



*Spring into Creativity*  
by Sandra D. Coburn

April is all about the new—new growth, new birth, new ideas... creativity. Here are some low-tech and hi-tech tools and gadgets to inspire growth and creativity in your writing.

**Digital Voice Recorder** – These tiny recorders are a terrific tool for brainstorming sessions with your critique partners. Set one in the middle of the table and start talking. You can easily upload sound files to your computer and share them with your partners. Carry one with you so you can work on filling plot holes while you wait in the carpool line. Note—if you use your voice recorder in your old, I mean, vintage car, and you later try to import the sound file into Dragon Dictate, you may find that your car says "num num num num num" – at least mine does. Oh, and please, drive responsibly.

**Timer** – One way to spark creativity is to give yourself permission to think. With all the demands of life, we often put time to contemplate, to observe, to think at the bottom of our agenda – if we put it in at all. For those of us whose minds, once unleashed, tend to wander far and furiously, we may find a day gone with nothing tangible accomplished and be reluctant to allow ourselves the luxury of thought. If this is you, try keeping a clock/timer by your workspace. Set aside a time for brainstorming, then relax and enjoy the freedom to think until it chimes. Parents, ask older kids to hold non-emergency questions, squabbles, or observations until the timer beeps. They may even want one for their homework.

**Digital Cameras** – Keep your phone cam, digital camera or Flip video camera handy and record those unexpected moments of inspiration – especially if you collage as a creativity tool. Does the hot dog vendor look just like your hero. . .or your villain? Snap him! Just don't put photos on your website or blog without the subject's permission. Instead, check out the next idea.

**Royalty-Free Stock Photo Sites** – Royalty-free stock photo sites are websites where you can download photos and use them for a variety of private and commercial purposes without paying royalties. Instead, you pay one fee upfront. Photography can be costly, but some of these sites offer free or very reasonable rates on royalty-free stock photos. Stock.Xchng ([www.sxc.hu](http://www.sxc.hu)) boasts free royalty-free photos. Fotolia ([www.fotolia.com](http://www.fotolia.com)) and iStockphoto ([www.istockphoto.com](http://www.istockphoto.com)) are relatively inexpensive. Sign up for iStockphoto and download free sound clips, vector art, photos, and video of their choice every month. When it comes to stock photos, larger, higher quality, or more unique shots are more costly. If you just want to spark your creativity, you don't need to spend the big bucks. These sites have extensive search capabilities, so if you search for "rose keyboard," you may find a picture just like the one in the Tech Talk banner.

**Pandora Internet Radio** – Is it music, not pictures, that gets your synapses firing? Pandora ([www.pandora.com](http://www.pandora.com)) lets you create your own music station. Writing a historical? Create your own classical music station. Is your book set in Scotland? Seed your Pandora station with Celtic song titles or artists. Writing a contemporary set at the beach? Create a beach music station. Due to royalty issues,

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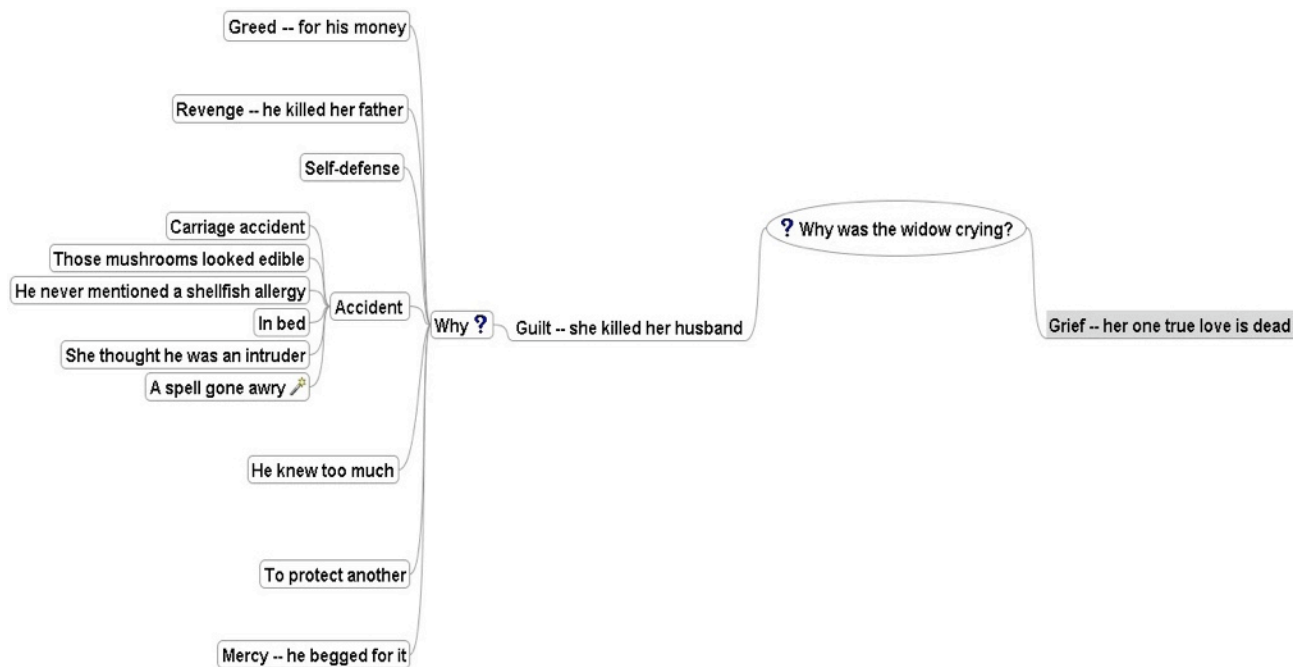
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Pandora currently only works in the U.S.

**Mind Mapping** – Mind mapping is a graphical way to brainstorm. You can draw a mind map by hand on paper, a poster or a marker board using colorful markers and magazine photos, but you can also mind map on your computer. There are several free mind mapping programs out there – MindMeister [www.mindmeister.com](http://www.mindmeister.com), Freemind (<http://freemind.sourceforge.net>), and XMind ([www.xmind.net](http://www.xmind.net)) to name a few. Some of these are collaborative, so several of you can brainstorm together. Maps can often be saved and exported as html. Some mind-mapping programs on the market are designed for complex project management with extensive capabilities and a hefty price tag. The free versions are fine for a little casual brainstorming.



**Word processing and spreadsheet programs** – Don't forget the basics. Use a spreadsheet to keep an alphabetical list of character names, to track plot points, to track word count and writing goals. Use your word processing program to keep track of ideas, to create forms, to record research. Don't forget to insert photos and links into your research documents. I keep separate folders for writing forms, brainstorming ideas, notes, and general research, as well as a folder for each manuscript.

**Specialty Writing Software** – There are many of these on the market, and they can be quite pricey. I can tell you about the three I own. Dramatica Pro ([www.dramatica.com](http://www.dramatica.com)) helps you plan and develop your story and characters by asking questions through its Story Guide. Dramatica Pro is very rich and complex but has a steep learning curve. Liquid Story Binder ([www.blackobelisksoftware.com](http://www.blackobelisksoftware.com)) is for outlining, organizing, and writing your story. It features timelines, storyboards, mind mapping, image galleries, and

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much more, making it a great tool for creativity. Be careful not to get lost in all the bells and whistles. Power Structure ([www.write-brain.com](http://www.write-brain.com)) helps you develop your story focusing on characterization, scenes, and conflict. It is the simplest of the three programs and perhaps the most powerful, but I wish Power Structure incorporated graphics into its design for us visual people. I use all three programs from time to time, but I probably use Power Structure the most.

**Idea and Project Management** – Programs like Evernote ([evernote.com](http://evernote.com)), Microsoft Office One Note, and Curio ([www.zengobi.com](http://www.zengobi.com)) help you organize notes, thoughts, ideas, photos, research, links – all the information you use. Think of them as a kind of electronic bulletin board. I use both One Note and Evernote. I like Evernote because it is cloud-based, meaning the files are kept on servers away from my computer – although I have a desktop version which I can use offline and later sync to the cloud. Evernote is free for the standard version, \$5 per month for the Pro version. One Note is a powerful program that is bundled with the Home and Student Edition of Microsoft Office. If you have it, you should try it. I have never used Curio, but watching my writing partner use Curio makes me want to dump my PC for a Mac. She uses it for organizing her writing and her life. Curio gets high marks for visual appeal.

**Bottom line** – There are lots of tools, low-tech and high, that you can use to help spark your creativity. Some of them you may already own, others are free or nearly free. Use them! There are also some very expensive gadgets and programs available. They may be helpful, but they won't write your novel for you. Make a little time for yourself this month to think, to daydream, to brainstorm, and then to write. The best, highest tech tool for creativity is your mind. Set it free this month!

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*Sandra D. Coburn is a right-brained writer whose imagination tends to wander. She thinks anything than can help her harness her ideas and get them on paper is a pretty cool thing indeed. She is a tech enthusiast, not an expert, but she is happy to share her minimal knowledge when she can. If you have a question about something you read in a Tech Talk column, e-mail her at [techtalk@sdwrites.com](mailto:techtalk@sdwrites.com).*

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