

Studies in SF

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Conventions in SF writing; Protocols in SF reading

“Convention” (as applied to SF) is defined by Webster’s dictionary as “[the] rule, method, or practice established by usage; custom [for example] *the convention of showing north at the top of a map.*” All literature has conventions; some conventions can be generally applied, and some are particular to a genre.

In no particular order:

1. ALL stories that work, like a good sentence, have a unity that comes from the selection and fusion of many elements—style and point of view, theme and mood, character and setting—all so related that none exists without the rest.
2. The opening [of a story] shows us people with a problem.
3. The body of the story shows us the people in live action, as their responses complicate their problems and reveal their traits of character. Plot interest rises as time runs out and the problems appear impossible to solve.
4. Surprise or not, the ending shows the problems solved.
5. Much of SF is about the possible, not the actual, so many SF stories begin with “what-if” questions. Jules Verne wondered *what if men could fly around the moon, or reach the center of the Earth*, H.G. Wells wondered *what if Martians invaded England*, and Jack Williamson speculated about *a world with no adults allowed*.
6. A complete dramatic scene has five steps: meeting, purpose, clash, outcome, and result. The meeting brings two people or forces together. One has a purpose, which the other resists. They clash, exchanging words or maybe space torpedoes. The outcome is a win or a loss or a draw. The fifth step, the essential result, shows the effect upon the larger action of the whole plot, shows the hero nearer his main goal or in despair of ever reaching it.
 - a. “Chekhov’s Gun” is a principle attributed to playwright and author Anton Chekhov (not the Star Trek character): “Remove everything that has no relevance to the story. If you say in the first chapter [the first act / the meeting] that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter [the third act / the clash] it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging there” (There are variations of this wording, but this common version was taken from Wikipedia.org, with my additions added in [brackets]).
7. Good scenes impinge upon *all* our senses.

8. Irony may lie in either language or action. Oedipus discovered that the criminal he was hunting was himself. “Jamboree” (Williamson) has a series of smaller, not necessarily lesser, ironies.
9. Style is a product of revision. Gunn’s first law of writing is: good stories are not written, they are rewritten. Gunn’s second law is that you cannot teach creativity. However, you can teach critical judgment: the ability to know when something works, whether it is right or wrong for the story, and how to fix it.
10. James Gunn says that “viewpoint is the key to the writing of [science] fiction.” Ask yourself *how does the narrator stand in relation to the story?* “The points of view that SF adopts are more than questions of narration. The viewpoints of SF, whether implicit or explicit, have made science fiction what it is; they create the tone and perspective that have distinguished science fiction from other kinds of fiction, and more than anything else, subject or scene, created the effects it has achieved.” He goes on to say that “the viewpoints of SF detach the reader from his anthropomorphism, from his blind involvement with the human race; for the first time, perhaps, he is able to see man [and hopefully himself] from afar and judge objectively his potential and his accomplishments, his history, and his prospects.” Four of the viewpoints Gunn urges us to attend to are:
- a. The distant, cold, and objective view is the indifference of **the universe**
 - b. Another, slightly more subjective, is the view of **man from space**. Such a view makes us feel very small in the scheme of things, brings humility. The further into space man travels, the less important his passions and agonies seem. Eventually, only survival remains.
 - c. The view of **the future** is another detached perspective. From this view the most important task of the present is to make the future possible. Therefore, SF stories of holocaust demonstrate the ultimate stupidity of actions that ruin the future for our children. In a sense, SF stories are letters from the future, from our children, urging us to be careful of the world.
 - d. The final detached view is that of **the alien**. This might be the man from the present in a future society, aliens visiting our society, beings here for conquest, even beings sent to help us move along the evolutionary trail. Such a viewpoint allows us to see the triviality of the minor differences between races or individuals on Earth.
11. In SF, man is important only in relationship to humanity; to focus on any individual is “as if a bacteriologist were to become fixated on, not a group of bacteria, but on one isolated bacterium.”
12. A good story begins in the middle of things.
13. SF stories are defined by their **milieu**—the world in which the story takes place. They are”
- Set in the future, because the future is not knowable—we write what *might* happen
 - Set in the historical past and *contradict* known facts of history (alternate world or alternate history stories)—what if the Cuban Missile Crisis had led to nuclear war?
 - Set on other worlds, because we’ve never gone there—if it isn’t Earth, it is SF.
 - Set on Earth, but before recorded history and contradicting the known archaeological record—stories about visits from ancient aliens, ancient civilizations who have left no trace, lost kingdom stories.
 - Contradictory to some known or supposed law of nature.

14. SF takes readers into unfamiliar places and readers have this love/fear attitude toward strangeness.
15. The difference between SF and fantasy is easily assessed using this rule of thumb: If the story is set in a universe that follows the same rules as ours, it is SF. If the story is set in a universe that does not follow the same rules as ours, it is fantasy. SF is about what could be, but isn't (yet); fantasy is about what could not be.
- Another helpful rule that's perhaps a little less reliable, but easier to recognize: SF is more often set in the future, while fantasy is often in a mythical past (usually, though not always, resembling the Middle Ages).
16. Orson Scott Card advises would-be science fiction writers to use a MICE Quotient. Card asserts that all stories contain four elements that determine structure:
- a. Milieu (see above)—the world of the story—the planet, the society, the weather, the family, all the elements that come up when a writer creates a world—is the milieu. Milieu Stories follow the structure of the observer, a stranger going somewhere, seeing things as we would see them, being transformed by what he sees, and coming back a changed or new person.
 - b. Idea—the information that the character discovers is the idea. The Idea Story begins with raising a question and ends with that question answered. Most mystery stories follow this pattern.
 - c. Character—the Character Story is about the transformation of a character's role in the communities that matter most to him. The story begins when the character becomes so unhappy, impatient, angry in his present role that he initiates a change. The story ends when he either gives up the struggle or settles into a new role.
 - d. Event—in the Event Story, something is wrong with the fabric of the universe; something is out of order. The Event Story ends at the point where a new order is established, or more rarely, where the old order is restored. The Event Story begins, not at the point where the world becomes disordered, but rather at the point where the character whose actions are most crucial to establishing the new order becomes involved in the struggle.
17. The SF writer trickles information about the world to the reader; the SF reader is expected to extrapolate, to find the implied information contained in the new world.
18. Different kinds of stories demand different kinds of writing; what is good for one story may not work for another. Here is a scene done using three levels of diction:

Sevora read the letter, showing no emotion as she did. Tyvell only realized something was wrong when the letter slipped from her fingers and she took a single hesitant step toward him. He caught her before she could fall to the floor.

He laid her gently on the thick fur before the hearth, then sent his dwarf to fetch the surgeon.

Before help could arrive, however, her eyes opened.

"The surgeon is coming," Tyvell said, gently holding her hand.

“Read the letter,” she whispered. “Lebbech has destroyed me.”

Sevora perused the missive, displaying none of the turmoil of her feelings on her impassive, stone-like face. Tyvell only became aware of the tumult within her when she let fall the curled parchment and staggered toward him. With the utmost hurry, he caught her in his arms before her delicate frame could strike the floor.

Gently he laid her on the pliant bearskin before the merrily dancing flames of the hearth, then sent Crimond, his astonished and frantic dwarf, to fetch the chirurgeon. Before the diminutive servant’s abbreviated stride could bring the desired aid, however, Sevora resumed consciousness and her eyes fluttered open.

“Fear not,” said Tyvell, stroking the smooth white skin of her hand. “I have sent for the chirurgeon.”

“I need him not,” whispered Sevora. “How can I be holpen now by his herberies? Nay, even his knife shall not serve me in my present need. Under the hideous spells of Lebbech, I now lie destroyed.”

Sevora read the letter as best she could, moving her lips and stumbling now and then when there were too many letters in a word. Tyvell realized it was bad news when Sevora crumpled it up and stumbled toward him, her eyes rolling back in her head. Here he was minding his own business and now she had to fall on him in one of her damn faints.

He dragged her over by the fireplace and yelled for Crimond to go get the doctor because Sevora was out cold. The dwarf took off like a shot, but before he could get the old surgeon sobered up enough to come, Sevora had gotten tired of Tyvell patting her hand. She opened her eyes and glared at him.

“Look, I already sent for the doctor,” he said. She always got so ticked off at him when he didn’t take one of her faints seriously.

But it was the letter she was thinking about—it really was pretty bad. “Screw the doctor,” she said. “Lebbech’s got me cursed six ways from Tuesday. If we can’t get these spells off me before the baby’s born, I’m toast.”

19. Protocols of reading [science] fiction: (ADD NOTES HERE)

- a. Consistency of story
- b. Story premise
- c. Application of the premise

- d. Credibility of the characters
- e. Consistency of theme
- f. Imagery
- g. Style
- h. Total artfulness
- i. Challenge to the imagination
- j. Overall impression
- k. What makes this work SF?
- l. What purposes do the SF elements serve in the work?
- m. Could this work have been written, filmed as non-science fiction?
- n. What is gained or lost through the SF elements of the story?

20. Science fiction differs radically from other fiction in exposition—the orderly revelation of necessary information to the reader. Exposition in SF is like watering a plant: If you do too little, it won't make sense, too much and you'll never get beyond the exposition into the rising action, plus you'll probably lose your reader because nothing is happening. Trickle your information, respect your reader, force or expect him/her to extrapolate. We not only have to introduce characters and the immediate situation, as per usual, we also have to let readers know how our rules differ from normal rules, and show them the strangeness of the place in which the events occur.

21. Robert Heinlein says “any plot can be made into SF if—
- a. The conditions of the story are different from present day conditions
 - b. The new conditions are essential to the story
 - c. The plot is a human problem that is created by or affected by these new conditions.
 - d. **NO ESTABLISHED FACT IS VIOLATED** (internal consistency)

Look at the world around you. Change one fact—a method of operation, a physical makeup, a color, and work out the logical consequences of the change.

“Science Fiction embraces political, social, ethical, and psychological issues” (Heinlein).