



A Pep Talk from
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The most common plea for help that I get from young writers goes something like this: “I had this great idea for a novel and the first five chapters were really easy to write, but suddenly I don’t know where to go next. It feels like here’s nothing more that can happen. HELP!”

Rest assured, it’s not just new writers who feel this pain. Running out of steam is a time-honored tradition for hardened professionals as well. It happens to every every writer I know. The original set of ideas we start with almost never sustains the novel-writing process to the end. Those ideas usually turn out to be too simple.

So what can we do now to keep going?

The first step is to realize that this isn’t only an issue for writers. Here’s a funny thing about human beings: we always think too simply. The universe is always bigger, messier, and more complicated than we expect it to be.

For example, when ancient astronomers first beheld other planets in the sky, they theorized them to be perfect spheres. That’s right, they assumed that other planets would have no features at all. Of course, when telescopes got good, it turned out that all planets are messy. They have mountains, volcanoes, and giant storms on them.

The exact same thing happened with atoms. Scientists once thought they were indivisible and indestructible, kind of like perfect spheres. But it turned out that atoms were made of electrons and protons, which turned out to be made of quarks. The closer we looked, the messier and more complicated things got.

The same thing happens to us non-scientists. Before we travel to new places, we often start with childhood generalizations in our head – “Texans ride horses!” or “Australians are outdoorsy!” or whatever. But when we arrive the reality is always more complicated and weirder than we thought. (Australia is the world’s most urbanized country, and the state with the highest horse ownership per capita is not Texas, but Connecticut.)

And here’s the funny part: No matter how many times this happens, we keep being surprised. We keep expecting things to be simple, even after being wrong again and again.

It’s as if we’re stuck in “childhood ontology.” When you were a little kid, you probably read a picture book with a title like *The Jobs People Do*. And the jobs were teacher, doctor, police officer, and the guy who sells you ice cream. But out here in the real world there are also chicken sexers, forensic accountants, perfume designers, and thousands of other professions you’ve never heard of. And that picture book about animals that taught you about cats, dogs, cows, and frogs? It probably skipped over zebus, tardigrades, and parasitic wasps.

When writing a novel, make sure you’ve upgraded to grown-up ontology. The real world is full of gnarly details, and whenever you think you have a handle on how complex something is, it just gets gnarlier. (If you just wondered what the hell a parasitic wasp is, the answer will depend on which of the 20,000 species of parasitic wasps you’re talking about.)

So what does this all have to do with writing?

Well, too often us writers have in our head some “perfect sphere” like, “My character is a lawyer.” But then we need this character to say something lawyerly, and suddenly we have to ask ourselves, what kind of lawyer? A trial lawyer? Does she do conveyancing? Bankruptcy? Intellectual property? Taxes? Human rights? There are about 3,000 kinds of lawyers. (Fun fact: there are also 3,000 varieties of pears. That’s right. Even PEARS are more complicated than you thought!) And even though the kind of lawyer may not be essential to the plot, if we simply blow past this moment without a decision and a little bit of research, the world of our novel will start to feel flat, less interesting than the real world.

But this isn’t all bad news. The inherent gnarliness of things isn’t just a pain in the butt requiring more research. It’s also an opportunity. When your writing starts to run out of steam, you can ask yourself, “What parts of my novel have fallen prey to childhood ontology, and how can I get beyond cats and cows to zebus and tardigrades?”

Dare to ask, “Where is my novel too simple?”

For example, let’s say your novel is set in a post-apocalyptic world that’s been invaded by all-powerful aliens. It was exciting at first, but your characters have been running and hiding from aliens for a while, and you’ve pretty much exhausted all the drama you can create from that. So what now?

Maybe your characters need to encounter more kinds of aliens. Big ones, small ones, smart ones, dumb ones. Not just the ones who are trying to kill all the humans, but also the few who feel bad and are trying to help. Human rights lawyer aliens! Aliens who eat the previous aliens, and use humans for bait! Aliens who don’t care about humans, and are just here to study zebus!

Make a list of all the varieties of aliens you can come up with. (And if it’s less than 3,000, then THE PEARS ARE LAUGHING AT YOU, MY FRIEND.) When your list is done, choose the four kinds of aliens that will put some steam back in your plot, plus a few more just for fun. Because complications are where plots come from.

“Okay,” you say, “but this only applies to science fiction and fantasy worlds, where you can make up a bunch of stuff about aliens! This advice won’t help me with my realistic contemporary novel.”

But as I’ve been saying all along, the real world is gnarly too, and everyday complications can make for large conflicts. Let’s say you’re writing a romance, and there doesn’t seem to be enough going on. Are both your romantic leads middle-class Americans? Did you accidentally forget about all the other kinds of people in the world?

What if one of your lovers comes from another country? There can be cultural clashes, language confusions, visa problems, political disagreements, and lost passports. All that from simply remembering that not everyone has the same nationality.

So that’s my advice if you’re running out of steam. It’s not always about writing more words or drinking more coffee. Sometimes getting to the end of a novel simply takes remembering that the world is more complicated than we know, and then sticking some of those complications into the story.

Scott