What is high concept?

In Hollywood and New York, concept is king. To succeed as a writer, you need more than a skillfully constructed novel. You need an idea that will be talked about, one that generates excitement. You need a high concept.

But what is a High Concept? Simply put, a high concept is an intriguing idea that can be stated in a few words and is easily understood by all. It’s the reason you went to see that movie you’d never heard of. The idea that roped you in. The moment you heard it, you realized “Yes! Wow! Why hasn’t that movie ever been made until now? It’d be so cool to see that! In fact, I never knew till now, but I’ve GOT to see that movie!”

To find a high concept, you need to think of a story in terms of mass appeal. One that can be understood by a large audience. A high concept idea will resonate with most people. Even if it’s written for kids.

High Concept Examples

Groundhog’s Day: Stuck living the same day over and over again.
Inception: Your mind is the scene of the crime.
Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Middle school survival guide—in comic form!
The Hunger Games: Fight to the death on national television.
The Fault in Our Stars: Love story between two terminal teens.
This Present Darkness: A small town is in the midst of an unseen supernatural battle.
Left Behind: The story of those left behind after the rapture happens.
Redeeming Love: In 1850s gold rush, God tells a farmer to marry a prostitute.
The Shack: God invites a man to talk with him in a shack in the woods.

Why Try for a High Concept Idea?

*It can open a lot of doors.
As a new writer… and even as a multi-published writer… having a high concept increases the chances of publication. By quite a bit. If you can tap into the “that is so COOL” feeling, it will likely affect an agent or editor or an entire pub board. A high-concept idea can open a lot of doors.

*It helps you find what the story is really about.
Being able to reduce your idea into something powerful that can be expressed in a few words forces you to come to terms with what the story is really about. In other words, to create a true high concept, you not only have to understand all of the important structural elements, you have to get at the very essence of your story.

*It helps you communicate your idea.
This is a problem all new authors experience at least once. And some for much longer. They can’t explain their story quickly and succinctly. But if the idea sounds so complicated that it is difficult to explain or for a listener to understand, you might get rejected. Even in print, if your idea doesn’t resonate, it may never reach the people who make the decisions. It can get lost in the translation.
Later at dinner, I sat beside another agent. I didn’t ask to pitch. I waited patiently. And finally she asked me what my story was about. And I said: “It’s for teens. It’s kind of a Christian Agent Cody Banks.” There was a hint of high concept there. And I made my story premise easy for her to instantly categorize.

*It makes marketing easier.
At the start, a high concept is a powerful seed that can help you create and sell your story. But once the story is published, the high concept is the face you put on the story when you tell people about it. When you market it. It’s what the public will see on the book jacket—and in your dreams, the movie poster.
To this day I’m terribly at telling people what my stories are about. That’s because I never put in the time to craft a high concept pitch. I still use Christian Agent Cody Banks for The New Recruit.
Is High Concept Selling Out?

So, am I saying, “Throw away all your personal stories that you love, and write only High Concept Hollywood fluff?” Am I telling you to “sell out”? No. I’m not saying that at all.

Yes, high concept was invented by Hollywood to make a lot of money. But that doesn’t mean that high concept stories are without merit.

1. Entertaining people is not a bad thing.
2. High concept doesn’t have to mean Snakes on a Plane. High concept can be important stories too.

The Sixth Sense, The Book Thief, The Hunger Games, The Fault in Our Stars, Redeeming Love. All these stories offer some value, character growth, deep themes to ponder.

The key is to find an idea where what you love to write and high concept overlap.

A High Concept…
1. is universal (It must resonate with everyone).
2. is unique (or has a fresh twist on a familiar idea).
3. involves an empathetic hero who is dealing with a BIG problem.
4. can be summed up in a few words that give a good picture of the entire story.
5. has a great title

1. A High Concept is Universal
A high concept isn't so dumb that everyone can get it, it's so Universal that everyone understands it. Either we know what that experience feels like, or it's an experience we've all fantasized about. The weirder the idea, the more it has to be grounded in universal human emotions or behavior.
An asteroid the size of Texas is hurtling toward the earth in Deep Impact. That's a high concept. Everyone knows exactly what that means. It arouses an emotional response, and, in just eleven words, everyone knows what the movie is about. Doomsday.

2. A High Concept is Unique
Find something that hasn’t been done before or a new twist on an old idea. Blend the familiar with the strange.

**A good concept should be both UNIQUE and UNIVERSAL.** If it's UNIQUE, but no one can relate to it, it's not high concept. If it's UNIVERSAL, but we’ve seen it a million times, it's not high concept.

3. A High Concept has an Empathetic Hero, Dealing with a BIG Problem (These three tips from author Heather Burch)
1. Unforgettable character.
Frodo. Unforgettable. Not because he's short or has hairy feet. Frodo is unforgettable because he’s willing to dive into danger (terrified) but willing. In Fellowship of the Ring, the fellowship is arguing about taking the ring to the Fires of Mount Doom. None of the great warriors are willing to do it. Yet Frodo steps up and says, “I'll take it. But I do not know the way.” That “I'll take it” shows that Frodo is an amazing character. But I do not know the way, tells us how out of place he is in this quest.

2. Impossible situation.
Remember what Boromir says in that scene? He talks about reaching the Fires of Mount Doom. “The very air you breathe is toxic … Not with 10,000 men could you do this. It is folly.” Sounds like an impossible situation. Can’t breathe. 10,000 men would be no help. Yet Frodo is still willing to try.
3. Relentless threat.
For Frodo, Sauron wants that ring. And not only does the way he designed the ring cause a threat to Frodo, Sauron has Ringwraiths helping him chase Frodo down, he’s got Sauramon helping him, he’s got Gollum, and massive amounts of orcs. That’s pretty relentless.

**Two things to consider when you’re coming up with your relentless threat: STAKES and the TIME LIMIT.**
What will happen if your protagonist doesn’t resolve the conflict? The higher the stakes, the more interesting the idea. In TERMINATOR Sara Conners isn’t just some woman, she’s the woman who is going to give birth to the man who saves the human race from extinction!

And what is the deadline involved in resolving the conflict? The less time to solve the problem, the more interesting the idea. In MY BEST FRIEND’S WEDDING Julia Roberts is trying to tell her best guy friend that she loves him before his wedding day... which is at the end of the week!
Low stakes means little impact if the protagonist fails, and no deadline means he isn’t in a rush to solve the problem.

4. **A High Concept is Short**
Shortness. Make your high concept as short and simple as possible. The aim is to be able to tell people what your high concept is and they will say “I’d read that.” without any more explanation.

A high concept is not a logline: Do not confuse a ‘high concept’ with the logline. A high concept is not a logline. A logline should be about 25 words long. But a high concept is a very short pitch statement that enables you to immediately communicate the premise of your story quickly, for example: Christian Agent Cody Banks.

5. **A High Concept has a Great Title**
Who hasn’t been captured by a great title? These all conjure up images that will unfold on the screen. You can almost see the story in your head, just from hearing the title.

-Simple  
-Says what it is  
-Often includes irony/humor

Legally Blonde • Star Wars • Miss Congeniality • Running Lean • She’s the Man • Four Christmases • Jaws • Uglies • Alien • Shakespeare in Love • Assassin’s Apprentice • To Kill a Mockingbird • The Sixth Sense • Titanic • Saving Private Ryan • Roswell • Gladiator • The Mummy

Examples of high concepts and loglines:

**Jaws**
**High concept**: Horror film in the ocean.  
**Logline**: A police chief, with a phobia for open water, battles a gigantic shark with an appetite for swimmers, in spite of a greedy town council who demands that the beach stay open.

**The Fugitive**
**High concept**: An innocent man is convicted of killing his wife.  
**Logline**: A fugitive doctor wrongly convicted of killing his wife struggles to prove his innocence while pursued by a relentless US Marshall.

**Planet of the Apes**
**High concept**: Evolution reversed  
**Logline**: An enslaved man tries to escape from a world in which apes are the most intelligent lifeform and humans are treated like animals.
**Who Framed Roger Rabbit?**  
**High concept:** A cop must enter cartoon land to solve a crime.  
**Logline:** A toon-hating detective is a cartoon rabbit's only hope to prove his innocence when he is accused of murder.

**Jurassic Park**  
**High concept:** Dinosaur theme park.  
**Logline:** A family struggles to escape a remote island park whose main attractions—genetically restored dinosaurs—have been set loose by a power failure.

**Here are some more pitches. Can you guess them?**  
Die Hard on a bus. -- Speed  
What if a boy found out he was a demigod?—The Lightning Thief, Rick Riordan  
Fairytale characters trapped in our world. Once Upon a Time  
A lawyer who cannot tell a lie. – Liar Liar  
What if Peter Pan grew up? – Hook  
A man dies and becomes his wife’s guardian angel. – Ghost  
What if a girl and a vampire fell in love? --Twilight

**Ways to Find a High Concept Idea**

**-Ask “What if…?”**  
Asking the simple “what if” question can lead to a high concept idea. For example, what if we put a shark in the waters of a beach town in the peak of the summer tourist season? But don't just stop there. How can you raise the stakes? Keep asking “what if...?" And don’t focus on the concept alone, ask this about the characters, the events, the location. For JAWS, what if the cop is afraid of water? What if the town council is too greedy to care about a few dead swimmers?

What if your plane crashed on a deserted island and you were the only one left alive? (Cast Away).  
What if there was a farm that grew people? (Replication)  
What if a volcano erupted, not in the desert, but in the middle of the city? (Volcano)  
What if a baby was left on the doorstep of three bachelors? (Three Men and a Baby)

Let your imagination take over. Consider anything, history or current events perhaps, and ask yourself “what if all is not as it seems?” What if it’s a cover story? Read conspiracy theories on the internet. Some of them are incredibly imaginative. Get paranoid! Keep asking, “What if…?” until you have successfully twisted them into something original.

**-Opposites Attract**  
Take two characters types who would normally never be together and put them together. This works well with actors. In the movie Speed, it’s Sandra Bullock and Keanu Reeves. In Lethal Weapon, it’s Danny Glover and Mel Gibson. Can you think of two character archetypes who don’t usually work together?

You can do this with authors as well. Or books or movies. Or mix and match them. For example:  
-Romeo and Juliet as written by Douglas Adams.  
-Doctor Who goes to Narnia  
-Jane Austen meets James Bond  
-Redeeming Love on a mission field

Or maybe just the opposite of stereotypes like in Liar Liar: a lawyer who cannot tell a lie. Drop Dead Fred, an adult with an imaginary friend. Or in Hook: Peter Pan has grown up. A struggling actor disguises himself as a woman and becomes a soap-opera star, only to fall in love with the leading lady. -Tootsie  
These concepts are great because they’re the opposite of how people envision them.

**-Meld the Familiar with the Strange**  
Try to add someone or something recognizable to your unique concept. This adds an element of believability even if the concept is unbelievable, like Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter or Cowboys & Aliens. Remember, high concept movies are simply taking an original idea and putting a twist on it.
Use a favorite story twist. Everyone has their all-time favorite classic story. Adding unique and original twists to traditional stories can help you create your high concept idea.
Pretty Women is Cinderella on the streets of L.A.
She's All That is a high school version of My Fair Lady.
Clueless is a modern-day (90’s, anyway) version of Jane Austen’s Emma
Star-crossed lovers on the Titanic.
A 19th Century Duke finds love in modern-day New York. Kate & Leopold

Steven King comes up with ideas by combining two unrelated things. Murder and mayhem and prom.
Summer camp & Greek mythology—The Lightning Thief
A criminal mastermind & fairies—Artemis Fowl

**What is Your Fascination?**
Work with a concept that fascinates you. Your interest will elevate the story. Think about hobbies or even your bucket list. Make a list of things you always wanted to explore and then dive in. If you’re fascinated by it, chances are other people will be too. Above all, write it in a way only you could write it. Let your passion for the project show.

**Involve a Ticking Time Clock**
Can you add a ticking clock element to the story? A deadline that must be met?

**Look to the Supernatural**
Look for things that don’t occur in the real world because they go against the laws of physics or nature.
Spiderman. Inception. A cartoon rabbit hiring a cop to catch a killer. A dinosaur theme park.

**Look to the Zeitgeist (Zite guy-st) The spirit of the times**
What’s in the news? What’s everyone talking about? What kind of story does that inspire?

**Play with high concept phrases**
A simple way to come up with a high concept idea is to drop in a high concept phrase. Take your story or a basic story idea and add a high concept tag. This is the whole Die Hard on a … plane! (Passenger 57) It’s just another way of melding the familiar with the strange. Taking a story that the audience understands and finding a new and imaginative way to tell it.
The Hunt For Red October… in space?
Gone with the Wind… with an alien.
Saving Private Ryan… with wizards.

Which leads to… weirdness.

Are These Ideas Too Weird?
Yep. And that’s the point. You are brainstorming. Turn your inner critic off and write down those crazy ideas – the crazier the better. Anyone can come up with an obvious idea! The problem is that most of them are not universally appealing.

For example: What if ants are actually alien spies?

That’s unusual, but it’s not a concept that has universal appeal. A good writer could make it work, maybe as a comedy, but no one is going to be rushing to read it, however good it is.

A lot of the concepts you come up with will be like that. But don’t give up. Keep brainstorming until something clicks and you think “I’d read that!”

Test Your idea

**Is Your Idea High Concept?** Ask yourself the following questions:
 **Is your idea universal?**
Have you touched on something common to all human beings? Does your idea speak to emotions and behaviors that everyone can relate to?
**Does your idea have a unique twist?**
Have you taken something familiar and added something strange?

**Is your protagonist likeable, or can we relate to him?**
Can we identify with him? Learn from her? Follow him? Root for the hero? Will the audience cheer? Will they care what happens? Does he grow as a human being in order to accomplish his goal?

**Are the stakes of the BIG problem high enough?**
What are the—primal—stakes? Do they tug at our emotions? Do they require action to be taken? What will happen if your hero doesn't achieve his goal?

- An asteroid the size of Texas is about to collide with the earth. Action has to be taken. It has to be destroyed or diverted.
- A serial killer is loose in the neighborhood. Action has to be taken. He has to be caught.
- An invading army has to be confronted and defeated.
- A man-eating shark has to be destroyed.
- A raging fire has to be put out.
- A terrible disease has to be cured, and so on.

You will know the stakes are big if action has to be taken.

**Can you summarize your concept in a few short words?**
Paring your idea down to a few words forces you to focus on what your story is about and keep you on track as you write. And when you make it simple to remember, you make it simple for them to pitch.

**Does your title capture the spirit of your story?**
A great title is a title that not only tells the audience what the story is about, it reveals the genre. It allows you to picture the story in your mind. Can you see it?

**High Concept Isn’t Enough**
**Having a high concept is no guarantee that your book will be any good. You still must do the hard work of writing the book. And once your book is finished and edited, the high concept will help you sell it.**