



Ideas - Where to Get Them and How to Develop Them

You may already have an idea for a book, perhaps even a work in progress, but let's spend a little time on the subject of getting ideas before we move on to fleshing them out.

Sources of Ideas

My most frequent source of ideas is my own family – my kids do, say and experience things, and I think, “There’s a book in that!” Children’s book authors often get ideas from their kids, or kids they know, as well as from their own childhoods. You can mine for story gold by going through childhood photo albums and journals, looking at mementos, and thinking about childhood friends, toys you loved, or activities you used to engage in. Home movies or scrapbooks are great resources for ideas. Often it takes just one hook – one ticket stub, one photo - to spark an idea for a story.

Other people’s children can provide great material as well - grandkids, cousins, nieces, nephews, students, neighbors. When writing for children, it’s hugely important to spend time with them on a consistent basis, so as to stay current with how they think and talk, and what their interests and concerns are. If you don’t have ready access to kids of the age you are writing for, find a way to connect with them, perhaps by joining a Big Brother/Big Sister program or volunteering to read at a local library or school.

Has this idea been done before?

As you troll for ideas, remember that very few are *truly* unique. Yes, there are hundreds of children’s books about bunnies, ducklings and princesses... but the question is, what distinguishes yours from the others? What makes *your* particular strong-willed protagonist different than Olivia, Trixie, Max or Owen, or

any one of the dozens of other feisty little picture book heroes out there? It's all about your unique perspective, your take on the subject.

Ideas File

I highly recommend keeping an ideas file, folder or notebook, in which you record everything from story ideas to character notes. For instance, if you see a little girl with dozens of colorful barrettes stuck in her hair, you might jot that down as a character detail to remember. You might overhear a terrific opening line, think of a great title, or witness an event that could be the seed of a great story idea. Keep it *all* on file – you never know when you'll use it. (My mother and I actually ended up publishing a revised version of a story we originally wrote together when I was five, so I know about this first hand. Trust me - you *never* know!)

Developing an Idea

OK, let's assume you have the seed of an idea and are ready to develop it further. At the core of every successful children's book is something we call "**the central dramatic question**." This is the question the story raises, or what the book is really *about*.

The central dramatic question can usually best be stated as:

"Will (the hero/protagonist) find, get, solve or achieve _____?"

For example, the central dramatic question at the heart of *Whistle for Willie* is:

"Will Peter ever learn how to whistle?" Or, more specifically, "Will Peter ever be able to whistle for his dog Willie?"

What might the central dramatic question be for the other four books we are studying?

The central dramatic question in *Olivia* is _____.

The central dramatic question in *Where the Wild Things Are* is _____.

The central dramatic question in *Owen* is _____.

The central dramatic question in *Knuffle Bunny* is _____.

What is the central dramatic question at the heart of *your* story idea?

If you don't yet have enough information about your idea, or it isn't fleshed out sufficiently to determine the central dramatic question, you can prompt yourself with other leading questions (you'll notice that many of them are connected to the ones you thought about last week in relationship to the picture books we are studying.)

For instance, **if you have an idea for a character** but don't know what their story is, ask yourself:

- What does s/he *want*?
- What is his or her *problem* that must be solved, or difficulty that must be overcome? (Another way of thinking about this is, what is standing in the way of their getting what they want? What are the *obstacles*?)
- How does s/he *solve or overcome* the problem?
- What does s/he *learn* in the resolving of their problem, or how might s/he *change* or grow by the end?

Now can you see what the central dramatic question might be?

If you have an idea for a subject (such as “being adopted,” “moving to a new home,” or “being different”) but don't yet know who the characters are, or what the story is...

- What do you want to say about your subject? What point or *message* do you want to give kids, or leave them thinking about?
- Who might be the *main character* – someone kids can relate to and connect with – that can help you tell your story, or make that point?
- What *problem* might they have to overcome?
- What would they *need to learn* or achieve over the course of the story in order to illustrate the point you intend to make?

Can you see a central dramatic question emerging now?

Identifying your central dramatic question helps you focus your story, and ensures there will be a compelling plot with a built-in conflict or problem for your character to overcome. It is also a helpful pre-cursor to being able to summarize your story in a concise sentence. This is a powerful exercise when it comes to focusing an idea, but it becomes even more valuable later, when the time comes for pitching, selling and marketing the book.

Cataloging in Publication Information

In the front or back matter of every contemporary children's book is the CIP, which stands for “Cataloging in Publication” information. This is the information that the Library of Congress uses to file and reference the book, and it is a summary of the entire story in one single sentence. This sentence is usually written by someone at the Library of Congress (as opposed to the author of the book).

For example, here are the CIP summaries for some of the books we have been studying:

Knuffle Bunny - A trip to the laundromat leads to a momentous occasion when Trixie, too young to speak words, realizes that something important is missing and struggles to explain the problem to her father.

Olivia - Whether at home getting ready for the day, enjoying the beach, or at bedtime, Olivia is a feisty pig who has too much energy for her own good.

Owen - Owen's parents try to get him to give up his favorite blanket before he starts school, but when their efforts fail, they come up with a solution that makes everyone happy.

(*Whistle for Willie* and *Where the Wild Things Are* predate the implementation of CIP summaries.)

Week 2 Assignments

This week, write a sample CIP sentence for your book:

1. Begin by writing your story idea as a brief paragraph, one to three sentences.
2. Distill and re-phrase that as a central dramatic question.
3. Rewrite it as a single, compelling CIP sentence.

And if you haven't yet identified the central dramatic question for *Olivia*, *Knuffle Bunny*, *Owen*, *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Whistle for Willie*, do that too.