

# Generating story ideas

*There are great stories everywhere, just waiting to be discovered*

According to “The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Publishing Magazine Articles,” the four best angles for stories are 1) how to save time, 2) how to save money, 3) how to be loved, and 4) how to make money.

That may be true, but it’s ridiculously oversimplistic, too. Because when it comes to feature writing, the varieties of story ideas are endless. As Robert Stein, former editor of Redbook and McCall’s, once observed:

“If you gave a dozen writers identical instructions for an article — to report, let’s say, on the largest maternity hospital in the city — one writer, whose beat is scientific, would come back with a detailed report on new medical techniques for delivery. Another would write about natural childbirth. A third, with a sense of the dramatic, would bring back a narrative of the hospital’s fight to preserve the life of a premature baby. A fourth would string together humorous anecdotes of mothers and fathers who barely got to the hospital on time. A fifth writer might bring back an article on the high costs of maternity care. ... Send a hundred writers, and no two of the resulting articles will be the same. Because no two writers have identical interests, curiosities, enthusiasms or ways of expressing what they see.”

## WHERE TO FIND THOSE GREAT (BUT ELUSIVE) STORY IDEAS

Need good story ideas? Sure-fire, can’t-miss, crowd-pleasing story ideas? Do what every smart feature writer does: Start making a list. Look for ideas everywhere you go, then jot them down in a notebook, in a computer, on napkins and matchbooks — but collect dozens. *Hundreds*. Many of them will never pan out; despite your best efforts, they’ll be too dull, too dumb or too difficult to do.

Organize your ideas by topic (people, places, trends) or by treatment (profiles, photo stories, how-to guides). Mark timely or seasonal ideas on your calendar or compile what’s called a “tickler” file to plan stories months, even years ahead.

The best ideas often pop up unexpectedly, so keep scanning the horizon with your journalistic radar. The best places to look for ideas include:

◆ **Your publication’s archives.** Stay abreast of local people, trends and events, because they contain the seeds of future stories. Read your own publication

(or browse the archives) so you’ll know what’s been reported — and what tales still need to be told.

◆ **Your competitors.** Just because they beat you to an idea doesn’t mean it can’t be updated or upgraded. Look for ways to add *your* spin to *their* stories.

◆ **TV, magazines, newspapers, websites.** Become a voracious reader. Seek out national trends, issues and statistics you can localize for your own readers.

◆ **News releases.** Your newsroom receives a steady stream of news releases and media kits promoting products, services, activities and awards. Many have the potential to become fascinating features.

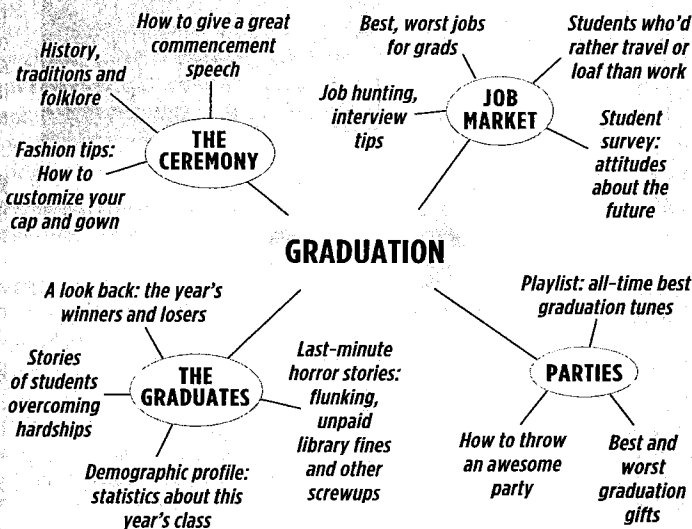
◆ **Reader suggestions.** Yes, readers (and editors) will pester you with idiotic story ideas. But they may occasionally have *terrific* ideas, too. So be ready.

◆ **Brainstorming.** Creativity doesn’t have to be a solo effort. Bouncing ideas around with friends or colleagues often generates solutions you couldn’t produce alone. Try this brainstorming method:

### CREATE AN IDEA MAP

Alone or in a group, write your topic in bold letters in the middle of a big sheet of paper. Then start blurting out any related concepts, phrases and terms you can think of — *who, what, when, where, why*. It may seem chaotic, but don’t judge. Don’t censor. Just brainstorm and jot it all down.

Finished? Now study the results. Identify the strongest themes. Look for “clusters” of ideas. Draw circles or lines to link related words and concepts. On a new sheet of paper, reorganize your key themes into a “map” or “web” like the one at right — then jot down story ideas that explain or illustrate different aspects of those key concepts.



## HOW TO TELL IF YOUR IDEA IS A GOOD ONE

*Here are eight ways to assess a story idea before you try selling it to an editor:*

**Where did your idea come from?** If it came from reporting, it’s probably a stronger idea than one that just popped into your head. Did your reporting suggest a trend? Did it turn up a fascinating person? Did something puzzle or intrigue you?

**Is the idea original?** Have you done a Web search? If something has been written about your idea already, look for opportunities to find a new angle or local perspective on the subject.

**Does the idea surprise you?** If not, how will it surprise your readers? Will they invest the time to read 50 inches of a story if they already know pretty much everything by reading the headline?

**Does the idea have movement to it?** What’s *movement*? It’s change, motion, direction — something that’s new, something people are developing interest in, starting to talk about, or think about, or plan for.

**Is there a STORY there?** Is there a tale in your idea that will draw the reader along — a story that has a beginning, middle and end?

**Is there tension?** Tension comes with conflict, a problem to be overcome, a mystery to be solved. Tension is reading the first paragraph of a story and not knowing what the last paragraph is going to say.

**Is the story true?** There are an awful lot of compelling ideas — about inventions, and social movements, and diseases, and vitamins, and truisms, and philosophies — that turn out not to be true. Before you propose a story, do enough work to make sure you know what you’re talking about. But remember: If something that everyone thinks is true turns out *not* true in some way you can prove, you’ve got a great story.

**Do YOU like the story?** You’re going to be spending a lot of time working on this piece. Shouldn’t it be something you love doing? How can you expect your editors and readers to enjoy a story if you haven’t?

— Excerpted from “Testing Your Ideas: Ten Pre-Proposal Checks” by Amanda Bennett, editor at Bloomberg News