Stephen Donaldson, the noted science fiction and fantasy author, had a vexing problem, the sort of problem that most writers dread. He had an idea that he wanted to write about, but could not find a suitable way to convey it. He wanted to probe the abstract concept of “unbelief,” an unwillingness to accept the possibility that fantasy worlds might exist. But, try as he might, he could not discern the story line, the vehicle that could transport this vague idea from mind to paper.

Unbelief nagged at him. It flirted with him. It poked its head out from behind a tree and then disappeared again, like some coy woodland nymph. But it would not be seized. How Donaldson ultimately captured the idea, and penned an exquisite set of books provides a classic example of the power of conceptual combination. In this chapter we will take a look at how authors employ that procedure and other techniques in practicing their craft.
Science fiction and fantasy writing are fertile areas for assessing the contributions that creative cognition can make. These genres call on authors to concoct not only engaging stories, but also fresh new alien life forms, cultures, and worlds. Thus, they provide a window on a vital aspect of creativity: how people conceive, amplify, and modify novel ideas.

We focus here primarily on how science fiction and fantasy authors hatch and nurture the ingenious ideas they convey in their stories. The chapter is not designed to make anyone a better writer, at least from the point of view of improving writing style. We claim no special expertise in handling matters of exposition, plot or character development, dialogue, or other technical aspects of crafting stories. Our goal is only to investigate how the basic processes described earlier manifest themselves in this highly creative arena. If readers also come away with tantalizing ideas for stories, or effective new strategies for giving birth to such ideas, then we have far exceeded that goal.

Some authors have claimed that they generate ideas for stories easily, and that the real difficulty in becoming a good storyteller is in mastering the skills needed to expound the ideas. Usually, however, the people who make such pronouncements are those who have already become prolific writers. Through years of practicing their trade, these authors have honed the cognitive skills necessary to come up with great ideas, making the task seem easier to them.

The procedures authors use to conceive initial ideas for stories are vital to crafting vivid science fiction, and are worth examining in their own right. The writing techniques authors exploit are also intimately linked to the imaginative process, which continues as they delve deeper into their germinal ideas in the very act of writing. Understanding where novel ideas come from, how they are structured, how they are extended and transformed, and how their form relates to existing knowledge can help us to understand the magic of science fiction writing.