

# Novel Pre-Writing Workshop: Better Questions Make A Better Book

By Holly Lisle

At the moment, in my meager spare time I'm working on building up a supply of novel ideas, so that I can start doing a bit more on-spec work (work where the writer writes the whole novel before attempting to sell it.) Without getting into why I want to do this odd thing, when it seems to be moving in precisely the opposite direction from the professional career arc, where the objective is to get more and more money for less and less advance work, I'm simply going to offer the series of questions I'm using to knock out some basic ideas that I can then refine.

**If you want to write a novel but you don't know what to write about, give this a try.**

Start out with the following:

**[Genre in which you want to write]** –*[Single sentence or sentence fragment that offers you two or three characters, a catalyst, and a conflict]*

Example:

**Supernatural Romantic Suspense** – *Small-town Midwestern violinist (heroine) meets returning-to-his-roots bad boy (hero) when the stage on which she's performing collapses (catalyst) after she receives an eerie warning not to perform that night (conflict).*

This is not a great story idea. I came up with it for this

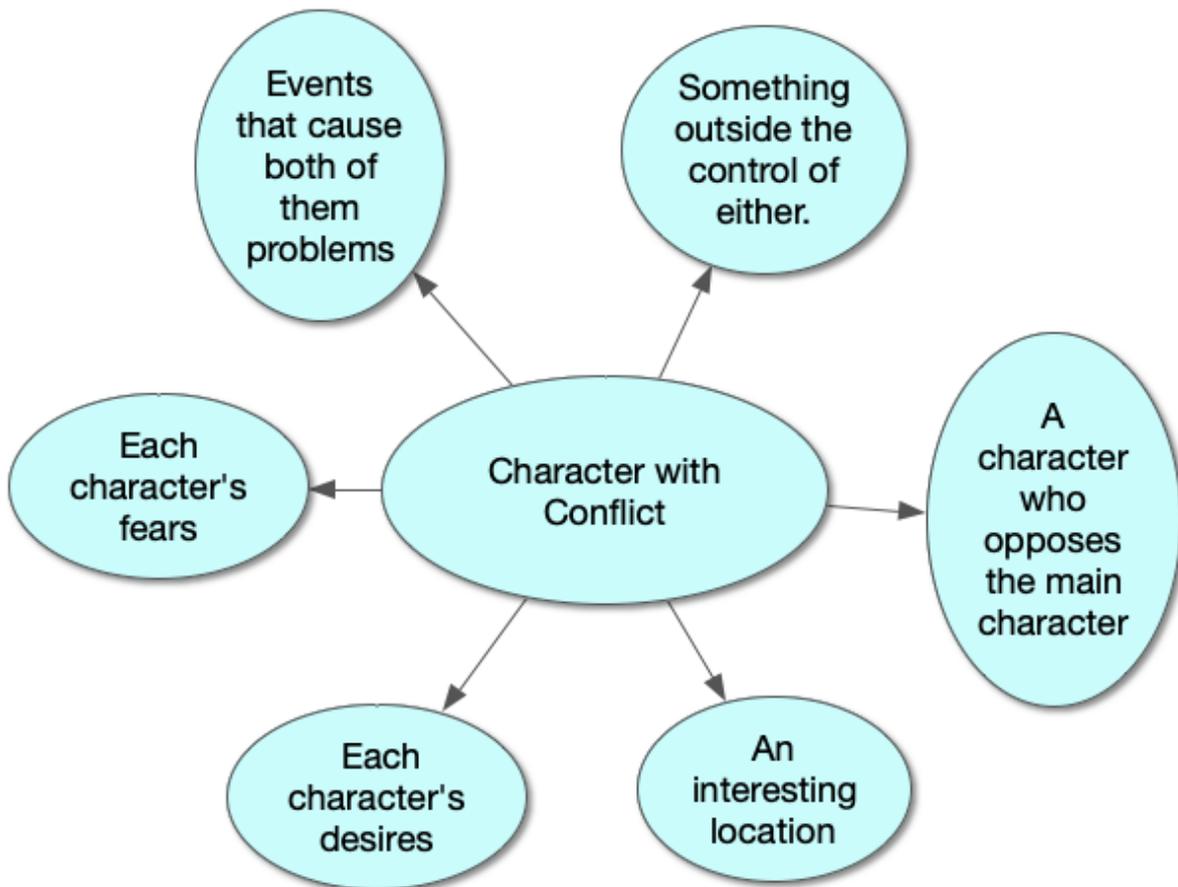
outline, and at the moment it's pretty lame. But that's okay. It's just the a jumping-off point.

Once you have the very vague beginnings of a couple of characters, a quick peek at a catalyst, and a tiny chip knocked out of the conflict, you can really make something out of this. This is, in fact, a micro-example of the process of writing the whole book and revising afterward rather than engaging in endless revisions of the first chapter or two, another technique I recommend for people who genuinely want to write rather than just claim that they're writers.

So once you've picked a tentative genre and thrown a few vague words against the wall, what questions do you ask to make them into a real story? Start with the questions I've listed below, modifying them to suit your genre and single-line idea.

I'm using **hero**, **heroine**, **villain**, and **catalyst** in the questions below, but you aren't bound to those, either by gender or by number. The catalyst can be a person, place, thing, event. The conflict will come if you just let yourself relax about it.

You don't have to do this in outline form, either. In fact, I strongly recommend that you don't. I certainly don't. I cluster these questions, and answer them (while asking myself even more questions).



A demonstration cluster

Paper works fine, Inspiration is a bit niftier.

## The Questions, Then...

### ▪ Who is the hero?

In this case we've already established that that the hero is a one-time bad boy coming home. But what has he been doing in the meantime? Why did he come home now? Why did he come home at all? What's good about him? What's bad about him? Why do you (the writer) want to see him win?

### A. What is the hero's secret?

Everybody has one or two, but in this case, the secret we want is going to be the thing the hero

can't tell the heroine about himself without betraying some other agenda – and the fact that he is evasive on this point is going to cause her (and the reader) to be suspicious of him. So – is he secretly working for a government agency? Digging buried treasure in her back yard? A cop chasing a killer he suspects her of harboring? What?

**B. What does the hero have to lose?**

The fact that he could get killed is a given. What ELSE does he have to lose? Ten million dollars? The serial killer who butchered his sister? A place on the next space shuttle?

**C. Who wants to use the hero, and what about him is worth using?**

Whatever his secret is, that's going to be the link to his vulnerability. But the person or people who want to take advantage of that aren't always going to be the main villain of the story. So who are the other people in the story who want to use or abuse the hero, and what are they after?

**D. Who hates the hero?**

This is going to be your villain, or one of them. What's the story here – what is the conflict between hero and villain that sets them against each other. In most cases, the hero has or is about to get something the villain wants and is willing to do almost anything to get. What is it? Does the hero know about the connection at the beginning, or does he step into a landmine and inherit the villain because of who he is.

**E. You'll have more questions by the time you get to this point. Draw circles, draw arrows, and ask them. Then go on to the next character, and her questions ...**

**• Who is the heroine, and what does she want?**

Some of who she is and what she wants should center around the way we meet her. In this example, what role does the violin play in her life? Why did she get interested in that particular instrument? Anything special about her violin – origin, make, previous owners? What else does she want? Husband, kids, family, friend, place to hide, enormous fame ...? What or who is standing in the way of her getting it?

**A. How is the heroine tied into the catalyst?**

Why did the stage collapse when she was on it? What sort of spooky message did she receive? What does she think about what has happened to bring her to this point? Does she have a theory? How does she react to the catalyst – with fear? Humor? Anger? Daring and courage? Spunk?

**1. What is her connection with the catalyst?**

In this example, is her violin haunted by a previous owner? Is the stage where she played haunted? Is there a non-supernatural explanation for the events? Is it the correct one, or did something truly outside the mundane happen?

**2. Where does the catalyst come from?**

Origin of violin, origin of stage, origin of saboteur, or something else... look at origins and come up with a story?

**3. What does the catalyst want?**

It might be the spirit of the violin, or a ghost attached to the stage itself. It could be a human faking the supernatural. The catalyst might end up being a helper for the hero and heroine, a helper for the villain, or the villain himself. The catalyst can also be a random event, of course, in which this question is probably irrelevant – but ask it anyway and see if something cool pops

up.

**B. What does the heroine fear?**

These can be phobias that you can exploit later, events from the present that are dangerous, current events that seem dangerous, people, places, all sorts of things. They can be valid or invalid.

**C. What does she *need* to fear?**

There should be something that she doesn't fear, but that she should. You need to know what this is, but you don't need to share it with the reader, nor do you need to tip off your heroine.

**D. Who hates her?**

She wants to be loved, of course, but somewhere, somehow, she's made at least one enemy. How did she make the enemy, and who is he? Or she?

**E. Who wants to use her, and what about her makes her worth using?**

What does she have or believe or care about that makes her vulnerable? That makes her attractive to predators? Who does she know who is willing to go after these parts of her life, no matter what the cost?

**F. What does the heroine have to lose?**

Her life, of course. That is always the given, but it isn't enough. What matters to her **more** than her own life? What would she die to save?

**G. As you're writing the questions and their answers, you'll come up with more questions. Ask them, answer them, and follow them through all the questions that **they** generate. Then move to your next question series:**

**▪ Who is the villain?**

What is bad about him? What is good about him? What things does he hold to be true? What things does he believe are false? Where did he first cross paths with

the hero or the heroine, and what does he want from them? How would he define his perfect world?

**A. What does he mean to the heroine (or hero)?**

Do they share a past enmity? A past friendship? A present friendship? How does he see this person who has come to be an obstacle to what he wants – to his view of his own perfect world? Why? What does he **want** to mean to the heroine (or hero, or both)?

**B. What does the villain have to lose?**

He's going to take some big risks to recreate his world according to his template. What will happen to him if he fails? What does he see as worse than death itself? What scares him?

**C. What does the villain have to gain?**

What thing greater than the value of his own life does he seek? Why does he value it so greatly? Where did his desire come from? What might change it?

D. Pursue your villain through more questions, more arrows and circles, more answers that spawn their own questions. When you have finished with him, toss yourself a couple more quick categories, and let your imagination run down the paths it builds for you. Ask yourself ...

**▪ Who lies?**

The hero? The heroine? The villain? Dear friends? Ex-lovers? Someone else? Why, why, why do they lie? You can ALWAYS find something rich and powerful in the answer to this deceptively simple question. And...

**▪ Who dies?**

Anyone? Anyone we love? Anyone we hate? How? When? By whose hand, or by what means?

By the time you've answered these questions, your initial sentence for the book may be nothing but scrap words for the

**Delete** key. But you'll have something far better than a basic idea. You'll have a solid and powerful foundation for your next novel.

If you want a story to come to you, all you have to do is ask.

NOTE: Along with all my articles and small classes, I offer a few big classes. If you've dreamed of writing a novel (or novels) but have never made it to the finish line... or even out of the starting gate, take a look at my *How to Write a Novel* class. It's built to take you from "No Idea where to Start" clear through "I finished! ... and I love what I wrote!"

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