

BRAINSTORMING

Reach For Your Potential

By **Kate Tremills**

We all have that editor or producer in our heads that keeps us from exploring our creative potential. Brainstorming is the time to lose the editor and let the ideas run wild. Think of it as the Olympics of originality for writers. If we can't sprint at this stage, we'll never break away from the same old stories. Use these techniques to lock up your editor and reach for the freshest story in your mind.

CRITICISM

As writers, our work gets criticized on a daily basis. Producers, directors, actors, readers: everyone has an opinion about what's not working with our stories. We all develop strategies to protect our creativity and passion because feedback is just part of the job. Unfortunately, the strategies don't keep that steady flow of criticism from working its way into our heads.

Our personal stream of criticism has many names: the inner critic, the perpetual editor, the internal producer. This critic follows us around 24 hours a day. You can't even dream without the damn thing spouting off. The hardest part

is that the critic seems to undermine us from inside. We veto ideas, locations, characters, and entire eras for an endless supply of reasons.

As valid as all of those reasons may be, limiting our stories will eventually keep us from starting them at all. The brainstorming phase is the most precious part of the process for a writer. This is the time when anything goes. In fact, it's the reason we love our job. Nothing is more exciting than realizing that brand new idea and wondering where it's going to lead you. This is when you fall in love with your characters, create a brave new world, or hold up a mirror for your generation.

LOCK UP THE EDITOR

Our internal editors have their place, but it's not in the brainstorming phase. We've come by those editors honestly and they have a lot of valid things to say. During the brainstorming phase, however, you have to lock it up. In fact, seal it in a soundproof room.

Brainstorming is the creative Olympics for writers. You have to reach for the highest stan-

dard of originality. This is where you get to prove yourself. Throw away every doubt, every worry, and every ill-spirited remark. You can't run if your ankles are shackled. Listening to those thoughts will limit your stories to a two-foot radius instead of the miles they deserve. Don't worry. That voice isn't going anywhere. The moment you open the door, all of those critical thoughts will flood back into your brain cells.

You're the only one who can lock up your editor. This means deciding over and over again not to let that critical voice make a sound. When the thoughts slip out, just set them aside. If you like, you can even write them down for future reference. Just don't let them interfere with your story's possibilities. As often as they come up, set them aside. The more you stop them, the quieter they get. Eventually you'll be able to sit down to a brainstorming session without that annoying voice distracting you.

INSPIRATION

Screenwriters work incredibly hard. If we're not writing,

we're pitching or meeting or reading or searching for the next great way to get our work noticed. This industry is non-stop. You can easily work during every minute of every day.

The trouble with this crazy work ethic (besides the copious amounts of coffee required) is that it keeps us from dedicating any time to ourselves. The fastest track to burnout is to forget to take care of your muse. Creativity needs to be fed. How will you come up with anything fresh if you've been looking at the same scenery for five years? It's easy to get caught up in chasing the dream of getting paid for your work and forgetting the reason you do this in the first place.

Inspiration looks different for every writer. Do whatever gets you excited. Maybe it's as little as people watching at a new café. Think of this as the first step in re-opening your creativity. You're warming up your creative muscles while giving your practical ones a rest. Taking the pressure off for a little while will go a long way in sparking fresh ideas.

Take a minute to create a list of inspiring activities. The possibilities are endless. Walk

through locations that spark ideas for your world. Research the story's era. Read books or listen to music that evokes the emotions you want to explore. Travel to the place where the characters live. Spitball ideas with a trusted friend. Watch movies from the same genre. Hang out in the joints your characters frequent. Flip through fashion magazines. Do whatever gets you excited to jump into the world you're creating.

The most important thing to remember is to have fun. Creativity is fed by throwing away the limitations of our regular lives. The fundamental concept of brainstorming is playing with ideas. So keep the editor locked up, break away from your everyday worries, and let yourself explore like you're seven years old again.

SET THE SCENE

Once you've reawakened your muse, ideas will be sparking everywhere. Unless you've got an incredible memory or are superstitious about touching a keyboard before you begin the first draft, you'll need to put your thoughts on paper (or hard disk).

Before you pick up a pen, take the time to create an environment that's conducive to creating fresh ideas. This means paying attention to even the smallest details. Always write in a different location from where you create your scripts or do e-mail. This keeps the creative process away from your day-to-day reality. The change in scene does your mind good and creates innovative thoughts.

Choose a location where you will be inspired. This may mean writing in a park or sitting in a café with a great atmosphere. The ideas will flow faster and you'll have more fun if you like where you're working. Think about whether you work better with a lot or a little

stimulus. Maybe you need to be able to control the music you're listening to when writing. The more you put into setting up your brainstorming environment, the more your mind will give back.

When you're finally ready to pour your ideas onto the page, put your process first. Write in a place where you won't be interrupted or the interruptions won't intrude on your brainstorming. Only write with friends around if you know they won't interfere. This is your time. If you're like most writers, it took a lot to tear you away from the paying work (or trying to get paid) to do something that feels frivolous. No matter how it feels, this is important work. Protect the time you've set aside. Your story and your sanity will be better for it.

Even your tools can make a difference. If you always create your scripts on a computer, use a pen and paper to brainstorm or vice versa. The physical shift opens up mental possibilities. If you're writing on paper, use a separate book for recording your ideas. This gives your brainstorming a separate space and helps to keep the critical thoughts at bay. You have more freedom to go with the flow of your ideas instead of cutting them up before they've even hit the page.

Some writers like to use tape recorders to preserve their thoughts. This removes you even further from the task of writing and gives you the flexibility to brainstorm anywhere. You can follow your thought process quickly and easily. The only drawback to this technique is that tapes make it more cumbersome to review the ideas you've recorded. You can, however, use this as a supplementary brainstorming tool or as a great way to make quick notes if you're stranded from a piece of paper.

The last thing to think about

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before you get started is to allow yourself as much time as you can. Commit at least five hours a week as dedicated brainstorming time. Just like running or swimming muscles that have been neglected, brainstorming muscles take some training. Dedicating regular time to the process makes it move faster and more easily as you progress.

Try to allow yourself at least an hour for each session. Your mental muscles need time to warm up. The thoughts will flow much faster twenty minutes into the session. Once you hit that groove, the last thing you want is to have to cut off

If writing sentences (no matter how long) is still too close to your working process, try creating a scrapbook for your story. Before you fall victim to fifth grade flashbacks, think about how useful this technique is to a screenwriter. You're creating a visual guide for the locations and the characters in your story. Paste anything in the book that will help you live in your story: photos, maps, fabric, leaves, ransom notes, perfume samples, or whatever lets the story hit you as soon as you open the pages. This can be especially useful if you're writing about a location you've never visited in person.

slipping back into a critical mindset. If you're used to working on a computer, the positive side is that your fingers may be able to keep up with your thoughts. The negative side is the association with the working process.

If you can't tear yourself away from the keyboard, mix up where, when, and how you work. Play music while you type or go to a local café. Brainstorm early in the morning if you only write at night. Just be sure to close your e-mail software and disconnect any network connection that tempts you to talk to other people while you're brainstorm-

When you get back to the basics, you'll also get to remember how intensely creative you are. The more room you give your mind, the farther it will reach. Don't worry about selling it or if the audience will understand. You can solve those problems later in the process. This stage is all about you: what excites you about the story, what you want to say to the world, and how you can give your true voice free rein.

Brainstorming is about falling in love again with words and ideas. Give yourself a chance to remember why you started writing. What made

Amazing and unexpected things come from freeform creation.

the flow to run to a meeting. You may think the thoughts will come back, but don't count on it. Treat your time as though you're panning for gold. You need to let a lot of water and sand pass through your fingers to find the gold. That takes time and dedication. Besides, soon you'll find yourself addicted to the adrenaline rush of fast-flowing ideas.

OPEN THE FLOODGATES

When putting the words down onto the page, give yourself as much leeway as possible. Leave behind grammar, punctuation, and yes, even spelling. The less ammunition you give your internal editor, the better. This means making a lot of room for the pure creative process.

You can let the ideas rip in many ways. When is the last time you wrote in stream of consciousness? Step away from all of the structural rules and just let the words flow. See if your pen can keep up with your mind. This is one of the best ways to turn off the internal editor and let the many ideas you've caged up behind structural bars come flying out.

Pictures bring us into a place quickly and remind us of nuances that might otherwise be lost. Best of all, this book will provoke you to write visually when you are ready for the first draft.

Another possibility is to write a journal from the perspective of each of your major characters. There isn't a better way to get to know the intimate thoughts of your protagonist and antagonist. You get a chance to write words that would never be seen in a screenplay while growing to understand what makes your characters tick. No one will know them better than you. These pages won't be a waste of creative time. After writing multiple pages in the voice of your characters, genuine dialogue will be a breeze. You'll make all of the time back when writing each draft of your screenplay.

If you decide to write on a computer, maybe you need to let yourself write in bullet form. Punch out the thoughts as quickly as you can. You could even put single words in a spreadsheet. Whatever sparks more ideas and keeps you from

ing. The one exception is if you happen to be brainstorming with another person over Internet messaging software.

The common theme to all of these suggestions is playfulness. As screenwriters, we're more limited by (and dependent on) our medium's structure than other writers. Not only do our written words have to conform to a specific format, our stories are limited by the budget of the movie. The more room you can give yourself during the brainstorming process, the less resentful you will feel about how little ends up on the page. You still created your limitation-free story. The movie audience just gets to see the edited version.

FEEL THE LOVE

Letting loose in the brainstorming phase will put you back in touch with how much you love the creative process. In an industry where everything is about the product, appreciating the process is important. Brainstorming is a writer's improvisation. Amazing and unexpected things come from freeform creation.

you want to do this? How did you come up with ideas when you were a child? In other words, what inspired you to create stories? If you've ever been blocked or burnt out, creative brainstorming can snap you out of your rut. Tap back into the original source of your creativity.

The best stories come from playing with numerous ideas before nailing down the ones that feel right. Brainstorming gives us all a chance to be kids again; to step back into a time when our imaginations reigned supreme. Use these techniques as a starting point to create what works best for you. We're all going to have a different approach to brainstorming. Your approach will inspire stories unique to your experience and voice. Best of all, you'll have fun in the process. ■

Kate Tremills is a writer/producer based in Vancouver, B.C., Canada. She works as a writer and editor in many capacities including screenwriter, business writer, columnist, and story editor. She has five feature screenplays and several short scripts to her credit. Kate can be contacted via e-mail at ktremills@telus.net.