

WANT TO WIN? PLAY WITH WORDS

Writing Advice from Bruce Hale



I love wordplay! Wordplay can be puns, bad jokes, double meanings, rhymes, goofy similes — it doesn't matter. To me, it's all about having fun with words.

Although I use a wide range of wordplay in the Chet Gecko books (you may have noticed), one of my favorite things is coming up with the chapter titles. Sometimes they're nothing fancy ("The Big Stink" comes to mind). Sometimes they involve a twist on a well-known phrase ("Sick and Fired" instead of "Sick and Tired"). And sometimes

I just like the way they sound "Alibi, Bye Baby").

Your challenge? To come up with new chapter titles for the chapters of DIAL M FOR MONGOOSE. And you can do it the same way I do. Here's how I create chapter titles...

- 1. Look for clues:** First, I reread the chapter, looking for anything that stands out. It could be an event like a fire, a new character appearing, or a change in Chet's fortune or mood. Usually, several things are going on in each chapter, so I'll jot them all down.
- 2. Deep thinking:** Then I just stare at the list for a while and stare out the window. (Insider secrets, here!) I brainstorm, just tossing out any old idea — doesn't need to be perfect. I'm just trying to get a feel for which theme on the list will lead me to the best chapter title.
- 3. Narrow it down:** Then I choose one of the chapter themes from my list, based on which one sounds like the most fun. Sometimes, I'll even combine two of them. For example, in Chapter 9, I choose to play with two themes: the frog and the fire.
- 4. Lots of lousy ideas:** Then, I brainstorm LOTS of lousy ideas. Usually it takes me at least nine lousy ideas to get one good one, so don't be discouraged if you don't come up with something brilliant right away. Write it all down. Each so-so idea brings you closer to the great one.
- 5. Try words that sound-alike:** This is a common type of wordplay — substituting your theme word for a word that sounds like it. For example, I titled Chapter 2, "The Mark of Zero." That's wordplay on a famous movie, "The Mark of Zorro," because *Zero* (as in Principal Zero) sounds like *Zorro*.

Incidentally, this is also how I come up with pun names. For example, in DIAL M FOR MONGOOSE, you'll find a character named Jerry Dooty. This sounds like *jury duty*, which is something you might not like when you grow up (ask your parents).

6. Use the rhyme method: One idea-hatching method I enjoy: hunting for rhymes. For example, in Chapter 9, I started my title wordplay by looking at rhymes for *frog*, like: *dog, log, fog, cog, clog, bog*, etc. As I'm doing this, I let my mind wander, looking for familiar movie, book, or song titles, or even common phrases, that have that rhyming words in them. The idea is to plug your theme word in place of its rhyming word to create wordplay.

7. Eureka (or not): After lots of brainstorming on Chapter 9's title, I recalled an old song named "A Foggy Day." Excellent! I just replaced *foggy* with *froggy* and got "A Froggy Day." Nice, huh? Unfortunately, I'd already used that title in an earlier book, so I had to throw it out.

8. Success at last: I try to devise as many titles as I can, knowing that the longer you brainstorm, the more likely it is that you'll come up with something good. With the Chapter 9 title, I thought about *dog* phrases and eventually came up with *hot diggety dog*. A simple substitution and voila! "Hot Friggety Frog."

Now it's your turn. Have fun, and be creative!