

Need a *Storytelling Creativity Boost*?

Try **Provocations**.

Stuck in a rut with the usual story approaches? Struggling to surprise your readers with something fresh and interesting? Provocation methods are super helpful for escaping our usual ways of thinking.

Here are some ways to provoke your mind and fuel your creativity:

Use what if? questions to push the boundaries of your thinking. What if your character can't speak a known language but must still communicate? What if emotions are banned in your story? What if friends aren't allowed but the main character can't feel lonely? What if people must rebuild their home every night? What if your setting is the main character?

Exaggerate things. Give a lot more or less to your character, storyline, setting or even sensory elements. Maybe your character uses extreme ways of communicating and this shapes their relationships with others. Maybe the way others react to them is extremely over the top or completely lacking. Perhaps a garden is growing wildly out of control, yielding more than the typical volume of produce (or the opposite)—how would this affect your story? Or someone has an acute sense of smell or hearing . . .

Block something a character would typically have. Take away a given. Maybe school is banned. Or there are no sidewalks. Or rules. Or . . . the sky's the limit!

Create opposites. Make some characters complete opposites in appearance, personality, situation or goals. Have a character at complete odds with the setting. Or experiment with how to magnify typical differences we take for granted, such as day and night, hot and cold, short and tall, hard and soft, etc.

These also can help with creating inventive structures and formats. For example:

- ❓ What if using a traditional birth-to-death biography structure is forbidden? How else could you structure that person's story? (what if? and blocking)
- ❓ What if you have only seven words to tell the story? (exaggeration)
- ❓ What if the words and the illustrations tell different stories? (opposites)

Pay attention as a reader, whatever the genre and reading age. Do you see examples of these techniques in play? And as a writer, give provocations a try to strengthen your characters and stories. Our readers will thank us!



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Here are some provocation examples I've played with in my own stories for young readers:

- My young adult novel *Firebreak* (Jolly Fish Press, 2024) explores early warning signs of an elderly genocide. This story idea started with a **what if?** question as I was reading up on aging population trends and issues. I also crafted a friendship trio that relies on the opposite personality traits of each character.
- In my picture book (unpublished so far!) about Rock Paper Scissors, the main characters want to be friends, not compete against each other. This started with me asking a series of **what if?** questions to stimulate new ideas.
- In another picture book (unpublished so far!), a boy desperately wants a cat but is blocked because of his dad's allergies. That's the provocation. He must get creative in trying to get around that obstacle.

Here's how the authors of just a few picture books out in the market used provocation methods to shape their stories:

- The *Pinkalicious* book series is a great example of exaggeration at work. The main character is extremely into pink and her actions go over the top as well.
- *A Fish Out of Water* by Helen Palmer probably began with a what if? question such as, "What if a child doesn't follow directions for feeding his/her pet fish?" and "What if it grows too large?" The main character must then deal with exaggerated circumstances when the fish grows as large as a whale.
- *The Book of Bad Ideas* plays humorously with opposites. Society typically focuses on celebrating and sharing good ideas. Instead, this book assembles a collection of funny bad ideas that both kids and grown-ups can relate to.
- *This is Not a Sleepy Bear Book* is a funny picture book that incorporates opposites and exaggerations as a bear tries to start his hibernation.

On the adult novel front, experimental fiction definitely embraces provocations. And a few other books that come to mind:

- *The Möbius Book* is a hybrid of memoir and fiction that can be read from both ends, with the two narratives meeting in the middle.
- *House of Leaves* is a horror classic that plunges readers into a maze-like reading experience. It includes vertical footnotes, unusual typography, and multiple nested narratives.
- *A New New Me* uses a diary-like structure to unfold the story of the main character, who experiences a different self each day of the week.

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