

Story Building Workshop Tip Sheet:

--We have to give a darn about the protagonist. The protag has to have something we can relate to/hold on to in order for us to go on the journey with the character.

--We all deal with people. Or animals. Or -- you get the idea. It's easy to get sidetracked with secondary characters, but if you spend one day jotting a mark for every person you encounter on your daily routine, you will be surprised how much contact most of us have on a daily basis. Your protag may be a loner, but chances are the character has others with whom there is regular contact, and, hopefully, some of it is positive.

--The antagonist must be well-matched to the protagonist. If everything is too easy, there's no reason to root for the protagonist. The antagonist must be as three dimensional and fascinating as the protagonist for your story to reach its full potential. If the antag is a cliché or a cipher, not only do we stop caring about the overall story, we stop caring about the protag. An antagonist doesn't have to be an all-out villain. It's the character who causes the primary conflict to the protagonist while in pursuit of his/her own agenda. Not everything is life and death or saving the world. The most minute daily detail can suddenly take on that type of importance in the right context.

--We deal with more than one thing at a time. In a short story, you have to keep focused on a primary conflict because of space and word restrictions, but most of us deal with multiple conflicts on any given day. At least hinting at more than one thing going on, even if it is not fully fleshed out, enriches an overall piece. However, don't make a reference to something and then drop it. Even if everything isn't tied up with neat little bows, make sure there's some hint of resolution or the choice of non-resolution in the piece. A novel gives you more room to expand secondary plot lines, whereas a series gives you all kinds of options. Keep your plots in line with your vision for the overall piece. I think of a short story as opening a curtain at a particular moment in a character's life. There has to be a reason we are invited to observe that character at that turning point. When done, we go on and the character goes on, but we are both changed in some way. Novels and series take that to a grander scale with more options. But there still has to be a reason we are with these characters at this precise moment, no matter what the format.

--Dialogue and action need to be integrated. Most of us talk WHILE doing something else. The WAY a character performs an action either supports or contradicts what the character says. It's a great way to reveal character. It's deadly dull for the characters to talk and then stop to do something and then talk -- unless there's a darned good plot reason.

--Good scenes and stories are layered. Choose what to work on in each draft. In my first drafts, I usually focus on character and dialogue, because, due to my many years in theatre, that's how I think and interpret. Then, I go back and fix the plot and logistics. Then I add in setting as an additional character. And I cut, cut, cut, cut, cut.

--The world of your story must operate on its own logic. If you are setting something in our contemporary world, it must follow those rules. If it is an alternate universe or a fantasy world, you must know its laws of logic and physics inside out, because otherwise your lack of knowledge will bleed out to the reader, and you'll lose the reader. If you use an historical setting, your research must be meticulous, because bad research affects a reader subliminally.

--Telling us ABOUT the scene we're going to read in the following paragraphs pushes us away. In early drafts, it's pretty common to put in that initial sentence that tells you about the scene you're about to write, to prepare you to write it. But when you edit and post, remove it. Don't give it to us because your scenes need to stand and fall on their own merit.

--Every scene within a story has a beginning, middle, and an end. Not everything is resolved in every scene, and not everything is resolved at the end of every story, but it needs to be a choice, not carelessness.

--Transitions are just that -- transitions. If you write a scene and then move them to a different place or time, you are writing an additional scene. Characters coming and going within the same location can also sometimes delineate different scenes.

--Trust your characters. They will lead you more truly than what you think you know about the piece.

--Everything you write is worthwhile, even if it's cut. Nothing is ever wasted. It always gets you further along.

Worldbuilding 101

Why worldbuild? Generate interest, give context, present an image, draw in the reader, give characters room to grow and limits within which to operate

Six Rules for Worldbuilding:

1. Let the story determine how you worldbuild
 2. Keep an internal logic
 3. Know how things work together
 4. Stay true to your world--or make the world true to the characters or story
 5. Check your facts
 6. SHOW, don't tell about, your world
- Let characters take things for granted
 - Explain from the characters point of view
 - Use the details that matter.
 - The more it matters to the story, the more detail you use.
 - If you need to explain, let characters do it--but avoid Q&A or "As you know, Bob.."
 - Decide the important details and remove the distracters.

Nuts and bolts or worldbuilding:

1. Consider all angles: location, environment, inhabitants, infrastructure, culture, how it works together
2. Coming up with ideas: "What if?" experts, similar fiction, twist the familiar, mix & match, characters
3. How much to do? Enough to start writing, then start writing!
4. Resources: Wikipedia, Google, librarians, call expert, take a class, read a guide

Worldbuilding 20 Questions (or More)

They say the devil is in the details, but sometimes the fun is there instead. Here are some questions that just might reveal some interesting details about your world.

Sense Stretchers

The best way to show a reader your world is through the senses of your characters. Here're some questions you can apply to any scene to help you stretch your imagination and your character's perceptions.

1. Could your character wear sunglasses right now?
2. What's the dominant color your character sees? (gray shadows in silvery moonlight, wheat-beige under a blue sky, garish graffiti in unnatural colors on a brick wall)
3. Is there something in the air that would make your character sneeze?
4. What could cause your character's stomach to rumble right now?
5. Does your character itch anywhere? Is he or she cold or warm?

6. If all conversation and action stopped, what would your character hear?
7. If your character sat down, where would he sit? Would he be comfortable?
8. Is there something in the scene that might irritate the character (even if it doesn't at the moment)?
9. If your character were to lick her lips or breath in through her mouth, what would she taste?
10. Is your character holding anything? How (by hand, in a purse or backpack)? How heavy is it? Is it comfortable?

World Wonderings

Characters are a result of their history and society. Situations are, too. Here are some questions to apply to your character or a scene to make you think about your world.

1. If your world had a fashion magazine, how would your character compare to the cover model?
2. Name three things from the past that resulted in this physical scene. (For example, the Westerman Act of 2017 provided incentives for solar sail freighters. ColeCorp used the design based on Gary Ike's study of Luna Moths to design their Starflutter 4. A piece of space junk intercepted the lower wing, which is why Jonas Todd is stuck in his smelly spacesuit trying to keep his magnetic boots clamped onto the narrowest part of the sail while he sprays the hole with photosynthetic compound.)
3. If a reporter wanted to interview your character, what magazine would she represent?
4. If a news crew were to report on your character or a given scene, where would it be in the nightly news?
5. It's Sunday (or the equivalent holy day). What does your character do? How would his parents feel about it?
6. If your best friend was suddenly transported into your story's world, what is the first thing they'd notice?
7. If your character was suddenly transported into your living room, what's the first thing he'd notice? How would he react?
8. Where in your story world would you send your worst enemy and why?
9. What would a comedian in your world joke about?
10. Your character is hungry, snacking-type hungry. Is this unusual for her species? What triggers the snack-attack? Where would she go to satisfy the munchies and what would she eat? Does it have a wrapper?

RULES OF WRITING

The following are Elmore Leonard's "Rules of Writing," with only a tiny bit of my editing and paraphrasing. Even though Mr. Leonard's tongue was firmly implanted in his cheek when he came up with these rules, there are pieces of wisdom here worth reading and keeping in mind, particularly when writing the oh-so-critical opening of your story.

Keep in mind also that no matter what Rules of Writing you come across, no matter who came up with them or how long they've been around, they're only guidelines, not obey-or-perish edicts. There is only one true Rule of Writing that is forever set in stone, engraved in granite, and embossed in ebonite. You'll find it at the end of this handout.

Keep in mind further there are exceptions to any rule or guideline. Only after tons of practice and miles of experience, however, will you learn when and how to bend, break and ignore them.

Meanwhile, here's what Mr. Leonard said about his rules:

"These are rules I've picked up along the way to help me remain invisible when I'm writing a book, to help me show rather than tell what's taking place in the story. If you have a facility for language and imagery and the sound of your voice pleases you, invisibility is not what you are after, and you can skip the rules. Still, you might look them over."

And now, without further doo-doo, here they are:

1. Never open a book with weather. If it's only to create atmosphere, and not a character's reaction to the weather, the reader is apt to leaf ahead looking for people.
2. Avoid prologues. A prologue in a novel is backstory. Drop it in somewhere else, in small pieces.
3. Never use a verb other than "said" to carry dialogue. The line of dialogue belongs to the character. The verb is the writer sticking her nose in. "Said" is far less intrusive than grumbled, gasped, cautioned, lied, or informed. An occasional "asked" or "replied" is permissible.
4. Never use an adverb to modify the verb said. . . ."he admonished gravely." To use an adverb this way (or almost any way) is a mortal sin. The writer is now exposing herself in earnest, using a word that distracts and can interrupt the rhythm of the exchange.
5. Keep exclamation points under control. You are allowed no more than two or three per 100,000 words of prose.
6. Never use the words "suddenly" or "all hell broke loose" or any other corny cliché. This rule doesn't require an explanation.
7. Use regional dialect, patois, sparingly. Once you start spelling words in dialogue phonetically and loading the page with apostrophes, you won't be able to stop.
8. Avoid detailed descriptions of characters, places and things. Even if you're good at it, you don't want descriptions that bring the action, the flow of the story, to a standstill.

9. Leave out the part that readers tend to skip. We all tend to skip over thick paragraphs with too many words in them. No one skips over dialogue.

10. If it sounds like writing, rewrite it. Remember, in fiction writing, even when the narrator is speaking, it is still someone telling a story and should sound like a person talking, not a writer writing.

Now as promised, here's the only true Rule of Writing:

Short Version: Whatever works best.

Long Version: Whatever works best for a particular writer at a particular point in a particular story.

If you can write it and make it work, go right ahead and do it. Read and think about any rules you come across and keep them handy, preferably by an open window so it's convenient to toss them out.