THE ORIGINS OF INSPIRATION

- Other art forms: Paintings, photographs, sculptures, films, plays, dance performances, song lyrics
- The world around us: Current events, a news article, a headline
- Our environment: What we notice around us
- Other people: Conversations we overhear or a story someone tells
- Our own mind: Dreams, characters, or bits of dialogue that just pop into our head
- Combining the unexpected
You want your work to be original. But you also want to know what’s out there.

Look at what’s sitting on bookstore shelves (virtually or otherwise). Those manuscripts may have gone to press 18-24 months before.

Familiarize yourself with the market. Know what tropes are popular and what cliches to avoid.

It’s impossible to write to trends, so don’t try. Write the story only you can tell.

READ WIDELY IN YOUR GENRE
READ WIDELY OUTSIDE YOUR GENRE

• Read everything that interests you
• Fiction, nonfiction, news stories, poetry
• You never know when two unlikely ideas will collide to produce inspiration
WRITING THE STORY ONLY YOU CAN TELL

...WITH CREDIT TO JOHN CLAUDE BEMIS, FROM WHOM I FIRST HEARD THIS IDEA!

How can you ensure your story will be unique? Embrace your passions

Make two columns, each of which contains a short list of things you love

Then draw lines between each column, matching up your items

Imagine a story that involves these unlikely pairings

Whatever you come up with will be unique to you...and something you're passionate about

Then pose a "what-if" question
• What if a young boy who was an outcast discovered he was really a wizard, destined to save humanity from evil? *(Harry Potter)*

• What if a teen volunteered in her sister’s stead, fighting other teens to the death in a live, televised battle—and started a revolution in the process? *(Hunger Games)*

• What if a girl discovered that she was really a figment of someone’s imagination, and belonged in an alternate dimension of brutal fairytales? *(The Hazel Wood)*

• What if a trans boy who was determined to prove his gender to his family summoned a ghost who refused to leave? *(Cemetery Boys)*
THEMES... OR, WELCOME TO YOUR SUBCONSCIOUS

• Think about the books you like to read

• Now, think about previous manuscripts you’ve written

• What do they all have in common? Are you drawn to specific themes?

• Write these down and figure out how they play into your current idea

• Every book has a ‘surface story’ (*Katniss Everdeen competes in the Hunger Games*) and an underlying theme (*resistance against an authoritarian regime*)
INTERVIEW YOUR CHARACTERS

What do your main characters want? (GOAL)

Why do they want it? (MOTIVATION)

Why can’t they have it—what’s in the way? (OBSTACLE)

What will happen if they don’t get it? (STAKES)

What do they NEED & how will they change? (FLAW/ARC)
BRIDGING THE GAP

- Consider creating an inspiration board
- Can be physical (bulletin board with pictures pinned to it)
- Can be virtual (i.e., Pinterest aesthetic or inspiration boards)
- Can set Pinterest boards to public or private
- Great source of images for character, setting, etc.
- Can be very helpful with worldbuilding and research

“I WAS TEN YEARS OLD. THE FIRST TIME I CONDEMNED A MAN TO DEATH.”
THE SEVEN SINS #YA #FANTASY
THE PERFECT, BEAUTIFUL, UNTARNISHED IDEA…

You have your idea. It’s perfect, a thing of beauty.

Then you sit down to write … and after a great start, Things Fall Apart.

What do you do?
DON’T PANIC

• Write down everything you love about this story, what drew you to it in the beginning
• This may be two of the ideas you combined from your list of things you love
• It may be tropes you’re drawn to (forbidden love, second-chance relationships)
• It may be themes (resiliency, overcoming grief, vulnerability)
• It may be the setting, a particular character, or something that happens—i.e., a heist
THIS LIST IS THE HEART OF YOUR STORY

• Look at your Passion Project list
• Has your story deviated from it? Have you strayed from incorporating the things you love, the ones that drove you to write the story in the first place?
• Look at what you’ve written. If you’ve strayed from these themes or ideas, how can you find your way back?
YOU FEEL PULLED IN A DIFFERENT DIRECTION. HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU SHOULD GO?

- Revisit your characters’ goals, motivations, obstacles, and stakes
- Will this new direction force you to change these? Does it contradict them?
- Does the new direction allow you to connect more deeply with your story?
- Does it raise the stakes?
- Does it make your story richer and more complex?
STILL NOT SURE? YOU CAN...

01
If you’re a plotter, revisit your outline. See how these new ideas affect each phase of it.

02
Talk over your new ideas with a beta reader or critique partner who’s familiar with your project. What do they think?

03
Go back to your Passion Project list. Will these new ideas allow you to delve more deeply into what drew you to this book—or are they a distraction?
DISTRACTION AND THE SAGGY MIDDLE

• It’s easy to be excited about a story when it’s shiny and new

• Often, writers abandon stories midway through because the shiny newness—the inspiration—has worn off and now the writing is getting HARD

• Persevere! Revisit what excited you about this project to begin with. Look at your goals and stakes.

• Are your characters growing and changing? Are they learning the lesson they need to learn by the end of the book (their arc?)
DOES YOUR BOOK FEEL TOO PREDICTABLE?

If you’re a pantser and you’re stuck, consider…

Turning a trope or cliché on its head

Having your character do something unexpected

Raising the stakes by putting your character in hotter and hotter water

Adding a plot twist that will surprise the reader

If your characters have clear goals, motivations, and stakes, then the reader will be rooting for them.
BE WILLING TO BE UNCERTAIN

Writing is not a linear process

Even if you’re a plotter, you may be questioning yourself every step of the way

If you get stuck, do something different.

Are you a plotter? Throw out your outline.
Do you normally write every morning? Switch to evenings.
Usually write every day? Take a couple days off.
EVERY DAY IS A CHANCE TO START OVER

- Didn’t meet your writing goals yesterday? You’re not a failure!
- We’re living in challenging times. Be kind to yourself.
- Maybe life got busy. Or maybe, while you were taking a break, your brain was busy resolving a crucial plot point.
- The important part is to keep coming back to your story. Remember why you fell in love with it and focus on how your characters need to grow and change.
- Your writing process is as unique as you are.
BE AWARE OF YOUR OWN HABITS

Every writer has projects we get excited about that don’t pan out.

Published writers have projects we adore that never see the light of day.

BUT—make sure that you’re not abandoning every project you start.

If a particular project isn’t for you, don’t force yourself to slog through.

But if you’re putting aside every manuscript half-finished, there may be a larger issue.
Just because an author you adore or a critique partner says that a particular process works for them, that doesn’t mean it will work for you.

Every writer is different. Don’t get discouraged if you try something and it feels like a terrible fit (i.e., waking up early to write; using writing software; trying a specific plotting process).

Be true to your process and the story you want to tell. Don’t let too many voices into your head too soon!
WHAT TO DO WHEN NEW IDEAS COME KNOCKING, MID-PROJECT

WRITE THEM DOWN SOMEWHERE, ALL IN ONE PLACE

THEN PRIORITIZE THEM. IS ONE MORE TIME-SENSITIVE THAN THE OTHER? DO YOU HAVE DEADLINES?

IS ONE TIED INTO CURRENT EVENTS, MAKING IT MORE RELEVANT?

IF NOT, DOES ONE CALL TO YOU MORE STRONGLY THAN THE NEXT?

REVISIT YOUR IDEA LIST AS TIME GOES BY. SOME MAY NOT BE AS EXCITING TO YOU—OR MAY HAVE ENOUGH COMPLEXITY FOR A SHORT STORY, NOT A NOVEL

IN SOME CASES, IT MAY BE IDEAL TO WORK ON MORE THAN ONE STORY AT A TIME
BE KIND TO YOURSELF

- Don’t expect perfection
- If you’ve never written a novel before—or even if you have!—there’s a learning curve
- Allow your first draft to be imperfect
- Write with placeholders if you need to (‘John and Elise arrive at XX, where Margo tells them the deal is off because XX is still in prison’).
- Know what you need to get down on the page to tell the story and what can come later
- Write without publication in mind—write for the joy of it
- Celebrate milestones (first ten pages! Thorny plot twist!)
CONSIDER USING SOFTWARE TO ORGANIZE YOUR THOUGHTS AND RESEARCH

- Some authors prefer using software such as Scrivener to organize their research
- You can keep your research, notes, and writing all in one place
- Excellent for longer-form works such as novels
- Can work on more than one project simultaneously
- Automatically saves your work
- Can write sections in any order and reorganize later (corkboard & outliner)
- Imports and exports to many file formats
TAKING A BREAK IS NOT GIVING UP

If you’re still passionate about your story but you’re stuck, give your brain a mini-vacation


Listen to music, a podcast, or an audiobook

Take a bath or shower. I find I often have my best ideas in the shower!

Talk with a friend—not necessarily about your book.

Read a book that does a good job of handling whatever’s stymied you
BE WILLING TO EXPERIMENT

Is your story in third person? Try rewriting it in first.

Is it in past tense? Try writing it in present.

Is a scene giving you a hard time? Write it from another character’s point of view.
World-building, many main characters, etc. are often set up earlier in the series.

This enables you to focus your inspiration on each individual novel’s arc without having to reinvent the world every time.

Remember, your characters need to change and grow in each book!

Each novel will have an arc; the entire series will have an arc as well.
RESOURCES

SAVE THE CAT WRITES A NOVEL, Jessica Brody

WIRED FOR STORY and STORY GENIUS, Lisa Cron

THE ANATOMY OF STORY, John Truby

One Stop for Writers (Character, Emotion, Setting, etc. Thesaurus)

Emily Colin, www.emilycolin.com
The End.