

Writing Speculative Fiction: Tips, Hints, Tricks, Pitfalls, Successes

Dr. Sara L. Uckelman
s.l.uckelman@durham.ac.uk
@SaraLUckelman

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What is speculative fiction?

A broad umbrella genre that covers things like science fiction, fantasy, horror, dystopia, steampunk, and all of their subgenres. They're all about the “what if” questions—what if we take our wildest dreams, our deepest hopes, our darkest nightmares, and made them true?

Why write it?

- The confines of academic philosophy are incredibly narrow—there are norms that we must follow in terms of citation, argument, tone/voice. Not every idea worth pursuing can be pursued in these norms.
- Fiction allows you the freedom to pursue the what-ifs without justification beyond “what if?” It allows you to adopt as axioms things that would have be justified in an academic paper.
- It’s fun.
- Reading it can be ethically beneficially; someone’s got to write it. (But don’t be *too* didactic!)

How to write it? Method

No single method will work for everyone. Don't believe the people who say "you must write every day or you're not a real writer"; but also, don't believe the people who say "there is no benefit in establishing a daily writing practice". Find out what works for you, and don't beat yourself up if something that doesn't work for you.

How to write it? Method

What works for me: I am to write 400 words a day, 5 out of every 7 days. But this covers all my writing, not just my fiction writing. When I am working on a story/stories, I generally aim to write in 100-300 word “bites”. If I get that much done on something in a single day, I feel pleased with my progress. Since I’ve started tracking my words, I’ve written:

- Sept 17: 4674
- Oct 17: 6356
- Nov 17: 50,000
- Dec 17: 8008
- Jan 18: 5273
- Feb 18: 3698
- Mar 18: 5559
- Apr 18: 8559
- May 18: 2549

How to write it? Process

How do you write academic papers? Do you outline your papers first, and then write according to outline? Do you do your research first and then write? Do you write linearly, or do you write out of order, and then stitch things together? Do you write first and then reverse outline to fix things? Whatever method you use for your academic papers, try to adapt that to your stories. But don't feel like you have to stick to the same method—feel free to venture to something else. (I don't generally outline my papers. But I've reached a point where I sometimes feel like outlines for stories are good.)

How to write it? Structure

Whether you are someone who struggles to put words to paper or someone who is always cutting words down, start small: Aim for 1000 words, and then if you end up with 3000, you've got a reasonable length story.

Some conventions:

- Drabble: < 100 (sometimes < 300)
- Flash fic: < 1000
- Short story: 1k-7.5k
- Novelette: 7.5-18k
- Novella: 18k-40k
- Novel: 40k+
- (typical books are in the 60-80k range; SFF can be upwards of 100k. Anything more than 110k you'll struggle to find an agent/publisher willing/interested).

How to write it? Structure

The “three scene” structure:

- the problem; the background; the resolution
- the background; the problem; the resolution

How to write it? Ideas

- historical sources/fairy tales/myths/classic tales retold—good if you struggle with plot!
- “It was a gold in the morning and a silver in the evening.”
- “He’d forgotten the meaning of the word ‘happiness’.”
- “schizophrenia is the price *Homo sapiens* pay for language.”
- <https://twitter.com/kerastion/status/999560689659334656>

More details about building a story

- Why this story?
- Why these characters?

This is what you have to answer within the first paragraph if you want people to read on. Why should we care about the characters, why are you telling us this story instead of another story? What is the merit in your story?

Some opening paragraphs (1)

Laura had never been down this street before, but she knew exactly where she was going. She'd mapped the route out in advance—from the underground offices where she and those like her spent their drudging hours out into the sunlight and fresh air ordinarily reserved for the lungs of the rich—and plotted out every plodding step she'd have to make along the uneven pavements upset by roots of trees and cracked by the weight of many feet. This was the tricky part. Laura picked up her feet and placed them with careful precision, each calculation lightning fast so that no one would know how much effort it took to act normal, to blend in.

Some opening paragraphs (2)

They say if we build the tower tall enough, we will be able to speak to the Gods.

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Twilight is the scent of juniper and balsam, of *burašu* burning slowly. It is the sound of carnelians being counted. It is the taste of pomegranate and the feel of cool breeze on skin.

Twilight is that moment when movement stops and there is nothing left but sensation. Then in a blink of an eye night falls. The incense stick shudders and falls into the flames, and the sweet smell is now acrid. The wind is suddenly cold with rain, the pomegranate seeds catch in your teeth, and the carnelians are swept back up into the bag from which they tumbled.

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They say if we build the tower tall enough, we will be able to speak to the Gods. But I do not understand this, for Amat-Ninkarrak talks to her Goddess every day. Then again, Ninkarrak never speaks back, so perhaps that is what they mean—not that we will speak to our Gods, but that they will finally reply.

Some opening paragraphs (3)

Click, click—thud. Click, click—thud.

The sounds were magnified by the vast silence of the old library, its high ceiling flanked by narrow windows, the sun through the windows turning the stained wooden shelves the color of honey.

“Go to the library,” the Nightworker had told Maksim. “There you will find what you are looking for.”

Some opening paragraphs (4)

We are nothing more than the sums of our memories. I must begin with what I know, and what I do not remember, I cannot know. If I do not remember my dreams, I cannot know myself, for dreams are those memories that no one but yourself remembers. Dreaming and remembering differ not in quality but in relation. Memories become dreams when no one else but you remembers them, and dreams cease to exist entirely when forgotten.

Plot, or, Once we're invested in the characters, now what?

- Following up on the 'what if'.
- Every time an event happens, ask: "what is the motivation?", "why is this happening?", "why is this character acting in a particular way?"
- *Consistency* of characters is as important as *consistency* of argument.
- For every "why did the character do this?", the answer should always be: because of the character's motivations.

Plot as argument; argument as plot

- Every character's actions has to be the natural conclusion of all of the reasons that a particular character has.
- Each character is building their own argument; their motivations, desires, and goals are the premises.
- Each character has some conclusion that they are working towards—something that they want.

Plot as argument; argument as plot

- Each character is building their own argument, with each step or action that they make.
- The relation between protagonists and antagonists is the relationship between arguments pro and arguments contra.
- The antagonist is the person who is working toward the goal that is contradictory to the protagonist.
- Antagonists are antagonists precisely because the conclusion that their argument leads to contradicts the conclusions that the protagonists are arguing for.
- They can't both be true at the same time, so the plot of the story is how this tension is resolved, and the resolution of the story is whichever one of the conclusions you end up getting to.
- Catastrophe if the antagonist's argument wins out; a eucatastrophe if the positive result is proven.

What to do when you're stuck

- Give yourself permission: Give yourself permission to suck. You're new at this! It takes practice! Give yourself permission to throw something away. Give yourself permission to write what you, to ignore the audience, and to write the words that you need to read. Turn off the inner editor: Write and do not allow yourself to delete. JUST KEEP WRITING.
- Change something: Change the tense. Change the POV character. Change the POV. (I recently wrote three versions of the same 500 word story; one from the POV of someone not directly involved in the action; one from the 1st person POV of someone in the story; and the last from the 3rd person POV of the same character.
- Read it aloud. (Yes, it's horribly awkward at first, but it's really useful!)
- Remember you do this for fun. When it stops being fun, stop doing it.

Publishing

Short stories

- The Submissions Grinder, <https://thegrinder.diabolicalplots.com/>
- Duotrope (paid service)

Novels

- Manuscript Wish List, <http://www.manuscriptwishlist.com/> and <https://twitter.com/search?q=%23mswl&src=typd>
- Query tracker, <http://querytracker.net/>
- Query shark, <http://queryshark.blogspot.co.uk/>

Philosophers who write creative fiction, FB group,
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/166183747401029/>