Brandon Sanderson, epic-level fantasy novelist and all-around good guy, teaches a fiction writing course at Brigham Young University. Because of the general niceness, he's made all the lectures available on Youtube. Because of the epic-level skill, the lectures are *freaking useful*.

Since you might not have time to listen to the entire hour-long class, I'm taking notes for you. They're not exhaustive, but they get the donkey work out of the way.

Contents

Session 1: Introductory Notes

Largely this is a discussion of the syllabus and the class format, but it contains some handy starting-off stuff. Blue text jumps to the mentioned section; less important topics are not linked.

On Advice

Rule 1: This advice is good except when it's not.

Writers *love* to give writing advice. Ask any writer, even one who doesn't write very often, and s/he can give you loads and loads of advice on what's worked for them. This is handy—provided you're filtering it through the fact that you are not that writer. Consider Stephen King and Orson Scott Card. King hates outlines passionately, believing they stifle creativity and suffocate the story. Card says outlines are great and you should use one.

All writing advice *needs* to be filtered through that idea. All writing advice is good—except when it's not.

On Word Count

You ought to be thinking in word count. Pages are malleable.

On Sizes

Books in different markets vary in sizes.
- Middle grade novels: 40k-50k
- YAs: 65k-85k
- Adult novels: 75k/80k and up

*From 15 minutes in until about 22 minutes in, it's just syllabus discussion

Ideas Are Cheap

The goal of this class is to turn students into writers who *write good books*, not writers who *write one good book*. There's a strain of thought that the fundamental ingredient of a good book is a great idea; Sanderson disagrees.

Jim Butcher, before he was published, was on a forum discussing this very thing and said something to the effect of, "A great writer will take the worst idea and make a wonderful story out of it, and a bad writer will take the *best* idea and screw it up. It's not the idea, it's the skillset." His opponent challenged him to combine *Pokemon* and the Lost Roman Legion—which then became the Codex Alera books, a bestselling series.

You may be a Mozart of writing, but that's *very very very* rare. The vast majority of writers toil in obscurity for a while, honing their craft. The concept here is that you're *training to be a writer,* not just writing. The focus is on becoming better and learning how to write well.

[Description of Class](#) and [Writing Groups](#)

Not relevant to writing novels, but *very* useful for building a writing group. Goes until about 56:20. Highlights:

- As with everything in the class, writing groups are not necessarily for everyone.
- Members have a weekly word count goal, submitted to other members of the group (4–6 people; preferred number is 5).
- Other members of the group read these submissions before meeting (should take about an hour). The group meets for about 1 hour to give feedback on each story, which works out to around 10 minutes per person.
- To the Workshoppers:
  - This is reader response, not fellow writers brainstorming. Once again, with feeling: **you are a reader**. Informed, intelligent, aware of the craft of writing, but still a reader. You are not turning the story into what *you* want—you are helping your peer write the story they want to tell.
  - Focus on *descriptive* content, not *prescriptive* content—that is, say "I was bored" or "I am confused" or "I hate this character" or "If you kill this character I, as an invested reader, will STRAIGHT UP KILL YOU BACK" instead of "Ooh! You should make him find a magic sword!" or "You *have* to kill the mentor!"
  - These help curtail the problem of workshop groups hijacking stories (because that can, and often does, happen).
- To the Workshopee:
  - Resist the urge to defend yourself.
  - Resist the urge to defend yourself.
  - Shut up.
  - Stop.
  - **Resist the urge to defend yourself.**
  - This is a *focus group*: you are using your workshop group to find out how audiences respond to your story, not to reassure yourself you're a good writer. Imagine yourself as a fly on the wall when the others talk about your story—this will be more useful to you anyway.
  - Readers might be confused by something that will *totally* be explained later; don't explain it to them. You'll want to prove to them that you're a genius, but **resist that instinct too**. If you give it away, you rob yourself of their honest feedback about the big twist at the end.
  - You are permitted to ask questions, provided you can do it without pre-disposing your audience.
- Appoint a team leader. Find the most Type-A extrovert you have in your group—someone who will (a) encourage others to talk and (b) encourage folks to stick on schedule.
- Those of you who talk a lot—**stop**. If you're talking the whole time, you will probably steamroll the quieter ones in the group. **Don't do that.**
- Quiet ones in the group (you know who you are): *your insight is valuable*. [Share it.](#)

- When you give feedback, **start with good things.** It helps the writers to know what is already working. (This can actually be more valuable than criticism.) Focus on what's working *for you* in the story. Liked a joke? Tell them. Think this character is the best one since John McClane? Tell them. One particular phrase gave you the shivers? **Tell them**.
- Move on from there to *large scale issues*. We're talking **characterization, plot, and setting**. Do not burn this time with grammar issues unless the workshopee has turned in something written in honest-to-goodness Pidgin English and it's getting in the way.
  - If you *have* to edit the other folks' work, print out the pages and mark them in red and give them to the writer; this will fulfill your duty to the universe to stamp out typos wherever they may hide, *without* burning your writing group's precious time.

The Two Types of Writers

Many of you are already aware of the idea that writers fall into two breeds: *gardener* and *architect*, or *seat-of-pantser* and *outliner*. The gardener throws some ideas in a bowl and lets them react (think mad-science chemistry). The architect plans out a story in great detail, deciding what will happen long before writing the thing out.

Though writers are not perfectly categorized by these two models, they will tend to lean in one direction or another; ultimately, both styles *are just tools.* Hypothetically, any writer could make use of either technique, but if it doesn't work for you, why bother? Don't feel pressured to shove yourself into just one of these. Use either of them as they're necessary.

Discovery Writing
- Stephen King: "put interesting characters in interesting situations; see what happens."
- Mary Robinette Kowal: "Yes, But; No, And" method.
  - Start with a person who has a problem.
  - Alright, what happens next? Does it work? **Yes, but…**something else goes wrong.
  - Does what they try to fix the problem work? **No, AND...**it gets worse.
  - Goes on and on in that cycle until the problem is fixed
- Note for everyone: the good stories, mostly, are about **something that goes wrong**. It all starts with a problem. It can be something small ("My deplorable aunt and uncle make me live in the cupboard," "I was having a nice dinner and then it was ruined by twelve rowdy dwarves…").
- Discovery writers *tend* to have better characters (first, because the characters' problems are the writer's problems, so the writer identifies strongly with the characters, and so too does the reader; second, because the characters are not shoehorned into actions they would not reasonably take; and third, because the discovery writer's method depends upon interesting characters doing interesting things).

- Discovery writers *tend* to have less intricate plots and "awful endings" (since they eventually get to the "and they solved it," which isn't satisfying).
- Discovery writers *tend* to struggle with getting past Chapter Three/the beginning. They'll write a few chapters and then suddenly go, "Oh! *That's* what this is about!" and feel a need to reset so they can lay the foreshadowing. Then they get to Chapter Three and say, "Oh, *now* I know what it's about" and start all over again.
- *Tend* is the operative word here, because there are always exceptions, and a great writer will compensate for his/her natural weaknesses. Discovery writers can have flat, boring characters and intricate plots and mind-blowing endings. This is merely a statement of tendency, not a universal law.

Outline Writing

- Outliner writers *tend* to have weaker characters because they are prone to ask, "What does the plot require the characters to do here?"
- Outliner writers *tend* to have solid endings (because they've known the plot the whole time).
- Outliner writers *tend* to hate revising because, fundamentally, they've written the story twice by the time they reach the end.

Points-on-the-Map Writing

- Mappers start with a decent idea of their ending and their internal conflict, and perhaps a few cool scenes that they want to hit in between. So they start with their idea, Discovery-Write to their first cool scene, Discovery-Write to their next cool scene, and on and on until they reach the finale.

Session 2: Brainstorming

The really in-depth look at how to midwife your idea into an honest-to-goodness no-fooling book.

As before, blue text jumps to the mentioned section.

Writers Need Multiple Brains

English classes will occasionally lapse into an overly-artistic side of writing—the "dance through tulips and talk about your feelings" style of writing. This is fine, just not for everybody, and it's tough to sell it for money. Artistic vision is not super-great at paying the bills.

You are a craftsperson: you are trying to *become a person who makes good art* (not just make good art) and you are trying to do that through practice over time.

However, **you are also a businessperson**, whose job it is to find a way to feed that craftsperson so they can go on dancing through tulips and waxing eloquent about the human condition.

The Craftsperson's job is to produce the best available work; the Businessperson's job is to exploit that in every way possible.

Which means that when the manuscript is complete, the Businessperson smashes the Craftsperson over the head with a blunt object, stuffs their body in a closet, and runs away with the manuscript with the express intention of making money from it.

Why Form Matters

Sanderson recalls a time from his high school days when he played trumpet. He had played it for several years and was at least an adequate player—but for his life he couldn't improv. He could hear the licks in his head, but couldn't force them through the front of the horn. This baffled him for some time, until a teacher ordered him to make his scales second-nature. Once he had them mastered, he could improvise much more impressively.

Jazz is a magnificently free and improvisational style of music—but it is built on a rigid foundation of scales.

Storytelling

Sanderson breaks his stories down into three primary components: **plot, setting, and character**. They are held together by conflict.

"Learning your scales" is simply this: learn what makes an engaging plot, an intriguing character, and an interesting setting.

Conflict

Why is conflict important? Why does it hold the story together?

- Nobody likes a story where nothing happens. "The king died and then the queen died" is not a story; "the king died and then the queen died of grief" is a story.
- A story is about what *somebody wants* and *why they can't have it*. Kurt Vonnegut advises, "Have your character start out desperately wanting something, even if it's just a glass of water." If your character starts out wanting something they can't have, you have *immediate* sympathy for that character, and an immediate telegraphing to the reader of what's going to happen.

Plot

Plot is making a series of promises to the reader and fulfilling them in unexpected, yet satisfying, ways. Many fledgling writers make the mistake of giving the wrong promises—starting off a romance story with an action-adventure opening scene, perhaps.

Character

Usually what we are looking for is a relatable character. Occasionally you can get away with an unsympathetic, unrelatable character—but it's very hard to do and people probably won't like your book.

Your main character doesn't have to be a "good guy." S/he just needs to have a few characteristics:

- Sympathetic (available ways to be sympathetic: be nice, wounded, disadvantaged, idealistic, principled, etc)
- Active (driven to accomplish *something*; this ties back to the character desperately wanting things. "Protagonists gonna protag.")
- Competence (capable of accomplishing at least a few things)

Two out of three can make for a very strong character.

- Sympathetic + Competent = Bilbo Baggins, surprisingly enough
- Sympathetic + Active = Harry Potter
- Active + Competent = Sherlock Holmes, the Twelfth Doctor

When you shove all three into one character, you get books about how awesome the character is. James Bond and Dirk Pitt are good examples: they start off being awesome, they solve problems by being awesome, and at the end of the book—oh, look, they're awesome. (Seasons 1 and 2 of *Legend of Korra* would be another good example.) These characters can be just as boring as characters who have only one of the three.

Setting

This is just as much a concern for romance and suspense writers as it is for sci-fi/fantasy writers: whatever book you're writing, you are going to give the reader a sense of your world. You decide the rules of this world—for instance, in Jane Austen's work, the underlying rule

of the world is "The romantic interests end up together." Setting will probably have a significant role in your story's thematic underpinnings; for instance, *Django Unchained* has a major anti-slavery theme, but that can only exist if the setting pushes the prevalence of slavery (so that the main characters can rebel against the prevalence).

In some stories (notably fantasy and sci-fi), setting is a main character; these novelists are concerned with *immersion*. Other stories use a lighter brush, giving pride of place to plot and character. It's all about choosing what to accomplish.

Conflict (Part II)

The easy pickings for story is finding a place where you can generate friction between two of those three components—or all three. (Usually it's going to be between Character and one of the others.) "A heretic in a world of believers" is a Character vs. Setting. "The wizard wants me to do this but I don't WANNA" is Character vs. Plot. Character vs. Character is self-explanatory.

Prose

One of the significant choices in how you tell your story is what kind of prose and style you want to use. These include decisions like:
- Viewpoint (whose head we are in, and how deeply)
- Tense (past/present/future)
- Floweriness (this one is a scale going from "terse" to "purple")

Nailing Your Ideas

A cool idea doesn't make a great story; a great writer makes a great story. Still, if you can have your cake *and* eat it….

Try to have a few story hooks for yourself. Shoot for, perhaps, two character hooks, one plot hook, and one setting hook.

Your **plot hook** is deciding what kind of archetype your story will align with. Really, you're looking for what's going to change. If you're doing a novella, you want just one major change; in novels, you can afford to have more. What's your beginning, what's your end, and what's going to change? That'll decide your plot.

(For further plot information, try Joseph Booker's Magnificent Seven on for size:
- Overcoming the Monster—there's a supernaturally bad baddie out there, and it has a precious prize (like a princess or ancestral sword) and *I need to kill it dead*. cf. the Mario video games, Jack and the Beanstalk
- Rags to Riches—a commoner embarks on a series of adventures, which culminate in their ascension to one of The Elite (and often an opportunity to enact revenge on those who abused them previously). cf. *Cinderella*, the biblical Joseph story
- The Quest—there is something awesome eight bajillion miles away, and I need to get there (*on foot!*). cf. *Treasure Island*, *Lord of the Rings*

- Voyage and Return—after falling into a strange and fantastical world, the protagonist attempts to get home, returning as an utterly different person. cf. Digimon, *Neverwhere*, *Alice in Wonderland*
- Comedy—a misunderstanding leads to another misunderstanding, which leads to *another* misunderstanding, which culminates in an *enormous* misunderstanding, all of which are cleared up in hilarious ways. cf. I don't even know, the page lists a bunch of examples that are older than anyone likely to read this.
- Tragedy—a character longs for something he *should not have*, and acquires it at a devastating cost. cf. *Lolita*, *Anna Karenina*, *Faust*, *Breaking Bad*
- Rebirth—a character falls into something like a living death and is brought out by a redeeming, often sacrificial act. cf. *Sleeping Beauty*, *Snow White*, Christianity

These plots can be combined, subverted, inverted, blatantly defied, and otherwise messed with in any way you care to try.)

A good strategy for finding a **setting hook** is just to look for something fun to play with. Fantasists can get away with a lot here: cool religions, cool magic systems, cool technologies, cool biomes, cool cultures. Look for something that will make your reader at least mildly intrigued by the world's possibilities.

Your **character hook** will boil down largely to what the character wants. Look for an interesting desire, or conflict, or past, or something like that. Be especially interested in setting them at odds with whatever is going to happen to them: Bilbo is interesting because he simultaneously wants and *does not want* to go on an adventure. Really, what you're interested in is making your character ripe for lots and lots and *lots* of conflict.

Example Brainstorming (Broad)

During this segment (which goes from about 24:00 until about 42:00), Sanderson demonstrates how he would construct character, plot, and setting hooks, given characters his class dreams up. Very interesting demonstration and worth watching, but difficult and time-consuming to relay via text.

Example Brainstorming (Narrowed)

This is a *swift* overview of plot (since there's a problem with assigning a novella-writing project and talking about plot in Week 5). Sanderson takes one specific idea from the previous segment and develops the story out loud. Like the last segment, very interesting and worth the time it would take to watch, but not the time it would take to notate. A few broad and remarkable bits of advice:
- If your story involves a cliche, *make your story about something else*. You can afford to have a cliche if it's in the background.
- Focus on something you haven't seen done before, or something you have seen done but done in a different way.
- Look for what promise you want to fulfill at the end. Sanderson builds his stories backward: he looks first for what great ending he wants to have, and then knows what promises to make at the beginning.

- After determining the most interesting ending, figure out what breed of story it is. A Big Problem? A Relationship? A Mystery? These will determine the major complications.
- After determining the type of story, Sanderson picks the setting, and then the genre.

Session 3: Prose I—Style, Viewpoint, and Infodumps

Mostly concerned with some nuts-and-bolts things, up to and including: viewpoint, infodumping, and learning curves.

Prose and Style

When folks pick up your book, they are going to notice your *prose* first. They judge whether they keep reading based *almost entirely* on that. They'll get a little bit of character, setting, and plot from your first few pages, but it's all getting filtered through the lens of your prose. If you have a great book that can't grab readers in the first five pages, you're going to have a *much* more difficult time selling your book.

So get really, really good at that.

Learning Curves

Every story will have a learning curve—how much the reader has to figure out before gaining "competence" in the book. Consider: how high does it go, and how fast does it get there? How fast can someone be brought up to speed?

A story with familiar characters, settings, and plots will have a shallow, easy learning curve. The more outlandish the story, the steeper the learning curve. What *you* need to do is figure out what your learning curve is and how to make it easy on your audience. What you *don't* want is readers slamming into a brick wall of worldbuilding. Remember that 50-page essay on hobbit culture at the beginning of *Fellowship*? Yeah, neither does anyone else, except to mention how dreadful it is.

Techniques for Lowering the Curve:
- Introduce a character who is just as confused as the readers, and needs things explained to them
- Limit your viewpoints (giving the reader an anchoring viewpoint that stays consistent despite a totally crazy, unpredictable world)
- Start with an event readers will recognize innately
- Twist a familiar detail (clocks striking thirteen in *1984*)

The more your reader trusts you, the more you can get away with a steep learning curve. If you select a steep one, try to ground the reader in something else as quickly as you can—usually characters.

Note: query letters should have the **shallowest learning curve ever**. If you're explaining the intricacies of your magic system in a query letter, that letter's prognosis is Not Good.

Viewpoints

Mastery of viewpoints, as a genre fiction writer, is one of the things that will sell your book in *two pages*. It's the skill barometer for writers. If you asked a pianist to demonstrate their skill, you would quickly know whether they're crap or not, irrespective of your own piano experience. *Readers can do that with you*, and editors do it even better, and it depends mostly on viewpoint.

Three Basic Viewpoints

First Person
- Pros
    - Develops a great deal of intimacy between the reader and the protagonist, and does it *right quick*
    - More freedom to be untrustworthy
    - Excellent for characterizing the speaker
    - Easier infodumps (in voice)—you can get away with a huge glut of information if your viewpoint character is hilarious or otherwise intriguing
    - Feels a little like dialogue (which readers engage with easily; they *love* long stretches of dialogue-dialogue-dialogue, whereas dialogue-long paragraph-dialogue will make them stumble)
- Cons
    - Harder to do multiple viewpoint characters
    - Hard to do dramatic irony (in which the reader knows something significant, but the protagonist doesn't); "if they don't know it, you can't show it"
    - Implies that the main/viewpoint character is guaranteed to survive (and doing the "narrator was dead all along" doesn't surprise readers as much as you might think)
- Notes
    - More or less the default for teen stories these days

Third Person (Limited)
- Pros
    - Better at multiple viewpoint characters
    - More trustworthy character
    - More freedom to kill the character (doesn't come off kitschy)
    - Greater leeway in authorial voice (you're not chained to the main character's voice)
    - Greater leeway with dramatic irony/secrets the reader knows and the character doesn't
    - Able to generate multiple perspectives on one character
- Cons
    - Harder to force reader to identify with character (there's a *very* good reason why *Lolita* is written in first person)
    - Harder to do infodumps/easier to make the infodumps suck
- Notes
    - Default for "grown-up" books

- - - Get across the name of the not-quite-viewpoint character *quickly.* Editors *hate* when you do 3PL without a named protagonist. DON'T DO IT unless you've got a great reason.
    - Try to stick inside that character's head pretty closely—that is, don't show what the character doesn't see

Omniscient
- Pros
  - Lots of leeway with foreshadowing
  - Can integrate things from first and third
- Cons
  - Difficult to do right—it's easy to confuse readers
  - *Much* harder to form relationships with the characters (because readers often bond with the one telling the story)
  - Makes it feel too much like a book
  - Really it's just freaking difficult to pull this off without annoying the readers
- Notes
  - In everyone's heads at once and sees the future; you get a sense that *someone* is telling the story to you
  - Often has a present narrator, though there are some that don't use it
  - Has fallen significantly out of favor; *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* is probably the best-known recent one

Variations

Hybrid
Mixing third and first. Check out the *Bartimaeus* Sequence from Jonathan Stroud for an example.

Epistolary
A story told by way of letters. *Dracula*, *The Prestige*, and *Screwtape Letters* are written in this form.

Journal/Memoir
A character reflects on previous experiences (usually in first person). The Kingkiller Chronicle, *Assassin's Apprentice,* and *Perks of Being a Wallflower* are all written this way.

Cinematic First Person
Often present-tense/immediate, like a camera on the shoulder of the narrator (which happens to have a chip that can hear the character's thoughts). *Hunger Games* and *Divergent* use this—it's more or less the default for YA books, particularly dystopian/post-apocalyptic strong-female-fighting-a-corrupt-system stories (though that's just what YA is right now, really). Truthfully, it's a third-person that happens to use *I* instead of *s/he*.

Committed Third
Stays in *just one* character's head for a whole chapter, but may swap them out next chapter. A Song of Ice and Fire is the most popular recent example.

Can have multiple character viewpoints in a chapter, though they're often separated by line breaks.

Tense

Common wisdom is that present is a more immediate tense, but you get acclimated to that immediacy pretty quick. It's unlikely readers will notice these after the first chapter unless you switch back and forth (which isn't advised unless you've got a real good reason).

Note: if you're doing a Journal/Memoir sort of story, tense could be weird—for instance, if you bring in a character whose status doesn't change by the end of the story, do you say, "John was my good buddy" or "John is my good buddy"? Stick to the past tense; it's easier for everyone, even if it's not *technically* correct.

Infodumps

Your job as a writer is to convey information in an interesting way, such that the worldbuilding is an enhancement instead of a hindrance. This is difficult. Do *not* stop for a paragraph to deliver an essay on hobbit culture; it's no longer acceptable.

The trick is to communicate your world smoothly and naturally.

Tricks for infodumping:
- **Use dialogue.** Readers *love* dialogue because there's so much white space and it's easy to read. However, **avoid maid & butler:** when two characters stand around expositing for *no good reason* except to communicate things to the audience. If you're using "as you know," it's likely to feel very awkward.
- **Use Watson**, a sideline character who needs educating, or **Alice**, a protagonist who's brand new to the world; both can feasibly say "Wait, what?" in the reader's place.
- **Show, don't tell.** If you want to tell the reader that the world is controlled by finicky politics, open with a grand debate about the price of cheese; if you want the reader to know that the gods are heavily involved with the world, open with the character dodging a lightning bolt and saying, "I should *not* have said his name in vain!" Internalize that. Vonnegut advised, "There are three things to do in your writing: evoke setting, advance action, or evoke character. Every line ought to do two of those, three if it can." (The audience wants to work for its lunch.) Sanderson advises getting **really really good** at this. Like love, it can cover a multitude of wrongs.

Session 4: Plot I—Promises and Progress

This is a groundwork session about plot, focusing primarily on the need to be honest with your reader, the benefits of knowing where your story is going, and why you don't need to be jealous of other people's plots.

Q&A
Questions asked by students, and more-or-less transcribed here.

- **How do you come up with really crazy brilliant ideas?**

  My strength as a writer comes from a love of stories. When I see an idea and think *that could have been awesome* my next thought is *how could I make it awesome?*

- **How do I balance *keeping the reader informed* with *maintaining necessary secrets*? My writing group keeps sending me questions that I can't answer without giving things away.**

  What that might mean is you're not adequately explaining character motivations. (It's hard to diagnose without seeing the story in front of me.) It sounds like they don't understand why the characters are behaving in the way they are. It's *very important* to make character motivations very clear to the reader. Be intentional when you've got a character whose motivations are shifting (as with Bilbo, whose priorities shift from "I want to have dinner" to "I want to have an adventure!").

- **I'm struggling with getting natural-sounding dialogue. My conversations are starting to move the plot instead of being natural.**

  Maybe this is a point where you want to practice doing things intentionally. Analyze dialogue, particularly in movies and everyday conversation. Ask, "Why does this feel natural? How does this advance the plot and express character while sounding natural?" Maybe try free-writing the characters talking so you can get their voices in your head, and then try rewriting the scene that's tripping you up.

- **What are some things you do, when you're kind of losing momentum, to get you to fall back in love with the story?**

  Oh boy. Excellent question. When I get interrupted while writing one book, I lose all my momentum. This is a serious issue. I've tried a number of strategies. One thing I try is doing a revision on what I've already got. Sometimes I'll skip chapters (which I very rarely do) to get to a climactic moment instead of doing the set-up moments beforehand, and this works very very well for me. Adding a new character and writing a scene from their eyes can do it. Writing a short piece in that world can do it. Try a few of those and see if they help.

- **Is there a way to use cliches properly? How do you do that?**

    Depends. There are multiple ways to use cliches properly. Avoid the cliche turns-of-phrase as much as you avoid using synonyms for "said" (which is darn near the last thing you want to do). Cliched prose is the second-to-last thing you want, right before writing that is so hopelessly, frantically creative that readers vomit.

    If you're talking about cliches in a more of archetype sense, well...let's look at this. When Rowling wrote *Harry Potter*, boy-goes-to-wizard-school was *very much* a cliche, but she made it her own and got away with it. Cliches in SFF (like the farmboy who saves the world, the grizzled veteran with a heart of gold, the elemental magic system) are occasionally unavoidable; the question is, how do you make it your own? What you want is an *understandable archetype* rather than a *wearied and overused stereotype*.

    Another way to do this is subverted tropes, where you use a cliche and turn it on its head. Be *very careful* with this. If you dally too long with this cliche—let me share a story with you. My first book, *Elantris*, came out around the same time another guy's book came out. Mine did well, his didn't so much, and we were talking about it later and he wondered, "I just don't understand why mine did so poorly." I'd read a bit of it and I said, "Well, to be honest, and not trying to offend you, but your book felt really cliched." To which he said, "Oh! You just didn't get far enough." And he explained about how he subverts every single one of those tropes. And it's really awesome! But the problem is that all the people who are looking for a standard classic fantasy with all the tropes will be disappointed by the ending. And the people who are looking for not-familiar fantasies will put it down before they get to the cool parts! So be careful with subverted tropes. They're tricky.

Plot

"Plot seems to come down to two primary concepts to me. The first is the idea of *promises*; the second is the idea of a *sense of progress*."

Promises

A good book is really a series of promises and their (usually) unexpected and (mandatorily) satisfying fulfillments. The balance between how expected and unexpected the story is depends on the genre and your own goals as a storyteller.

For instance, the regency romances (which are still being written) are not concerned with unexpected fulfillments. In the first few pages, a Jane Austen book promises that it will involve a strong romantic plot *with resolution*, that it will (probably) have a significant female viewpoint, that it will be rather witty, and that you will know within 50 pages who'll be getting hitched at the end. The readers *desire* an unsurprising resolution.

For other readers in other genres, those unsurprising resolutions are less important. The readers of *A Song of Ice and Fire* (*Game of Thrones* to the TV-watchers here) are addicted

to the no-holds-barred anybody-can-die I-don't-remember-making-no-promises style of storytelling that series gives them. It's a continuum between expected and unexpected, and, so long as you're honest about what kind of book you're writing, *neither of those is bad*.

You want to start making these promises *on page one* if possible.

Sense of Progress

"But isn't it real progress?" Well, no. When you're writing the book, you have *absolute control* over the book. You can make one second of story-time last 500 pages. (It's not recommended, but it's possible.) Or you can pass a million years in like three words. So you can squeeze or expand basically anything. What readers want is a *sense* of movement toward the fulfillment of the promises you've made. You're assuring them, "Motion is happening. We *are* moving forward."

If, for instance, you introduce a plot with a tremendous things-will-explode promise and then spend 50 pages on a really interesting romance, *no matter how cool the romance is* the readers will feel like things are meandering. You really just don't want to let your promises get out of sight too easily.

Tools to Streamline a Plot

There are a *bajillion* of these, but these are probably the most popular. You can think of them as training wheels if you want.

Student Beware!

These are not checklists. The danger is looking at them and feeling like you're *required* to follow the patterns described. Scholars came up with these based on *hundreds* of stories, but every story does not *necessarily* follow them. Fundamentally, **they are descriptive, not prescriptive.** Follow these too religiously and you will rip the soul right out of the story.

You are permitted to use these *if you want*. But you are not required to put them in there.

Three-Act Format

This helps you know, more or less, when to introduce big changes in your story.
- Act One: sets up who the characters are and what the problems are. Usually 25% of the book.
- Act Two: deals with the problems, and probably ends with the hero in desperate straits. Often 50%+.
- Act Three: resolves the problems. Often 25% or less.

Simply stated, in Act One the character climbs a tree; in Act Two you throw rocks at them; in Act Three they get out of the tree.

The idea here is to break the story up into three pieces, so you can work on them individually. Note that this is a very Western format.

"I don't use 3-Act," says Sanderson. "I like what it does, it's a great tool. It just doesn't come naturally to me. It works very well for film; it works not-as-well for epic fantasy."

The Hero's Journey

Gives story beats for the progression of the story.

1. Object-at-rest: the Hero is at home, doing nothing much.
2. Call #1: the Hero is summoned. He usually refuses.
3. Call #2: the Hero is summoned. He can no longer refuse.
4. Journey Begins: what it says on the tin.
5. Loss of Mentor: crap is now real.
6. Descent into Underworld: crap is now realer.
7. Confront the Evil Within Themselves: crap is now THE REALEST.
8. Apotheosis/Everything Comes Together: often using skills learned between steps 4 and 5, the Hero succeeds in his goal.
9. Return Home (Upgraded): in the falling action, the Hero comes home having defeated the Bad Guy—but, more notably, having defeated the Bad Guy **in himself**.

This is handy for several reasons. One, it gives you a roadmap ("What do I do now? Oh, I guess it's Underworld Descent time…") and two, it gives a handy cheat sheet for what readers expect from their stories.

Scene/Sequel

A simple, direct plotting method based around "Yes, But, No, And."

Yes, life is good, **but** my cat is suddenly missing. **Solution:** I go to the pound. **No,** the cat's not there, **and** I accidentally set free all the other animals. **Solution:** I seek out an animal catcher. **Yes,** the catcher caught the cat, **but** it's actually an evil cat bounty hunter and they already sold the cat for glue!

You're forcing yourself to escalate your story. It forces you to create more conflict *and* to give a sense of progression. Basically, it's a more developed version of Fortunately/Unfortunately. (This might actually be a great development of that game, by the way: introduce a problem, next person introduces a solution, next person gives a **Yes, But** and so on.)

Plotting Methods

First, let's dig further into Promises/Progress. Every type of story will have different Promises and, significantly, different ways to give the impression of Progress. For instance:

Mystery
- A plot *about* information

- Sense of progress derives from clues/released information

Relationship
- A plot *about* people learning to like each other (falling in love or falling in friendship)
- Sense of progress derives from moments together/changes in the relationship

Travelogue
- A plot *about* a journey toward a particular destination
- Sense of progress derives from a literal progression toward a destination

Internal Conflict
- A plot *about* a character's necessary change (becoming braver, becoming kinder, becoming worthy of another person)
- Sense of progress derives from character's different actions/reactions
- NB: You can fit this type of story into darn near any other story; some philosophies of storytelling will tell you you *have* to put it in everything

Plotting by Brackets

You can think of your story as a series of nested brackets, a little like this:

$$\Big[\big[[\text{---}[\text{--}]\text{----}[\text{---}]\text{-----}]\big]\Big]$$

Each bracket represents a conflict of varying size. The biggest, as you can see, is introduced at the beginning of the story and resolved by the end—in fact, that's how readers decide that the story is over: whether that "huge bracket" has been closed. The middle of the story may involve some smaller conflicts to keep things moving, but really the readers are there to find out how the major brackets get closed.

Any of those bracket-pairings can be any of the previously mentioned plot types. So the major brackets can be a **Mystery** plot, and the secondary brackets a **Relationship** plot. This can work well provided you don't get your wires crossed.

The Strange Attractor

All stories will, to some degree, mix the familiar and the unfamiliar. The familiar grounds the reader, giving them something to hang onto; the unfamiliar, though, is why they're coming to the story in the first place. SFF writers, for instance, can get away with somewhat tired plots because the *unfamiliar* of their story is taken care of in their setting; a well-made SFF world can pull in readers even if the plot is a bit hackneyed.

Further notes on this idea located here.

Concerning Plot Envy

Writers will inevitably be jealous of each others' skills. A friend of Sanderson's once admitted that she envies how well he can create eight bajillion plot threads in the beginning and tie all

of them together by the end, while her books tend to be "I really wish that I were married [insert 95% of book] OH I'M MARRIED." The thing is, though, her books are still fantastic.

If you are making promises and *keeping them*, your book can still be a delight to read. There's nothing at all wrong with making a simple, honest, "these people are going to meet and fall in love" promise and keeping it. There's a sense, sometimes, that we have to do something unexpected *just to be unexpected*, but **this isn't the case**.

If you're making huge promises about, say, a mystery and then produce an answer that's not satisfying—either because it's unexpected, or because it's *too* unexpected—then your audience will be *severely annoyed with you*. (Looking at you, LOST.)

You Are a Stage Magician

Take as an example *Lord of the Rings*: at the end of the story, Frodo suddenly decides he's going to keep the Ring. This is unexpected because we've been focusing on the BIG brackets—the journey Frodo has to take to throw the Ring in the hole. But another bracket-pair has been nested inside that bigger story all along: Frodo's slow and inevitable corruption.

One of the things we're trying to do is hold up an idea and say, "Look at the monkey! Look at the monkey!" while we're palming something in our other hand. It's all about redirecting someone else's focus. (For more on the idea of redirecting focus, check out this great TED talk.)

How to Make a Book Guide

Sanderson writes a book guide before starting any new book. The main concerns are:
- What promises am I making (about the style of story and what will happen at the end)?
- What kind of story is this?
- How will I give a sense of progress?
- How will my resolution fulfill *all* the promises that need to be fulfilled *in this story*?

A "book guide" starts by identifying what kinds of plots will be happening inside the book. What are your "big brackets"? What are the secondary brackets, the tertiary brackets, etc.? (Note that there will be small brackets chapter-by-chapter; this focuses on the big things.) His outlines are really just lists of goals and wrenches that will be thrown into those goals. Each chapter, he simply combines several of the bullet points, such that each chapter advances a few of the main goals.

(NB: this is a *very* similar method to Rowling's style of outlining, which happens on a grid: the *x* axis is each of the main plots, and the *y* axis is chapter-by-chapter. The two main plot concerns, in columns 4 and 5, are advanced almost every chapter, while the plots to the right of column 5 occasionally have blank spots in the graph.)

Session 5: Character I—Likable, Active, Competent

Q&A: Plot

Some Q&A with Brandon Sanderson.

- **How do you pace a chapter properly?**

  Writing a book, for *most* of us, is about taking something large and breaking it into smaller and smaller pieces. One of those pieces is a chapter. A good chapter will have some of the same feel as a great book has, in that you have a beginning, middle, and end. You're familiar with the sort of "rising action" idea: sometimes, you'll want to end your chapter right at the height of the action. Other times you'll end it with a small resolution.

  If you chop things in the middle, things will be sort of jerky, very exciting. If you end on the resolution, things will be much smoother. Thrillers will be structured so they always break in the middle, then close that, then immediately open another problem and break in the middle. It drags readers along by the nose, which can be very very fatiguing. Readers never get to relax. Chapters that sort of wrap up at the end will feel more elegant, almost.

  (This works for paragraphs, too. Short, choppy, two-sentence paragraphs will have a yanking kind of feeling, whereas long paragraphs have a slower sort of movement.)

  Those are really two extremes. You can fall in the middle if you want. But every chapter, usually, should be introducing problems and then dealing with them. This relates to the Try-Fail cycle, where you introduce a problem and the hero tries something *intelligent* and *reasonable*. This fails (usually twice) and then finally succeeds.

  Really, just decide what your chapter is trying to achieve. Probably it should have its own problems, but it should also keep the larger ending in sight.

- **What's an easy way to do, like, a "proof of concept" of a novel before you put time and energy into something that might actually suck?**

  If you are a new writer, it most likely *is* going to suck. The only way to make it not suck is to let it suck first, until you get good enough to write things that don't suck. In that case, it doesn't *matter* what you're writing, as long as you're excited about it.

  What I think you're also asking is, "Okay, Brandon, you've said that ideas are cheap and what I really need is practice, but *some ideas are definitely better than others*." The problem here is that it's so individual to you that I can't actually tell you what might end up not working for you. You've got to learn your own process well enough that you can tell what will or will not work for you. A discovery-writer will have to write

into the story to find out if they care about it. An outline-writer needs something exciting to write toward.

Anything you write, you're going to say, "Wow, this is not very good yet." But what you really need here is to hone your skills, get your fundamentals down, learn your scales, and you'll be able to make the things you want to make. (**Extremely relevant video.**)

I do want to note that sometimes it is going to be a slog no matter what you write, and you have to push through anyway. It's not all sunshine and dancing with unicorns.

- **My wife and I need to vocalize things in order to figure out what our books are really about. Do you do that? Do you ever try different methods like that?**

  Um—erm, no. I'm very solitary in my writing. The collaborative writing thing is not something I do a lot of. A lot of writers do it and love it a lot. Different processes work for different people. Use what works for you. If it makes you write good stuff you enjoy writing, then it's working.

- **In this class we're writing sort of chapter-by-chapter and then having people read it. Do you recommend that for normal book-writing?**

  Mostly, I'd suggest finishing a book before you workshop it. It's not a hard-and-fast rule. For a lot of writers, getting something critiqued while you're writing it will discourage you way too much. There's also the danger that your writing group will say "Wouldn't it be awesome if?" and then suddenly it's a completely different book.

- **I'm trying to make a believable, historically-viable magic system, and…[goes on for some time without actually asking a question].**

  We'll talk about magic systems next week, but for right now, let's go back to what I said earlier: writing is basically being a stage magician. With worldbuilding, you can do what Tolkien did and spend 20 years. That's perfectly legit. But if the book doesn't demand that, that's fine too. Either way you want your worldbuilding to have a sort of "iceberg" feel to it. You want to indicate to your reader that you know all of this other stuff—but you don't want to throw the entire iceberg at them. In epic fantasy, you want to imply you've got a *whole lot of iceberg* even if there's not a lot underneath the surface. In things like a Michael Crichton book, readers aren't looking for a big iceberg. They're actually looking for a very small iceberg, that's just what they want.

  I do want to bring up that the small, concrete detail matters *way* more than a page of description in a lot of places. Think about someone who knows a lot about horses and is talking about horses and boil that down to one line. Compare that to what someone who *doesn't* know a lot about horses would say. If your character talks and thinks like an expert, you will give a sense that things are very real. Also think about

how people legitimately talk. For instance, no scientist every *really* says "Let's go do some physics!" In the same way, no false-world mage would say, "Let's go do some magic."

Character

Arguably the most important part of the story in most genres. There *are* genres where the character is a little bit secondary to the plot, and it's also arguable that fantasy/scifi is distinguished by its worldbuilding. However, great worldbuilding will not make up for utterly bland characters. It's *very important* to make the characters compelling.

Recall from an earlier lecture the three qualities that readers often enjoy in characters:
- Active
- Competent
- Likable

As already stated, two out of three will suffice to make a compelling character; in the first chapter, you can even get away with only giving the character *one* of those things. The Hero's Journey, for instance, will often start off with someone who is *just* **likable**; they get to be competent and/or active later on (Bilbo is a great example). Another popular option is to start off with nothing but **active** (Indiana Jones, for instance, doesn't immediately communicate his likableness or competence, but dang if he isn't active). James Bond movies round out the trio by introducing a ridiculously **competent** character.

Likable

Likeability is increased tremendously by relatability. A character with goals, struggles, passions, fears, and failures that readers recognize and resonate with becomes almost instantly likable.

Another swift way of establishing likability: display a valued trait in the character. Everyday human kindness endears characters very quickly (cf. [Pet the Dog](#)). On that canine note, readers *love* the underdog. A character who gets picked on becomes lovable.

Perhaps the most interesting thing: readers will quickly develop affection for characters who already have *friends*.

Active

Consider the Villain Problem, a recurring issue in stories based off the Hero's Journey:

> **"If the Villain hadn't come along, this Hero would never have done *anything*."**

Readers sympathize with characters who *do things*. If the villain of your book is the most active person onstage, readers will start liking the villain way more than they like the hero. (This is only bad if you're doing it without meaning to.)

The other big issue is that if you use plot structures like the Hero's Journey, at the beginning the hero *does not want* to protag. We like reluctant heroes (because, of course, it's relatable). And if the hero starts off being reluctant, it's that much more dramatic when his character development makes him *super excited* to do heroic things.

So...why is an active character so appealing, if we find reluctance relatable? First of all, because *crap gets done*. Active characters keep things from getting boring; they advance the progress of the story. Activity also makes the character admirable; we like reading about driven people.

Ultimately, it's based in this: **in every character we like, we see a mixture of who we are and who we want to be.** (This brings up something valuable about villains: well-drawn villains often have a little bit of us inside them.)

Often, newbie authors *suck* at active characters. It can be something as simple as studying for a test or as weird as collecting the last figurine in his expansive and eclectic collection. Bear in mind that a character does not have to be *good* at their passion for them to come across as active. Start the story with your character *doing something*.

Competent

Sanderson doesn't go into this much at all in this lecture, but in previous years spends a lot of time talking about how readers love it when characters are **good at stuff**. Flynn Rider is good at two things: (1) stealing things and (2) cracking wise. This endears him to us despite the fact that he's arrogant, callous, untrustworthy, manipulative, and traitorous. You wouldn't want to be friends with Flynn Rider, but you *love* watching him do cool stuff.

Many of the characters we love are preternaturally good at one or two particular things. Hermione is Preternaturally Intelligent; Samwise Gamgee is Preternaturally Loyal; Katniss Everdeen is Preternaturally Gritty.

Probably you will not find yourself being too stingy with character superpowers; the trend is more often to give your character *all* the powers. Try to focus them into one area.

Character-as-Role

Wooden characters happen. It's a thing. Often, this happens because you're writing a character into a *role*. Characters need to have a *realness* to them, and they can't do that when they're created according to a checklist. It's rather esoteric, but realness often derives (in Sanderson's opinion) from characters who have *life outside the plot*. What would this character be doing with his/her life if the plot had never barged into their life? If you took your character out for coffee, what would they talk about? Can you imagine your character in any context but the plot they've gotten tangled in?

Consider the evolution of superhero comics. Batman, in his original incarnation, was *just* a vigilante. Superman was *always heroing*. As the genre evolved (and as Stan Lee become involved) superheroes started having real lives. Spider-man has classes to pass; the

Fantastic Four have their internal conflicts to work out. They exist as more than just superheroes.

Your goal is to *keep your character from being defined by a single thing*, particularly their role. Characters defined by their roles quickly become stereotypes.

Character Considerations

"Round characters" are all the rage these days, and for good reason: a round character communicates realness. Four factors contribute to roundness:
- Flaws—Sanderson splits these into Handicaps and Flaws. **Handicaps** are things the characters must overcome that aren't their fault (and probably won't be solved by the end); **Flaws** are often the character's own fault, or at least something the character *must* solve if they're going to be whole.
- Passions—characters who are only passionate about the plot get *very irritating very fast*. More specifically, a character with *only one passion* gets irritating because they're so *boring*.
- Quirks—absurdly popular method and *so tremendously easy* to overdo. Feel free to give characters something totally perpendicular to their expected role, but be careful about making them annoying. Don't let a quirk define the character. In addition, it's advised that the quirk not have any bearing on the plot. It's not a plot thing; it's a character thing. It's where the character *deviates* from their established role.
- Expertise—cf. Competence.

Exercise: try taking all the characters in your story and slotting them into different roles. The love interest becomes the wise old mentor, the plucky sidekick becomes the main character, etc. It might not be a wise course for writing a whole book, but it's a handy trick for figuring out why any character is in his/her given role.

Exercise: put two characters into the book who fit into the same role. You'll force yourself to distinguish between them.

Most of all, remember that **everyone's a hero in their own ~~way~~ head.** Everybody's narrating their life story with themselves as the good guy. Even the mook who's guarding the castle gate. Treat them appropriately.

Session 6: Setting I—You Cannot Do Everything

Q&A: Character

Some Q&A with Brandon Sanderson, hypothetically focusing on the previous lecture.

- **How do you plan something large-scale?**

  A lot of us read SFF because we *love* reading huge projects. Back in the day, back when SFF lived mostly in magazines, writers who wanted to work in the genre started with short stories, which were published in those magazines. My generation started reading right around the time that magazines started dying, and also when SFF migrated into a novel-centric environment. So when my generation started publishing, very few of us had read short stories and so very few of us had mastered it or wanted to write it. So that sort of "apprentice in SFF by writing short stories and then move into a longer form" has died out.

  My generation grew up reading epic fantasy, so we all wanted to start out by writing that. Learning to write epic fantasy is *hard*. Short stories are hard too, but you can make one of those a lot quicker than you can make a whole long novel.

  A lot of aspiring writers will start thinking about their Big Project in their teens, and then they'll spend fifteen years thinking about *just that*. It's an ideal story in their heads, and it transforms multiple times, and eventually you've got this *perfect story* that's actually kind of just a huge hodge-podge of ideas that you've been having for the last fifteen years.

  The number one thing I would suggest you do is **throw *all of that* away and start fresh** with something else. I'm not saying you'll never write that one, but if you don't have the experience writing, you can't possibly handle that huge thing. Learning how to write a novel is the number one thing that's going to help you write large-scale.

  Once you have a grasp of how to do a single book, you'll have a better chance of understanding how to put together a series. The Three Act format, for instance, works well inside a single book; it also works for a trilogy. Really it's just a matter of learning what works for you on a one-book scale and then exploding that a little.

- **If you're doing multiple first-person perspectives, how do you handle that?**

  The thing I've seen most often is titling the chapter after the character whose head you're in. That's the simplest method. Another way of doing it is trying to make your narrators have very distinct voices.

Setting

Simultaneously the most and least important of the three major components of writing (in SFF). Most important because it's *why* you're writing SFF as opposed to YA romance. Least important because it cannot hold a novel up on its own; useless characters or a bland plot will kill your book no matter how great your setting is. (Note: setting works well in short stories because shorts are very idea-driven, and setting is all about those ideas.)

Setting is *great*. Setting is what pulls folks into SFF more often than not. Setting is culture and socioeconomics and politics and magic systems and customs and religion and mood. It's especially important for SFF because, really, when you think about it, it can do *anything* that the other genres can do, *but* it can have dragons.

The other awesome thing about setting? It's free-form. Where plot and character are concerned, your audience is ahead of you: most of the pieces for those things exist already and your readers have seen them before. Plot structures and character archetypes are not really up for invention and debate.

Your setting, though? The gloves are *off*. You can do whatever you want.

You want your sovereign nation to make policy based on where and when the hedgehogs pop out of their holes? You can do that. You want time to be 100% cyclical? You can do that. You want your planet to be a massive disk resting on the backs of four elephants, who themselves stand on the shell of a cosmic tortoise? By gum, *you can do that* (although it's not recommended because Terry Pratchett has been doing it for a while and by this point he's kind of got the market cornered).

This makes the current problem of SFF a little ironic: we can do *whatever we want*. But we keep on aping Tolkien. New and original ideas are what draw us to the genre in the first place. We are the most imaginative genre out there; no one should be saying, "Yeah, fantasy is kind of all the same."

The Basics of Setting

Rule number one of Setting: **you cannot do everything**.

Tolkien tried. It took him 20 years to put together Middle-Earth and he *still* did not quite get everything in there. There are still visible seams in that book's worldbuilding.

Rule number two: **everything filters through your characters**. If your character does not care about a particular aspect of your Setting, you would be ill-advised to carry on in that vain (that's a pun and *I'm not sorry*). Readers follow the characters' attention.

You may experience an urge to show off your worldbuilding—perhaps to have two characters on a roadtrip stop at a specific landmark where you will suddenly give a

twenty-page essay on the battle that happened there. You are not adding depth to your world: you are adding pages. They are not the same.

Your primary concerns will be:
1. How can I do an original take on this?
2. How can I make it a source of conflict?
3. How can I make it a source of passion (relevant and significant) to a character?
4. Does it lend itself to some cool description?
5. *Sanderson's Zeroth Law: Err on the side of awesome.

What we are doing in this genre is *stuff that is awesome*. This is what separates SFF from, say, poetry. **We want to make dragons.** Dragons do not make sense, but they are *cool*. Some things are awesome because they are awesome. Always be doing things that you think are awesome.

Physical Setting

This is setting that would exist regardless of sentient races. It'll include:
- Topography
- Climate
- Wildlife
- Magic (sometimes)
- Atmosphere
- Lighting
- Elements and geology
- Races

And really everything else. What you're looking for is an idea that you think is really *stinking* cool. The fantasy-setting-that-is-basically-Medieval-England thing is getting tired these days. Look for something that (a) will stand out and (b) is cool to you.

Cultural Setting

This is a direct result of (and very directly relates to) the sentient races in the book. These can, of course, differ according to the alternate cultures in the book. It'll include:
- Parent/child relationships
- Gender roles
- Religion
- Government
- Education
- Military/warfare
- Economics
  - SFF gets a lot of flack for its treatment of this topic (what are all those armies *eating*?). It can be worth giving this some extra thought if only so you can keep your head up around the folks who know a little bit about this stuff.
- Folklore
- Music
- Art

- Ethnicity (and how they deal with it)
- Demographics (and how they relate to each other)
- Recreation

SFF spends a lot of time talking about History and Linguistics and (sometimes) Ethnicity but almost none on Recreation, Family Relationships, or Education. That's why the genre feels stale a lot: SFF writers put all their focus in the same areas.

Be sure to let your cool ideas play together. Let the Topography influence the Religion. Let the Government influence the Magic. When they influence and play off each other, they'll generate greater depth for your story.

Sanderson's Laws

Sanderson devised these as advice to himself, to make his stories better. They're all more or less themed toward magic, but can be geared toward other setting aspects. Additionally, they're not necessarily going to apply to you, but it can't hurt to learn them.

Zeroth Law: Err on the side of awesome.

First Law: Your ability to solve problems (in a satisfying way) with magic is directly proportional to how well the reader understands said magic.
> **Corollary:** The more you explain the magic, the less sense of wonder remaining.
> **Tip:** Your numenous, not-explained magic will feel a lot less deus-ex-machina-y if, when you fix problems with the mystical magic, you cause *bigger* problems.

Second Law: Limitations of powers are usually more interesting than the powers themselves.

Third Law: Expand what you already have before you add something new.
> **Note:** This doesn't mean those other things can't *exist*, but the more things you cram into your lens the more difficult it is to care about any of them. The Hollywood Villain-Sequel Problem is that if you have one villain in movie 1, you need two of them in movie 2, and then three of them in movie 3. This makes all three of the villains in that last film *slightly less than a third* as cool and interesting as the one villain in the first film, and it's why *Spider-Man 3* wasn't as great as it could've been.

Session 7: Prose—The Grand Skill

Q&A: Prose

Now that the class has had a taste of all the major topics, the Q&A is open-season (not that it wasn't before).

- **What gets you stuck when you're writing? How do you get beyond it?**

  I get stuck when things don't make sense. Solving it comes down to knowing my own writing style. For me, blocks can come down to a few different things. One is that I just don't want to write, which happens. When it comes to that, I write it anyway, I set it aside, and I come back to it the next day to see if it really was as bad as I thought it was. If yes, I throw it away, but now my subconscious has been working on it and how to fix it…probably. If I try again and again and it still doesn't work, I take a step back and ask "How much does this *actually* impact the book?"

  At worst, I have to scrap the whole thing and start over, which is terrible because momentum is *king* in how I work. Sometimes that works out beautifully, sometimes it doesn't.

- **I've found I'm pretty good at making scenes that work—that are fun or climactic or interesting, scenes that just *work*—but I struggle to fill the gaps between those scenes with the necessary stuff. How do I do it?**

  Ooh. This is gonna be difficult for me to 'diagnose.' I've known people who write like this and basically their process is to keep on writing fun scenes, just pages and pages of different cool scenes, and then the end step of their process is stringing them together into a book. I cannot comprehend that. That would not work for me at all because I can't figure out where each character is emotionally. Film actors can do that sort of thing, because they're always—you don't film a movie chronologically, it has to fit with the budget and who's at work that day and all sorts of things, so they bounce around.

  That said, if you're writing great, fun scenes, that's...like the best first-world problem to have. If it were me, my solution would be to take two scenes that seem like they're sort of close together and then try to write a scene that connects them and is fun to me. It'll be boring to you, so you'd need to find some ways to make it entertaining to you. You could do that with a one-off viewpoint if you wanted—take a scene through the eyes of a waiter and make that waiter really interesting and serve all these bizarre characters. You could also do it with a different setting. Really just make sure that something interesting is going on while you're getting your boring stuff out of the way. Don't do the exposition-while-strolling thing from the Star Wars prequels.

- **What do you do for revising? Do you revise as you go, or at the end?**

So, revision. Revision is the *worst*. I loathe it. One of the reasons I took so long to get published was that I never revised, I just wrote a new book. My process for revision is to make it very goal-based. I identify, "What do I want to achieve in this draft?" and then I try to make that happen.

For instance, you'll probably have a Polishing draft at some point. In that draft you're looking to cut away stuff that's repetitious, you're looking for word choice—really your goal there is to increase clarity and, if it's your thing, beauty. When I do a polish draft, I focus *only* on those things. Not character actions, not relationships, not events. *Just* the small-scale.

What you're probably asking is how to do the Editing draft, or the major-changes draft. I'm a quintessential outliner, or a one-drafter. I have to have my momentum and write chronologically by character viewpoint. What this means is that if I have a great idea midway through the book, it is better for me to insert that idea and pretend it's been there the whole time than it is to go back and start the whole thing over.

This means my first drafts are *bad*. You can see more of this with Warbreaker—that's the book I wrote and posted as I was going, so other people could see how my writing process goes.

The next draft is where I fix the major problems, like characters who just vanish halfway through. I have a document on my computer that's named "Notes for Next Revision," which is where I keep comments to myself about things that need to be changed. My second draft I'm mostly fixing the big problems, making sure that the whole book works together rather than suddenly jumping the rails in the middle. My second draft is when I start filling out the Notes for Next Revision. They're small-scale things that need to be fixed, but I don't focus on those right now. I'm focusing on making the novel cohesive.

Draft three is my first polish, where I take care of the things that I noticed in the Notes. I send this draft to my editor, my agent, my beta readers, and then their feedback goes into the Notes.

Draft four is where I integrate their feedback. Draft four is when I do the really discouraging editor-things. At this point, I organize the Notes according to severity. I read through the whole book looking for things to change.

After that it's basically bug-fixing. Occasionally I'll need to do a draft five that's as big as draft four.

I want to note that this is *very different* from how discovery writers do revision. Ask Jansey (sp?) when she comes in, because she's very different and very good at

revision.

- **Do you ever abandon a draft? Is it ever so bad that you just give it up?**

I finish the draft unless...well, there are only a few drafts I've never finished. One was *Mythwalker*, which I didn't finish because it felt too generic, it felt too much like what I'd already done. Another one was *Death by Pizza*, which was my first experimentation with urban fantasy—necromancer with a pizza joint—and it was something I'd only done for fun in between two other books, which I do a lot and very few of those get released. Another one was *Liar of Partinel*. I'm not sure if I finished the first draft of that one, but I definitely didn't do multiple revisions on it. It's very dangerous for me—if I put down a book, like write four or five chapters and then stop, it's extremely difficult for me to get back into it, which is bad.

What I recommend for new authors, particularly when your skill is still developing, is just to *finish books*. If you don't, you're not likely to ever learn how to, and then you'll always be disappointed with your stuff. You won't progress as quickly as you need to.

- **Do you have any recommendations for how to finish a book if you've never done it before?**

[Just do it.](#)

Every person I've known personally who's finished a first book, the ending has been a disaster. Me included. Most of us, when we first finish a book it's sort of just, "Okay, this is long enough, let's wrap it up now." At the journeyman level of writing, you're learning how to write great scenes, but you probably don't know yet how to pull it all into a book. The only way I've known to learn that is to practice.

- **I'm struggling a little with voice; I've got five different characters, but their voices are the same.**

One thing I've heard for this problem is to take a well-received book and imitate the voices in there. It's one thing that artists do a lot, where they'll learn how to paint like an Impressionist or a Realist or whatever. So take a character or a writer with a really distinctive voice and try to imitate it as well as you can.

- **Do you do anything before you start writing?**

I don't have a lot of writing rituals. I'm a very workmanlike writer, so I just get up, I read my Scriptures, and I turn my music on and I write.

- **I have a character who's basically a god, and I'm trying to figure out how to set limits on his power level so he can be interesting.**

Ask Howard about this. In his comic, he has basically a god character, and he solves

it really well.

There are a couple ways to solve this. One is to confront them with problems their deific powers can't solve—this is the Superman solution. Another is to confront them with a problem that *only* they can solve, and that will take all their resources.

Prose

The grand skill of SFF writers is the ability to convey setting and character to the reader in a way that is engaging, powerful, and not-boring. There are multiple ways to take this on, and none of them are required—again, it's all about what works for your story.

Window Pane Prose

This style of writing considers prose a window through which you see the story. Basically, you want your prose "translucent." There's an extensive essay on this subject, but the concept has kind of stepped out into the world and works on its own now.

Stained Glass Prose

More or less the opposite of window pane prose, where your word choice is so powerful and evocative that it can add to the story by drawing attention to itself. This doesn't necessarily mean it's overly flowery or purple, just that it's very intentionally beautiful. This is difficult to do without being self-conscious, which can turn the whole thing into a farce.

Hybrids

It's extremely dangerous to write Window-Pane 90% of the time and Stained-Glass the other 10%. When it's surrounded by a transparent style, Stained-Glass looks a lot more like purple prose, which is the writing equivalent of caking your entire face in makeup.

The Pyramid of Abstraction

As your writing grows more abstract, it becomes easier to talk about lofty ideas and harder to keep the reader involved in the story. You can visualize this as a triangle; things up at the top are more abstract (narrower, harder to make readers connect with) and things at the bottom are more concrete (broader, easy to visualize).

This is why a lot of writers will start off with a *grounding* element, some short setting description so that no characters are "talking in a white room."

Writers are prone to *navel-gazing*, in which the character broods. Take, for instance, Batman mulling about how his dead parents would feel about how he's handling the crime problem in Gotham and whether they would be proud of him or ashamed and what if he's actually doing something they wouldn't approve of but really he's probably right because they *tried* to change the city and they failed and they died but he's going to change things by *beating up psychopaths*—

blech

This sort of thing is all the way up in the Pyramid of Abstraction. It's hard to keep the reader grounded while your character is mumbling about their moral philosophy and flashbacking to how they developed it when their family's butler was talking about Kant.

Love and morality and heroism fit at the top of the Pyramid, obviously. Where would you put "dog"? If you said "bottom," sorry, try again, but take comfort in the fact that everybody else thought that way at first, too.

"Dog" is actually an abstract concept. It's like a Platonic Ideal, because if you say it to two different people, they'll get two different images. Dog is only slightly lower on the Pyramid than love because when you say "dog," you're giving your reader almost nothing. You can drag almost anything down from its place on the Pyramid of Abstraction by giving *specific detail*. "Her Majesty's corgi" is way more specific than "dog." The danger, of course, is that adding detail often requires adding words, which slows your prose down a lot.

One of the best ways to go about this is to pick one or two significant details for your scene, and describe those with their own concrete details, and these will help evoke your scene. Using multiple senses, rather than just sight, will also help solidify the story.

Do be cautious of using The Gorilla in the Phone Booth. If you give offhanded description of something extraordinary, like a gorilla in the phone booth, you'll redirect the audience's attention without necessarily meaning to.

Take note that epic fantasy can handle more description than, say, an urban thriller, but try not to go overboard. Precision and economy are your primary goals in prose, even if you're doing Stained-Glass.

It *is* possible to do too little description, but it's extremely rare.

Infodumps

You, as an SFF writer, have a lot of really cool stuff you want to get across to your reader. Rule number one is that you don't need to give nearly as much as you feel you have to give. Err on the side of leaving it out. Your readers will let you know when they're confused.

In general, new writers try to stuff too much in. There was, in early fantasy, a trend toward three-page Prologues that explain the whole of the storyworld in incredibly dry, boring detail. You can still do prologues, but readers really want to start with conflict and character and then work the setting in later. Readers have gotten too sophisticated to read a travelogue at the beginning of their novels.

Rule number two is to set your tone early and honestly.

Rule number three is to be unobtrusive. One way to do that is the character-in-school trope, where a lecture on the magic system is happening, but it's broken up with character and conflict so that you only include the most necessary details. Another is to have characters have *natural* conversations (or, better, *arguments*) about the things you want to exposit.

When you're doing this exposition, be cautious about creating Great Walls O'Text at the beginning, because they communicate to the reader, "*Steep* learning curve; dense prose; reader beware." If they come in and they see something a little more broken up, with smaller paragraphs and interspersed dialogue, they'll consider it a fast-moving book.

Really, the grand skill is just the ability to commit inception on your audience, where you convince the reader that they're watching the main character's argument with a horse merchant, when *really* you're slipping in details about how that character yearns to become a ship captain *and* that your setting is steampunky *and* that the character is poor *and* that the character is extremely brusque and struggles to communicate his feelings *and...*.

Q&A Again

- **How can you start with an exciting scene and then transition into, like, lore stuff?**

  For that stuff, it's largely personal taste. One thing that is really helpful for this is the prologue. You can set up tone and lore in that prologue, although you have to be careful with them. The "baby is rescued and then fostered out" and then, like, 18 years later that's the main character is one of the *most* cliched things in prologues. That doesn't mean it can't be done well, because that's what Harry Potter did and it's a fantastic book, but it's dangerous.

- **Is it possible to show too much and not give enough of the character's reaction?**

  Yes. I've noticed this a lot more with my YA stuff than my adult fiction stuff. One way to do it is to sort of let the character muse on something and break up their "feelings" about something with their conscious thoughts, like dialogue.

- **[something unintelligible about show v. tell]**

  Telling is writing "He was lonely." *Showing* can give us the specific type of loneliness and lets the reader infer things and develop an emotional connection with characters. Showing the lonely character sitting at the lunchroom table by himself, listening into the conversations of others and whispering to himself what he would say if he were lucky enough to be part of their group, can be more powerful than "He was lonely."

- **Do you have any rules of thumb for doling out clues in a mystery plot?**

A good one is "Mention it three times before it becomes relevant." Test-readers are good for this. Err on the side of being a little more obvious than you think you need to be. As before, it's really just about giving a sense of progression.

- **[something unintelligible]**

Readers are better at picking up "shows" than you think they are. They are worse at picking up clues about the large-scale plot than you think they are. Remember that you *cannot* fool everyone, and if you did then you probably wrote a bad book. The best reveal, to me, is when the majority of the readers figure it out one paragraph before it's revealed, and they're excited/worried that they're right.

Session 8: Prose III—Shop It

Q&A: Assorted

- **How do you handle stubborn characters?**

  It'll depend on what your arc is. You might want your character to overcome their stubbornness inside the book, and you might not. Some characters will be very aware of their own flaws and trying to fix them or acknowledge them or something. Others will be less self-aware and more instinctive.

  One thing that's helpful is maybe running your character through a scene that isn't relevant to the plot at all and seeing how the character reacts, so you understand their idiosyncracies better. And then you can do that again at the end of the book and see if the character's reactions are different.

- **[something unintelligible about book releases]**

  I don't have much say in when my books get released. A lot of it depends on what the publisher wants to do and also when I turn the book in. One big benefit to publishing in fall is that you get the Christmas season, which is great for sales, but if a book is published in the spring there's less competition for bestseller lists. Bestseller list placement is important because booksellers use that as their gauge for which books they ought to give pride-of-place to.

- **Do you pick an aspect of your writing and focus on it when you write a book?**

  Yes. Significantly. In *Warbreaker* you can probably tell that I'm trying to work on humor, in *Way of Kings* I'm focusing on worldbuilding. Obviously you want to get better at everything the more you write, but it can be helpful to focus on just one aspect of your craft in any particular project. Shorts can be really good for this, too—*The Emperor's Soul* was me seeing if I could write a story that basically takes place in only one room, and *Legion* is me trying to do a contemporary detective story.

- **What kind of time commitment does it take to become a great writer?**

  That's going to depend a lot on where your skill level is when you start and also on your own style of writing. Eric Flint (sp?) describes himself as a "binge-writer." To my knowledge his style has always been taking three or four months, and write 12 hours every day, and get the book out of his system and then he won't write for months. My friend Jansy is also a binge-writer.

  I myself am a daily-quota writer. I write every day consistently, and I need a *block*, not interspersed in 30-minute bites.

Other writers are great at dabble-writing, where they do those small, bite-size chunks of writing and then they watch TV or something.

We say "write every day," but there's a big old asterisk on that. Really it's very individualized. You have to figure out what works for you. Bear in mind, though, that most people need years of doing a thing before they become a "master" of a form. That's the idea of "10,000 hours."

- **If you're a new writer, but you can't get published, when should you start thinking about self-publishing?**

  I try to avoid *should* in this class, so I'm going to avoid saying that. I'm trying to give you as many "you can" and "if you'd like" statements as possible, instead of "you must" or "you should." With that said, self-publishing today is *extremely* viable. There are writers today who are making a living doing full-time self-publishing and they work completely off of electronic publishing.

  When should you be considering it? It depends on your own feelings. If having print editions in the bookstores is a big deal to you, self-publishing isn't your jam. If you hate doing your own cover design or hiring a cover designer, or hiring an editor yourself, or doing all your own marketing—pursuing traditional publishing is the best option for you. But if you feel like "I could do all that" then maybe you should pursue self-publishing from the get-go.

  So what is the "should"? The *should* is based on what you want, what you're comfortable with, and what you're capable of doing. If you're only going to write a book every four years, self-publishing will *not* pay your bills.

- **Thoughts on online writing groups?**

  I personally do not like online writing groups. I prefer being able to see the body language of people who are reading my stuff.

Prose Workshop

During this segment, Sanderson reviews several submissions from his own students, looking specifically for ways to show instead of tell, for instances of too much wordiness (or too little), repeated constructions, phrasing that goes too high on the Pyramid of Abstraction, and other small-but-significant writing bugaboos.

It is, however, nearly impossible to read the text on the projector, so I've collated Sanderson's personal tips:

- Start by turning on Track Changes and turning off Autocorrect. Sanderson also likes having the Document Map up (which is not a feature I'm familiar with).

- Follow the viewpoint character's attention; don't lark off onto things the character doesn't notice *unless you really know what you're doing*. The style-in-vogue is to keep yourself confined to one character's head and downplay the "little did he know" style dramatic irony.
- Beware passive voice!
- Focus heavily on *image* and *character*.
- Beware lazy sentences—in fact, beware adequate sentences. The overachieving sentences, which accomplish two or three things at once, are where the money's at. If your sentence is *only* describing a standard situation, odds are good it's not working hard enough.
- Weigh the costs and benefits of each wording decision you make. Sometimes you'll need to pick between giving more detail about the world and giving more detail about a character's history or emotion. Consider what you gain and what you lose.
- Be careful to let your reader follow the character's line of reasoning; don't let the character jump through conclusions all on their own.
- It's often helpful to give a magic system sensory components. If you were to describe a carpenter carving wood, you could go into great detail about how he grips the knife, how the wood smells, how his fingers move over the grain. Any kind of art in our world has that. Often, though, fantasy writers will just give their magic a keyword and nothing else. Magic systems are more interesting when they have sensory components. (Consider *Avatar: The Last Airbender*: the magic system is highly visual, as well as being very, very active.)
- Be careful about viewpoint errors, like mentioning that your viewpoint character didn't notice something. If your viewpoint character didn't notice, you cannot bring it up without breaking viewpoint.
- Strive to move details down the Pyramid of Abstraction. Instead of "a general air of bemusement," describe slightly squinted eyes, a mouth that has opened without its owner realizing it, or something similar. That being said, sometimes you can get away with "a general air of bemusement."
- Those of you who self-identify as editors: be cautious about applying hard-and-fast rules to others' writing. Be hard on your own writing, but gentle on that of others. For instance, if you're reading a submission from your writing group, do not presume to change "hollered," "lobbed," "rebutted," "replied" or "claimed" with "said." Be judicious about interfering with someone else's diction.
- Be extra careful about metaphors and euphemisms in your phrasing, particularly when writing SFF. For instance, "He flew across the room" is a permissible (if somewhat lazy) sentence in a contemporary novel, but in a fantasy novel it could mean something *very* different.