What If? Getting Unstuck

This series of exercises is designed to help when you don’t know how to move forward on a piece. It was adapted from the book *What If* by Anne Bernays and Pamela Painter, which contains many great writing exercises to spark your imagination. I’ve tweaked some of their ideas and added exercises of my own.

A writer can get stuck for a variety of reasons. Sometimes we’re truly not certain where the story needs to go because there are so many possibilities. When in doubt, I believe in allowing the characters to speak. Mine often know where the story needs to go.

Frequently we get stuck for other, more personal reasons that may have nothing to do with the writing. Sometimes, we’re afraid of what the story is saying or where it is going. Sometimes we’re not willing to trust the truth of what we have to say. Often, our inner critic has decided that something in the story is dangerous, and so it needs to be stopped. Sometimes we run into that brick wall of self-doubt that is called writer’s block. The exercises below won’t cure any of those illnesses. However, they will get you moving and writing again. So try them. And if you’re having a battle with your inner critic, don’t hesitate to see me. I’ve worked with mine for years and have a few tricks that have lessened its hold. I’m happy to share them with you.

**Step one**
Choose a classmate as a partner, someone with good creative ideas. Since you’ll be sharing a piece of work that is stuck, choose someone who you feel will welcome a fragile work in progress.

**Step two**
Exchange the scenes or stories that feel stuck. Talk a bit about why you each feel stuck or uncertain about how to continue the tale.

**Step Three**
After reading your partner’s story, write down five possible things for what could happen in the very next scene. Among the five, suggest something that seems very probable and something that is very improbable.
Step Four
Read over the suggestions that you got from your partner and choose one to develop. Note your reactions. Sometimes the suggestions that seem off-the-wall are a good indicator that you know what should happen next. Be adventurous! Take a good 20-30 minutes to develop this scene.

Step Five
Exchange it with your partner. Read your partner’s new work and underline the great stuff. Show your partner what he or she has written well. Be aware that your partner might not be able to appreciate her or his own strengths.

Step Six
Free-write what is going on with your character in this scene that isn’t being said. What is happening underneath your story, at the heart of it? Allow your character to reveal to you a secret about him/her or the story that you don’t already know.

Step Seven
Incorporate this information into the scene that comes next. If you’re not sure what should come next, ask your partner for five more suggestions.

Step Eight
Choose one of the following exercises to stay limber:
- If you want to keep moving forward, ask your partner to read your latest work and give you five suggestions of what could happen next.
- Write a scene that occurs before your story begins (before the place where you have begun it).
- Write a scene that occurs after your story ends.
- Become your main character. Imagine them 10-15 years after this story has ended. Let them speak to you and tell you what you need to know to finish this story.
- Take your main character out for a gossipy lunch. Describe where you eat, what’s served and the conversation in which you dish about the other folks in the story. Ask questions! Find out things you don’t know.

Discover the trail to where the story needs to go