

Fantasy

An Introduction to Writing Your Own Story!

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Note from the Author

This e-book came about when I was asked to give a talk about fantasy writing. I was given a list of questions by a friend who organised author tours and visits in the U.S. at the time. I was told these were the most-asked questions by those who came to listen to authors speak.

Many other books go into detail about plot, structure, characterisation and more. This e-book is intended to give an overview and helpful hints for the very beginning writer.

It can also, and has been, used for classroom tuition of first basic fantasy writing techniques.

This e-book is intentionally short. It is not a finite resource – but a great place to start.

Where to Get Ideas – and Will They Be Any Good?

A good idea is usually the basis of a story. Without an idea you probably don't have a story to tell. The first question an author usually gets asked (after 'How old are you?') is 'Where do you get your ideas?'

Ideas come from anywhere, anytime, anything. This list is just a basic sample of where ideas can come from. Try one, try them all!

Postcards

It's not so common to get these now, but you may find a drawer full from years gone by. This also works well with old family photos, or photos of people you don't know at all! Advertisements in magazines are great too.

Pick a postcard with an interesting scene. It's best if there's a person in the picture, but okay if not.

Make up a new name for the location, a name for the person.

What were they doing just before the picture was taken/painted?

Where are they going?

Why are they there?

How do they feel right now?

What if you were suddenly in that picture too?

What if the person, animal or thing was suddenly in the room with you?

People watching

This one is easy. When you go out you'll find a wealth of story ideas in the shopping malls, parks and anywhere that people gather.

Stop for a few minutes, sit on a bench or lean against a wall and just watch the people around you. Be careful not to stare or be intrusive – nobody likes a nosy-parker!

Do this with a friend or just write down your observations.

Give them names, occupations, etc

Where were they ten minutes ago?

If they have bags or parcels – what could be inside? Who is it for?

Why are they here?

What are they thinking?

Do they like the people they are with? Is it their family or have they just met?

Where would they rather be?

Events

Look in the daily paper. There are hundreds of headlines each day that could be converted into a unique story. Don't just look at the main headlines; look at the small one-paragraph snippets too. A story about a long lost pet reunited with its owner may spark a story idea for you.

Other stories

Yes, it's okay to get ideas from other people's stories. As long as you don't use their story or characters it's possible to spin off a story off your own.

Change it up – take a story and change the setting/time/ages/etc.

Romeo and Juliet in the 21st Century would be a very different story.

Pinocchio – have the boy turn into a puppet instead – and in a future setting.

Read other books in the same genre that you like to write. The more you read, the more your imagination will grow and it helps to have a huge imagination to write.

Is this the right idea for my story?

There are many hundreds of other ways to get a story idea of course. But once you have your idea you will wonder if it's the one to write about. Some questions you might ask yourself are:

Do YOU like it?

This is an important one. If you don't like it you can't expect other people to.

Has it been done before?

This isn't a bad thing as long as it wasn't too recent but do you bring something new to the idea? Is it better, more interesting?

Is it topical?

Does it coincide with a current event?

Is it related to the country in which you are hoping to publish it?

Do your characters and plot seem real? Will people care enough about them to read right to the end?

Does it have a satisfying end?

What is and isn't Fantasy – and by Whose Standards?

We decide for ourselves if a story is fantasy or not. What some people consider fantasy, others would class as Science Fiction. Deciding between them is something you do if you want to. If it's a good story, don't worry about it – let others decide which one it is.

However if you're determined to classify it, here are some ideas on how to work it out.

Fantasy stories have characters and events which CANNOT happen in the real world. They can only exist in our imaginations.

Science Fiction stories start with what we know to be true about the real world and ask us to believe in new possibilities. Sci-Fi looks out from where we are now and imagines what MIGHT happen.

Extreme examples of the difference are:

Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll (Fantasy of course)

The Time Machine by HG Wells

Somewhere in the middle of these two the line between fantasy and Sci-fi blur - but if you stick to this final difference then you will always know which it is.

Fantasy MUST be the overriding theme of the book. It CANNOT happen in real life.

Fantasy has Rules – What are They and Why Use Them?

1. You can have wizards, witches, flying nannies, giants and fairy godmothers in fantasy. Even talking trees are acceptable but some things are not.

It must be BELIEVABLE TO THE READER. If it isn't, then they won't read it.

Readers of fantasy have become experts at what they expect from fantasy and what they won't tolerate. If you have flying giants, pixies taller than trees, trolls who live in treetops – it will go beyond the limits of what fantasy readers will accept.

2. Magical Characters - They can't be magical ALL the time. Have them 'normal' a large portion of the time. They need to deal with issues all normal beings deal with. The reader needs to identify with the character in some way.

Harry Potter. He can do magic, but not when he is away from school. He has to deal with family problems, bullies and many 'normal' things which he can't solve with magic.

Keep the balance right and it will work out perfectly.

3. The characters in your story must believe in the fantasy elements within it. If they don't believe it – then the reader won't either.

4. The characters magical qualities CAN NOT EXIST IN REAL LIFE. It's not magical, or fantasy, if it can happen in real life.

Do You Create the Fantasy World First – or the Characters?

Neither way is wrong but each has different approaches.

CHARACTER

If you start with a character it can limit the setting or fantasy world in which the story can take place.

If your character is a fish (Nemo) then your setting/world is most likely to start in the ocean.

Sometimes this can be a good thing. Having too many choices at the beginning of a story can make it hard to actually START WRITING.

FANTASY WORLD

If you start with the setting or fantasy world it can work just as well.

Define your world. Is it similar or different to our world... how?

Is it set in a jungle / desert / Ice-capped mountains / etc

What sort of characters would live in a world like this?

When Building a fantasy world try to avoid 'WORLD BUILDERS' disease.

It's okay to draw a map or two to help keep your fantasy world more vivid in your head.

It's also okay to have different ways of speaking or naming conventions for different areas within your world.

BUT STOP if you find yourself building intricate political/religious/social structures if they aren't important to the story. Avoid having your characters speaking two totally different languages unless you are sure you can carry it off successfully.

Most often, keeping your fantasy world simple is the best option to start with. You can add small details and bigger changes later on if the story requires them.

Setting the Fantasy Scene

Whenever your characters go somewhere new or revisit a familiar place it is important that the reader can picture it as well.

As a writer we know what we can see in our minds – the trick is to project that to the reader in words.

The five senses are the key to making sure the reader sees what you see.

SIGHT / SOUND / SMELL / TOUCH / TASTE

SIGHT

Tell the reader what you see. Spatial dimension is usually the first thing we notice.

Is the ceiling high or low, is there one at all?

How far can we see? Up to the horizon or only a short distance to a brick wall?

Are there objects in view?

Then we usually notice if it is light or dark or maybe full of shadows.

Is there a high wall with only a small, dirty window to let in the light?

Also we see colours. Is the light glaringly white? Does the colour of the grass blend in with the monster heading your way?

Contrasts of colours are sometimes a key point. Any object which is backed by a bright light will show as a black, shadowy shape instead of its natural colour.

A red fire engine seems more vivid if it is against a white building.

A sea of umbrellas on a rainy day... all black except one which is yellow.

SOUND

After sight we know that what we can hear is important.

Is there any sound? Is it loud or soft? Sweet or harsh? Why?

Is it from a single source or is it a complex multi-sound?

A lone singer or a choir with a backing orchestra.

A jackhammer on a quiet street or a busy building site.

A child reading aloud on their own or a school playground at lunchtime.

Is the sound nearby or far away? Muffled or designed to startle the reader?

How does it make your character react to these sounds? Afraid, happy, remembering an event in the past?

SMELL

Thirdly we notice smell. It is often overlooked in real life. We usually only notice strong odours – either pleasant or foul – but they are important to set some scenes.

A forest scene is more vivid if you add the smell of pine and rotting fallen leaves.

The smoke from a fire is often smelt before the flames are seen.

A smell can instil fear, happiness or many other emotions.... Use smell where it works best.

TOUCH

What does your character feel / touch? This is a physical sense and adds depth.

Is the rain cold on their face, or does it soak right through their clothes?

Is the ground so hot it is burning right through their shoes?

They have just walked into a low tree-branch – did it hurt? Where? What happened?

TASTE

Not as often used but on occasions it can be the icing on a cake when describing your scene.

Can they taste the sulphuric metallic taste when they reach the bubbling mud pools?

When they are offered a magical drink, or potion, is it bitter, sweet, reminds them of their mother's cough medicine?

The sea tastes salty when you get an unexpected mouthful.

These five senses, used well, can build your scene and show the reader how you are picturing it yourself.

Cycle of Tension and Release

All stories, whether fantasy or not, use a system of tension and release to build up their story and bring you to the final moment of the story.

If there isn't enough tension, or it fades away completely the reader loses interest in the story.

The first thing a story MUST do is HOOK the reader. The hook is a very important part of the story and it should ideally be in the first page of the book, or in the first chapter at the very least.

So what is a hook? A hook is a way to get the reader interested, to grab their attention and offer them a part of a puzzle that just HAS to be solved. You want them to think 'I have to read this find out what happens'. A couple of good examples are more easily shown by movies.

THE TENTH KINGDOM

As this movie starts an invisible Troll is bludgeoning prison guards in a dingy prison and releasing the evil queen. Why? What is going to happen? This ensures readers/viewers will want more.

STAR WARS

The first scene of this movie is a tiny spaceship being shot at by a huge one that flies over and seems to go on forever. Everyone wants the little guy to beat the big bad guy and the reader (or viewer in this case) will want to carry on to make sure it happens.

Then starts the cycle of

OBSTACLE - PLAN - SUCCESS / FAILURE

Usually followed by more increasingly challenging OBSTACLES... ..bigger PLANS and more spectacular SUCCESS / FAILURE.

This carries on right up to the big finale.

If you release the tension too early it will kill the story. The good guy can't win on his first attempt or it would be a very short story.

Example:

The King wanted the dragon killed. He calls for the dragon slayer who hops on a horse, rides over the hill and throws a sword at the beast. It drops dead and everyone lives happily ever after.

Not much of a story!!

Give the hero(s) something to fight against. Something to improve on and a chance to show they can overcome anything thrown at them. They are a hero, let them prove it!

Mixing the Real World and Fantasy Worlds

Triggers

If you want your story to move between the real world and a fantasy one you will need triggers that take your character from one world to the next.

The Lion Witch and the Wardrobe

The trigger used in this story is a wardrobe. They go in one world and come out in the other.

The Black Knight

The trigger here is when he falls into the moat and comes out in a lake in the other world (actually the past of his real world but still in a fantasy theme as it CANNOT happen in real life)

The Tenth Kingdom

Here the trigger is a large mirror which can only be seen from one side.

If you stay in the one fantasy world these triggers aren't needed but it's good to know about them for future stories.

Fantasy Objects.

Objects – simple everyday items – can become very important in fantasy. Giving magical qualities to an object is a major part of plotting.

What magical qualities would you give to the following items?

Ring

Pair of gloves

Bicycle

Box of chocolates

Watch

Television

Umbrella

Remember – a magical quality is something that CANNOT exist in the real world.

How could this object be used in your fantasy world?

Is it good or evil?

Who will use it?

Do they already have it or do they have to go and find it?

Using magical objects can create a richer, better story – as long as they fit the story.

Fantasy Creatures

We all know the accepted fantasy creatures:

Elves

Fairies

Giants

Unicorns

Witches

Dragons

And more...

Sticking to these is fine. There is always another story to be told with these creatures. Try to mix and match them so it doesn't sound too familiar to the readers.

Try putting giants with unicorns or dragons with fairies...

You could also create new fantasy creatures. Be aware this can be tricky. Making creatures that the reader will believe is a delicate balance. Perhaps simply giving a different characteristic to an existing fantasy creature will be enough. A Giant with an inferiority complex, or a Fairy who likes to dig tunnels?

If you're keen you can try changing the physical appearance of the creatures.

Naming Your Characters

In other genres this isn't such an important thing – although it is always important to get the right name for your character.

In fantasy they carry a more important meaning. They let you know the character is from a different place / world than where the reader lives.

If you have a fantasy world where people can fly, rocks can talk, magic is everywhere – would you really call your main character Bob or Joe? Names such as Zhan and Djana are far more exotic and 'otherworldly'. One big exception to this is if your main character is from the real world and travels to the fantasy world. He / she would of course, have a more commonly used name.

Hard to pronounce names are also difficult for the reader. If they stop every time they need to work out how to say a name it will interrupt the story and possibly put them off. Difficult names often have multiple consonants or vowels together. Hrfida, Eaarorn, Pfydho. It may look fancy, but if you can't pronounce it – try again!

Places

Are there different places within your fantasy world? People who live in the mountains and others who live way down in the swamplands?

Try having names that are easily identified as one place or the other. Naming conventions are good for this. One place could have names that all use double consonants (Djana, Llored) and the other without. (Saran, Torek).

Animals / Creatures / People

All three categories need different types of names. Magical creatures are special. They deserve special names. You might think twice before you call a dragon 'Fido' or 'George'. Try Brightflame or Starchaser. It works much better.

Equally wizards wouldn't want to be called Ben or Michael. Unusual names work best for wizards... often starting with least used letters of the alphabet (Z, X, Y, V) Zared, Xaro.

Research – Do You Need to do it for Fantasy? Why?

Some settings in fantasy stories can be made up but a lot actually needs to be researched.

If your story is set in a society based on medieval times you will need to know what it was like to live in such a time. How did they dress, who was important, who wasn't – and why, what were living conditions like?

Of course you can make most of it up but to sound convincing it should have at least a base of truth beneath it.

Alternatively if it is in the future you will need to have a good understanding of more technical ideas and inventions. Avoid the slip into Science Fiction when your writing is set in the future... remember the overall theme must be fantasy which CANNOT happen in real life.

Certain plots can mean research too.

If you have your main character stuck out in a desert and desperately searching for water – he needs to know how to find it. Find out how people actually find water in a desert, is it easy, or hard, where is it? How long can a person last out in a desert without water? What effects would it have on them after 1 day... 2 days etc...?

What to do with False Starts that go Nowhere

NEVER, EVER, throw them away.

Keep them all in a file or a box. When there are a few in there, mix them together. Often when one idea on its own doesn't work it will suddenly spring to life when another idea (or character) is added to it.

If a story falters further into the story – dig into your box and see if you can revive it with one of the ideas (or characters) you put in there already.

You will probably need to alter the idea (or character) to fit the new story but it will kick things started again.

Sometimes a false start doesn't mean the end to that idea. Before you toss it in your ideas box... Jump ahead into the story and try again from a different point. You may have started the story in the wrong place. Jump to an action scene and see what happens. You can always go back and fill in the gap if it works out. Try telling the story from a different viewpoint. Who is your main character? Are they the right voice or the right main character for this story? Would it be better told by another character? Maybe even a narrator? The opening scene isn't as important as you might think when you're starting out – at least in the first draft. Just keep writing and see where it goes.

As you write your story the storyline will change – it always does! – so, often what you thought was the beginning turns out to be wrong. Make notes of what you want the beginning to achieve, and then just keep writing. You can fix up the beginning later.

If you really like your idea and don't want to toss it in the Ideas Box or just keep writing... try this. Write down the numbers 1 to 10 on the left side of a blank page.

Then write ten ideas of what MIGHT happen next. It doesn't have to be possible, or even very likely. Make them funny, ridiculous even. Once you have the ideas started you'll get to ten without a problem.

Look back at the list. I am willing to bet that at least two or three of the ideas have real potential and will kick start the story.

How to Tell When your Story is Finished

A first draft is never a finished story... REWRITE – REWRITE – REWRITE

Plot

Has the main problem of the story been solved?

Did the main character solve it?

Does the ending answer all the questions it needs to?

Was the problem solved too easily? Will the reader be disappointed?

Does the story deliver the ending it promised?

If your characters are building up to a big duel, you can't have them decide to solve their grievances at the last minute with a game of tiddlywinks or just shake hands and forgive each other. It may be very P. C. but your readers will feel cheated.

If you don't want them duelling at the end - don't lead the story in that direction or at least have a few hints that things may end amicably after all. Let the reader know this is a possibility rather than springing it on them at the end.

Characters

Do we know what the characters look like?

Drop reminders throughout the story to remind the reader.

His red hair clashed with the green jacket he was given to wear.

He wasn't sure the horse would carry someone as fat as the king.

(This may seem an obvious question but it is surprising how often a writer forgets the reader can't see in their mind. What colour is their hair / skin / eyes...? How do they dress? Are they tall / short / fat / skinny / old / young?)

Have the relationships between the characters grown / changed? Did they need to?

Do the characters learn and grow each time they try to solve the problem in the story?

Do ALL the characters act to the best of their abilities? A badguy doesn't stop trying to thwart the goodguy – ever.

After all that

READ IT ALOUD

This will show you where it flags, falters and just how believable it all sounds. If you can't read it aloud it probably isn't finished.

When you can read it to a family member, the mirror, or the cat and not cringe or falter....

IT IS FINISHED!!

Workshop Ideas

The following ideas have been used in classroom situations, but are just as valid for adults too. They may not kick off the best-selling novel of all time, but they will let you see that you don't have to stress too much over the basics of getting the story started.

WORKSHOP # 1

Take a blank sheet of paper. Choose story elements from the following lists.

Example

Character 1: Dragon
Characteristics: Old, Sad
Character 2: Giant
Characteristics: A Big Chicken, Messy
Setting: Dungeon
Fantasy Elements: Magical Sword, Magical Spells
Problem: Search for something that was stolen
Obstacles: The clue had two meanings and they got it wrong

CHARACTERS (PICK 1 GOOD AND 1 BAD)

Dragon
Knight
Princess
Elf
Witch
Human Child
Sea Monster
Giant
Wizard
Servant
King
Queen
Fairy
Troll

CHARACTERISTICS (PICK 2 OR 3)

Young
Old
Snobby
Always Happy
Greedy
Selfish
Generous
Sad
Lonely
Mischievous
Strong-Willed
Determined

Courageous
A Big Chicken
Messy

SETTING (PICK ONE – (for now))

Castle
Desert
Busy City Street
Swamp
Wealthy Neighbourhood
Back Alley
Slums
Jungle
Under the Ocean
Mountain Top
In a Dungeon
Stranded on a Wrecked Ship
Farm
Orphanage
Dark Alleyway
Flying in a Hot Air Balloon
Busy Marketplace

FANTASY ELEMENTS

WHAT MAKES IT A FANTASY SETTING
(PICK AS MANY AS YOU WANT)

Fantasy Characters
Golden Touch
Magic Spells
Spinning Straw to Gold
Talk to Animals
Magical Objects (Sword, ring, hat, shoes, etc.)
Talking Trees

PROBLEM TO BE SOLVED (PICK ONE MAIN IDEA)

Search for something that was stolen
Stop the evil character from succeeding in their plan
Find something on a secret map
Restore an object to its rightful owner before a deadline passes
Avert a disaster which only the main character can do (Either a natural or magical disaster)
Help someone escape the evil character

WHAT OBSTACLES MIGHT THEY COME ACROSS?

Evil character finds out their plan and beats them there
They find they are missing something important and have to go back
Someone steals something they need
Something they do causes an even bigger problem
Their clue had two meanings and they got it wrong
The person they want to help is gone – or doesn't want their help

This is only a basic plot beginning. It will lead you to a much more involved plot but you have to start with the basics or you will get confused and mixed up and never even start the story.
Now, write one or two paragraphs using the choices you made.

WORKSHOP # 2

This is best done with a group of at least three or more.

STORY TAG

Write your name on a blank sheet of paper. Then write the starter line you chose. Write two more sentences to add to this story.

Hand the paper to the next person.

They write two more sentences. Limit time to two minutes each person.

After about five changes of person, the next person must end it in two sentences.

NOTE: avoid the 'They all fell off the cliff' ending. Be creative.

Hand the sheet back to the name at the top of the paper

This does not have to be read out. It is to show how different perspectives on a story can change it completely. How close to your original idea is it?

PICK ONE OF THE FOLLOWING STORY STARTERS.

The king stepped out of the shadows. 'I've been waiting for you,' he said to the dragonslayer.

When the boys finally dragged themselves over the huge boulders – the dragon's nest was empty.

The young witch unwrapped her new broom and stared at it in dismay.

As the wizard entered the troll's magic shop he looked around the dark room for the item he needed.

The knight took a step backwards in confusion. He hadn't expected the dragon to cry.

They stood in the deep hole and realised it was a giant footprint.

The princess ran from the castle. How could they shoot arrows at her beloved unicorn?

The young girl rubbed the lamp in delight. There just HAD to be a genie inside.

The dragon saw something shiny in the sand and picked it up – then wished he hadn't!

A tightly rolled scroll was tied with a ribbon. Slowly I untied it, dreading what it might say.

At the bottom of the old tin was half a yellowed, torn map. I knew just who had the other half.

The compass wasn't pointing north as it should be. It led them right into the dark swamp.

It seemed like the only escape. With a deep breath the prince leapt out of the castle window.

It said 'Book of Spells' on the cover. Surely there was no such thing?

WORKSHOP #3

TEN DIFFERENT WAYS TO SAY THE SAME THING.

Sometimes you need to keep letting the reader know something but want to avoid repeating yourself over and over again. In this exercise we are finding different ways of saying the same thing.

For example - the weather. Is it hot or cold in your story? Blistering Hot? So cold they're going blue?

It's not great to keep saying IT WAS HOT. Or IT WAS COLD, or IT WAS RAINING.

Find ten different ways of saying one of these three phrases, without using the words

Hot

Cold

Rain

Example

His fingers were so numb he had trouble untying the horse's reins.

He ate his ice-cream as fast as he could, but it still melted all over his hands.

Her clothes were soaked within seconds of stepping outside.

Try these ones as well.

I was angry

I am sad

He was mean

He was tall

She is short

She was late

They ate fast

They ran away

Now it's over to you.

Read. Read. Read.

Write. Write. Write.

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