



Story Prompts: Speculative

Introduction

The following story prompts are designed as entry points to new stories. Some of them will spark an idea. Some of them won't. With the ones that do spark an idea, can you keep pushing that idea into something completely unique? Perhaps the story you come up with in the end only references the prompt in a very oblique fashion. Perhaps it sticks to it more closely.

A black and white world

Most of us are very lucky to experience the world in vivid technicolour. But imagine that wasn't the case. Imagine the world was simply black and white with no colour and no grey. How might that society be different? How might that reflect our real world?

The black market

We tend to associate the black market with drugs or other illegal items, but what if something we take for granted was only available on the black market. Perhaps it is literature. Perhaps it is technology. Perhaps it is fresh fruit. Perhaps it is medicine. What story might emerge from this scenario?

Bodily augmentation

When we think about the concept of 'augmented humans', mostly what comes to mind are humans with technology implanted in them. But what if the augmentations were biological ones? What might you choose? A third ear? An extra arm? An elephant's trunk? A tail? A kangaroo's pouch?

Boxed up

Imagine you could pack your problems into a suitcase or shut them in a box. What would you put in there? How would the problems manifest themselves in physical form? Where would you hide the suitcase / box to keep it safe / hidden? What might happen if the problems got back out? Would boxing up the problems properly resolve them? For inspiration, see: <https://newflashfiction.com/box-by-natalie-warther/>

Ctrl + Z

What if reversing our actions was as easy as pressing ctrl + z to undo something on our computers?

The dream reversal

What if everything was back-to-front in our dreams compared to the waking world? What if we lived half our lives consciously in each? Would we choose to be excessively rich in one world and excessively poor in the other? Would we choose to be handsome in one world and ugly in the other? Would we choose to be happy in one world and sad in the other? Or would we look for a greater sense of balance?

The end of the world

The end of the world is here and there is nothing you can do about it. How do you spend the final day? Do you panic? Do you have a party? Do you prepare for the afterlife? Do you have a picnic as the world burns? For example, see: <https://cabinetofheed.wordpress.com/2019/02/08/picnic-at-the-end-of-the-world-sharon-telfer/>

The eradication of death

Scientific progress means that death has been wiped out. What are the consequences of this?

The eradication of pain

Wouldn't it be nice if we didn't have to suffer physical or emotional pain? Wouldn't it be great if we could simply push a button when we were feeling ill or upset and those feelings would disappear? Create a story that contemplates this idea.

Excessive criminality

Imagine a world where everything 'bad' becomes a crime and every 'crime' is punishable by 'death'. What is the tipping point within that? For example, if being angry becomes a crime, if swearing becomes a crime, if having a negative thought becomes a crime?

Expiration date

Imagine a world where everyone knows the precise date and time of their death. How does this change people's behaviour?

Extinct animal brought back to life

We already have Jurassic Park that focuses on un-extinction of dinosaurs, but what other creatures might be brought back to life. A dodo? A passenger pigeon? A golden toad? A great auk? Choose something interesting and weave a story around it. Does the un-extinction of this species provide fear or hope?

Future memories

Imagine if rather than being able to remember the past, we could 'remember' the future. What would we lose by now not knowing what had gone before? What would we gain by understanding a little of what lies ahead? Think about how memories are fallible, how sometimes they are incomplete or fabricated. Think about the logic of the story—if a character acted on a future 'memory', when they arrived at that moment, they wouldn't remember the 'past' of having already seen that moment...

Genies

We'd all like a personal genie, right? But genies generally come with rules. What are the rules that might create restriction within your story? Perhaps each person is allowed only three wishes over the course of their life. Imagine the possible tension between people who use all three wishes very young and those who store them up for future need. Imagine the doubt you might feel about using up your last wish. Are there any things a person can't wish for? What happens if a child makes a spur-of-the-moment wish like 'I wish my parents were dead' or 'I wish I was the president of the world'?

Ghost funeral

Can ghosts die? How might a ghost approach death the second time around? Can a ghost be mourned? What parallel might this create in terms of how a person has two deaths—their physical one and the one when no one is left alive who remembers who they were?

Imaginary X

Many of us might have had imaginary friends when we were young, but most of us probably claim we grew out of it. But did we? How many of us still do this in one form or another, perhaps conjuring imaginary lovers or imaginary doctors or imaginary bosses. Consider the possibilities of pushing those imaginings a little further, the imaginary figure transforming into a physical manifestation. For example, see:

<https://gonelawn.net/journal/issue34/Allen.php>

Memory world

The world of memory is often pictured as a house that can be walked through. But what other image might we use? Could the world of memory be a forest or a library or a system of caves? Could it be an ocean? Could it be a sweet shop? Pick a place to represent the world of memory and have a character explore that place.

Merchant of X

Dreams for sale! Buy one memory get one free! Get your wishes here! Write a story that engages with the idea of speculative capitalism, a market for dreams, memories, wishes, curses, prophecies, ideas, inspiration, energy, happiness, luck etc. What might be bought or sold? Are the items bought with money or something else? Is everyone able to afford them? Does this create a new axis of poverty and wealth?

Minor difference

Sometimes it is the small things that make all the difference. Imagine for example if our standard map of the world had the Antarctic on top and the Arctic at the bottom—how does that change things? Imagine for example if the traditional colours we associated for boys and girls were reversed?

The museum

Most museums are repositories for the past, but what if that 'past' was our 'present'? Set a story a hundred years in the future with a character or group of characters visiting a museum about the year 2025.

New fairytale

Rather than taking a fairytale that has already been written and writing it in a new way, can you invent a completely new fairytale with a strong moral message for our modern times? Perhaps a fairytale that acts as a cautionary tale around the use of AI? Perhaps a fairytale that reflects on our contemporary addiction to mobile phones? Perhaps a fairytale that reflects on consumerism?

Personification

Write a story where a physical concept like time or gravity is given an animate form. How does Gravity the person feel about everyone taking them for granted? How does Time feel about people wishing for it to slow down or speed up?

Portal to a better world

Give a character the motivation to find the perfect world and have them explore alternative universes. Does the perfect world exist or do all versions of the world have flaws?

Raining cats and dogs

This is an expression we use in English just as the French talk about it raining ropes and the Czechs talk about it raining wheelbarrows and the Greeks talk about it raining chair legs. There are she-trolls in Norwegian and snakes and lizards in Portuguese, husbands in Colombian Spanish and aunts with knobsticks in Afrikaans. What if one of these variants were reality? Pick a random thing to fall as rain and use that as the inciting incident for a speculative story.

Recycle bin

What if your brain was like your computer or your mobile phone and it was only capable of holding so much data? How would you decide which memories and knowledge to hold onto and which to put in the recycling bin? How might this cause regret later in life?

Superpower discrepancies

In a world where superpowers exist, this would create a new axis of privilege / disadvantage. Who would be among the most advantaged in that society and who would be among the least advantaged?

Universal laws

What happens if the accepted laws of the universe are turned on their head? Perhaps there is no more gravity? Perhaps the heat from the sun no longer warms the earth? Perhaps time doesn't flow forwards any more, but instead skips about in a random fashion?

Unlikely hero

In many fantasy stories, it is the dragon or the goblin or the orc who is the villain, but what if you flipped this on its head? What if they were the hero and the villain was a knight? What if it were the sidekick character who saved the damsel in distress?

The un-privacy of thought

Imagine a world where everyone can read each other's thoughts and nothing is private. What problems might this cause? What are the consequences for thinking the wrong thing?



ENDNOTE

Bio:

This resource has been created by Matt Kendrick. Matt is a writer, editor and teacher based in the East Midlands, UK. His short fiction has been widely published both online and in print. His work has been included on the Biffy 50 list for 2019-20, in Best Microfiction 2021, Best Small Fictions 2022 and the Wigleaf Top 50 list for 2022. He has also been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize.

Other Resources:

For links to other free resources, please visit my website: <https://www.mattkendrick.co.uk/resources>

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