

EPISODE 12

Fiction Series Concept Brainstorming Tips

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Welcome back everyone. I'm really excited you're here. This is the Author Revolution Podcast and I'm your host, Carissa Andrews. This episode is really going to be a lot of fun. When it comes to story creation, nothing ignites my imagination more than thinking about how to create an incredible series. So, today, we're going to be talking all about getting those creative juices flowing and brainstorming ideas for a series of books. Now, before you ever lift a pen or start tapping on the keyboard, you need to slow your horses and take a few moments to ask yourself a couple of questions.

1. What genre are you wanting to write in? This can determine a lot as we progress through our brainstorming session. The best way to do this is to head over to Amazon and take a look at the genre category you want to write in. Look over the charts and see if you can spot a trend in the bestsellers. It works really well to dive down a little bit deeper, too, into sub-genres so you can find a way to really mix things up a bit. You can get tons of inspiration simply by seeing what other authors are writing about. For example, if everyone is writing about shifters in the urban fantasy or paranormal genre, you could find a unique way to bring shifters in, but using a method no one has seen before. Or, perhaps turn it on its head by creating a world of animals and the shifter actually changes into human. By studying what's selling and what other authors are currently doing, you can also get some flashes of insight as to what might be coming as well. Which could help you get a leg up on a trend before it ever becomes one. Speaking of trends...

1. Are you writing to market? If so, this involves some research and legwork on your part before you really sit down to brainstorm your concept. You need to know not only what types of stories are trending, but what the tropes are, what readers are going to expect, and, as we just discussed, how you can make your series concept unique to you. In this step, you really want to think about who your readership is and what they want from you. Now, if you're not writing to market, then anything is fair game.

Once you've done some of this crucial research, you may or may not already have a good idea for your series. If you do, great! You're a step ahead. However, if you're not sure, I want you to sit down with a piece of paper and a pen or pencil. In the center of the page, I want you to write your genre and circle it. For those of you familiar with mind maps, you'll already see where I'm going with this one.

Next, take all of your notes from your research and start writing down single words from the different areas you found, and make them spokes coming off of the genre. For example, going back to that Urban Fantasy/Shifter example, you would have Urban Fantasy in the center and Shifter as an offshoot. Write it to the side of the big Urban Fantasy bubble, circle it, then draw a line between the two. If you realize you want to write about werefoxes for your shifter series, add werefoxes as a new circle off of shifters and draw a line between those two. But don't stop at just one. Write down all of the trends you spotted and flesh out the mind map. Brain dump anything else that comes up as you do this so you can spot the unique ideas you have as you do this. Don't worry, I'll make sure there's an example in today's show notes for you to download, but hopefully you get the idea. If not, I want you to google mind maps and have a look around.

By creating a mind map, you give yourself a visual of all the trends and things you have to choose from when it comes to creating a series. Once you've done this, you're ready to move on to creating a high-level idea for the series. The example of writing a series taking place where the shifters are animals who actually shift into humans is an example of a high-level idea. For those of you who hear this and think, "that's a great idea!" I give you permission to run with that. HA! As cool as that sounds to me, I don't have the time to write it, so hopefully one of you will!

Whatever your high-level concept is, I want you to write it down. Next, I want you to think about the kinds of trouble you could create based off that idea. What trouble could be thrown into the mix. What problems would need to be solved? If you get stuck here, I have a plan for you, too. This actually is inspired by a conversation I was having with my Education Director of the Lakes Area Writers Alliance who's creating a piece on how to find story ideas. She said a good way is to take a look at obituaries and get inspiration by people's lives. Not only would you be honoring those people, in your own way, but they can offer you some invaluable insights into what it means to be alive.

For me, story ideas aren't the problem, it's the actual cohesion when I start writing. I'm not a huge fan of stories that are cookie cut or that follow a formula to the letter. I want to be surprised, while knowing I'm still on a journey with the characters. That means, I strive to make sure each of my books are unique, but tie together. For the Pendomus Chronicles, I knew that the second book in a trilogy is where things often fall flat for me, so I was determined to make sure that didn't happen with book 2. I sat down and researched coming of age trials and brainstormed ways I could put my main character through a ton of crap so I could make her stronger. I also knew that if your ending in the 3rd book sucks, readers are unforgiving. So, I knew I had to make whatever big battle and reveal I had in mind, BIG.

These are still examples of high-level series creation because while I knew where I wanted to go, I didn't dive into my story development, outlining, or any of that. I just knew what I wanted. It was then up to me to make sure I got it there.

For the Windhaven Witches, though, I didn't know it would be a series when I first started writing. It wasn't until I chose to turn it into a series that I started to really think about what that would look like. I knew I wanted to have a creepy house, witches, and a paranormal/supernatural vibe. But that was really it. Then I added in the Academy and a ton of darker mythological beings/stories (most of which won't be discovered until far later in the series.) The way I answered the question of how my story will be unique by changing names of things, like zombies to revenants... I also pull in a lot of elements most people may not know about. It allows me to geek out, while semi-educating at the same time. I love that.

As you sit down to brainstorm your series, I need you to first off, think about how many books you plan to write in. One of the things my mentor Rebecca Hamilton stressed as we got started is that a series has to be able to carry the story through the books.

But... there's a caveat to that.

You need to decide which type of series you're creating. Are you writing a series where each story builds on the other one? Or are you writing a one of title within a series (think Nancy Drew or the Hardy Boys... Goosebumps, etc.) Both of those examples need different things answered when it comes to having the high-level concept carry through.

If you're tying the books together so they build on each other, you need to sit down and think about how many books you can or want to write. If you think you could write the stories in continuum, but they will still be linked, then at least map out the first three or four. Research suggests that four is the critical number that hooks readers and once they get past those first four, you'll have them for your subsequent books, as long as you keep producing quality stories.

Let's use my example of the Windhaven Witches. I knew I wanted to have four books, so I needed to give a high-level idea for each of the four books. Book 1 is all about the discovery of my main character's secret legacy. Book 2 is all about the soul and the difference between right and wrong when you have magical power. Book 3 is all about my main character's haunted past and the discovery of more ghosts living amongst her. Book 4 is about her final evolution and overcoming the curse on her family.

I will mention that I got the majority of these ideas based off of the titles I chose – which I actually did first. So, another brainstorming method can be to pick a title you think is awesome or sit down to deliberately craft ones to market – then develop a story with the framework of your series' high-level idea.

I like to keep all of my series concept ideas in Scrivener, so I can quickly and easily go back to the information I need. If you don't use Scrivener to write, you can always use a Word Doc, or Microsoft OneNote to keep things organized and easy to find. Heck, you could use a paper notebook. Whatever feels right to you. Just make sure that as your series is developed, you have a place to go back to because as your worldbuilding fleshes out, it can be easy to get lost in it. You want to have a reference point you can always go back to.

Well, guys, I hope this helped to give you some good ideas for brainstorming your next series. The next step is to really sit down and outline your series and books so you can make them all a cohesive unit. Stay tuned because I will be talking all about outlines the first week in February.

Until then, I want to remind you that if you liked this episode or the podcast, please leave me a review. Once I have a few, I'll be reading a listener shout-out section where I give your review a special spotlight.

Alright guys, that wraps up our talk on Brainstorming Your Series. With a little luck, it inspired you to start your research process and dig into your genre to see what's trending. You'll be amazed at all of the creative inspiration that will flood at you.

Now, don't forget you can find all of the show notes, clickable links to stuff we talked about today, and reach out to me online by going authorrevolution.org/12.

Next week I want to take a quick beat to talk about author overwhelm. I don't know about you, but I have seasons where I feel this one hard. Let's bring it to the light and give you a few tips and tricks for overcoming it.

Alright, guys. Until next time. Go forth and be awesome.