

Need a Storytelling *Creativity Boost*?

Try **Word Clustering**.

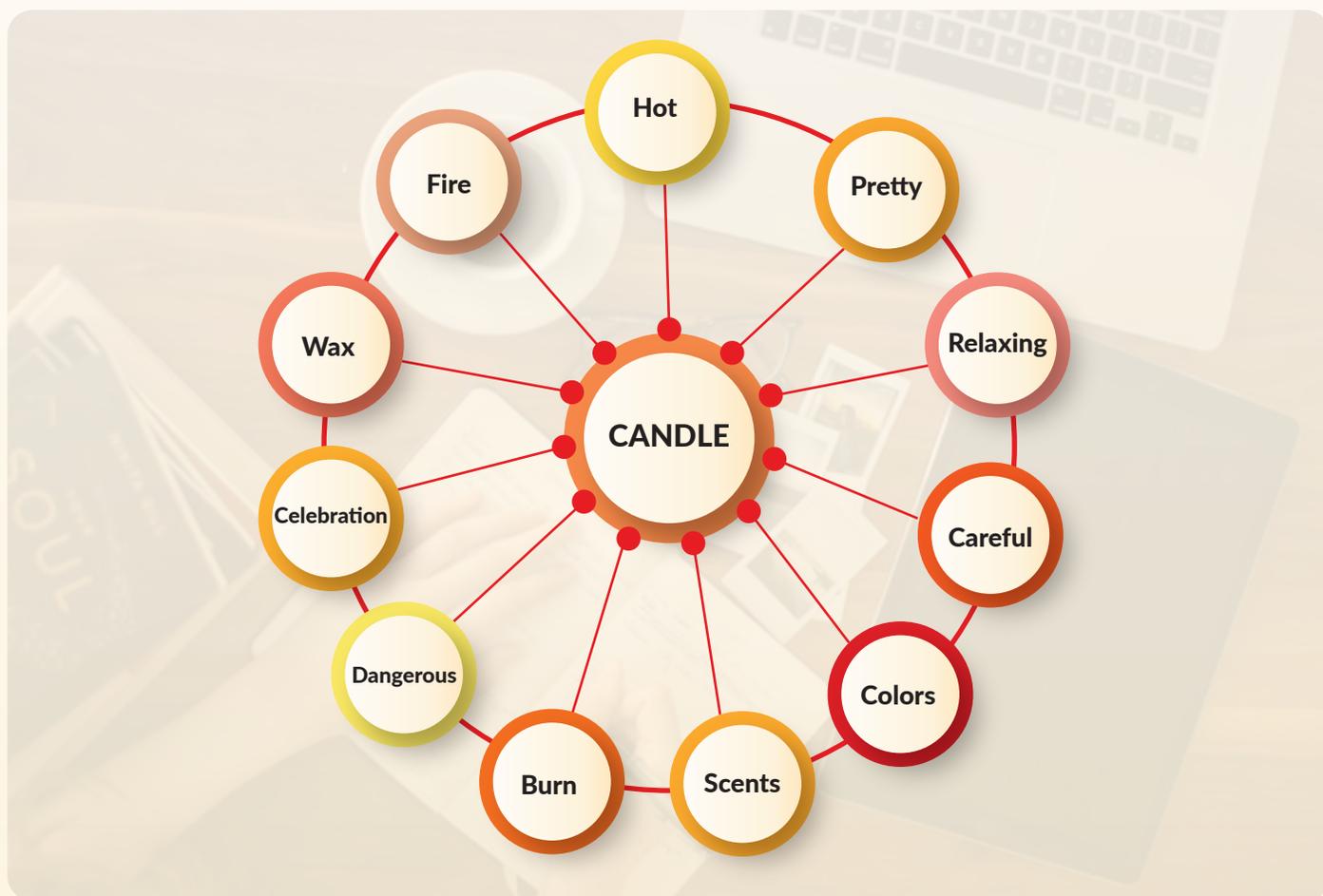
Story ideas can come from many sources. Sometimes we need a way to focus our creative thinking to help with new ideas or developing ideas we have already. Try the simple and fun strategy of word clustering if you need a boost.

- Pick a single word. It can be anything that pops into your head or something you've been thinking about.
- Write the word in the center of a piece of paper and draw a circle around it. (You can also do this with sticky notes.)
- Let your mind go wherever it wants—what other words come up as you think about your word? Write these around the word, drawing lines like spokes on a wheel. There's no right or wrong ideas . . . just anything that pops into your head.
- Do this for a few minutes until you're running out of words.
- Stop and think. Are any memories or story ideas coming to mind?
 - Take some of the words you want to use and start organizing them into a chain of events or ideas for starting to build your story.
 - Ask "*what if . . .?*" and other provocations to explore plot and character ideas.
 - Build out more branches using your chosen words to dig deeper into specifics you can use in a story.
 - Or focus your creativity further by building separate word clusters for a character, a setting, a problem, etc.
- If this isn't taking you to a fruitful place, pick another word and do another round.

My notebooks include lots of chicken-scratched word clusters as I think through particular stories or generate ideas for new books. Look at the examples on the following pages. And have fun with this technique. It is very flexible and can lead to some interesting stories!



Here's how the word clustering technique helped me get jumpstarted with a particular children's story. I started with a random word, "candle."



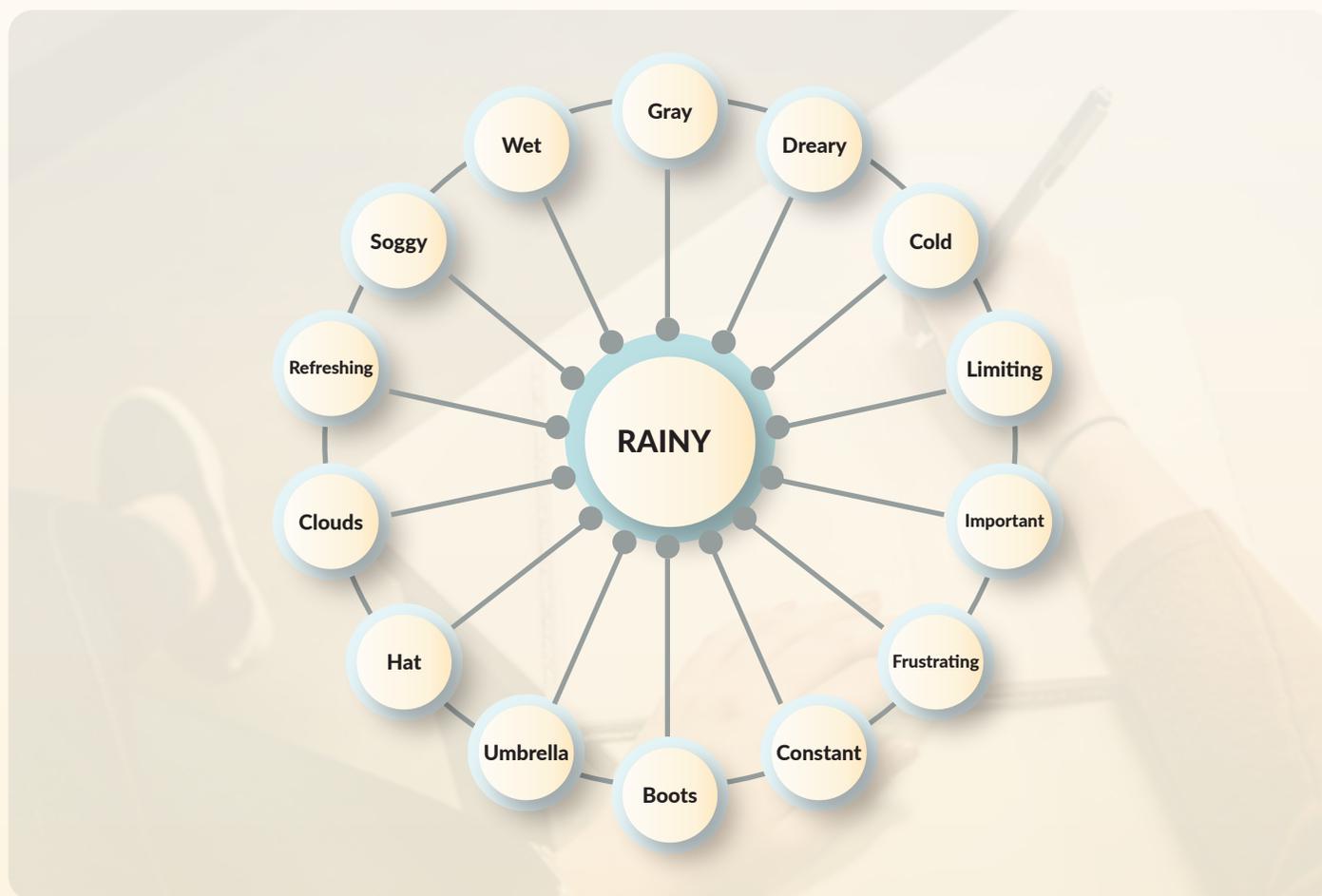
From this, I ask myself questions such as:

- Where are candles usually lit, with children present?
- What kind of conflict and problem can involve a candle and a child?
- What if a character wanted to know what it feels like to touch the flame?
- What if there was a bully involved, pressuring another kid to play with the fire?

I built out sub-branches for words such as celebration and scents to find details I could incorporate into the story.



For another short children's story, I started by exploring a random word, "rainy."



From this, I ask myself questions such as:

- Should my story be about having fun with the rain, or the opposite?
- When does it rain a lot? Where?
- What if it rarely rained and the child went to great lengths to change that?
- What if a child was so sick of the rain that he/she fantasized about making it stop?

I built out sub-branches for words such as clouds and constant to explore details that could bring my story to life.



I've been exploring ways I can write about resilience in a children's story. I don't know where I'll go with this yet, but I've been creating word clusters when I have a few minutes to help my brain wander.



From this, I'm asking myself questions such as:

- What are examples of resilience in nature, animals, humans, architecture, engineering, textiles.
- What's most surprising or unusual?
- Do I want this to be a nonfiction concept book or narrative fiction?

I also will pick some of these words and build sub-branches for deeper exploration before potential stories will start to take shape.

