

Brainstorming for Story Ideas: Where do I Start?

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One of the biggest obstacles that many beginning screenwriters encounter is “what (and/or whom) do I write about?”

The first place I always suggest to look is in your own backyard—literally. Your next door neighbor, your crazy uncle, that co-worker who just won’t shut up about all of her personal problems—these can all be rich sources for interesting characters, situations, etc.

Of course, one must always be careful writing about close friends or family members, especially since those are the people with whom you’ll want to share in the excitement each time you get published. If the character or situation is “too close to home,” it can sometimes cause resentment or hurt feelings. What YOU think is funny might not be funny to the person who is close to the event in question!

One way to get around this problem is to change names, dates, places, and even gender. For example, let’s say you were at a family reunion and overheard a conversation between two cousins, both women, who are both married and in their late thirties. The situation described was just too intense-hilarious-quirky, etc. for you to resist, so you decide to write about it.

Why not use the basic context of the conversation (never use the exact words, barring a phrase or two that can’t be paraphrased) but make the characters two teenage boys instead? Or move the conversation from the family reunion to an office building in New York City? Or change the time period from present day to the 1920s or (if you are into Sci-Fi) the year 2452?

The point is, change enough of the dialogue, the character traits, or the time or place to make the situation as unrecognizable as possible. You are then putting the “creative” back into the act of creative writing. You are also then creating a unique story that now belongs to you.

All the best writers, from Shakespeare to Hemingway to modern novelists, have used this technique (and some have taken more or less trouble to disguise the original character or situation). As a Christian writer, though, you want to be as ethical as possible, so you don’t want to inadvertently offend anyone or make them upset. And you definitely don’t want to have to hire a lawyer to protect yourself from a lawsuit!