

Need a Creativity Boost? Try Provocations.

by
Jennifer Phillips

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 his/her relationships with others. Maybe the way others react to him/her 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 be 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.

Look at the examples on the second page, think about your own writing and explore how these techniques are used in published works you enjoy.

Definitely give provocations a try to strengthen your characters and stories. Your readers will thank you!

Here are some provocation examples from my own stories in development:

- In my young adult story called *Firebreak* about an elderly genocide unfolding, I've crafted a friendship trio that relies on the opposite personality traits of each character.
- In my picture book draft called *Scissors, Rock, Paper*, 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 my picture book called *How to Keep Dad and Get a Cat*, Jasper desperately wants a cat but is blocked because of his dad's allergies. He must get creative in trying to get around that obstacle.
- In my picture book called *The Weather Wish*, the main character must deal with the unintended consequences of being able to change the weather through her thoughts. This resulted from her own *what if?* question because she was sick of the rain.
- In my *Knitting Needles Now!* picture book, I've exaggerated the main character to the extreme in her personality and actions as she yarn bombs her town.
- In *Sounds of Friendship*, the main character, Porcupine, struggles with the extreme ways everyone reacts to him because of his quills.
- In my middle grade novel, *The Peculiar Mechanics of Soaring*, the main character is at odds with her setting and also must cope with getting blocked from things the other kids take for granted.

Here's how the authors of 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 it grows too large?" And the main character must 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.