



PILLAR #1: CONCEPT WITH A KICKER

Writers are often confused about the difference between concept, idea, and premise. And no wonder. Writing craft books and instructors have differing definitions, many of which add to the confusion.

To make things simple, for the sake of clear, easy-to-grasp novel construction, let's break this down.

An idea is just a germ of a story. A lump of clay. Ideas are a dime a dozen, as they say. Not every idea has the makings of a great concept. This

first corner pillar requires a concept with a kicker, which is much more than an idea.

Here are some examples of ideas:

- **A novel about the first manned mission to Mars**
- **A novel about man stuck on an island for two years alone**
- **A novel about a teenage girl who falls in love with a boy vampire**
- **A novel about a bunch of kids learning to be wizards at a wizard school**
- **A novel about an evil being who searches for his lost ring of power**
- **A coming-of-age novel about a boy who hitchhikes across the country**

As you can see from these “ideas,” they are just a starting point for a deeper, richer concept. You may have lots of general ideas for a possible novel, but once you find an idea that intrigues you, you need to take it to the next step. You need to start molding that clay into shape.

Your Premise

Just what is a premise? A premise supposes something is going to happen. And that *something* requires a response.

You could say, for example: “I propose this (bad, scary, tense) situation, and this is what must be done to deal with it.” As you might conclude, a lot of ideas fail even at this “premise” stage by not having a **compelling situation** that requires some **specific action**. This is where premise meets Protagonist with a Goal, Concept with High Stakes, and Theme with a Heart. Someone with some passion needs to deal with the situation in the midst of huge conflict.

Examples:

- “An evil power searches for a ring that’s been lost for ages, and *in order to prevent him from taking over the world*, that ring must be destroyed.”
- “A girl in Kansas gets taken over the rainbow to a magical land, and *somehow she must find her way back home*.”
- “An alien race is coming back to destroy Earth, and so *young boys must be trained to become battle commanders to stop them*.”

** In this workbook, I join in and take a random idea I thought up off the top of my head all the way through the same steps alongside yours, to show you ways you can use this process productively. It’s important to test your idea to see if it has “novel” potential, and, if so, build twelve strong pillars to ensure success.*

Let's start with your idea. See if you can **state your basic idea simply in one sentence**. Try a few variations:

Examples for my idea:

- *A man who's been struck by lightning eleven times risks his life to stop a killer.*
- *A terrorist is on the loose in the mountains, and a park ranger who has been repeatedly struck by lightning is the only one who can stop him.*
- *A man at war with lightning must fight it to stop a killer.*

Your examples:

Now, Ask “What If?”

One way to start fashioning your idea into a strong concept with a kicker is to ask “what if?” questions. This can help turn your cool idea into a premise. Every novel you’ve ever read and every movie you’ve watched can be fashioned into a “what if?” question. Why is this helpful? Because it takes the germ of an idea and starts moving it into the realm of concept.

Take a look at the “what if?” questions for the previous examples:

- “What if a simple, humble hobbit must take a ring of power to a dangerous land in order to destroy it and thus prevent the evil ruler from using it to take over the world?”
- “What if a girl who is taken over the rainbow has to get the broomstick of a wicked witch in order to return home to Kansas?”
- “What if a young boy, who is chosen to be the top battle commander, must train hard and risk lives to defeat an alien race from destroying Earth?”

Your “what if?” questions may be variations of the same basic idea, but they can help you explore the potential aspects of your idea.

“What if?” questions for my idea:

- *What if a man has to risk his life in a storm to save a hostage(s) from a serial killer?*
- *What if a cop who is afraid of lightning has to face down his greatest fear to save someone?*

- *What if an antisocial park ranger who's been struck by lightning eleven times must reluctantly track down a killer to save lives?*

Write some “what if?” questions for your idea:

What if . . .

What if . . .

What if . . .

What if . . .

Coming Up with a Kicker

A premise starts giving your idea purpose and shape. But that's not all it needs to become a concept with a kicker.

What is a kicker? A kicker is what turns your idea or premise into a terrific concept. A kicker is not a plot twist but an aspect to your story idea that makes a simple or ordinary situation intriguing. Just about any average idea (or one that's been done a thousand times) can be turned into a viable concept with a kicker. How?

Concept cannot be just about plot. A great concept for a novel can't hold up if it's just a good idea or an interesting premise. It has to have the support of the three other pillars. That's when the concept gets into high gear with a kicker. That's why a great concept sentence will not just include what the novel is generally about (plot) but will focus on the protagonist's goal, conflict with high stakes, and theme.

So, let's work on developing your kicker to turn that idea into something truly compelling. Bring to that tired old plot idea something unexpected, something intriguing—some factor or component that will shake the traditional, basic, simplistic story and make it a Concept with a Kicker.

First: Read through chapters 3–12 in *The 12 Key Pillars of Novel Construction* that cover the four corner pillars before you start the hard work on your Concept with a Kicker.

Here are three great ways to create a kicker:

- **Unusual Setting.** Come up with an unusual setting or locale for your novel that will make this story unique or fresh.
- **Unexpected Career or Hobby.** Choose an intriguing career or hobby for your protagonist that can turn your idea on its head.

- **Impacting World or Local Events.** By placing your story in a specific period in time and/or a place where some important event occurs, you can amplify your idea.

Think up some variations using these three factors, and see how you might generate a kicker for your story. If you think you have a good kicker, play around with ideas that can make your kicker even bigger, better, more impacting.

Let your imagination go wild, for here is the key place for your idea to bloom and grow.

1. Examples of unexpected settings:

- Boy meets girl . . . underwater (Mer-people? Scuba divers seeking sunken treasure?). Or while stuck in an elevator during a power-out. Or while serving together on a jury (or he's on the jury and she's on trial for murder).
- Man competes in a race . . . on the moon. Or through a jungle. Or across a city populated with zombies.
- Two men fight for the same woman . . . in a mental ward. Or while tunneling underground to get to freedom. Or in the White House.

As you come up with ideas, keep in mind your possible themes (your fourth corner pillar). If you want to explore themes of justice or racism, you might come up with *settings* that will create high tension and conflict (the third corner pillar), such as setting your story in a prison or in a place where racism abounds.

Key to your concept will be the goal you set for your protagonist. By coming up with a creative setting in which to place your character and show her going after her goal, you can make your story not only more intriguing, you can ramp up the stakes and the themes. This is all a part of holistic novel construction.

Setting might be part and parcel of your idea already, but play with it and see if you can come up with other possible locales or settings that will add a kicker to your idea.

A list of some unusual or unexpected settings for my idea:

- *The Rocky Mountains or other US Western Mountains (where there are low incidences of lightning)*
- *Congested urban area where lightning usually can't strike (for some of the settings) but it does*
- *Mountains with lava tubes, subterranean cave systems, active volcano*
- *Mountains infested with ? Rabies, bees/wasps, other living threats? A "keep out" area due to contamination or ?*

List some unusual or unexpected settings that might work with your idea:

2. Examples of unexpected careers or hobbies:

- Two people fall in love . . . an undertaker and an archaeologist. A cop and a professional jewel thief. A prison guard and a prisoner. A therapist and a serial killer.
- A woman who pursues a career of being a detective . . . in 10th century Japan. Or Victorian England.
- A computer nerd who gets messages from “the great beyond” and uses his skills to try to crack the “code” to the dead.
- A man who creates perfumes to lure and control women.

A list of some unusual or unexpected careers or hobbies for my idea:

- Park ranger (I know I want this to be his vocation)
- Expert in lightning since he's been struck repeatedly. Member of some lightning victims' club
- Science nerd or geologist—some specialty that ties in with love of wilderness—that will be key (motif?) in story
- Former cop (some park rangers are law enforcement officers), but got disabled on the job by lightning
- Has some uncanny sixth-sense, paranormal ability, telekinesis (heightened electromagnetic field?) due to lightning strike? ** (I starred this idea!) so this topic is a huge hobby/interest for him (and source of grief)

3. Examples of unexpected world or local events (which can be invented):

- A love story set on an island after a war destroys most of the world. Or set in the crowds in Dallas when JFK was shot. Or set in a penthouse suite on a beach when a huge tsunami hit. Or set in a submarine during an alien invasion.
- A brilliant man races to find a cure for a killer disease . . . when an earthquake strikes and the power goes out. Or during the worst winter on record. Or while his mind is succumbing to Alzheimer 's disease.
- A girl tries to find her missing father . . . on the streets of New York as the Trade Towers fall. Or as a terrorist shuts off all the power in Anchorage, Alaska, in the dead of winter.

A list of some unexpected world or local events for my idea:

- *Huge killer lightning storm (of course!)*
- *Earthquake or other regional disaster—causes volcano to start erupting? Bomb goes off? Plane crash or lightning starts a wildfire?*
- *No world event applies or might affect protagonist and story, but some local event could hinder or complicate if it brings runners or hikers up into the mountains. Fourth of July celebration or?*
- *Terrorist attack/threat? Caused by the nemesis?*
- *State elections/local celebration that brings a lot of people to town—about an issue terrorist is passionate about and uses violence to make a statement*

List some unusual or unexpected world or local events that might work with your idea:

And these aren't the only ways you can tweak an idea to make it zing with concept. Characters' hobbies, passions, past hurts, secrets, or unusual upbringings—the possibilities are only limited by your imagination.

Other unexpected factors that might help me create a kicker:

- *Protagonist has an obsession and personal relationship with lightning—which is his true nemesis in the story, not the serial killer/terrorist.*
- *The story is more about the protagonist and the issues of controlling his environment vs. giving in to the greater power of the elements to acquiesce to his destiny (theme of control—do we let go to have it?).*
- *Hero plagued with past guilt over his brother's death (feels it's his fault, has penance to pay—lightning strikes). He can't become whole until he purges that.*

Brainstorm Key Questions

When you are brainstorming your ideas and homing in on the one you want to develop into your next novel or if you are already writing a novel but feel it's not all that extraordinary, spend some time thinking about the kicker.

Here are some of the questions you want to ask. These should get your creative juices stirring. Try to freewrite your ideas.

What is unique and compelling about my central idea for my novel?

My idea: It's not just a typical suspense thriller of a cop chasing after a killer. It's all about the lightning and this man obsessed with gaining control over lightning (symbolic on many levels, great motif!). His nemesis is this element, while he goes after a killer and rescues hostages.

Your idea:

How can I tweak this idea and infuse it with something outrageous, tense, full of conflict?

My idea: The lightning can almost be sentient, chasing him down. Maybe becomes paranormal (or to him? He may think he's going crazy). Maybe he knows the killer from his town, his past? Or knows one of the hostages? Maybe there are bigger stakes than just stopping a killer? His confrontation of lightning creates huge environmental dangers and effects.

Your idea:

Can I elevate the stakes dramatically for my main character to give the concept heightened drama and suspense?

My idea: In addition to the expected conflict and stakes of the basic cop/killer chase plot, the weather and other natural plaguing incidents can add to the tension. His life under attack while he's trying to do his

job. Add in other characters that get in the way and have other agendas? Key: if he fails, he has to impact more than just himself—others and the environment? He has to risk his life and lives of others to reach his goal.

Your idea:

What kind of goal can I give my main character that will seem impossible to reach?

My idea: Well, he wants to stay alive, which will start to seem impossible and make him want to quit. He also wants to save the hostages and stop/kill the killer. He has to face his nemesis (lightning), which he does not want to do, in order to reach his goal (willing to die, maybe does?) His visible goal of saving people has to include his need to control lightning, which would seem impossible but could be essential to my story.

Your idea:

What controversial or sensitive issues or themes can be at the core of this idea so that it will tug on readers' hearts?

My idea: Sacrifice and redemption, big themes! He has to come to a place where he is willing to die and give in to his nemesis (which maybe he learns really isn't his nemesis after all but his savior of sorts). Concept forms around these themes, as the climax has to be his giving his life to stop the killer and save those at risk.

Your idea:

How can I twist the whole idea so that it poses an intriguing dilemma or conflict?

My idea: The intriguing conflict is his fight with lightning in the midst of chasing a killer. The conflict is more within himself than with the external forces. Or he can find ways to channel/harness the lightning so that he can use it to reach his visible goal.

Your idea:

These questions bring in the other three key corner pillars— Protagonist with a Goal, Conflict with High Stakes, and Theme with a Heart. I mentioned that in order to have that Concept with a Kicker, you need to develop it with the three other corner pillars, and so these questions are meant to get you start thinking holistically.

Remember, to have a strong, compelling novel, it has to be more than a great idea or a clever premise. It needs to have some interesting aspect to it that pushes it into the realm of high concept—which basically means that people will want to read your book just from hearing your one-sentence story concept (which you’ll work on as you start answering the questions in your checklist).

Kickers Will Vary Based on Genre

You might argue that some novels really don't need a kicker. Maybe you write formulaic romantic suspense or cozy mysteries or traditional Westerns. Does that mean you don't need a kicker? You may not need much of one to sell books, but if you want to write a great story, one that will stand the test of time and be memorable, you'll want to infuse your basic plot with a kicker.

It doesn't have to be monumental, but it's not hard to take a good idea and make it a great one with a kicker. As we've gone over, sometimes all that is needed to turn an idea into a viable novel concept with "legs" is to create an intriguing framework in which to set your story.

Is a Kicker a "High Concept"?

You may have heard the term "high concept." Michael Hauge, Hollywood screenwriting consultant, gives this definition as it pertains to movies (however, this applies agreeably to novels as well): "A high concept is a story concept that is strong enough that it will draw an audience without any other components. It is not dependent on casting, name director, execution, word of mouth . . . it is simply the story idea alone that will promise an emotional experience."

Think about a novel like *The Hunger Games*. If all Suzanne Collins came up with was "a girl in an oppressive dystopic future society has to struggle to survive (and gets caught in a love triangle)," do you think she would have sold that book to a publisher? If the kicker—the games themselves—was not a part of the book(s), she might have had a good idea and maybe could have sold a few copies—but perhaps not millions.

The kicker in that novel was a fascinating predicament. Featuring a game that forced children to murder one another, Collins introduced an element into the primary structure (pillar) that could support the entire novel. Again, this is not just an idea or premise or plot point of a novel.

This is a foundational concept that creates tension, mystery, and curiosity. It makes readers ask questions they really want the answers for. How in the world could a child make it out alive? What kind of emotional damage would these children suffer?

Kickers make readers ask questions they want answered. Kickers move the ordinary into the extraordinary. Kickers take ordinary ideas and put them on steroids.

Can you think of some great novels or movies that have a terrific kicker? Have you ever had someone tell you a brief summary of a novel they'd just read or a movie they'd just seen and you knew instantly you would have to read or see it? Think about what intrigued you and why. Then see if you can generate that kind of a kicker for your story—something that will get listeners intrigued when you tell them. If people say to you, “Wow, what a great idea. I want to read that book!” you will know you have clinched your kicker.

A Caveat

I'll concede this point: not all novels have to have a high-concept kicker. If you are writing formula romance for Harlequin's Love Inspired series, you may not need anything that outstanding. Same with a post-modern literary work—although I would pose the challenge that with every novel, a writer should be able to come up with a kicker of some sort.

I'm all about writing great stories—ones that will stand the test of time, like a well-built house. Yes, well-built romance novels written to formula are structured well. And many will endure the ravages of time. Formula novels follow “building codes” and are a fine example of a builder using a blueprint correctly to build a specific kind of structure.

But if you are striking out “on your own” to create an original novel with a high concept, you'll need a great kicker.

Inspection Checklist #1

Concept with a Kicker

Here are the sets of questions and exercises on your inspection checklist, and more. Take time to think these through and answer them. If you haven't yet come up with the solid answers you need for some of these questions, leave them blank and come back to them later, after working on the other three corner pillars. But be sure to get them all answered to your satisfaction before you move on to the eight other essential pillars of novel construction.

Question Set #1:

What is your basic idea for a novel? Write this as a statement:

List three "What If?" questions that reflect your premise:

What is the kicker that twists an ordinary idea into something unique, original, and compelling? Try to explain in one clear sentence:

To have a strong Concept with a Kicker, you'll need to know how the other three corner pillars come into play in your story. Consider these examples (from Netflix):

- *Maleficent*: “Turning the classic fairy tale ‘Sleeping Beauty’ on its head, this fantasy drama retells the story from the point of view of evil godmother Maleficent. While defending her homeland from invaders, the young Maleficent is dealt a cruel blow by fate.” The kicker is having the evil antagonist be the protagonist of the story.
- *The Giver*: “In a future society called The Community, pain, war, and disease have been eradicated, as have individuality and free will. When a teenager named Jonas learns the truth about the real world, he must decide whether to reveal all or remain quiet.” Note the high stakes, the protagonist’s goal. The “what if?” is tied in with what Jonas will do with the secrets he uncovers. Also clear are potential themes. The unusual setting “frames” the well-used basic plot in a new setting.
- *Non-Stop*: “On a commercial flight at 40,000 feet, federal air marshal Bill Marks starts receiving text messages from a threatening blackmailer who claims he's on the airplane too. Can Marks identify his camouflaged adversary before he begins killing passengers?” No need to comment on the unique setting for this cop-chasing-crook story, or the kind of high stakes involved.
- *The Fault in our Stars*: “Teenager Hazel, who has pushed people away since her cancer diagnosis, reluctantly joins a support group, where she

bonds with a boy named Gus. Together, they face the challenge of building a relationship under the shadow of terminal illness.” Here’s a great scenario for a typical love story—a Concept with a Kicker that has potential for a lot of emotional high stakes and themes. Falling in love knowing you could lose the one you love—or you could die and cause your loved one pain? That’s huge.

- *Snowpiercer*: “The Earth's remaining inhabitants are confined to a single train circling the globe as revolution brews among the class-divided cars.” Again, a unique setting/situation to gives a twist to the commonplace plot of man against man.

Now, rewrite your one-sentence concept statement that includes your protagonist and his/her goal (you may choose to come back to this after working through the second pillar section):

Now, rewrite your one-sentence concept statement that notes the central conflict in your novel and what is at stake (you may choose to come back to this after working through the third pillar section):

Now, rewrite your one-sentence concept statement that includes your theme(s) (you may choose to come back to this after working through the fourth pillar section):

Now, try to write a 2-3 sentence pitch that includes all four corner pillar elements to create a cohesive, complete concept statement: (Think of how your novel, now a movie, would be listed and promoted.)

Describe your idea, and explain how it's like a lot of other ideas out there:

Now write a short blurb explaining how your kicker makes this common story unique:

Question Set #2:

In what ways is your kicker tied into your protagonist's core need? (You may choose to come back to this after working through the second pillar section.)

In what ways is your kicker tied into your protagonist's greatest fear?

In what ways is your kicker tied into your protagonist's deepest desire?

How does your protagonist's goal for the book embody or showcase your concept and kicker?

Question Set #3:

What one element or focus makes you excited about your concept?

Why will it also excite readers?

List three ways you could make it into something controversial:

Question Set #4:

Picture a movie poster for your novel. What one key scene is pictured on it that embodies your concept and kicker? Describe it.

Now explain why you chose that scene:

Does it reveal something about your novel's themes? If so, what? If not, can you think of a way to infuse that key scene with some thematic import?

Question Set #5:

What is the main gut response/emotional reaction you want your concept to evoke in your reader? Explain.

What are some ways you can tweak your concept so the reaction will be stronger?

Ask: Why do you want your reader to react to your concept this way?

What take-home thought or feeling do you hope to leave the reader with when he finishes reading your novel? How does your concept and kicker ensure this will come across?

Question Set #6:

What possibilities does the kicker add to your concept in the way of higher stakes and deeper conflict?

How might your kicker create higher stakes for the world at large (beyond your protagonist's life)?

Question #7:

What themes, issues, or volatile topics does your kicker involve?

List some ways you can add them to the story line:

Question Set #8:

What iconic scene can you write in your novel that will showcase the essence of your concept and kicker?

How can you make it even bigger, more intense?

Question #9:

State your concept with your kicker in one sentence. Include the central conflict and stakes:

Can you tweak your kicker so the stakes are even higher? Try to show this below:

Question #10

What happens (or will happen) in the climax of the novel that will show why your concept and kicker are unique and compelling?

Question #11

What key way will your protagonist change by the end of the novel that ties in specifically with your concept and kicker?

Question #12

Think about your novel's premise or basic plot idea. Ignoring the kicker you came up with, what three other, different kickers can you think of? Is one better than your initial idea? If so, consider using it instead.

Write a one-paragraph summary of your novel highlighting your Concept with a Kicker:

Now write a one-paragraph summary of your novel highlighting your Concept with a Kicker *but including your protagonist's goal, central conflict, and theme* (the other three corner pillars):
