



## HOW TO: GENERATE STORY IDEAS WHEN YOU'RE

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### DRAWING A BLANK

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Writers talk all the time about writer's block, but no one really discusses the bigger issue: idea block. After more than a decade of writing for a living, I sometimes feel like I've completely run out of ideas. Not just story ideas, but all original thoughts.

If you cover a beat, you often find yourself in a recurring cycle of news, with the same issues popping up over and over, and it can feel like you've already done it all. Even freelancers can get bogged down by idea block, because having the opportunity to write about anything and everything means you have to narrow down your ideas. That can be problematic in a 24-hour news cycle when, by the time you put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard), it feels like

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every idea has been taken by someone else.

There are, however, ways to beat the “I have nothing left to say” blues.

**Be willing to recycle ideas.** When I wrote about veterans’ affairs for a popular men’s magazine, we worked with as much as six months of lead time, so every idea I had was covered in another outlet before we had completed a publishing cycle. To work around this problem, I started looking at what was getting my favorite reporters talking. One journalist I loved was [Katie Drummond](#), and I found an old piece she’d written on [military burn pits](#). Her article came out in 2012, and by the time I was writing the issue in 2013, very little had changed – and in this instance, no news was big news. So, I explained the issue to my readers in a way that worked for them. It turned out I was on the right track, too, because a few weeks after my article published, Drummond published her own follow-up on the [burn pits](#). But Drummond’s original story also inspired me to look for other similar issues, and I eventually found a story about Navy veterans suffering from problems caused by contaminated water on their ships, as well as a story about post-traumatic stress. And those only came about because of Drummond’s original idea.

**Look for connections.** Don’t want to recycle? You can still borrow to get to the story by finding the trends. Maybe you’re seeing a lot of stories in the national news about the run-up to the Olympics. Maybe equipment used by the athletes is made in your city, or perhaps you have former Olympic hopefuls living in the area. You can even cover stories that don’t necessarily have a local angle off the bat. With California legalizing recreational marijuana, you can write about what that means for your region’s legalization efforts, or you can dig into non-THC cannabis products, like the newly popular CBD-infused health and beauty products, which are legal in all 50 states. There’s always a way to connect a story to your audience if you dig deep enough.

**Know your audience.** Reporters can feel like something is old news even if the rest of the world thinks it’s breaking news, so it’s crucial to think about who you’re writing for.

“I approach writing the way I approach planning a party,” [Olivier Knox told me](#)

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[last year](#). “I know what kind of food I want to eat, what I want to drink, what kind of music [I want to hear]. I know I need a sign that says where the bathroom is. So while some stories [are driven by] my curiosity, I also try to think of what the reader would want to know.”

You may know everything you’d want to know about a particular topic, especially as a beat writer, but you’re not writing for yourself.

**Know your purpose.** “A story will either get a reader or keep a reader,” says [Joanne Cleaver](#), a freelance business and personal finance writer. In her beat, that means that a story on buying your first home, while it’s not new, will be new to a segment of the population, and could attract new readers to your outlet. Such a story also has the potential to keep an older, more engaged reader active, because they may want to pass that story along to someone else, or use the information you’ve provided them to advise a younger family member or colleague for whom that information is new.

**Be curious.** Knox, Yahoo’s chief Washington correspondent, told me that curiosity is a big part of what drives his feature storytelling. That should be a driver for every reporter. Chances are, of course, that after a while you’re no longer curious about your beat – especially if you’ve been on the same one for years – but you’re definitely curious about something. So, figure out what that is and find a way to apply it to your newswriting.

When I started working on defense stories for *VICE News*, I brought some of my curiosity about my previous profession writing for men’s magazines with me. When I was tasked with writing about the advancements of the intelligence community, instead of writing straight news, I [compared the agencies](#) to old-school men’s pin-up magazines, how that industry evolved and how the internet changed that field completely. It turned out there were surprising similarities between the two industries’ growth, and my approach made the story easy to understand and accessible to readers who might not be familiar with the inner workings of the intelligence community. (And that article has since been used as a teaching resource in at least one college class and one military training class.)

**Ask stupid questions.** Every journalist does their research before starting a

story, so by the time you're interviewing a source, you know as much about the topic as possible. But that means you probably aren't asking the super-simple, very basic questions. "Don't be afraid to ask dumb questions," said Sarah Gray Miller, editor-in-chief for *Modern Farmer*, when [I spoke to her in November](#). Often, she says, you'll get a new angle for your story from asking something as simple as "What does this mean?" or "Why does this matter?" This is especially important for reporters who are covering a niche topic for a general audience. "Some of our stories come from just asking the really obvious question and then doing a deep dive into it," Miller explains.

**Find what *isn't* news.** This may sound counterintuitive, but things that aren't news can be news, if you try. Cleaver, who often covers personal finance matters, says 401ks are never big news, but there are plenty of stories you can tell about them. Off the top of her head, she rattled off more than a half-dozen ideas that journalists could cover in January as people are thinking about their contributions to their plans. "There are a lot of angles [to every story]," Cleaver says.

The important thing to remember is not to get so bogged down by the news – or lack of news – that you lose sight of the story ideas that are all around you.

If you have tricks for beating the block, or if there are other topics you'd like to see covered in the new Alliance how-to series, please reach out. You can email me at [jennifer@newsmediaalliance.org](mailto:jennifer@newsmediaalliance.org) or tweet me at [@editrixjen](https://twitter.com/editrixjen).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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