

Creative Writing Exercise

Finding inspiration Outside the Frame

Want to write something, but have no idea what? Looking for inspiration, but drawing a blank?

The writer staring at a blank page with no idea of what they can write about, let alone how to start writing it, is a common image in films and books. The fruitless search for inspiration for a story, has now become a story!

So, where can you go to for that inspiration?

Many writing exercises give you a picture invite you to come up with something inspired by that picture.

This exercise is a little different. The challenge is to think about what's outside the picture frame and use that for inspiration.



The picture is one of two cars that have collided with each other. Our immediate instinct is to write about the confrontation between the two drivers, or the injury to the person in the first car. Maybe as part of this, we find out where one of those drivers were heading, or what that injury might mean to the person who's suffered it.

But what if we zoom out from this picture? What else do we see?

It's a busy road. There are a lot of other cars. Maybe some of these are also involved in the accident itself, while others are caught in the ever increasing traffic jam behind the two cars. Some may be close enough to see the accident, others will have no idea what has stopped the traffic, or just how many miles ahead of them the blockage is and how long it will take until they get moving again.

And over on the other side of the road, there's another long queue of cars forming, as drivers slow down to look at the incident on the opposite carriageway. When each of those cars get moving again, there'll be a mix of people who've taken a gruesome interest in what they've seen, and people who will be cursing the people that slowed down to look at an accident and are now responsible for them being so late.

So late for what?

There are so many different people and they'll be late for so many different things.

Some will have been eagerly looking forward to reaching their destination, it could have been a holiday or maybe they were on their way to finally meet the person they met on Match.com who might actually look like they did on their photo. Or maybe they were heading for a job interview, or a meeting with a new client. The opportunity to move on from the job they hated, the one that had been holding them back for years, or maybe they had been in two minds about applying.

In another car, there may be the soon to be dad, trying to make it home, because he knew that it would soon be the time to go to the hospital. Or maybe, the trip to the hospital was to see an ill or injured relative. Or maybe they weren't even going to the hospital, but the accident reminds them of a time when they did have to.

And for everyone who was heading to somewhere, there may be someone else heading away from somewhere. Escaping the bad marriage, the abusive relationship, or the place that held so many bad memories as they looked to make a new start.

All of these people, and so many more, start to emerge when we look outside the picture frame.

For some the delay may be a curse, for others it may be a blessing, a relief. Maybe it's a message telling them they should stick where they are, or maybe, yet again, it's life and the Gods of fate ganging up on them and wrecking their chances.

And now let's get a little further outside the frame, and into another picture altogether. It's a picture that has the people they were going to see? Who are they? What's their story?

And go wider still, we maybe have another picture, someone else way outside the original picture frame. For every opportunity a person in a car has missed, is there someone else, who now suddenly gets a chance that would otherwise not have come their way, because it would have been taken by someone else, someone now delayed as a result of a car accident. Is someone else's misfortune their good luck, do they feel guilt about this, does the success feel less rewarding than it should have done, or is it no more than they deserve?

All of these types of stories lurk outside that one picture frame.

The exercise

To start to unlock these stories, go outside that picture frame and think about all the other people and how their lives may be directly or indirectly affected as a result of that accident.

As you do this, remember that no story has ever emerged fully formed. The first part of starting to write a story is exploring your idea and discovering all the different stories that it could contain. Scribble down your thoughts, don't rule anything out, and don't edit yourself as you do it. When you find the situation or character that really grabs your attention, focus in on them and let your imagination lead you where it wants you to go as you start to build that idea into a story.

And have fun doing it!