GUIDANCE AND ADVICE FROM THE EXPERTS

FANTASY WRITING 101

Guidance and Advice from the Experts
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THE ONLY CREATIVE WRITING COURSE I TOOK IN COLLEGE WAS A DISASTER.
And I knew it would be a disaster on the very first day, when the professor strode into the room and announced, “In this class, you can write anything you want—except sci fi or fantasy. Because I refuse to read any stories where everything is solved with a magic wand or a ray gun.” Which, frankly, is so far and away not what fantasy and science fiction is about that I remain shocked that he was considered such an authority on writing.

The point of fantasy isn’t that magic can solve all problems. In fact, more often than not, magic is the problem. But any good fantasy will tell you that magic comes at a price. And it’s that price that is the heart of the story.

Most stories—most art—is either a mirror or a window. Either the story allows you to see inside a world you’d never otherwise know, or it’s a mirror that reflects our own world. And even if most fantasy literally takes its readers to whole new worlds, most fantasy is also a mirror, reflecting our world. Magic may not be our world, but the idea behind it—the price of magic—is something that reflects our own values. Fantasy may tell a story about how far a character will go for their magic, but it’s really asking how far you would go.

When I started writing *Give the Dark My Love*, this is exactly what I was thinking about. My main character, Nedra, ultimately is faced with a choice: When her alchemy isn’t strong enough to save lives, should she start to raise the dead?

Necromancy isn’t exactly an option here on real, alchemy-less Earth. But if it was... would you? How far would you have to be pushed—who would you have to lose—before you walked down the same dark path presented to Nedra in *Give the Dark My Love*?

When I first started writing—before that disastrous creative writing class in college—I thought that when I told my stories, I had to be sure to hold up that mirror high. I beat my reader over the head with these Great Ideas (TM) that I had. But if I could go back in time, I would tell myself that’s not needed. It’s not the author’s job to figure out what answer the reader is supposed to have. It’s only the author’s job to present the questions. It’s the reader who finds the answers. And there are as many potential answers in a book as there are readers. More, actually, because the answer a reader finds the first time they read a book may not be the same one the second or third or fifteenth.

And while I’m going back in time, I’d stop by my college years and visit that professor. I’d make him see *Fullmetal Alchemist* and ask him to tell me how magic solved all the problems of the characters. I doubt he could have lasted past Nina. But just in case that didn’t convince him, I’d show him Laini Taylor’s *Strange the Dreamer*, where there...
is no winner in a generational-long magical war. I’d make him read Leigh Bardugo or Kendare Blake’s fantasies, as bloody and raw as any story without magic. I’d give him *The Glass Spare* by Lauren DeStefano, where magic makes everything far worse and solves literally nothing at all.

I would make him read that one scene in *The Hero* and *The Crown* by Robin McKinley, after Aerin faces the dragon.

And hopefully, after all that, he’d know that fantasy isn’t about magical unicorns frolicking around and every problem solved with a flick of a wand.

Fantasy is dark. Thanos himself would approve of how perfectly balanced a good fantasy is—for every spell that solves a problem, a price must be paid or another problem must be presented. Every good magic system has rules that precisely prevents it from being a solve-all.

As you write your own fantasies, remember the costs and consequences of magic (whatever form magic takes in your worlds). But also remember that the price of magic plays into the nature of your story. Your characters all walk along the edge of the mirror that reflects our world, and the choices they make remind your readers of the choices they would one day make. We may never be able to carry the One Ring, or fight a dragon, or descend into the darkness of necromancy, but by reading of the characters that do, we peer unblinkingly into the mirror.

These are action scenes you can’t look away from. The tension is high, the fighting is dynamic, and the cinematography is gorgeous. And then there are the characters—eyes blazing, knuckles tense around weapons. They fight until they have nothing left to give, or they give themselves up to the blade, because it’s the right thing to do.

But the scenes are memorable not just because the fighting is impressive or the settings are lush or the emotions are high—but because we journey with the characters. We feel their anticipation, their trepidation, and their rage.

The same is true of fight scenes on paper—except we don’t have the benefit of sound and cinematography. We have to translate three dimensions to two, and still make readers feel the tension. So how do we do it?

We go back to the basics.

**ALWAYS REMEMBER THE REASON**

An action scene isn’t just a comma between acts. It can also help a character learn, change the stakes, or increase tension in a story. But in order to be more than just a break in conversation, you have to understand the “whys.” Why is the action happening now? Why is this scene integral to the plot? Why is the conflict happening to these particular characters?

The “why” is the foundation on which you begin to script the scene. It determines the characters’ motivations (To win? To survive? To prove something?), the mechanisms of the fight (Weapons? Location?), the challenges you’ll throw at them (Injury? Humiliation? Surprise?), and the ultimate result (Humbling defeat? Brilliant victory?).

The “whys” need to be both forward-looking and backward-looking. In other words, the scene should be a bridge between the events that occurred before it (backward-looking) and the effects that unfold when it’s over (forward-looking). What errors or decisions or choices—including those that occurred before the book began—led us to this fight, to this battlefield, to this conflict? Looking back, was the fight inevitable?

**SET THE STAGE**

Once you’ve figured out the “why,” it’s time to consider the “who,” “where,” and “when.”

An action scene should fit into the story, which means your world-building rules need to apply just as they would in non-action scenes. Consider the location, the weapons,
the characters’ clothing, even the fighting style. Are those details consistent with the world you’ve developed in other parts of the story? If they aren’t, can you explain why you’ve broken the rules, and how it serves your narrative?

**WATCH THE MOVES**

Writing conversation and banter? Not a problem. That’s a relatively easy thing for me to do.

But accurately describing a crescent kick, or how multiple characters interact in a fight scene? Not within my usual skillset. It’s very difficult for me to visualize three-dimensional movements in a way that allows me to translate them into two dimensions and onto the written page.

Until I realized I didn’t need to translate them per se; I just needed to watch them. Online videos saved me: martial arts techniques, tournaments, self-defense moves. I watch the moves I’m interested in—the style that fits the world and the scene. And once I’ve seen it happen, it’s significantly easier to write about it, because then I’m only describing it, not creating it from scratch.

**DON’T FORGET THE AFTERMATH**

Physical fights usually have consequences. If you punch someone in the face, chances are they’re going to fight back, call the cops, or find a lawyer. The effects could ripple for years.

Similarly, good action scenes should resonate through the book. The impact doesn’t end when the battle is complete; it affects through the rest of the story, keeping the tension high and ensuring readers continue to turn the page.

For example, characters who’ve been through a battle are going to think differently about the next fight: they might have learned to love the gun, so they rush into battle without thinking. Or they may become gun shy and hesitant to fight again. And don’t forget about battle injuries! Unless fast-healing is a quality of the particular character, wounds and scars need to be carried through the book until they’ve healed.

Finally, consider the impact of action scenes on the communities in which they occur. Communities which have seen battle and its aftermath might begin to think differently about your characters—and decide they aren’t so heroic.

**THE TAKEAWAY**

The takeaway? Instead of fighting for fighting’s sake, interrogate the reasons for the fight within the context of the story. Here are few questions to get you started:

- Have I established the reason for the fight in prior scenes? Does the inciting cause make sense?
- What will my characters learn from the fight? How will it affect their choices?
- Does the manner of the fight make sense in the context of the story? Do the characters use the right weapons? The right armor?
- What happens when the battle’s done? Who are the real winners and losers?

**GOOD LUCK!**
BEYOND BACKSTORY

Three Less Obvious Things DMing Can Teach You About Writing

Alexis Hall

When I’m not writing books, I’m playing roleplaying games. But when there are conversations about how the skillsets required for those two activities overlap, the focus tends to be either on world-building or else on the negative example of the “frustrated novelist”: DMs who are clearly more interested in telling their pre-written story or expositing about their detailed setting rather than engaging their players in a fun, interactive experience. So by way of contrast I thought I’d give a few examples of the ways I write like I DM and DM like I write.

REMEMBER WHO YOUR STORY’S ABOUT

Many years ago I ran a D&D campaign that was supposed to be based around a gigantic megadungeon. There was a whole big backstory attached, involving gods, terrible evil, and the end of the world. Then one of the players’ character got infected with ghoulism and the party immediately turned away from the megadungeon and went looking for a cure. They never came back. The lesson this taught me was that no matter how much I care about my epic history and intricate cosmology, players will always care far more about things that happen right in front of them. Even if those things are relatively small.

And, of course, the same is true of readers. All the history, geography and theology that goes into making a setting feel real only has value insofar as it’s relevant to people we care about. To put it another way, your world is a tool for telling stories about characters. Your characters aren’t a tool for telling stories about the world.

EXPECT YOUR CHARACTERS TO SURPRISE YOU

Many years ago I ran a Call of Cthulhu campaign in which the player characters were the owners of a small, family-run bookstore. Their aunt had died and left them some mysterious gubbins. In the first session the main villain showed up to be gnomic and gloaty, and they promptly shot him in the head. This actually massively improved the game. It established character and raised the stakes (the villain came back in the dead body of their aunt, which they found even more galling). More significantly, it made the story a personal one that stemmed from player choice rather than a generic one about the machinations of a somewhat opaque bad guy.

Now, received wisdom suggests that this is a clear point of difference between interactive and non-interactive media. And obviously real humans are far more likely to throw you a curve than humans you’ve made up in your head. But it does still happen. No matter how rigidly you structure your book, and how thoroughly you plan in advance, your
characters are still complex systems that interact in unpredictable ways.

Letting your players shoot the primary antagonist in session one when you'd planned for that to happen in session eight can make for a more satisfying and memorable game. In the same way, letting your characters have that heated emotional moment or whacky misadventure in chapter three when it feels natural, instead of in chapter twelve like you'd planned can make for a more satisfying and memorable story.

MAKE JUDICIOUS USE OF ELVES

Many years ago I went through a phase of only ever running games using homebrew systems (that is to say, systems I invented) because I felt it was the best way to produce the gameplay experience I wanted. Then I realised I was making a whole load of unnecessary work for myself and my players. So these days, if I want to run a fantasy game I'll run D&D. If I want to run a game about vampires, I'll run World of Darkness. If I want to run a game about supernatural mysteries, I'll run Call of Cthulhu. DMing a game, like writing a novel, is ultimately about communicating ideas to people. And if you're working in an established genre there are a wide range of signs, symbols, and codes that let you communicate specific ideas quickly and effectively. It's okay to subvert these codes, or to ignore some of them, but it's also completely fine to use them where they're helpful. And they're often helpful.

In any given game, or any given story, there will be bits that are important and bits that aren't. You don't need to waste time reinventing the bits that aren't. When my players walk into a tavern, there will always be a bartender behind the bar cleaning a glass with a dirty rag. Because neither the tavern nor the bartender matter, and everyone knows what a generic fantasy tavern looks like. The parts of your world that you need to focus on are the parts that are unique, the parts that matter to your protagonists, or the parts that reinforce the story you're trying to tell. All of the supporting superstructure needs to be—and I'm aware this isn't sexy—efficient. If your main character comes from a race of forest-dwelling immortals then, sure, build something from the ground up because they're going to be on-page a lot. On the other hand, if your protagonist just needs to have a five minute chat with somebody who comes across as ancient, wise, melancholy and a bit mysterious it's completely okay for that person to be an elf.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Obviously, writing and DMing aren't actually the same thing, convenient as it would be if my characters would improvise their own dialogue. But if I had, for want of a less awful term, a single piece of ur-advice for basically anything you're interested in, it would be this: You get better at stuff by thinking critically about it, and a really good way of thinking critically about stuff is to try and relate it to other stuff that you already know about. I mean, up to a point. There's a reason this article wasn't called Three Things You Can Learn About Writing From The Time-Independent Schrödinger Equation.
THE LANDSCAPE OF FANTASY

Amy Rose Capetta

For this piece, I really wish I could draw a fantasy-style map for writing fantasy: complete with the swamp of info dumps, the slippery peaks of well-trodden tropes, and the uncrossable desert of inconsistent magic systems. It would also, of course, have seas of gorgeous prose, villages filled with incomparable characters just waiting to go on a quest or two, and bottomless wellsprings of wonder.

The fantasy genre has a landscape of its own, with joys—and perils—that are so unique that a fantasy writer has to learn how to craft their book twice over: first how to write a great story, and then how to write a great fantasy.

But alas, I'm not good at drawing so there will be no map today. Instead I've made a quick list of things I wish I'd known or thought about more when I was a new fantasy writer.

FANTASY WORLDS DON'T HAVE TO REPLICATE THE PATTERNS OF OUR WORLD, and if they do, it should be for a reason—not just because that’s what we’re used to.

We see people talk a big game about fantasy being the narrative space with the most possibility—but then why do we also read so many fantasies that cling tightly to the way our own lives are set up? This tends to be less about the surface of the world (clothing, food, landscapes) than the deeper, less visible elements (politics, power, family structures, how relationships of all kinds work.)

As someone who writes queer fantasy, I get to ask myself every time I write a story: what is it like to be a queer person in this world? What are the attitudes toward LGBTQIAP+ folks? Are they static or evolving? Do they mirror our own world, or are they radically different? Doing this work has prompted me to look deeper into every aspect of how I build a world—and take nothing for granted.

DON'T RUSH TO WRITE

It took five years of research before I felt ready to write my Italian-inspired fantasy, The Brilliant Death.

I read history books that gifted me glorious details I never could have made up myself. I read folktales filled with a frank transformation magic that was nothing like the wands-and-spells systems I’d grown used to, giving my magic system its underpinnings. I read memoirs that immersed me in a different understanding of the world. I worked on my language skills, expanding my ability to name places and characters and bits of my world. I ate as much Italian food as I could (that one was a real trial).

This is just one example involving a historically grounded fantasy, but our genre often takes the most pre-writing time because we need to construct all of the layers that make the world feel multi-dimensional and real.
Enjoy that. Luxuriate in creating and researching, imagining and playing. Give yourself the time and space (and glorious notebooks) to layer your world so that it doesn’t just thinly prop up your story—so that it lives and breathes and lingers in the reader’s head long after they inhale the last sentence.

**DON’T BE AFRAID TO PLUNGE IN AND LEARN MORE AS YOU GO**

This might sound like I’m contradicting my last piece of advice. I’m not saying to skip all of the above—but I am giving you permission to, at some point, embrace that there are things you can only learn about your story by writing.

Your characters will surprise you. Your plot will take left turns into new territory—adjust your outlines accordingly! If you’ve set up your world well, you’ll stumble into corners of it you didn’t even know existed.

There is a heady rush to letting yourself loose in the landscape you’ve created. If the world is truly alive, there will always be more to discover, and we can’t always do it from the safety of our plots and plans. At some point we have to step outside and go on the writerly quest ourselves.

**PUT YOURSELF INTO YOUR FANTASY WORLD**

This is the hardest part for me, and the lesson it took me the longest to learn. For a long time, I thought I wrote fantasy because it allowed me to get away from myself. I believed I wasn’t terribly interesting. I didn’t live the kind of life that would make a good story. I could write, though. Which meant I could conjure up characters who were far more interesting than me, who did more important things and lived in glittering magic worlds.

Those stories always fell flat. They were DOA.

No matter how far-flung and imaginative great fantasy is, it brings us back to ourselves, gives us a deeper understanding of who we are. That work has to start with the writer, or it will never have the pulse of truth for the reader.

For me, that work started when I finally embedded pieces of my heart in my work. It might be in the setting: the redwoods in *The Lost Coast*, my upcoming novel about queer teen witches who live in the same part of California where I moved as a teenager. It might be in the main character: in *The Brilliant Death*, Teodora struggles with hiding parts of who she is from the family she loves. It’s definitely in the themes I explore: in *Once & Future*, my Arthurian space fantasy written with my partner Cori McCarthy, there’s a lot about the loneliness of facing a broken past that seems to keep repeating itself and discovering hope in found family.

And I put myself into my stories by giving myself the freedom to write queer characters in all of them, no matter what the world is.

As we do our work and draw our maps, we have to be bold and put our own beating hearts in our fantasies.

Anything less, and how will they come alive?
Urban fantasy is an interesting subgenre. On the surface, it should be easy—just slap a few vampires into the supermarket and call it a day. But once you get past that surface layer, what you find are questions upon questions, all branching off in different directions. You don’t have to answer all of them, thankfully; that would be too much to ask. At the same time, some of those questions are load-bearing, carrying the weight of your modified world on their querulous shoulders, and if they’re not answered, everything falls apart. So how do you begin?

**DEFINE YOUR RULES**

Is your urban fantasy restricted to one source of magic, or is it more of a “and the kitchen sink” situation? Will you be focusing mostly on one magical aspect, or do you intend to explore them all? It’s best at this stage to sculpt big and script small—focus your first story on a single aspect of the larger world, rather than throwing absolutely everything at your readers at once. At the same time, build in as many of the hooks as you can for the big stuff you may be planning to do later.


**SET YOUR LIMITS**

Does all magic have costs? Can vampires live forever, but at the expense of being able to work ley lines, or cast spells, or eat ice cream? Is magic secret (closed world urban fantasy) or publicly known (open world urban fantasy)? If magic is secret, why? If magic is open, how has that changed the functionality of daily society?


Open world urban fantasy example: Southern Vampires, by Charlaine Harris; first book, Dead Until Dark.

**DECIDE ON YOUR TIME PERIOD AND TIMELINE**

Has magic always existed in this world? If no, when did it appear, and why? If yes, when did the world settle into its current circumstances? Has magic been moving behind the scenes all along, or has something changed recently? Are you planning to explore vampires in the 1980s, mermaids in the 1920s, or werewolves in the 2020s? (Note: This is one of the areas where genre can get murky—historical urban fantasy can also be classified as steampunk or gaslamp, while future urban fantasy can be classified as science fiction. Write your story and let the market sort it out.)
Historical urban fantasy example: Immortal Empire, by Kate Locke; first book, God Save the Queen.

Futuristic urban fantasy example: Ty Merrick, by Denise Vitola; first book, Quantum Moon.

START SETTLING ON CHANGES

Does the existence of magic make things better or worse for humanity? Is the overall standard of living improved, decreased, or roughly the same? Did we get certain technologies sooner, due to the intervention of ancient geniuses, or did it take longer to develop them, due to those same geniuses working to keep humanity in the dark?


Urban fantasy with complications for humanity: The Others, by Anne Bishop; first book, Written in Red.

DECIDE HOW LONG YOU WANT TO STAY IN YOUR NEW WORLD

This is a big one, and an essential decision for you to make. The core process of creating a new urban fantasy setting is the same whether you’re planning to write one book or one hundred, but the pacing, the scope of what you’re going to do, that all shifts based on how much time you want to spend in this sandbox. There are amazing urban fantasy stand-alones, even if they don’t attract as much attention as the long series; series are often where urban fantasy truly shines, since it gives them the space to truly show their construction. There’s no requirement to go either way, but you should know before you start writing if at all possible. It will make things so much easier for you.

Stand-alone urban fantasy example: War for the Oaks, by Emma Bull.


Urban fantasy is a subgenre with a lot of scope and a lot of space for authors to play. It’s a lot more enduring than people think it is—the earliest fairy tales would have been urban fantasy by the standards of the day, after all. If you decide it’s for you, you’re going to have a wonderful time, and I can’t wait to see what you come up with.

THERE ARE SO MANY STORIES HERE, STILL WAITING TO BE TOLD.