

A photograph of a wooden crate filled with walnuts, placed on a wooden floor. A teal rectangular box is overlaid on the center of the image, containing the text "NOVEL in a NUTSHELL".

NOVEL
in a
NUTSHELL

URBAN
WRITERS
RETREAT



Novel in a Nutshell Day 1: Story seeds

Whether you have a clear idea about what you want to write, think you have no ideas or you have a thousand half-formed ideas lurking at the back of your mind, it's always useful to have a store of ideas. They don't have to be fully formed or 'good' yet, you just want plenty of seeds that could become stories.

We've given you a selection of different places you can search for inspiration. You might not think you'll find any in your old notebooks or your bookshelf, but look again. Look for single words, song titles, characters you love, questions, even existing storylines. We're not suggesting copying, but you can explore existing ideas in new ways (for example, 'a group undertakes a quest to destroy an all-powerful object' from Lord of the Rings could go in a hundred different directions).

Your challenge is to come up with 20 idea seeds, and we want you to bypass your inner critic so you'll do it fast, in just 15 minutes. Ready? You're up.

Ideas from my scribblings	Ideas from my bookshelf/the newspaper	Random questions
Song titles, lyrics and dialogue I like	Characters and settings I love	Things/themes I want to write about



Novel in a Nutshell Day 2: One-line stories

So far you have the germ of an idea. Now let's develop it to see whether it's going to be possible to turn it into a whole story. Pick 1-3 ideas from yesterday and brainstorm different directions they could take.

An example... yesterday's idea is finding a grandmother's brooch:

- Grandmother was forced to abandon a child she had with someone unsuitable she loved, was sent into a loveless marriage. Long-term repercussions.
- Her brother enters and accuses her of trying to steal an heirloom. They fight.
- Short story at grandmother's funeral, an uptight girl learns what her apparently staid grandma was like as a wild youth. About freedom.

Again, don't over-think this. Do it fast, in just 15 minutes.

Idea 1	Idea 2	Idea 3



Novel in a Nutshell Day 3: Free writing

Look through yesterday's work and circle the idea you love most and that feels most fun.

Set a timer and free write on your idea for 10 minutes (write about it as fast as you can, without censorship or stopping). It doesn't matter what you write. Tell the story, create a setting, talk about a character's childhood, just let it out and don't stop. If you get stuck, ask yourself questions about the idea in writing, then answer them. Don't stop.

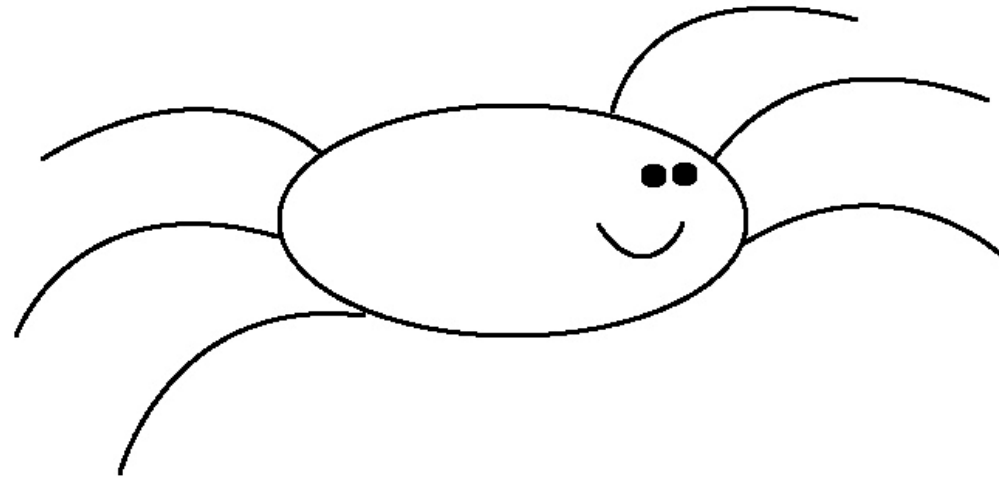
If that idea doesn't seem to be panning out, you can always go back and choose again.

Novel in a Nutshell Day 4: Spiders

Do you remember spider diagrams from school? Well we were always a bit disappointed that spiders weren't actually involved, so here's a proper spider diagram for your story (though he only has six legs). Don't worry, he's friendly.

Write a word or two to represent your idea in his middle and start brainstorming. Keep adding extra legs and offshoots, keep coming up with ideas. When you've run out, ask yourself, what else? It doesn't matter how ridiculous or contradictory your ideas are at the moment.

If you discover you don't really love your idea and another one looks shinier and prettier, do this exercise for a second idea.





Novel in a Nutshell Day 5: Character voice

Character builds story. A shy, retiring librarian and an adventurer who works in a library while researching treasures will react to the situations very differently. You need to know how your characters think, how they talk, how they feel.

Take 10 minutes and write your character's diary or an email. The topic can be anything from regular life to major story events or something from their past.

Character:

Date:

Dear Diary:



Novel in a Nutshell Day 6: Point of View (POV)

Now that you know some of what happens in your story, where it is set, and a bit about your main character, it's time to decide how to tell it. What do you know right now that you can write a paragraph about? Ideally it should show someone doing something or reacting to something, but don't worry too much about what. Write whatever comes into your head.

Write a paragraph from your main character's point of view.

Rewrite the same scene in the 3rd person but allow your narrator to see inside your main character's head.

Now rewrite the same scene in 3rd person again but your narrator can't see inside heads so character actions are the only clues to their thoughts and emotions.



Novel in a Nutshell Day 7: What's at stake?

Now that you know a bit more about your character, it's time to work out their place within the story.

Look over your spider diagram to refresh your memory, then set that timer for 10 minutes and free write about what your character wants.

Ask yourself questions like: What do they care about? What's the most important thing to them? What do they want? What's at stake for them, why does this matter? What's the most important thing in their world? Why can't they have it at the moment? What are they going to do about it? Can they succeed? What if they don't?



Novel in a Nutshell Day 8: Conflict

What or who stands in the way of your main character getting what they want?

They may face many problems including natural disasters, people trying physically to stop them, societal pressures, internal conflict, difficult choices and their own personality flaws and other good people whose needs conflict with theirs, as well as evil villains. Answer these questions to see if you can get a handle on the conflict and solutions.

What is the central problem your character faces, the question they must solve or the thing they must do in this story?

Who or what stands in their way?

What does this opposing force want and what will they do to get it?

What will the main character have to do to succeed?



Novel in a Nutshell Day 9: Possible endings

You should have an idea about what your main character is like, what they want, what they're up against, and you've probably got a few ideas for things that might happen along the way.

Knowing where you want them to end up will help you connect the dots and bring the story to a satisfying conclusion, so today you'll come up with 5 possible endings to your novel.

Set a timer for 10 minutes, and off you go.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.



Novel in a Nutshell Day 10: 100-word synopsis

A mini synopsis is great for getting clear on the essentials of your project. It won't tell you everything, but it's like having a pocket compass; if you get lost during writing, just pull it out of your pocket and use it to correct your course.

Handily enough, you're also going to need a 100-word synopsis to apply for the Six Month Novel, where we'll work on turning this idea into a proper outline made of glitter and stardust (possibly useful things like a logical story structure and solid character work too, but mostly glitter).

You've done the hard work already. All you have to do is look back over your challenge work to fill in the prompts, then turn it into a 100-word paragraph. Easy!

Name and 1-10 word description:

in [setting]

is/wants/needs [describe what they are trying to do/get]

but [describe the central conflict/choice/problem/person they face]

In the end, [what happens]