

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Meeting the genres: Sci-fi, fantasy, and horror
- » Creating characters born for drama and story worlds built for conflict
- » Succeeding as a writer is about more than writing

Chapter **1**

Taking Journeys into the Imagination

This is a book designed to help writers tell stories better.

It's as simple and as complex as that.

Teachers, librarians, parents, and other fans of sci-fi, fantasy, and horror may get a lot from this book, too, but our goal is first and foremost to help writers tell their stories. Our areas of focus are the craft aspects and foundational considerations that increase a writer's ability to create sci-fi, fantasy, and horror stories that matter.

Because good stories matter — we firmly believe that.

Every well-told story is a wondrous journey into the human imagination. Stories are a shared enterprise that brings joy to authors and audiences. A symbiotic experience, we might suggest.

This chapter serves as your portal to the world of sci-fi, fantasy, and horror stories. If you want to create written works of these three genres, then you've come to the right place.

Looking Closer at the Big Three Genres

Three of the most popular creative writing classes we teach are Writing Science Fiction, Writing Fantasy, and Writing Horror. And in the other classes we offer, we frequently attract students who are looking to write and talk about stories with dark elf thieves, robot assassins, or hooded axe-wielding maniacs. Sometimes all in the same story!



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Some people choose to group these three genres under one far larger umbrella called *speculative fiction*, which is a type of story that could've been generated from a "what if?" question because these stories include elements and aspects that don't exist in *consensus reality* (the things people generally agree on about how the world works). That's a fairly basic definition, but the term itself is slippery. Plenty of writers don't fully agree on what it means, which is one reason we don't use it in this book.

Even though other authors may be satisfied to lump sci-fi, fantasy, and horror together, we find it more useful to examine, understand, and appreciate the differences in each as a way to improve your ability to write effective stories. The lines between these genres do blur and overlap, but that's okay — we handle them separately in this book to keep things clear for you.



REMEMBER

And although the three genres do have clear distinctive characteristics, some of those characteristics can overlap in lots of interesting ways. Visit Chapter 27 for more ways to mix, match, and blend story elements to good effect.

One thing all these genres share is an emphasis on the art and craft of worldbuilding, which we cover in detail in Part 2. Chapter 5 explores the idea of creating a very specific world for your story. Chapter 6 combines research with imagination, and shares secret worldbuilding advice from Kenneth Hite, a top gamemaker. Chapter 7 helps you find ways to engage audiences on multiple levels versus sticking to a formula. Worlds can be so rich and robust that they're practically a character, too. That's the idea behind Chapter 8, which explains how worlds actively want something.

The following sections take a closer look at the three genres.

Imagining possible worlds — Sci-fi

Sci-fi stories offer audiences possible other worlds. It's based in or at least inspired by scientific reality as people know it at the time of the writing. The genre goes beyond that, however, to ask "what if?" questions about the future, new technologies, and humanity's place in the universe.



REMEMBER

Before writing your sci-fi story, answer the following questions:

- » **What's the Big New Thing?** At the heart of a great sci-fi story is a science-based development that's vital to the narrative (that's your *Big New Thing*). What ideas do you have for a cool Big New Thing?
- » **How would it change the story world?** Whether it's new tech or a scientific breakthrough, the world should be affected by its creation or use. If not, your Big New Thing probably isn't big enough to carry your story.
- » **Who would care?** At least some people can't ignore the Big New Thing. They should be in awe, be fearful, or have some other significant reactions that will drive them to action.
- » **What conflicts emerge?** Someone wants to corner the market, change the world, oppress those who need oppressing, or just make a quick buck. If someone wants something, someone else is going to try to stop them from getting it, and the Big New Thing should be central to resolving that conflict.

To blast straight into writing sci-fi, visit Part 3, which explores the other possible worlds of science fiction. From the huge “what if?” at the center of every sci-fi story (see Chapter 9) to spaceships and space travel (refer to Chapter 10) to aliens and every type of artificial life (flip to Chapters 11 and 12), it's all here. We even investigate ways to create other planets in general and other Earths in particular — that's Chapter 13. We also get into the idea of dystopias and utopias, two possible futures that audiences like to see come alive through stories.

Imagining wondrous worlds — Fantasy

Fantasy stories give audiences impossible other worlds. In the wondrous worlds of fantasy, consensus reality is shattered to exciting and entertaining ends, which makes room for magic spells, ancient artifacts, and fantastic creatures.



REMEMBER

Here we explore a few questions to help you write fantastic fantasy stories:

- » **What's the impossible thing?** One of the things that makes your story fantasy is the inclusion of something that's impossible for the real world. Unicorns exist. Lightning bolts can be triggered from wands. All brown-eyed people can read minds. Start with one impossible thing and build from there.
- » **What rules does it break and follow?** Thanks to being impossible, it can break all sorts of real-world rules, like physics or the need for sleep. But it can and should have its own rules. What cost does casting a spell require? What weak spot does the otherwise invulnerable dragon have? Limits make the impossible more interesting and dramatic.

- » **How does your main character encounter it?** How the impossible thing manifests needs to matter. Does your character move from a mundane world into one rich with wonder? Is the wondrous all around from page one? Or does the wonder come barreling into the character's normal world, which really mucks things up?
- » **How does the impossible thing relate to your antagonist?** If it's powerful, an antagonist surely wants it. Or maybe it's something that was simply theirs, and they want it back. In any event, wondrous, impossible things should only be included if they have meaning to characters and the story world. They shouldn't just be flavor text or props.

To transport audiences to carefully built worlds populated with rich characters and potential conflicts, fly on over to Part 4 where we peer into the wondrous world of fantasy. How do you get to the fantastic? Portals, intrusions, and immersions (see Chapter 14). How the @!#\$! do you create a magic system? Think in terms of rules and costs (go to Chapter 15). Those fantasy worlds are intimidating, so how do you create a good one? The key is to think of what makes a story-rich world (refer to Chapter 16). What about those wild monsters and creatures they have? We cover those brutes in Chapter 17.

Imagining fearful worlds — Horror

Horror stories offer audiences terrifying worlds. Sometimes the scary stuff in a horror story could indeed happen (serial killers, plagues, cults, and ruthless corporations), whereas in some horror stories, it couldn't (demons, ghosts, zombies, and witches). Regardless of the pathway to terror a writer chooses, a quality horror story will make audiences quake with fear and plead to keep the lights on at night. Just in case.



REMEMBER

Here are some questions to get you thinking about a prevalent horror story type — the discovery plot:

- » **What's the mystery that launches the story?** The key discovery of this mystery (a missing child? a murder? a stolen artifact?) launches the characters into a larger story where they need to confront and survive a horrible truth they've uncovered.
- » **How does the mystery connect to your character's core want?** An easy way to do this is to make it personal — the missing child is their niece. Or the murder happened on their property. Or the artifact is their family heirloom. Regardless of your specific choices, the character should only be able to ignore it at great personal cost.

- » **How do clues and discoveries create a sense of dread?** The deeper your characters go into the story, the more foreboding and menace they should encounter. Really amp up the fear. Audiences know the protagonists have no choice but to plunge ahead (thanks to that core want driving them along).
- » **What terrible thing happens?** It's a horror story, after all, so audiences expect something terrible. A death cult wreaks havoc on a seaside community. A demon is summoned from beneath the museum of antiquities. What do your characters do in response?

To find out more about crafting hair-raising stories, we dare you to step into Part 5 that introduces you to the world of horror. We start with core audience reactions — dread, fear, and terror (see Chapter 18). We then focus on the emotional sources of fear, which includes a look at the cathartic effect of being scared (refer to Chapter 19). We face menacing monsters and equally menacing human horrors (head to Chapter 20). We investigate the many environments where unsuspecting folks may encounter horror, from haunted houses to vampire lairs to abandoned moon colonies to Himalayan mountain caves to the weird house three down from yours in Chapter 21.

Creating Characters

What people tend to remember most about stories are the characters they love. Chapter 2 reveals all you need to know to create characters worthy of great stories. *Minor spoiler:* Characters need to have a goal they're willing to work hard for, and they need to be flawed. No one's that interested in reading about perfect people who've got their act together.



REMEMBER

What audiences want is to follow along with a character who's relatable and who's doing things that matter. They want engaging characters they can hope and fear for all the way to the end. That only happens when characters are interesting. Chapter 2 also offers advice on picking the best point of view, using telling details, and crafting strong dialogue. It's a one-stop shop for all your character-making needs.

Great characters need great conflicts. And conflicts are the engine of story — making those is what Chapter 3 is all about. We examine the DNA of story conflict, showcase effective pre-existing story structures, and make an argument for the importance of character arcs. We also share our best tips for pacing, explain the various types of scenes, and look at beginnings, middles, and ends (and how to create them, of course).

Pursuing Writerly Success

We want more for you than just helping you become far more knowledgeable about sci-fi, fantasy, and horror. That's worthwhile, of course, but to be a successful writer means you regularly do things that professional writers do. That's where Part 6 of this book comes into play.

These sections give you an overview of what you can do to be a better writer.

Revising your words

No one's perfect, and you shouldn't have that level of expectation for yourself on a first or even an early draft. But when it's time to get those words under control, we recommend that you do the following:

- » **Read your work aloud.** Whether you're doing the reading or someone else is, your ears will catch things your eyes somehow miss.
- » **Take notes.** When rereading your work, make a to-do list of things to work on later versus fixing issues as you find them. Trying to fix it all as you go is too overwhelming.
- » **Track themes.** Use highlighters, sticky notes, or a color-coded spreadsheet to keep track of your themes. Do they really say what you intended to? Are there places for them to be elevated and enhanced?
- » **Revisit characterization.** Make sure that every character is consistent and believable. Are the descriptions effective? Do they have their own way of speaking, acting, and thinking?
- » **Know when to stop revising.** There's a point where you've done all you can, and further work isn't making things better — just different.

Chapter 22 shows you how to revise and edit like a pro. Doing that is a must if you want your work to be published or presented to an audience. We discuss revision plans, revising for theme, editing your scenes, sentences, and words, and much more.

Turning to pros for help

Although doing everything on your own may seem important or even glamorous, that's not how most stories are made. Writers are definitely expected to do a lot, yes, but they should know when it's appropriate to bring in outside help.



REMEMBER

Here are just some of the types of pros they turn to for expert guidance and input:

- » **Developmental editor:** These story gurus specialize in improving the structure and content of your story. They also have marketplace insight and use that to ensure you're able to make the best story possible.
- » **Proofreader:** These folks go way beyond your software's spellcheck features and ensure your writing is free of typographical, grammatical, spelling, syntax, and formatting errors.
- » **Sensitivity reader:** If you're writing about members of any marginalized group, a sensitivity reader can scrutinize your story for insensitive, incorrect, offensive, or out-of-date portrayals. Even if you're a member of that group, a fresh perspective can still be quite useful.
- » **Subject-area experts:** These people do and know things few others can appreciate . . . until you need that information for a story. Think NASA astrobiologists, forensic anthropologists, and prosthetists.
- » **University researchers:** Even though these experts may not be in the field, they know as much — or more! — than those doing so. And they love to talk about what they're researching, teaching, and writing about.

Getting quality outside assistance and guidance is often invaluable in helping you get your work to its highest level. Turn to Chapter 23 for more details.

Focusing on the three Ps

The three Ps are important parts of your writing journey. In no particular order, they are as follows:

- » **Pitching:** A *pitch* is the bite-sized, most compelling version of your story in verbal or written form. It's often called an *elevator pitch* because you should be able to deliver it in 30 seconds or less (about the duration of a normal elevator ride).
- » **Publication:** This is your goal with writing stories, whether publication is book form, live performance, audio production, or any of the other main delivery options to get your work before audiences.
- » **Promotion:** Selling yourself as a writer and your work as worthwhile is a skill all on its own. Those who develop this gift really reap the rewards.

Chapter 24 explains the three Ps in much greater detail. We're really getting into industry stuff here, which is something you don't need to worry about much until you've got a complete draft of a manuscript that you're extremely proud of, and you want to get it out in the world. Until then, agents and publishing house editors aren't something in which you should invest much time.

Setting the right goals for you

Your success as a writer is going to be different than that of another writer. You may share a few common goals with others, but some specific goals are uniquely theirs. Set your own goals and figure out what you want to do with your stories. To help get a handle on your relationship with writing, consider the following questions:

- » Why do you want to write?
- » What can you write that nobody else can?
- » What type of writing do you find most rewarding?
- » Does it matter who — or how many people — connect with your writing?
- » Is writing a hobby, a part-time thing, or something you want to do as a full-time career?
- » If people read your stories, does it matter if your writing makes money?



WARNING

One mistake we see students and early-career writers make is solely thinking about big picture success, like writing a blockbuster movie, penning a bestselling book, or creating the next Netflix hit series. We hope those outcomes are in your future, but for most, they're still a long way off. If that's your benchmark of success, you may feel like a failure because you may feel as if you're making little to no progress because the target remains so far away.

Instead, we suggest you create a series of goals that are organized by the amount of time and energy they require, such as:

- » **Short-term goals:** Finish reading this book. Practice 30 minutes of morning journaling for a week. Come up with five story ideas. Select one idea and create an outline for the entire story. For five days straight, write 300 words of that story each day.
- » **Medium-term goals:** Revise, deepen, and enhance the story outline. Write 300 words of that story each day for a month. Repeat for the next month. And the next. And then the next one after that.
- » **Long-term goals:** Complete the entire first draft. Enlist two smart readers to give thoughtful feedback on your story. Revise the story draft in response to their comments, with the goal of cutting 10 percent of the total word count.

Having a series of measurable goals like these — that you celebrate when you achieve! — helps you avoid burnout, create accountability, and track your progress. Add in your own motivation and passion, and you should be well on your way toward making writing stories a meaningful part of your life, whatever that looks like.

THREE TYPES OF SUCCESSFUL STORIES

The incredibly prolific children's author Jane Yolen — who also writes a lot of science fiction and fantasy stories — talks about the three different types of books she writes:

- **Head books:** She creatively chews on a problem or idea that interests her.
- **Heart books:** She engages with something she's deeply passionate about.
- **Pocket books:** These are books she knows will be highly commercial.

If you wrote a head story but made little or no money on it, would that be okay? What if a heart story also brought you little or no money? Is there a way for you to write a head or heart story and have it be a pocket story?

The only good answers are the honest ones you tell yourself. Make sure you create a bull's-eye that's right for you as a writer. Then keep it in sight as you work on your craft and write the best stories you can. If your goals ever change, that's fine. Adjust as needed, and then keep writing. It's also smart to review your goals at least twice a year, if not more.

There are many ways to be successful, and we want you to pursue the ones that make sense for you and you alone. That's the correct route to take.



REMEMBER

When creating goals, think about the acronym SMART: Each goal should be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely. Do that, and you're well on your way of generating ideas, writing stories, and hitting deadlines.

Making the Most of This Book

We spent a lot of time contemplating how to ensure this book is useful from the first to the final page. Our goal was to create a fluff-less writing how-to book. We think this is it.

One way to engage with this book is to read it cover to cover, from start to finish. We'd be more than pleased if you did exactly that. There's a lot packed into here that can help new, intermediate, and advanced writers. In one big bite or many smaller meals, devour it all if you will.

But we also realize you may wish to focus on certain things first. That's a fine option, as well. Feel free to review the table of contents and plunge into the parts you need on a case-by-case basis.

You can also mix and match parts of this book to tailor-make a learning situation to suit a specific goal. For example, if you want to write your own urban fantasy (a story where supernatural/magical elements occur in a real-world city setting), you can build a reading list like this:

- » **Chapter 2:** How do you create a main character who goes where she shouldn't and engages in activities others quite reasonably avoid? Give her a powerful reason to seek an audience with a fairy criminal underboss.
- » **Chapter 7:** What's the best way to show how dangerous these fairies are? Put them in some kind of violent altercation so the main character — and the audience — can witness it and say, "Wow, those fairies are bad*ss!"
- » **Chapter 10:** What type of society do the fairies have? Let the interpersonal dynamic options of a spaceship's crew offer suggestions for how fairies might interact in close quarters with each other as they stay out of sight of normal humans.
- » **Chapter 16:** How does fairy magic work in a modern world? For a story where magic is quite rare, develop a magic system that has dramatic, interesting costs that justifies why magic isn't more prevalent.
- » **Chapter 20:** How can the fairy court be as unnerving as possible? Let them personify and fully embody a societal flaw.

If you're more inclined to try your hand at creating an untraditional haunted house story, such as an abandoned spaceship recently discovered in orbit around the third moon of Saturn, the following is an ideal reading agenda:

- » **Chapter 2:** No one travels way out in space alone, so who should accompany the main character? Provide companions to support, protect, and serve as confidantes as things get weird way out there in space.
- » **Chapter 6:** How can the derelict ship itself be uniquely interesting? Make it like every other spaceship that audiences know of, yet change one big thing that fits the mood and themes of this story.
- » **Chapter 10:** In what way can the ship be inhospitable and unwelcoming? Take away the comforts most ships offer, such as artificial gravity and a functioning life support system.
- » **Chapter 17:** What role might the monsters — whatever they are — play on this abandoned ship? The monsters may serve as obstacles to answering the larger more deadly question of what happened to the crew.

» **Chapter 21:** How may the ship itself be a fear-generating environment? Use shifting structures to keep the main character (and whomever is still alive at this point) unsettled.

Our intention is for this book to have what you need for you to write great sci-fi, fantasy, and horror stories. Taken as a whole, the book is a comprehensive take on exactly that, but the individual parts are versatile and can work together to troubleshoot a specific problem or create a particular type of story or story effect.

