

Eminently Sage and Pithy Advice Regarding Writing Fiction

In the Mind: the Art of Writing

- In his poem “*In the Neolithic Age*” Kipling said it best: “There are nine and sixty ways / Of writing tribal lays / And every single one of them is right!” (This quote has been re-quoted and mis-quoted over the years, so there are even several ways of saying how Kipling ever said this.)
 - There are infinite ways to present a generic story: writers are only limited by their imagination.
 - Conversely, there are only so many ways to present a specific story; the art is for the writer to do it creatively.
 - Each story also has its own way of being written.
 - Don’t get trapped into trying to write every story in the same way.
 - However, the only true way to write your story is *your* way.
 - Discovering that way is the hardest yet most rewarding task of any writer
 - Writing is the only path of discovering that way.
 - All the preceding means that trying to copy another writer’s way of writing will ultimately be pointless.
- There are no new stories, only new ways to present and make use of old stories.
 - Any new story already been done, just not in this particular manner. It is the writer’s job to present it as new.
 - For instance, the movie “Top Gun” is another variation on the monomyth of the Hero’s Journey which is typified by “The Odyssey”.
 - If all else fails, do what the professionals do: steal from the best. Just remember to file off the serial numbers.
- Show, don’t tell. Build the image of the scene in the mind of the reader.
 - Use descriptions to show non-verbal communication. Describe how the character is acting as opposed to just telling how they are acting.
 - Involve more than just the sense of sight or sound in the descriptions.
 - Use dual-purpose (direct and implied) descriptions: make your words do double duty.
 - Implied descriptions involve the reader by having them work through the implications to arrive at the desired conclusion.
- Respect your characters: after all, they are in part a part of you.
 - Learn to listen to the internal voices of your characters. Occasionally, they can surprise you!
 - Use the power of the character’s mental voice in selecting the proper words and language for them.
 - Recognize that the antagonist characters in your story are the protagonists in their own story.

Under the Hood: the Mechanics of Writing

- Know the tools of writing and use them correctly.
 - Words are the fundamental building blocks of all writing.
 - As the writer, it is your job and your responsibility to choose the right word for the situation. Twain said it best: “The difference between the right word and almost the right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.” You want to write with lightning.
 - Expand your vocabulary: the more building blocks that are available to the writer, the more likely the actual result is closer to the desired result.
 - Learn how to use connotation for choosing the right word for any particular situation.
 - Stop making common spelling mistakes: for example, know the difference between “it’s” (possessive) and “its” (contraction) and between “there” (location) and “their” (possessive) and “they’re” (“they are”).
 - Language is the fundamental structure of all writing.
 - Learn how to properly form sentences, apply grammar and separate paragraphs.
 - Use active language, not passive.
 - Avoid clichés like the plague. Better yet, create your own.
- Characters + Setting + Conflict + Change = Story
 - All these elements of a story are equally important but are not always equally presented.
 - Characters: the reader needs someone to watch, someone to identify with, someone to cheer for or against.
 - Choose the proper characters and character types for the story.
 - Every character should be shown to want something in every scene, even if it’s just a glass of water.
 - Setting: the story doesn’t take place in a void.
 - The setting can also take on qualities of a character (conflict and change.)
 - Conflict: without conflict, there is no drama, no reason for anything to happen.
 - There can be more than one conflict or type of conflict within a story
 - There can be more than one conflict or type of conflict involving a single character.
 - Not all conflicts have to be resolved within the story.
 - Change: a story where there is no change to a character during the course of the story is not a story.
- Each story as told by each writer has its own voice and its own characteristics.
 - The correct length of any story is whatever length it takes to properly tell the story as the writer imagines it, no more and no less.
 - Choose the correct type of viewpoint for the story: first person, second person, third person limited or third person omniscient viewpoint.
- Avoid common errors.
 - Do your research. Nothing ruins a story like a glaring error that could have been avoided by some quick research. Even SF or fantasy stories must have some basis in fact.
 - Maintain internal consistency. Things do not change from one chapter to the next unless there is a good reason for justifying it, even if it isn’t stated at the time (but must be explained at some point.)
 - Write what you know. If you don’t know it, research it until you do know it.
- Edit yourself.
 - Learn when to subtract words as well as when to add them.
 - Respect but don’t trust your spell checker. The word that is spelled correctly may still be the wrong word for the situation.
- Read.
 - You don’t have to read what other writers in your field are writing: many writers don’t, they read other genres or non-fiction and research related to their fiction.
- Write
 - The only way to improve your writing is to write, write and write some more.
 - No amount of writing is truly ever wasted. There are many professional writers who started out writing and publishing fan fiction, including *Star Trek* and other media fanfic. Some even recycled their fanfic into professional publication.
- When it’s all finished, proof your story by reading it to yourself out loud.

B(u)y the Books: the Business of Writing

- ANYTHING you write is AUTOMATICALLY under copyright.
 - There is no need to register it, you don't even need to put "copyright" or the © symbol on it.
 - When publishing, however, do make it habit to include a copyright statement.
 - (C) is not a recognized substitute for © or "copyright".
 - Registering your story with the copyright registry, however, allows you to get more damages from anyone violating your copyright. Do so immediately after publication.
 - If you sell your story, you are selling the rights to publish it, never the story itself.
 - Never, ever, sign a publishing contract that does not spell out exactly how long or for too long the publisher has the rights to publish your work or does not spell out how or when the rights revert to the author.
- Professional writers who make their living solely by writing fiction are the exception, not the rule.
 - For every successful King, Rowling or Clancy there are dozens of other writers who barely make even.
 - Nielsen Hayden's Corollary: "Don't Quit Your Day Job."
 - As a professional writer, writing *becomes* your day job. And night job. And takes over your life.
 - Stackpole's Corollary: "If you want to be a professional writer, first take a vow of poverty."
- Any situation where the writer is asked to pay to make anything happen to or for their story is a scam.
 - Agents and publishers get paid from selling a story, that's their profit motive.
 - This includes the publisher taking any kind of fees out of the writer's advance or payments.
- "Work For Hire" is different: you are writing under contract for someone else and they assume all rights to the story.
 - Why write "work for hire"? Notoriety, fame, experience, money, the chance to play with some famous properties. Lots of professional writers do this.
 - A number of writers with credentials in other forms got their start as professional writers doing work for hire.
- Become part of a writers community.
 - If you qualify, become a member of a professional writers organization. They protect their own.
 - Associate with other writers. Most of them are in the same position as you.