

### Writing the Science Fiction Short Story

This handout presents some basic concepts about fiction writing. Although I am specifically concerned with science fiction, much of this advice applies to all fiction, including fantasy.

**What is my question?** Science fiction stories are based on a “What if?” question. This question is usually about the effects of a new technology or scientific discovery on human life. The question may involve ethics, morality, the quality of everyday life, or other factors. A fantasy story may also have a “What if?” question, such as “What if an elf ran for president?” or “What if pigs could fly?” A good story will have an interesting and important question.

**Who is my main character?** Usually, the protagonist should be a character with some great strengths but also some weaknesses or flaws. You need to think about how the character got to be the way he or she is, what motivates him or her, what kind of philosophy or code he or she lives by. The story might involve working to overcome a particular weakness, at least in part. Weaknesses might be that the character is too young, too inexperienced, too afraid, too angry, or has a physical or mental handicap of some kind. Overcoming weaknesses is part of character development and is different from defeating monsters or other external threats. Usually, the character is someone the reader can feel comfortable identifying with, though in some more experimental stories, the viewpoint character is unreliable, devious, selfish, or otherwise unpleasant. Of course, in science fiction, your character might not even be human. However, if your character is a living rock who can’t move and spends 10,000 years composing a haiku, your reader might lose interest.

**What other characters do I need?** Your protagonist will probably interact with others. He or she might have a friend or a sidekick. There is likely to be an antagonist or counter-agent who stands in the way or plots against him or her. There may be a love interest. In the best stories, these other characters are also developed to a certain extent. They are not stereotypical cardboard cutouts. However, if they are too well developed, they may take focus away from the main character.

**What is my world?** In science fiction, the world or setting of the story can be strange and unfamiliar. In realistic fiction, the writer can let the reader assume that the world works the way our own world works. There might be historical or cultural differences, but water still flows the way it flows, fire burns, rocks roll down hills, etc. A science fiction story might take place in a weightless environment, on a moon with methane lakes and hydrocarbon rainstorms, or in a digital, virtual universe. The reader needs to learn about the new world through details and descriptions, and the way the characters interact with it. In some stories, the world is almost a character, in that the purpose of the story is to explore the strange world.

**What is my plot?** Your character needs to have a problem to solve. Then there have to be obstacles in the way, probably more than one. Along the way, your character interacts with others, tries things and

fails, grows stronger in skill, understanding, or both, and eventually succeeds, or in a dark story, does not. Conflict between characters is essential, whether it occurs in boardrooms, bedrooms, or on the battlefield.

**How do I explain things?** One of the toughest problems of fiction writing is exposition. The reader needs to know some things to understand what is going on, but the characters already know these things, so it is illogical for them to talk about them or explain them. One solution is to write in third person with an omniscient narrator who can simply tell the reader what he or she needs to know to understand the world or the character's actions and thoughts. However, this is not the most popular way to tell a story these days, and even with such a narrator, long paragraphs of explanation bog the story down. Another common solution is to introduce a character who is also new to the world and the situation, so the people around this character have to keep explaining things to him or her while the reader listens in. This works, but if it becomes too obvious that this is happening, the reader will lose engagement with the story. The best way is to follow the "show, don't tell" idea. Let the reader figure things out, and use some kind of overt explanation only when absolutely necessary. By the way, writing in first person using "I" may seem easy at first, but it makes exposition even harder.

**How do I handle dialog?** Dialog is also tough. Real speech is full of "ums" and "uhs" that are not interesting to read on the page. Hemingway noticed that people repeat things a lot, so his dialog is full of repetition. This may be realistic, but it gets boring. Characters should not make speeches at each other that sound planned or contrived either. One way to learn about dialog is to sit in a coffee shop or other public place pretending to study and just listen to the conversations around you. Type the best bits into your laptop. You may be able to use them later, in an idealized or adapted form. One final tip: Don't use fancy words for "said." Nothing sounds more artificial than words like "interjected" or "expostulated." Just use "said."

**What is the difference between "scene" and "summary"?** Some things happen on stage in full view, fully acted out and described. Other things happen off stage and are only summarized. Some writers talk about this pattern as a sandwich in which the summary is the bread surrounding the meat of the scene. It is up to you as the writer to decide which parts of the action deserve a scene and which should be summary.

**Where do I start?** Aristotle said that a good tragedy starts *in medias res* or "in the middle of things." This is good advice for most fiction. Don't start at the beginning of time or with your character's birth, unless that really is the necessary place to start. You might start in the middle of an argument, or a battle, and then carefully develop what that argument was about and why your character was there. Remember, every story has a beginning, a middle, and an end, but every ending is the beginning of something else.

## **What is my Point of View?**

When you start writing a story, the first decision you must make is whether you are going to write in first person, using “I,” or third person, using “he” or “she.” The second decision is whether to write in present tense or past tense. There are five principle points of view (POV). (This part is adapted from: Ursula K. Le Guin. *Steering the Craft: A 21st-Century Guide to Sailing the Sea of Story*. New York: Mariner Books, 2015.)

### *First Person*

In first person narration, the viewpoint character who tells the story is “I.” “I” is a main character. “I” talks to the reader. The reader can only know what “I” sees, feels, perceives, understands, guesses, hears, etc. The reader’s understanding of everything is filtered through the “I.” It may seem easier at first to write in first person because it feels natural. As the writer, you identify with the viewpoint character, and you want your reader to identify with him or her as well. However, writing in first person can be very challenging because you cannot explain things that your character does not or cannot know.

### *Limited Third Person*

In this viewpoint, perception is limited to a main character. The narration is written in third person (he, she) but it functions pretty much like first person because the reader only sees what that character can see. The reader is generally not allowed access to other minds or knowledge beyond what the viewpoint character can know. It is possible to shift viewpoint characters for different parts of the story, but if this is done too much or too quickly, without signals, the reader can become confused. This viewpoint is probably the most common in modern fiction.

### *Omniscient Author*

This viewpoint is written in the third person. The author is not a character in the story, but tells the story from different viewpoints, explains the thoughts and actions of characters, provides context and backstory. This is the oldest form of storytelling. Fairy tales and folk tales are written this way.

### *Fly on the Wall*

Another third person approach. The viewpoint is not a character, but is detached and objective. The narrator does not access the minds of any characters, but gives the reader only what a neutral observer of the action could see or hear or otherwise perceive. This approach might be the easiest for beginners.

### *Observer-Narrator*

This viewpoint can be done in either first or third person. The narrator is a character, but not the main character in the story. The narrator has witnessed the story and wants to tell us about it. Dr. Watson in the Sherlock Holmes stories is a good example.

## *Second Person*

Recently, some writers of fantasy and science fiction have begun experimenting with with second person narration in which the narrator addresses the viewpoint character as “you.” This creates a sort of tension for the reader, who tends to resist being the character addressed in this way. This is difficult, even if done well. Not recommended.

### **What verb tense should I write in?**

Historically, most stories have been told in the past tense. More recently, some writers have thought that writing in the present tense, what is often called the “historical present,” provides more immediacy, more realism (news stories about sports events are often written in the historical present). It is generally easier to write in past tense. Whatever you do, don’t switch back and forth from past to present tense without signaling or without good reasons.

**How will my story be evaluated?** Stories will be evaluated under the following criteria:

- The originality and interest of the “What if?” question.
- The presentation and development of characters.
- The nature of the plot, especially in terms of the nature of the conflict and the problem(s) the character(s) must solve.
- The ability of the writer to use details to suggest a possible world.
- The effectiveness of the style in terms of sentence structure, word choice, etc.
- The quality of your proofreading. In other words, grammatical errors, punctuation problems, misspellings, and awkward sentence structure should not detract from the expression of your ideas. (If you are unsure of your proofreading abilities, an appointment in the University Writing Center is recommended.)

After considering these questions, you are ready to start writing. Some writers start with the “What if?” question, some the character, some the plot, some the problem, some the setting. Some draw maps and plot outlines first. Some just start writing the first scene. You will find your own way to work. A story written in a few weeks, especially by a first time story writer, will not be perfect, but the only way to learn is to start. For this class, your story should be six to eight pages of fiction. If it is not yet a complete story, you should provide in addition an outline that shows where you are going with it.