

Retirement-Writing

Where Do Ideas Come From?

All writing begins with an idea. Everyone knows that. It's just common sense. You sit down to write because there is something you want to say. A concern. An issue. Or just a fact or a tale you want to share with others.

Nonetheless, wanna-be writers still frequently ask, "Where do ideas come from?"

You can call upon your years of experience in a business or profession to write a nonfiction book or articles. It's an ideal way to bridge the transition from career to retirement. Perhaps you'll choose your life-long hobby to create a how-to book. If you're really into creative writing, you may decide to place the protagonist of your novel in the career field you know so well or make him/her a devotee of your favorite hobby.

The genesis of an article or a book may be right within your home. Look and you'll undoubtedly find it. The interaction of siblings, techniques of parenting, a loved one's severe illness.

Perhaps you met a fascinating character, discovered an unusual location or attended a unique event, and want to tell others about it. Hobbies and recreational pastimes are frequent subjects for books or articles. You've enjoyed so many interesting experiences during your lifetime, you now have the time as a retiree to place them into proper perspective and to write about them.

Become a Clipper

As a writer, you must be alert and constantly probing to find the right subject. Oftentimes an article you find in a magazine or newspaper will touch a chord. Whatever

the source the writer must see things others don't, and ask, "Is there a story here? Does it have the potential of becoming a full-length book or a meaningful article?" If it does, jot it down and file it away.

Even if you are not ready to pursue it just then, make sure you can easily return to it when time allows. In the interim, every time something pertinent to that topic pops into your mind or you see an article or news story that relates to your idea, add it to the file.

Clip, Clip, Clip

You've got to catch "Clip Fever." It's an essential part of the writer's life, whether full or part-time. Clip, clip, clip each time you spot something of interest in a magazine or newspaper. File those clippings away, and add to the file whenever you see another relevant clip or whenever a pertinent thought strikes you. Call it a *Potentials File*.

You may never use some of these clips. But when you're ready to tackle the story, you'll have the nucleus of your piece in that file if you've done your clipping faithfully. And that will save you a good deal of research time later.

Know What You Write

Time and again, you've heard the admonition, "Write what you know." You'll find that advice in almost every book on writing or hear it from many instructors. I prefer to tweak it just a bit to "Know what you write."

Stop and think of the difference. "Write what you know" is not a license to write off the top of your head, thinking you know all that there is to know about the topic. Quite the opposite. It means write only when you have become knowledgeable enough.

If the subject is something you know a good deal about to begin with, you're at a distinct advantage. It will help you develop a unique hook (or angle) that someone

unfamiliar with the subject may not discover. That could make the difference between a sale and a rejection slip. Nonetheless, your basic knowledge does not negate the need for additional research to update your understanding of the subject or to expand it.

Rounding Out Your Knowledge

Although starting with a fundamental knowledge of the subject gives you a definite advantage, it certainly is possible to write on a topic with which you are not familiar if you have done adequate research. We'll be discussing research techniques at great length in other articles. For now, let's look at a very simple illustration of what I mean taken from my newest book *The Writer Within You* to be released in August.

Certainly a trout fisherman with years of experience is far better qualified to tell readers how best to tie a *Greased Lightning* than I am. However, none of this precludes me from writing on the subject if I do the research necessary to develop a command of the material that a well thought-out book or article demands.

Facts are extremely important to all writing. They are the essence of a nonfiction piece. But they are essential to a short story or a novel as well. While you can let your imagination run free when crafting fiction, beware. Your story still requires an intimate knowledge of the location in which it is set and the characters that you develop. If readers detect errors of fact in your description or inconsistencies in characterizations that don't ring true, they will lose interest in the piece and lose confidence in you as the author.

Trawling for Ideas

Because it is so important, let's return again to the issue of discovering ideas. Some of you may be unsure exactly what you want to write about, although I suspect

almost any retiree can reach back into his/her big bag of life experiences and easily find myriad ideas. But if your creativity needs a little boost, try one of these.

Writer's Market, the popular directory of periodicals published by Writers Digest Books lists magazines covering well more than 100 topics. Flip through the index for both consumer and trade publications. Once you have determined the subjects that interest you, peruse the listings of each magazine to help you narrow down the broad subject into its various offshoots. That will help you crystallize your own ideas.

Just because *Writer's Market* is a directory of periodicals, don't feel this process is applicable only if you are writing articles. You are trawling for ideas which, once found, can be used in articles, books, essays, poems and more.

Use the Web

Those of you who are computer literate—and I'm sure that anyone reading this material is or shortly will be—can use the Internet to stimulate idea generation. This treasure trove allows you to click on a subject in a search engine and find hundreds, if not thousands, of informative entries.

Newspapers, daily and weekly, are superb sources of story ideas in their news columns. If you're looking for an offbeat idea, you may well find it in the kooky listings that frequently appear in the classified section.

When using the news columns, recognize the difference between daily journalism and creative writing. The harried reporter has little time to put a great deal of "flesh" on the "bones" of a story as he/she rushes to file copy by edition deadline.

If you choose to expand on the story as nonfiction, it is up to you to enrich your work with far greater detail, quotations, the input and perspective of others associated in some way with the story, all of which will come from solid, investigative research.

Those of you who decide to use the news story as the basis for a fictional work, will have to use your creativity and expand the piece greatly, far beyond the bare bones of a news report.

Get the Facts

One last caution as we close this article on idea generation and the research necessary to flesh out the idea. Facts are critical before you sit down to write. Envision this scenario that unfortunately happens far too often.

You're eager to write. Perhaps a bit too eager. You sit down at your computer. You stare at the blank computer screen, and it frowns back at you, chiding you to start typing. To make the grand leap from thought to reality. You can't.

You haven't done your homework. You have the germ of an idea, but without the ammunition to fire off a powerful opening and back it up with solid narrative.

You, my friend, have fallen into the trap known as *Writer's Block*. The dread monster that snares both the experienced author and the wanna-be. I have little tolerance for anyone who falls back upon writer's block as an excuse not to write. It occurs because they approach the computer without adequate preparation.

Starting Up

The toughest part of accomplishing any task is getting started. That's certainly true of writing as well. If you haven't digested enough information to let your writing flow, stop trying to write. Go back and do your homework properly.

If you are adequately prepared and just frightened by the enormity of the task ahead of you, stop hunting for a way to start. Plunge ahead. Simply start writing on the first aspect of the topic that comes to mind. Or you may be more comfortable if you first outline your thoughts on paper.

Get started regardless of the quality of what you turn out. Keep on writing, and before very long, you'll find it all comes together if, in fact, you have done your earlier legwork properly. You can now go back and clean up those initial paragraphs. Even revise your opening totally. Once started, you're on your way. I'm sure you learned this in the positions you held before your retirement. As I frequent tell my students, "If you don't get started, you'll never finish."