

WHEN YOU HAVE NO IDEAS . . .



**Help! November is a Week Away
and I Have No Idea What to Write About!**

First, repeat after me: It is going to be okay.

Now that we have that out of the way, I want you to consider the following:

What makes you tick?

In other words, what are you passionate about? What drives you to get out of bed each morning and move forward? What do you live for? Once you can answer this question, you can infuse your writing with things that are uniquely yours, the ideas or activities or experiences that make you tick.

What do you want your story to *do* to your readers?

Do you hope to entertain? To educate? To teach a lesson? To scare and horrify? Think about the people who will read your book, and figure out how you want them to react to your story. This will help you determine which genre or type of story you want to tell.

What defines you?

Have you devoted every free moment you have to working for a personal cause or agenda? (Environmentalism, human rights, animal rescue, etc.) If you've dedicated much of your energy to supporting a cause or idea, chances are you will probably want to focus on it in your book, at least in part.

Who are your readers?

When you imagine people reading your book, who are they? How old are they? What do they do in their free time? Why are they reading your book? You may not have your story ironed out yet, but you may know whom you want your audience to be.

The Rocking Chair Rule

I highly recommend the exercise called *The Rocking Chair Rule* in Victoria Lynn Schmidt's *Book in a Month*, page 48 – 49. It's a lovely little exercise, and it may really help you focus your ideas.

(*I used the "Setting and Keeping Goals" section of *Book in a Month* by Victoria Lynn Schmidt, PhD, to help create the above section.)

WHEN YOU STILL HAVE NO IDEAS . . .



**And . . . I STILL Don't Know What to Write!
SOS! HELP! SAVE ME!**

If the exercises on page one didn't help you find your story, do not despair. There is still hope.

Write it Out

You already know that writing is a process of discovery, so now may be a good time to surrender to that process. November is still a week away, so savor the time while you have it!

To **Write it Out**: First, you have to give yourself the time and the space to *just write*. I recommend you first set the mood for writing. Brew your favorite writing beverage, eliminate all distractions, turn on your writing tunes, grab your writing totem, and take a deep breath. This is going to be fun. Then, crawl into your writing zone*, and set a time limit for your writing, say ten to 20 minutes. And then, you just write.

The key is to **keep your pen moving** for the entire time you've set aside for writing. This means writing things like "I have no idea what to write about" if you have no idea what to write about.

This exercise will work best if you focus on the questions on page one before you Write it Out. Keep your mind focused on finding your story, and chances are, as soon as you give yourself **the time and the space to write**, you will find it. You may not discover your story during your first Write it Out session, but if you take time every day this week to focus on these things, and to surrender to the writing process, it will happen. Think on it, and it will come.

*If you have not yet decked out your writing zone, you must do this. Immediately. Stop reading this handout and get thee a writing zone!

Tips for the Desperate

If you have given yourself the time and the space to write several days in a row, you focused on the questions on page one, you've followed every tip and suggestion I've made in all of the prior workshops, and you *still* haven't found your story, here are some things to consider:

- Why the heck are you doing NaNo? What drew you to this activity? Certainly you must have *some* reason for being here. Perhaps your story is buried deep beneath that reason.
- Play **The People-Watching Game** for the next several days. Sit in a crowded space, by yourself or with a friend, and find the most interesting people around you and make up stories about their lives. I survived high school using this game, by the way. It's very entertaining.
- What are your favorite books, movies, stories, or song lyrics? Consider writing an adaptation or retelling of a story that you love.
- Beg, borrow, and steal. When I taught high school, my teacher friends and I joked that we begged, borrowed, and stole everyone's ideas. This was actually true. Talk to your friends; see if they have great story ideas that you can borrow for November. Remember: It's the *execution*, and not the *idea*, that makes a story uniquely yours.

DEVELOP YOUR STORY



Discover Your World

Now that you have an idea for your story, you can start developing it pre-November, if you'd like. Here are some things to consider:

Who's There?

Is your character a Mary-Sue? Find out:
The Universal Mary-Sue Litmus Test

<http://www.springhole.net/writing/marysue.htm>

Answer these ten questions about your characters: (Baty 90)

- How old are they?
- What is their gender?
- What do they do for work?
- Who are their friends, family, and love interests?
- What is their living space like?
- What are their hobbies?
- What were they doing a year ago? Five years ago?
- What are their values and politics?

What Happens?

Are you a Plotter or a Pantser?

Plotters like to plan ahead, to create outlines or guides before November hits so they enter November with a structured idea of how their story moves forward and what happens over the course of the book.

Plot = The movement of your characters through time and over the course of your book. (Baty 94)

Pantsers like to fly by the seat of their pants, to sit down at the computer on November 1st with either a vague idea of their story, or no idea at all, and see what happens.

Your Dos and Don'ts List from Workshop 3: Avoid incorporating things from your lists of things you do and don't like in stories. (You created that list, right? If not, somebody has some homework to do!)

Check out The Snowflake Method of story development:

<http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/art/snowflake.php>

DEVELOP YOUR STORY



Discover Your World

Continued:

Where is Your Story?

One great tip for surviving NaNo is to model your setting on places you know well, or places you really want to visit. This will help you focus on the *story* during NaNo. You can always go back and add details about the *setting* after you have your entire story finished and you've won.

It is unwise to get caught up in the details of your setting during November, because you may be tempted to research setting, and that will derail your daily word count goals and wreak havoc on your writing momentum.

Which Point of View?

Will you write your story in first- or third-person point of view? Read sections of novels that are written in both to figure out which you prefer before you sit down to begin on November 1st.

Still Need Ideas or More Support?

- Remember this: **the details tell the story**. If you have ideas for tiny little details you'd like to include in your book, write them down now and build out from them.
- Need ideas? Try one of the **Seventh Sanctum's generators**: <http://www.seventhsanctum.com/>
- Check out the **OCC library's collection** of books on writing. I've used ideas from *Book in a Month* and *No Plot? No Problem!*, but there are hundreds of books on writing novels out there. We are lucky to have a great collection right here on campus.
- The **NaNoWriMo forums** have several threads on plot development, idea development, writing help, and other things to help you get started with the writing process. Browse the forums for a while.
- You may find your story **when you least expect it**, so be open to ideas every single waking moment of the next week. Carry a small notebook and a pen with you so you can write them down as soon as inspiration strikes!
- The Internet** is your friend. There are so many helpful websites out there for writers. I will make a list of resources available on the RaiderWriMo page, but a little googling on your part may be just what you need to stumble upon your big idea for November.

RESOURCES



For More Information

November is almost here! If you've been keeping up with our workshops, you may have already done some of these things. But here's the master checklist, just for good measure.

- OCC's NaNo Guide: <http://researchguides.oakton.edu/nanowrimo>
- Lori Oster's RaiderWriMo page: <http://www.oakton.edu/user/0/loster/RaiderWriMo.html>
 - I'm keeping an updated calendar of all the local NaNoWriMo events on this page, so check it out and put the November write-in dates in your calendar ASAP!
- Contact:
 - Robin Dillow (rdillow@oakton.edu)
 - Ruth Whitney (rwhitney@oakton.edu)
 - Lori Oster (loster@oakton.edu)

We'll See You Next Week!

Kickoff Celebration/Write-In

Tuesday, November 1st, 11:00AM - 2:00PM

Library Classroom 2418, Des Plaines Campus

Join us as we celebrate the first day of this year's NaNoWriMo! November is always unpredictable when you're a WriMo, so while there's no telling what antics may ensue, we can promise you this: There will be snacks, and there will be writing. Stop on by and see for yourself.

Check out www.chiwrimo.org for all of the other local write-ins as well!