

Writing and the Creative Life: There are no useless ideas

[Scott Myers](#)

"If it is true that the best way to come up with a good idea is to generate lots of them, that means we will intersect with plenty of ideas which are not good ones."



One of my favorite quotes regarding creativity originates from Nobel Prize winning scientist, author and educator [Linus Pauling](#):

"The best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas."

This is especially relevant to my particular area of focus — screenwriting — because the importance of a great story idea within the Hollywood movie industry cannot be overstated. A strong story concept can help a script hook a reader's attention, making it stand out from all the other thousands of potential projects that filter through the

system. The story's central narrative conceit can serve as a thematic touchstone helping steer decision-making throughout the entire script development process as well as into film production and post-production. And a compelling story idea often becomes the foundation of the movie's marketing campaign.

A seaside resort town attacked by a giant white shark.

A cynical weatherman forced to relive the same day over and over.

A serial killer using the Seven Deadly Sins as his modus operandi.



Screenwriter Andrew Kevin Walker came up with a great idea when he thought up the concept for 'Se7en'

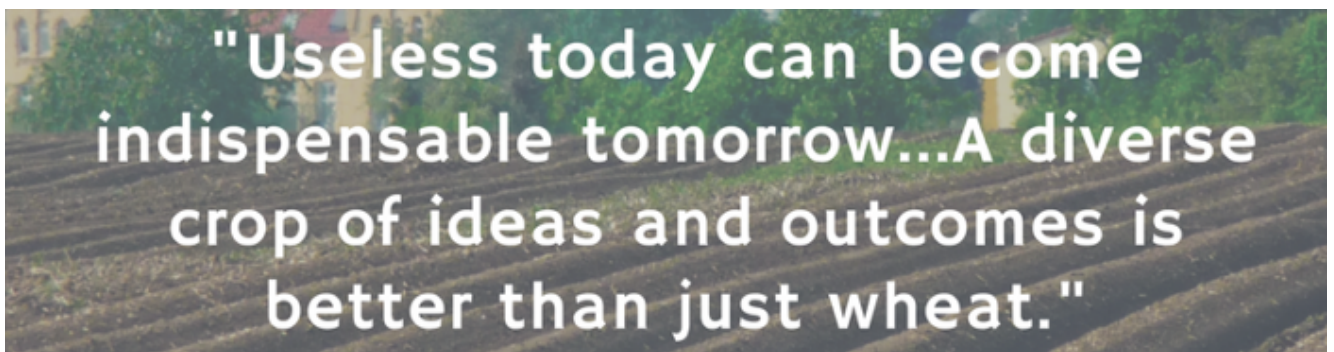
Jaws, Groundhog Day, and Se7en are just a few examples of movies that achieved enormous critical and box office success in part because of their underlying story concept.

The importance of ideas extends well beyond the scope of filmmaking. Indeed, it's difficult to imagine any entrepreneurial or creative endeavor where participants not only potentially benefit from new and innovative ideas, the task of generating them is an imperative.

We simply must come up with ideas, it is a necessary part of the creative process.

If it is true that the best way to come up with a good idea is to generate lots of them, that means we will intersect with plenty of ideas that are not good ones. In fact, it is almost certain that *most* of the ideas we conjure up and consider will not meet whatever tests we use to assess their viability and value to move forward with them.

So what of those discarded concepts? Does that mean they are *useless ideas*?



Let's say I am taking a shower or going for a run, two activities I have found to be especially conducive for those "Aha!" moments, where an idea suddenly leaps to mind for absolutely no apparent reason. And let's imagine that while I'm out for a jog, I do have a revelation — boom! A great idea bursts into my consciousness, seemingly out of

nowhere.

If I track back on my creative process, I am likely to see dozens and dozens of *other* ideas that have come before it over the previous weeks and months, all of them noted, none of them deemed worthy of pursuit.

I would argue those ideas are not so much litter on my creative path, but rather have functioned together to build a bridge to this one Great Idea. In other words, the work I have been doing generating ideas has contributed to creating the harmonic convergence of everything transpiring in my life that resulted in that startling, wondrous experience whereby a killer concept leaped to mind.

Which means — at least to my way of thinking — there are no useless ideas. Each is part of an overall, ongoing creative process. That process may be circuitous, messy, and haphazard, but when I do come up with a great idea in the Present, I can look back on the Past and see hundreds of other ideas, not only a testament to my daily efforts to generate story concepts, but also serving as a conduit to this very moment of revelation.

I can offer no objective proof in this regard, but as a writer, it feels *emotionally* true to me. I choose to believe Pauling: The best way to surface a good idea is to generate a lot of ideas. And if the end result of that process leads to a handful of great ideas, then the multitudes of ones that have come before which have not made the cut are not

useless...

They are essential.

Writing and the Creative Life is a weekly series in which we explore creativity from the practical to the psychological, the latest in brain science to a spiritual take on the subject. Hopefully the more we understand about our creative self, the better we will become as writers. If you have any good reading material in this vein, please post in comments. If you have a particular observation you think readers will benefit from and you would like to explore in a guest post, email me.

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