

The Complete Guide to Finding Ideas

So You Want to Be a Journalist · By Simon Townsend · 9 min read

4-page complete guide to ideas

By SIMON TOWNSEND

You are entitled to take great pride in having good ideas for articles.

But I'm sorry to tell you that ideas are worthless. Ideas have no value at all. In fact having a great idea can be dangerous because you might sit on it for months thinking "WOW, I've got this great idea and when I can find time to research it, do interviews for it and write it, then wow, every editor in the land will want it."

But you can't sell ideas. No publication publishes ideas. They publish completed articles. So until you have done the work and turned a "precious idea" into an article, you have nothing - absolutely NOTHING. No matter what someone at the publication says to you about how "fabulous" your idea is, until you've written and submitted it, that idea remains worth nothing.

I urge you to drop feeling satisfied about simply having ideas and get busy on doing the real work - bringing forth a completed article.

Protecting an idea It's impossible to protect an idea. No-one can OWN an idea. Ideas cannot be copyrighted.

And no one may own a title to a book, movie or article. If you look up books in a library, you'll find many identical titles for totally different books. It's the same if you look up a movie directory. Many different movies use the same title.

However, it's most interesting about ideas. Ideas float free in the marketplace, and no one has a moral or legal right to own an idea. If I can explain this further, let me know. It's the same with facts. No one owns the fact that Simon Townsend has five pairs of blue jeans or always carries a notebook and pen. No one owns the fact that Smith's Bakery charges \$3.70 for a white loaf. But if you took the fact from book or article and wrote this fact using exactly the same words and expressions in the same order, you'd be plagiarising . . . you'd be stealing not the facts, but the original writer's copyright in the WAY he wrote about the facts. So, facts are free. Just don't COPY (steal) someone else's exact words. Express it in your own way.

But there are three ways to sort-of temporarily protect your idea.

FIRST, you ask an expensive lawyer to draw up a Confidentiality Agreement, also known as a Deed of Confidentiality. You may find a suitable wording on the internet, though I don't know where. Then you ask the person you're dealing with to sign two copies, and so do you, and give him one copy and you keep one copy. Anything you require of him, he is entitled to require of you, so the words should be about both parties, not just what you require of him. Most confidentiality agreements are considered unreasonable if they are for longer than a year. I am not offended when someone asks me to sign one, but I know people who are

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Tool 4: PEOPLE Any of the people who pass through your life can lead you to a story, or, is a story him/herself. Start a conversation, ask questions, be curious, be interested. Get a name and phone number, and call later. To make the "people" tool work you must believe: everyone is a story. You'll find it true.

Your thoughts on this idea tool: ???????????????????????????????????????.

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Tool 5: BRAINSTORMING You need two other people who are also interested in ideas. Get together over a meal or a drink. There's only one rule for brainstorming sessions: never criticise anyone's idea, no matter how crazy, un-doable or feeble, but always build on that idea.

Your thoughts on this idea tool: ???????????????????????????????????????.

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Tool 6: WORDS All ideas must eventually be expressed in words, and most words can represent an idea. So, why not start with words? Wander through your thesaurus and dictionary - and feel the many ideas that will pop into your mind.

Your thoughts on this idea tool: ???????????????????????????????????????.

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Tool 7: YOUR KEYBOARD Open a new file in your computer and start typing. Type "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog" or copy-type an article you admire. But keep typing. Eventually you'll find yourself writing out an idea, rather than merely typing.

Your thoughts on this idea tool: ???????????????????????????????????????.

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Tool 8: YELLOW PAGES People who are in the Yellow Pages want to be phoned. They will be just as happy to talk to you, a freelance journalist, as to a potential customer. Everyone knows media exposure can help business.

Your thoughts on this idea tool: ???????????????????????????????????????.

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Tool 9: OLD IDEAS There are no new ideas. (REPEAT: There are no new ideas.) All good ideas are old ideas with a new twist. So, regurgitate, re-circulate and re-use old ideas. Get an old magazine, and imagine how you can revive an old story.

Your thoughts on this idea tool: ???????????????????????????????????????.

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Tool 10: THE MEDIA You must be a consumer of the media (radio, television, print, the internet).

Worldwide, the media feeds off itself. Journalists follow-up each others' ideas every day. You must do it too.

Your thoughts on this idea tool: ???????????????????????????????????????.

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"Original" ideas There are no original ideas. There is not an article you can think of that hasn't been done, in some form, before. You might be in a bank and it's robbed and you write a firsthand account. And you think: "Well, that's never been done before." Sorry, yes it has.

You might win lotto and you write "How I blew \$15 million in 7 weeks". And you think: "Well, that's never been done before." Sorry, yes it has. So don't worry about it. An editor wants well-written stories, and so long as her publication hasn't run a similar story lately, that's fine.

There are no new ideas, only new twists to old ideas. Good luck.

How to set out ideas if an editor asks

1. Set them out briefly.
2. SELL, DON'T TELL. Tempt an editor, and sell him. But don't tell him everything.
3. "Dot list" style, NOT paragraph after paragraph of prose.
4. Short, punchy . . . half a page at most.
5. NOT wondrous, clever, big ideas, but "do-able" ideas. Show that you and you alone are capable of doing this story.
6. No good saying: "My idea is an interview with Nicole Kidman explaining exactly why her marriage to Tom Cruise broke up." Good idea? It's a GREAT idea. Mainstream publications the world over are after this story. But it's not a "do-able" idea, since Kidman is not talking, and she doesn't know you.
7. Your ideas must already be at least partly researched, ready to be put into action immediately.

Idea 1: LOVELY GIRL'S RECOVERY FROM DRUGS

By "Your Name"

[Keep reminding people of your name at every opportunity.]

Summary:

- Lana Smithson is a stunningly beautiful, model-like young woman.
- She became a drug addict and prostitute at 12.
- She lived a hellish life for two years until her parents tracked her down.
- They helped her through "Tough Love Now", a drug rehabilitation group.

I have interviews with:

- Lana
- Lana's mother, father and sister
- TLN counsellors
- Arresting detective

Other points:

- I have all these interviews on tape
- I have signed permission and cooperation from all concerned
- Heart-breaking and emotional story of betrayal, love, disappointment and forgiveness
- With Lana's beauty she will make great photos and has agreed to pose.

Idea 2: HISTORIC PUB FOR SALE FOR \$1

By "Your Name" [Keep reminding people of your name at every opportunity.]

Summary:

- An outback pub is for sale for \$1.
- I chanced upon this story while on holidays recently.
- They will start advertising in major newspapers next month.
- I have the exclusive if it is published before the 20th of next month.
- The catch is: the new owner must operate it seven days a week and it's only marginally profitable under that requirement.
- But it provides a great lifestyle, a lovely building and no loan repayments.

I have contact details of:

- Shire President
- Former leasee
- Brewery CEO
- Historical Society secretary
- Local committee pushing to re-open pub

Other points:

- The outside and inside make glorious photographs
- I know where to obtain some old historical photos of the pub in its heyday
- Fantastic story of country characters and a wonderful building

No one at steals Some students write to me suggesting someone at might steal their idea. Firstly, I don't know if these students realise how incredibly hurtful is their suspicion of us. I would like to make several statements.

1. I wonder how the accusing student would feel if he/she came to visit us at , and we asked him/her to remain in the foyer and explained we couldn't take him/her into the inner part of the because we suspected that he/she might steal paperclips. That student would be insulted and probably stalk out angry. Well, we're only human too, and so you may know how we feel being accused of being possible thieves of our own students' ideas. We're educators, not thieves.
2. Also, editors don't steal ideas. I suppose it may have happened, but after 46 years in the media I don't know of a proven case. Some new freelancers sometimes have a fairly obvious idea, it's rejected, then they see a similar idea in print and immediately become paranoid, accusing someone of stealing their idea. What has happened is that lots of journalists have the same idea at the same time. Someone else simply got in with the idea first. Don't worry about your idea being stolen. It's more important to research, do interviews, write your idea and submit a finished article quickly.
3. To prove the point, please buy copies of The Australian, The Australian Financial Review and one or two of the major dailies in your area. Looking through them, you'll see the same ideas popping up in ALL of them. Did journalists steal the ideas from each other? Of course not. The ideas were obvious ideas the day before publication.

I compiled years ago a list of "controversial topics". It contains lots of good ideas that might spark even better ideas in YOUR brain. See the article on 1000 argument starters.

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