out to your kids how you use creativity in your daily life.

As parents, we always try to do the very best for our kids and provide opportunities that will help them mature into intelligent, capable adults. Nurturing their creative spirits helps them along this road. With their well-developed imaginations, maybe they'll turn it into a yellow brick, pink polka-dotted road with sparkles!

Susan Stump is the mother of two children and the owner of ChildCrafter, Co. – Craft Kits and Subscriptions that Inspire a Child's Imagination. This work-at-home-mom offers a great selection of creative craft kits from ALEX, Quincrafts, and Curiosity Kits from her catalog and website

How to Raise Creative Kids
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