Intro to Sci-Fi/Fantasy Writing

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Intro to Sci-Fi/Fantasy Writing

Brandon Sanderson

Class goals:

- Write 50,000 words. (The class takes place over 4 months, so 12,500 words/month.)
- Try to submit 1000 words a week.
- Get an expert to critique 2000 words, preferably your first chapter.

(Disclaimer: These notes are my own thoughts, and as such make me responsible for any errors, omissions, additions, or misrepresentations made herein. These notes are not a transcript of Brandon's lectures. - NC)

LECTURE 1

Writing is about skill

- Writing is not about inspiration
- Writing is not about ideas
- Writing is not about luck
- Writing is about skill

Good editors and writers can tell, by reading a single page of your writing, whether you are any good or not.

Practice is the key to developing writing skill.

Start looking at writing as a performance art. If you practice enough, your mind will figure out your writing problems naturally.

Ideas are usually cheap. A great writer can take the most basic ideas and make a brilliant novel out of it.

Ideas should not be treated as sacrosanct.

Readers can't tell the difference between "inspired" writing and labored, forced writing. Don't wait for the "muse" to strike.

Methods of writing

"Discovery writers" (gardeners) work best without a lot of structure (no outline).

- They prefer to let stories come together organically.
- They tend to revise a lot.
- Generally need to keep going so they don't just get stuck constantly revising.
- Have problems with endings, since they don't know the goal of the book ahead of time.
- Writing groups can be bad for discovery writers because they constantly introduce new ideas and might actually derail the writing process with suggestion overload.
- George R. R. Martin is a discovery writer.

Inspiration is sitting and *working* until something clicks.

"Outliners" (architects) work best when they know what their specific goal is.

- They build stories through small steps.
- Tend to have really explosive endings that come together well at the end.
- Tend to have "world builder's disease", where so much time is spent crafting the world that none is left for actual writing.
- Tend to rip through first drafts and move on to something else; need to spend time revising.
- Writing groups can be very beneficial for outliners.
- Orson Scott Card is an outliner.

Writing groups

Don't tell people *how* to write their book, but give feedback on what is already there (like a movie critique).

Give both positive and negative feedback.

Be specific with feedback.

Be descriptive not proscriptive. Describe your reaction to writing rather than pointing out what is wrong with it. It is less confrontational and more truthful.

Ignore the small stuff (minor spelling, grammar, language repetition, etc.). Talk about plot, characters, and setting.

If you are being critiqued ("workshopped"), you cannot speak, only listen. This prevents you from biasing your readers, and avoids putting readers in an argumentative mindset. You may ask a question or two at the end of the session, for clarification.

Resist the urge to try and turn someone else's work into what you want it to be when you are critiquing it.

LECTURE 2

What makes a good plot

A good book is a cross-section of **character**, **setting**, and **plot**, bound together by **conflict**.
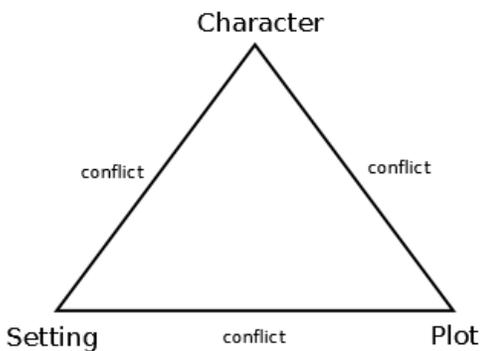
Characters should be as close to conflict as possible. Do not create an inactive protagonist. The protagonist has to have a vested interest in the conflict.

A common problem in fiction is that the villains are more interesting that the heroes because they ACT while the heroes REACT. (e.g., Luke Skywalker would have nothing to do if Darth Vader wasn't trying to blow up planets.)

A good hero should be acting, even while reacting. He should have his own agenda. Active protagonists are extremely compelling.

Characters should be at the intersection of conflict points, not observing them.

Conflict/plot ideas can be gleaned from different sources:

- history books are full of great examples of interesting situations
- look to books you really love, and try to boil them down to the core of what touches you
- take common themes from one genre and transplant them into another genre (e.g., a "train heist" in a fantasy setting)

Pack more ideas rather than fewer into your book.

Plots by outlining

Process for creating an outline.

- Start with a "mind map" of different ideas.
- Create a document with the three sections "plot", "character", and "setting", and break down the elements on the mind map where they fit, noting conflict between the elements.
- Pull ideas from the "cool things that have to be used sometime" notebook/document

- Start brainstorming to fill in the gaps.

Plot backward, then write forward. Make it awesome first, then make it make sense. This works for the overall plot, and subplots as well.

Sometimes it is wise to keep keep research to a minimum until after the first draft is complete. Details, corrections, and facts can be added during revision. Often an expert can read a specific passage and tell you where your errors are quicker than you could on your own.

Kevin J. Anderson method of writing

Progressively detailed outlines.

Plots by discovery

ASIDE for new writers: limit viewpoints to 1-4 characters, max. This can increase as your writing skill increases.

Young adult genres

Genres

Consider your audience.

- Middle grade novel
    - age 8 -13/14
    - sweet spot is 6th or 7th grade
    - kids given books by adults at this age (libraries, parents)
    - max 55k words (publishers like large print, and making the reader feel like they are "tearing through" the content)
    - edit for content
    - "whimsical" sci-fi/fantasy
    - kids sucked into fantasy land
    - fun adventure
    - tend to be 3rd person, but not always (60-65% of the time)
    - single viewpoint
    - simple plot (most of these books take place in a single day, over a summer, or over a semester)
    - adults are useless
- Young adult novel
    - age 13ish - 19ish
    - 75k - 80k words as a starting point
    - young adults purchase books for themselves
    - **not** edited for content (uncensored)
    - very frequently setting is at school (school is conflict at this age)
    - "edgy" books, angst, "teen girl problem novels"
    - conflicts revolve around boy/girl relationships
    - adults **are** the problem; they are untrustworthy

Adult genres

Fantasy

- Epic fantasy
    - large cast of characters
    - world-building focused
    - larger than life (world is at stake in the plot)
    - 120k - 150k words
    - write as a standalone with sequel potential
    - have an awesome ending that resolves all loose threads
- Heroic fantasy
    - dudes with swords
    - "Greek" fantasy (Conan the Barbarian)
    - smaller cast
    - 80k - 100k words
    - lots of action, short on conversation
- Urban fantasy (Dark Urban or Paranormal)
    - chicks in leather kill dudes (Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Dresden Files)

- - our world with a dark underworld
  - often mystery plots
  - really fast, thriller pacing -- an "explosion" at the end of every chapter
  - 70k words

Science fiction

80k - 100k words for all genres

- Military
  - space marines!
  - tend to revolve around big space battles that are realistic
  - really need to have military experience to make these books viable
  - highly technical, focus on the details of weapons, command structure, tactics, etc.
- Space opera
  - adventures in space
  - basically anything that's not military or hard SF
- Hard SF
  - written by people with P.h.D's
  - Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke
  - stories with genuine scientific statements and consequences
- Dystopia
  - really a sub-genre in YA literature at the moment
  - Philip K. Dick, George Orwell
  - the future is bad (and kids usually have to save the day)

LECTURE 3

Different types of third person viewpoints

- limited
  - one viewpoint at a time in a scene
  - a common choice for writers
- omniscient
  - viewpoint changes in a scene, usually paragraph-by-paragraph
  - avoid this viewpoint unless you have a good reason to use it
  - since all viewpoints are revealed, there are essentially no secrets to the reader, and so conflicts cannot be resolved by startling revelations
  - body-hopper -- viewpoints "jump" bodies in a scene, usually revealing thoughts (Dune)
  - hidden narrator -- feels like someone else is telling you a story, and occasionally dips into other characters' thoughts (The Hobbit)

Viewpoints can be mixed sometimes for effect, e.g., using omniscient in the first chapter to establish the setting, and then switching to limited for subsequent chapters.

Basic tenses

- past (mostly found in market fiction)
- present (mostly found in literary fiction)

First person viewpoints

- seen often in childrens' books
- simpler
- single character
- helps the reader identify with the character quickly
- build an attachment to one character
- ensures the the protagonist lives in the story
- allows you to cheat
  - untrustworthy narrator -- is the narrator telling the truth?
  - "info dumps" given in character make them easier to bear
- cool things you can do
  - epistlary first person -- narrative told through letters, or blog posts
  - character reflection -- the character, at an older age, reflects on his younger self, effectively creating two characters
- limitations
  - more characters makes it tougher to distinguish who is who (when the viewpoint changes); chapters should be named for the

- characters presently speaking
  - untrustworthy narrator
  - personality dominates
  - hard to be epic in first person
  - characters are basically guaranteed to live at the end

Third person viewpoints

- careful of viewpoint errors
- in one person's head during a scene, and you do not know things they do not know
- can do a large cast better
- sometimes better for setting a scene because the focus is on what the character is experiencing and not on the character himself (as in first person)
- epic scope
- best for hiding things, because you are not showing a viewpoint that knows secrets
- can use "throwaway viewpoints" for a scene (minor characters, or characters who die)
- more immersive

Description

Try and make the character come to life by the little things they do.

Avoid overdoing description in a story.

Be shorter and sweeter (brevity -- retain the content in fewer words).
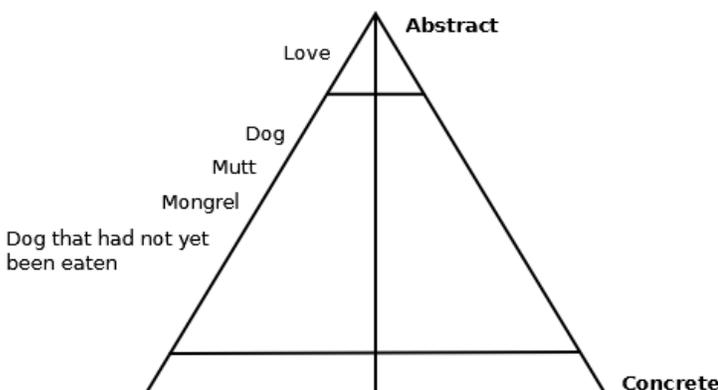
Be more concrete.

Focus your descriptions on things that do more than one thing.

Use all five senses, not just sight.

Manage the learning curve in your book -- the shorter the learning curve, the better. Delay new and complicated concepts until later in the book.

Dole out the information as it becomes strictly relevant. "What is the really relevant information for *right now*?"

Pyramid of abstraction.


```
                    Abstract
        Love
                 /|
        Dog    /  |
        Mutt  /   |
     Mongrel /    |
  Dog that had not yet
  been eaten
                        Concrete
```

If you build a foundation of concrete language, as you add things that are more abstract you will hold the reader in the scene.

Often, brevity and concreteness can be antithetical; the more concrete you get, the more words are required. If something concrete can be added without adding words, it should almost always be done.

Knowing the *right* words, the *precise* words, is better than having a generally large vocabulary. Avoid using lots of adjectives to describe something, instead use more concrete words that paint a picture (e.g., "mutt" instead of "dog").

Ideally you should choose words that set tone, tell something about the character, tell something about the setting, and are concrete.

LECTURE 4

Sympathetic characters

All characters, heroes and villains, should be sympathetic.

What makes a sympathetic character?

- similarity to the reader
- problems (underdog character)
- consistency
- depth (interests, thoughts)
- shares the reader's aspirations
- expert at something
- proactive -- the character needs to have goals and should be pursuing them
- quirks, things to make the character unique
- sometimes sympathy can be built for a character by introducing another character that likes them, even though they aren't very likable at face value (e.g., Dr. Watson makes Sherlock likable)

A character doesn't need to have all of these characteristics; these are all tools to increase the sympathy for a character.

Character continuum:
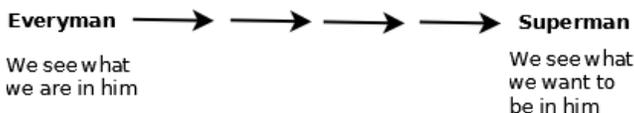
- Star Wars
- anyone on the Hero's Journey
- Spiderman

Show us the character, don't tell us

Don't tell us that Bruce hates puppies; show us Bruce hating puppies.

Dialog can make this happen effectively, but you don't want to have characters discussing things that they both already know.

Giving characters a life beyond the plot

Make characters care about things other than the plot and the main character.

This is particularly hard with characters who are a different gender than you are, which tend to get written in as a love interest role.

Don't think of characters as simple "roles" in the plot.

Characters should have *multiple* passions and desires, and these should, to some extent, conflict.

The main character should be going about their life when the plot hits them like a freight train.

What does the main character want most in life?

Build into the character things that are unanticipated.

Character creation examples

A good exercise in character creation is to swap character roles, or have different characters walk through the same scenes and notice different things.

age/gender	age 17 female	age 52 male	age 28 female	age 6 boy
passions	- passionate about croquette - passionate about	- passionate about string theory - passionate about	- passionate about weapon-smithing - guardian of her family	- passionate about herbology - passionate about the color red

	necromancy	Zen gardens	• has siblings • father has Alzheimer's	
setting	• modern setting • lives in 21st century UK	• sci-fi setting • he's a trash collector	• fantasy setting	
secrets	• failed at raising loved one from the dead, now there are horrible consequences	• digs through peoples' trash to create his Zen gardens • created an alternate time loop, and now he's in hiding	• wants to travel, but can't, because she's tied down by her family	• can read peoples' minds
other	• personality: obsessive introvert	• unusual political or religious philosophy: racist against an alien species	• what shapes her life at the start of the plot: younger sister steals a magic sword she is crafting	• superman complex: tries to affect the world around him based on what he gleans from his clairvoyance

- add other characters that create friction with the main characters
- add setting elements that creation friction with them
- give characters a personality archetype

LECTURE 5

Guest Lecture - Eric James Stone, Short Story Master

Keep writing, even when rejected.

Short fiction does not pay enough to work full time. There aren't enough places buying at professional rates to make a living.

Reasons to write short fiction:

- you're really passionate about it
- to practice your craft
    - how to write a story arc
    - how to make a powerful ending
    - how to introduce characters
    - how to write scenes
    - how to write snappy dialog
- to make a name for yourself
- takes less time to write
- can get away with a lot more experimental stuff

Many writers have problems keeping stories short.

The shorter your story is, the more you need to "use shortcuts" -- relying on a lot of cliches or tropes that people are already familiar with that don't need to be explained.

World building cannot be as extensive as it can be in novels.

Characters typically conform to well-known stereotypes. The short story spends time telling how they differ from these known stereotypes.

Far fewer characters in a short story.

Far fewer scenes in a short story.

Far fewer locations and plots in a short story.

Make it as short as you can by focusing on the most important point in the story.

Get into the story late, as close to the climax as possible. (Sounds like a short story is kind of like an extended scene at the end of a novel.)

Figure out what characters want the most, and what they fear the most, then create a situation where, in order to solve the plot problem, the characters must face their fears and risk loosing what they want most.

Make the climax really important to your characters; let character desire drive plot.

The biggest problem with endings is that they often don't feel satisfying; they don't feel complete.

The key to a good beginning is to start with a character with an "attitude" towards something.

Short fiction needs to stat much quicker than novel-length fiction.

Show an interesting character doing interesting things and your character will keep reading.

It is pretty much always fatal to start off with a character who is bored; that character will not be interesting.

Writers of the Future contest is good for breaking into short fiction. http://www.writersofthefuture.com/

The key to success in writing novels is to keep writing, and keep submitting, and keep refining your craft

Word counts:

- flash fiction: <= 1000 words
- short story: < 7500 words
- novelette: 7500 - 17,500 words
- novela: 17,500 - 40,000 words
- novel: 40,000+ words

Short fiction market websites:

- https://duotrope.com/
- http://ralan.com/

LECTURE 6

Networking at conventions (Cons)

Learn to think like a pro.

Meet editors/agents at conventions (e.g., World Con, World Fantasy, Dragon Con, or local/regional conventions).

Learn your craft -- almost all conventions will have writing tracks.

Meet authors.

Meet other aspiring writers; become a member of a serious and skilled group.

Some alternatives to Cons

Follow editors/agents' blogs, tweets, Facebook page, etc.

Read the books that editors/agents have worked on to determine whether or not you're a good match for them.

Know the names of different editors.

Meeting editors and agents

Do not go to meet them with your manuscript unless you are at a conference that has a pitch workshop/session.

It is ok to give editors/agents business cards.

Do go with a pitch -- be ready to give it if prompted. Do not go right into the pitch, wait until the editor/agent gives you an opening.

Pitch when your book is finished

Do not go in costume :-) -- dress nicely but not too nice.

Three goals in meeting editors/agents:

- just to have met them
- find out more about them as an editor (what they're working on and why)
- submit a manuscript

Keep a "black book" of editors/agents:

- page for each editor/publishing house
- books they've edited
- what they've said at conventions
- editorial style
- what they're looking for
- etc.

Publishers are not editors; the publisher is a business person who runs a business. Occasionally a publisher will also be an editor, but often not.

Don't pitch to publishers, pitch to agents/editors.

Agents are talent scouts.

When sending a manuscript to an editor, send a physical copy.

Default format for manuscript subscription:

- default font face (Times, Calibri)
- 11 pt, double spaced
- page numbers
- (or whatever the editor's writing guidelines are)

Pitches

Have three different levels of pitches prepared:

- single sentence ("log line")
- elevator pitch (~30 seconds, 1 paragraph)
    - don't sound rehearsed
    - don't sound like its the first time you're giving the pitch
    - will probably be included in a query letter
- one page

Fewer names during a pitch is better.

Pick something exciting.

Your goal is to make them *want* to read your book.

Use the "strange attractor" -- the match of a familiar element with an unfamiliar element -- if you have a story that has one. (e.g., Pride and Prejudice and Zombies)

Questions and statistics

Know what kind of material that agents represent -- don't send childrens' books to a sci-fi or fantasy agent.

Some publishers will have "acquisition editors" that are responsible for vetting material.

If an editor asks for a manuscript, send it *directly* to the editor, marked as *Requested Material*.

There is an unspoken "gentleman's agreement" in publishing that if an editor has a full manuscript, he gets to consider it exclusively until he says yes or no; agents can send to as many people as they want.

Reasonably, editors may exclusively consider a manuscript for about 6 months.

Editors make money based on how a book sells; they have a strong incentive to find good books.

LECTURE 7

A success story

Join a writing group. Meet once a week and submit one chapter per meeting.

Queries to editors can contain up to 5 pages of content unless the editor specifically says not to submit content.

The three act format

Lump your story into three parts:

Act 1	Act 2	Act 3
Introduction	Escalation	Climax
Chase your hero up a tree	*Throw rocks at your hero*	*Cut the tree down*
Reaction (character is being "chased")	Hero tries and makes things worse	Pulls it out by the skin of his teeth (or fails)

A "call to action" happens between acts 1 and 2.

Usually a transition between acts 2 and 3 -- "everything is awful and can't get any worse".

The try-fail cycles

A monumental problem to overcome.

The hero trys and fails a number of times to resolve the problem--often failing because of his "fatal flaw".

Tension is raised because of continued failures.

Two kinds of try-fail:

- *yes* the hero solves a problem, *but* it creates another problem
- *no t*he hero doesn't solve a problem, *and* the problem gets worse

Tension builds linearly.

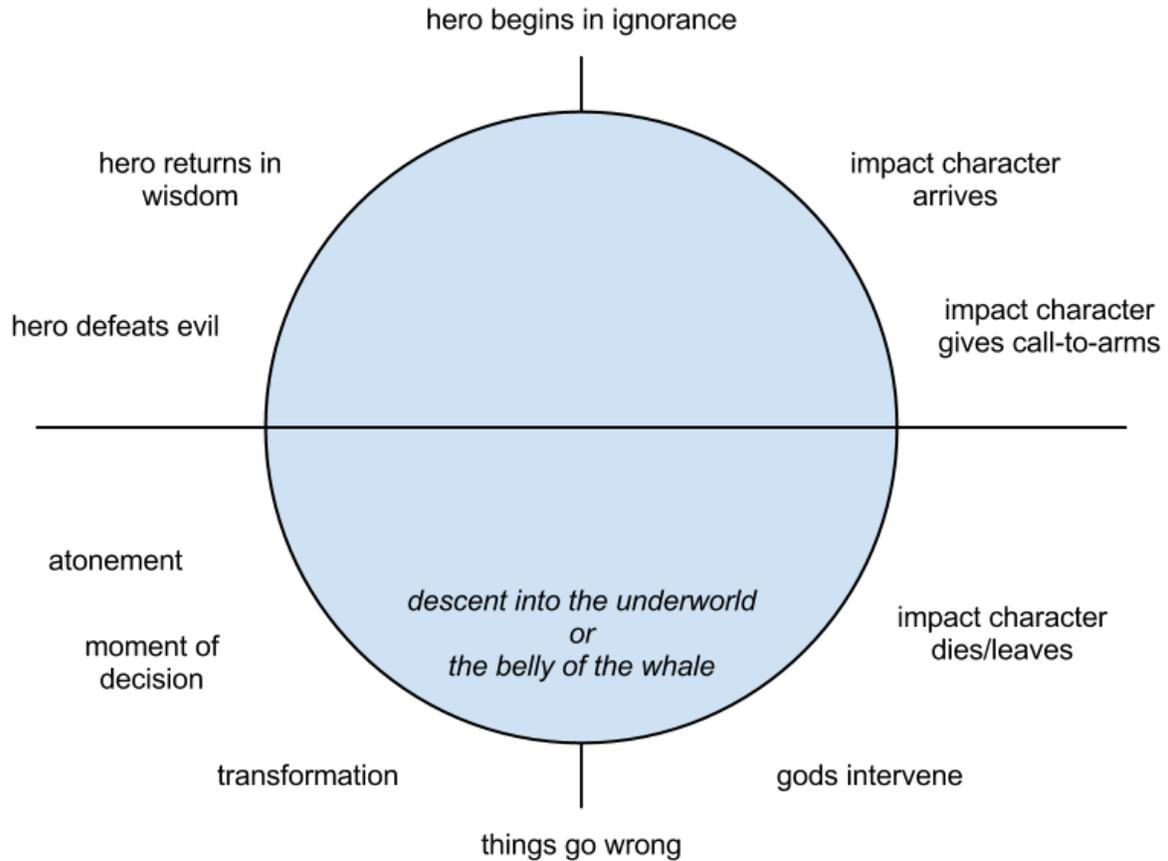For every try-fail, the hero should fail twice before he succeeds.

Important things should always be foreshadowed at least three times before they are revealed as important.

Avoid making your character look hopeless; the net effect of each try-fail must still be an incremental gain.

The hero's journey (monomyth)

A circular story-telling methodology about the growth of a hero from ignorance to wisdom.

hero begins in ignorance

hero returns in
wisdom

impact character
arrives

hero defeats evil

impact character
gives call-to-arms

atonement

*descent into the underworld
or
the belly of the whale*

moment of
decision

impact character
dies/leaves

transformation

gods intervene

things go wrong

Hero's journey plots don't use all points on the circle--it just describes the abstract progression of all hero's journey stories.

Brandon's plotting method

Look for a "sense of progression".

The reader should feel like there is motion through a story; that things are always building and moving towards something.

Many different plot devices can be mixed to form a whole sense of progression.

The Travel Log

- the "travel log" plot device is about moving from one place to another
- lots of episodic adventures in the travel log
- episodes give the story its sense of progression (Star Trek: Voyager, Battlestar Galactica)

Mysteries

- clues give a sense of progression

Relationship

- romantic or non-romantic
- two characters becoming friends and/or more than friends
- characters must share proximity in the story (a good plot device is to make them "stuck together" so they have to learn to deal with each other)

Big Problem

- introduce a Big Problem and have people break it down and work on the pieces (most heist stories, Inception)
- solving pieces of the problem moves inexorably towards the goal

Time Bomb

- a countdown to some horrible thing
- the hero must achieve his goal before the horrible thing happens

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Lecture 8

Random questions

Keep track of word counts so you can gauge your progress.

Leave yourself notes when you change a chapter so you know what you've done differently, and what you're trying differently.

Agents and contracts

Three people who can deal with your contracts:

1. an agent - 15% commission for the duration of the contract
2. an IP attorney - expensive flat fee, out-of-pocket expense
3. yourself - free, except for time and headaches :)

An agent knows contracts. They are one part attorney.

A lot of language in contracts have to do with rights and royalties issues. An agent knows how to navigate these.

Dean Wesley Smith and J. A. Konrath both write on self-publishing and advocate avoiding agents.

Agents and New York

Agents have contacts at publishing houses. They know who publishes what, all the editors in your genre, etc. They know how to pair up new books with interested editors.

On the other hand, an agent might not distribute your manuscript as widely, instead opting to submit to a few "favorite" editors. Your manuscript might not get the best exposure possible.

Agents serve as an advocate for an author's complaints towards the publishing house, so that the author doesn't have to air his grievances with the editor.

Agents and translation rights

It is very difficult to sell in foreign markets without having translation rights. Agents will have relationships with other agents in foreign markets.

Translation rights are a really big deal early in your career; they can be decently lucrative.

Foreign translation rights commissions are usually split 10% for the domestic agent and 10% for the foreign agent.

An advance on a book should be about what a book is estimated to earn in its first three years (its hard-cover run and paperback run). If the book becomes a perennial earner you will earn royalties. New authors will probably get paid less because they have no bargaining power.

Fantasy novels translate very well to other languages.

Sci-Fi/Fantasy markets by size:

1. North American English (North America + Philippines)
2. World English (UK/Europe, Australia, India)
3. German (Germany)
4. French (France)
5. Japanese (Japan) (big SciFi market)

6. Simplified/Complex Chinese (China, Taiwan)

The South American (Spanish) market is very small.

Misc. agent duties

An agent can help auction books to publishers/editors.

Sometimes an agent will solicit to a few high-power publishers and allow them to make a preemptive offer on the book before going to auction.

Sometimes an agent will do editorial, especially for new authors, to see if an author can make revisions with editorial direction. Some authors adamantly insist that this is bad because an agent isn't supposed to be an editor, but others see it as getting a free "professional" edit.

A little on getting a good agent

It is not easy to change agents, so try to meet them at conventions and feel them out.

If you have a contract in hand from a serious publisher an agent will definitely pay attention.

Book advances and royalties

The way a contract works:

1. You get an advance

The advance is against earnings.

2. After your advance has been covered by earnings, you earn royalties.

Royalties get paid twice a year, for previous earning periods. This is slow.

When royalties equal your advance, you have "earned out". Any book that earns out is considered a success.

Not earning out does not necessarily mean failure; it simply means that *your cut* of the book was not covered.

Standard royalty percentages (SciFi/Fantasy):

- hard cover - 15% of the cover price (first 5k is 10%, second 5k is 12.5%, 10k+ is 15%)
- paperback (pocket-sized) - 8% of the cover price (first 75k is 6%; 75k+ is 8%)
- trade (oversized) paperback - 10%
- ebook - 25% of net from the retailer (who nets 70%)

You earn royalties as long as the book is being sold under a contract. When a contract expires all rights are returned to the author. Usually a contract only expires if the books is not selling.

A tidbit on the fiction industry

Market share:

- Non-fiction
  - self-help books inflate this market
- Childrens' (18 and younger)
- Romance (~50% adult fiction)
- Thrillers (~30% adult fiction)
- SciFi/fantasy
- True crime
- Western
- Horror
- Mystery
- (everything else)

Lecture 9

Misc questions

If you have non-writers review your work, they won't have the skills necessary to critique your writing as a writer, BUT if multiple people have the same critique (a trend), you should pay attention.

If you want to include humor, immerse yourself in the type of humor you want to emulate. Make sure that humor matches your tone.

Adults tend to like humorous books, or humorless books--not mixed. Children are more receptive to mixed books.

A good book is about making promises to your reader, and fulfilling them.

To guarantee future expansion, add throw-away characters/kingdoms/events to your books that you may or may not extend later.

For your first book, try to encapsulate the whole story in a single book. Fulfill all the promises, and only *then* plan sequels. Write the "cool book" first.

Thinking of setting as a character

Having a weak setting with great characters and plot will *always* be better than having a great setting with weak characters and plot.

Your settings should have traits like your characters:

- personality
- existed "before"; it has momentum; it has history
- things going on that are not related to the plot
- quirks
- "strengths" (challenges) and "flaws" (obstructions) according to the nature of the setting

World building geography

Setting occurs on different levels:

- world
- nation
- local

Geography and maps:

- coastlines
    - very irregular
    - look for patterns in nature (rust stains, fractals, etc.)
    - pick an area on google maps and zoom in
- rivers
    - rivers flow "down", i.e., away from mountains toward the ocean
    - rivers combine, they don't split
    - rivers take the path of least resistance
    - if rivers flow into a lake, it will have one, and only one, lowest point at which a river will flow from
- deltas
    - tides can push salt water into a river
    - soil type
- tides
    - if multiple moons exist for your world, ask a physicist what would happen to the tide
- mountains
    - mountains come from tectonic plates colliding, and/or volcanos
    - tall mountains with jagged tops are now, small mountains with worn down tops are old
    - mountains typically appear near coasts
- desserts
    - desserts form because of "rain shadows" -- rain falls when clouds experience a pressure change as they near mountains, causing land on the other side of the mountains to remain very dry
    - desserts often exist along the 30 degree parallels (the sub-tropics); pressure prevents clouds from forming
- caves

- - generally form in limestone and nothing else
- harbors
    - cities on harbors must be defendable
    - a natural break-water stops waves and large ships from entering the harbor
    - small islands outside the harbor can host cannons/fortresses to defend a harbor
    -

Hire a private artist to create maps (~$500 for an average map), don't rely on the publisher. By the copyright outright so you can use it in different mediums.

Your maps can be "in-world" maps that come from cartographers, geologists, or prospectors in the world itself. These maps can have mistakes or exaggerations.

Make a rough map for yourself as you write, especially for distance reference.

Horses generally average the same speed across land as a human. Horses are sprinters. People use horses because they can *carry* more.

Traveling in a wagon will take longer than walking.

Traveling by horse can be very quick if you can trade horses after each sprint.

Make your cities smaller instead of larger. Make your distances smaller instead of larger.

In cities, the things you need to worry about are food/water delivery and waste management!

Creating interesting nations and towns

The cultural setting of a fantasy/sci-fi novel.

Ask "what-if" with your nations/towns.

Experiment with:

- governments
- religion
- gender roles
- race relations
- cultural mores
- what is offensive
- language/linguistics
- economics
- technology
- warfare
- codes of ethics
- family structure

Pick three or four and work with them.

Sanderson's First Law of Magic

Magic is a sliding scale between "wonder" and "plot device" (problem solving).

The more that the reader understands the magic, the more a part of the plot it can become, but the less amazing it seems.

First Law: Your ability to solve problems with magic in a satisfying way depends directly on how well the reader understands said magic.

Sanderson's First Law is a law of foreshadowing more than anything else.

Soft magic systems are more wondrous, hard magic systems are more explained/consistent.

Hard magic can be used to solve problems.

Sanderson's Second Law of Magic

Second Law: Limitations are more interesting than abilities.

- weaknesses (a "hold" in the magic) -- kryptonite
- costs (what the magic must use in order to work) -- Dune/spice
- limitations (what the magic can and can't do)

"Weaknesses" are the least interesting; limitations are the most interesting.

Third Law: Everything should be interconnected; immersion is the name of the game.

Lecture 10

Misc questions

When using really fantastical or theoretical magics/technologies, the more *consistent* and plausible you can make it, the more the reader will accept it as true.

Dialogue mechanics

Put attribution (e.g., "said") earlier rather than later, so the reader knows immediately who said it.

- BAD: "I went to the store and then came home and cooked dinner," said Steven.
- GOOD: "I went to the store," said Steven, "and then came home and cooked dinner."

If there is no good place to put an attribution early, add a "beat" before the dialogue.

- Karen grimaced. "This dish tastes a little odd."

Don't use too many beats. It can disrupt the reading flow.

(Terry Pratchett is a genius at dialogue.)

Prefer "said" to other forms of attribution (e.g., questioned, queried, stated, exclaimed, etc.). The reader is used to "said" and will read it transparently. Other types of attribution interrupt the flow. Occasionally it is permissible if you *need* to break the flow (e.g., screamed, yelled, shouted, etc.). "Asked" is ok.

Replacing adjectives and passive voice

Streamline your prose and make it more active and more concrete.

Don't repeat unusual words. It makes the reader think you are farming a thesaurus.

Using the *right verbs and nouns* is key to good prose; ditch the adjectives and adverbs, e.g., don't say "he walked silently", say "he sneaked".

"To be/was" verbs are usually a sign of something you can cut, e.g., don't say "he was cutting wood", say "he chopped wood".

Get rid of passive voice. Instead of things happening to nouns (e.g., "the hammer was slammed against the table"), nouns do things (e.g., "Billy slammed the hammer against the table").

For children's books focus more on the character and the voice of the character and less on world building.

Orwellian prose

In Orwellian prose, the story should be like a pane of glass through which you can see exactly what is going on; nothing is obscured.

Other prose is like a stained glass window, in which the prose itself changes the way you see the events in the story.

Intro to modern self publishing

The fundamentals of self-publishing have not changed, though it is easier now to self-publish than it used to be.

You have to do everything yourself.

"Shelf space" is your biggest problem. You don't have the publisher's marketing team behind you, so there aren't as many readers' eyes on your book to make sales. Also, you are competing with every other self-published author as well.

Successful self-publishing happens when an author has a good *platform*, a specific niche audience that you are heavily involved in or have a far reach in to.

You have to *market a lot*. Have a very interesting blog that relates to your book, but is not about your book.

Mechanics of self publishing online

A good cover is still *very* important. Don't just get a stock art cover. Pay someone to create a cover for you.

DeviantArt might be a good place to find covers.

The average cost for a good cover is $200-$400.

Its worth the extra money to get a professional quality cover.

Pay for editing; at *least* copy editing. Will cost a couple hundred bucks. Might also want to look into content editing.

Layout -- your e-book needs to support reflow in e-readers.

Overall, the cost of self publishing will be $500 *minimum*.

In New York, titles that are shorter are generally perceived as better.

Business models for self publishing

Two main archtypes:

1. publish book first, then MARKETING!!! (hard in the self-publish world)
2. publish a bunch of small, cheap stories (3 or 4 a year, 80k words, $0.99) and get exposure/following, then release full books at a higher price point

Books on endcaps at bookstores, or on the front shelves, or on the front page of Amazon.com, in email marketing, are all there because publishers *pay* for them to be there (called "co-op").

Getting reviews is "all but impossible" for e-books, and largely unnecessary so it doesn't matter too much. Reviews can be valuable if you write YA books and are trying to get into school libraries.

Some final thoughts on self publishing

Unfortunately there are a lot of poorly self-published works on the market with the good. With a traditional publisher, these are filtered out.

A big publisher will pay attention if you have good self-publishing numbers.

Short, quick books (80k) sell much better in self-publishing markets.

Lecture 11

Misc questions

Two classes of writers:

- writers who know a lot about one topic, and write extensively on that topic
- writers who know a little about a lot of things and write books that are very broad

Take classes that teach the "whys" -- e.g., why X revolutionized history.

A writer that has something about which to write tends to make a better writer than someone who is an English major.

Making stories meaningful

People read for *entertainment*. What you give them, what a good book gives them, is *entertainment*.

Don't forget to be *fun*.

Don't try to mold your characters to the theme, let the characters and their life outside and inside the story react to a theme to illustrate it.

Create sympathetic protagonists with good arguments that act *contrary to what you believe* to add depth to the story.

Three rules for fight scenes

1. Show, don't talk, about fight scenes.

2. In a film, blow-by-blow is fun, but in a book, blow-by-blow is not as fun.

3. Clarity is king.

- who is where
- be concrete
- tone down metaphors (and passive voice)
- follow one character through the fight sequence, and reference other characters through that character's viewpoint

The relevant information is:

- who got hurt
- who didn't get hurt
- who lived

The fight seen must be mentally visualized.

Things movie fight scenes can't do

Show character's thoughts, emotions, and senses.

Flexibility with pacing; can speed up or slow down moments naturally.

Unlimited special effects.

Can explore backstory.

The larger narrative flow of a scene

When writing ask yourself: what is the point of this scene?

What does the sequence achieve? What is its goal? Advancing the plot is often not enough.

What does a fight sequence show us about the character(s)?

You should be trying to do something different and cool in every scene.

Focus on the goals of the character; what are they trying to achieve.

Realism vs. hollywoodification

Romances will be unengaging if a character exists solely for the sake of romance.

You first have to determine how realistic you want your romances to be.

A lot of people who like romantic subplots don't want realistic romances.

Plotting romances

Try to make your characters actually compatible if they are going to have a romance.

Prolonging the gratification of the romance through the story is a compelling factor for readers.

Using try/fail romantic attempts can be an effective way to set up romantic tension.

Lecture 12

Avoiding being scammed

Poe's law: money flows towards the author. Be wary of anything that includes an up-front fee--co-publish, reading fee, conditional publication (we'll publish it only if you hire a particular editor).

Read "Writer Beware": http://www.sfwa.org/for-authors/writer-beware/

Read "Predtors and Editors": http://pred-ed.com/

Visit the "Absolute Write" forums: http://absolutewrite.com/

Serious agents do not charge reading fees.

Agents are talent scouts; it is their *job* to read widely and pitch authors for a percentage of royalties.

RoFR's, advances, and royalties

Right of First Refusal (RoFR)

RoFRs exists in almost every contract:

- a publisher gets to see a work first (usually a time frame in which they can consider the work)
- an author cannot take *less* from another publisher for the same work

Watch out for a RoFR that is too broad (e.g., a RoFR for any work produced by the author for the next ten years).

Everything is negotiable in a contract.

RoFR usually apply to an author's books in a specific series or genre.

Your relationship with an agent is different than your relationship with a publisher and/or editor.

Advances

The contract will specify the advance, and the points at which the advance will be paid out, e.g.:

- 1/2 at signing / 1/2 at publication
- 1/3 at signing / 1/3 at acceptance / 1/3 publication

Really big advances are divided even further.

Royalties

Do not accept royalties "after expenses" -- royalties should come directly out of net earnings. This is "Hollywood accounting".

IP rights and publishing firms

Rights

Authors should keep all translation rights and profits, but may want to relinquish World English and North American Spanish to publishers.

Publisher keeps book club rights ("book-of-the-month club"). This is a bigger deal with children's books.

Most publishers require ebook rights.

Authors should keep dramatic rights (film, stage, video games).

Audio book rights are negotiable.

Video games may be specified as a separate right.

Ebook vs. traditional contracts

Selling ebooks through a publisher will earn you less per book (than publishing yourself) but may have the potential to reach a much wider audience.

Small but important clauses

Indemnity Clause

If the publisher gets sued because of something illegal in the book, the author will be sued.

Copyright Clause

The publisher will register a copyright for the work in the author's name. Do not allow a publisher to claim the copyright unless the publisher approached you with their original idea.

Due Date Clause

Due dates tend to be flexible, but try not to miss them.

Reversion of Rights Clause

When an author can sell his rights again.

Marketing Plan

Book tours in certain cities, etc. Often promised verbally but tend to get left out of contracts :)

Short story contracts

- Publisher can publish the story in their magazine first.
- Publisher gets an exclusivity period where only they can publish the story.
- Pays a certain number of cents per word, up to some lump amount.
- Electronic print rights retained by the publisher, but usually the story must be bundled with other stories.

Getting a good agent

You can meet agents at conventions.

Finding an agent is easier if you have an offer on your book already.

Research agents, publishers, and editors.

Ask your agent for a list of clients, or look for one on their website and try to find their clients' books on bookstore shelves.

Beware of agent scams!

Agents usually live in New York. If they don't live in New York they might have a hard time helping you. An agent needs intimate knowledge of, and relationships with, people in the publishing industry.

Legitimate agents don't usually solicit clients; they let the name of the agency draw clients that they can then represent. If an agent solicits you it is a red flag, unless you've just won a substantial literary award/contest.

Lecture 13

Misc questions

Tips on foreshadowing

You can be more heavy-handed than you think. Don't be too subtle.

Writing groups can help you determine what people will figure out early.

All readers will be in a different place in regards to foreshadowing. Some are very analytical and try to figure things out; others suspend belief and want the discovery.

Good working relationships with editors and agents

Agents can be the "bad cop" in a relationship with an editor. They play hardball.

Take advice from your agent but keep the driver's seat. Don't just do what they say.

Pen names

There are very few good reasons to use a pen name.

A few good reasons:

- if you have the same name as a famous person
- if your name is something embarrassing

You don't usually trademark a pen name unless you hit a significant level of fame.

Submit to agents and editors under your own name.

Making magic feel rare when all your characters have it

Make at least one high-profile character with no powers.

Brandon's revision process

Revision	Task(s)
1.0	Write whole book beginning to end. Change things mid-stride; adding new characters, plot, themes, etc. Take notes as you go so you know what needs to be fixed later. DON'T STOP WRITING UNTIL YOU REACH THE END.
2.0	Right after books is completed, start at page one and fix all the issues noted in revision 1.0 (continuity).
2-3 week gap	
3.0	Polish language; cut 15% line by line. Cut out "to be" verbs, passive voice, repetition, excessive world building, etc. Add more powerful descriptions, concrete language.
6-8 month gap	Send to alpha readers (agent, editor, writing group, wife). Gives you time to shed your biases and prepares you to kill your darlings. Take notes of potential changes that might need to happen in later revisions. Start a new book (revisions 1-3).

4.0	Incorporate valuable alpha reader feedback. Incorporate notes taken during 6-8 month gap. Usually the hardest revision; you have to know what fundamental things are broken and what needs to be changed.
5.0	Second polish. Less focus on cutting, more on cleaning up language, dialogue, viewpoints, etc.
	Send to beta readers (fans/fan groups, editor -- different readers than alpha group)
6.0	Final fixes from beta feedback. Most revision is done at this point.
7.0	Copy edit (publisher).
8.0	Proofreads (publisher).

Misc. questions on revising

You need a good group of alpha readers who can give you descriptive responses, not prescriptive responses.

Alpha readers should be writers themselves (if possible). Writers can be more detailed in their critiques.

Get a variety of alpha reader responses -- send to multiple alphas.

Writing groups are notoriously bad about picking at pacing issues; they will think things are paced too slowly when they're not because they aren't reading the book all the way through.

Editors who read the whole book through will have a better feel for pacing, but they will forget the little continuity problems in individual chapters.

All revisions take about 1/2 the total time to write the book (in Brandon's revision process).

Revising for discovery writers

Many discover writers will make edits and revisions as they go.

Some will put a work away for a period of time (even years) if things just "aren't right", and pick it up again later to finish.

All the best writers Brandon knows are better *revisers* than *writers*. They don't have very clean first drafts.

A little writerly psychology

You need to *talk to other people* to get a good grip on different psychologies and personalities that you can incorporate into your writing.

Being a writer is about observation and extrapolation. Observe others and how they act/react and mimic that in your characters.

Interviewing people with different emotional states can help understand their personal psychology.

Master the revision process early in your career.

Figure out how to motivate yourself to do the things you don't want to do.

The success of a writer is directly tied to how good a job he does. Writing is a meritocracy (at least more so than other fields).

You don't want your spouse to be the one giving you really harsh feedback/criticism :)

Thriller plotting

A chapter should have a good arc; beginning, middle, end.

5k - 6k word chapters are considered big and meaty.

In thrillers, chapters "yank" you through the story; each chapter ends with a hook.

Thrillers usually have very short chapters that end when something goes wrong, or when something needs to be answered. (e.g., LOST)

Thriller plotting can get tedious; it feels like the writer is doing dirty tricks.

Excessive thriller plotting can also lead to high expectations. The answers to thriller plotting questions may be no where near as cool as the questions themselves, leaving readers feeling disappointed. (e.g., J. J. Abrams)

Thriller plotting works well in short books, but poorly in long books.

Linguistic variation

Linguistic prowess can help when world-building cultures.

Linguistic tropes from our world (e.g., German/Russian language is very "blunt") can be layered on fictional cultures.

Don't go overboard on dialect; just use simple rules to add flavor.

Smart people don't actually use big words that often. They tend to make better arguments, be much more self-assured, and use complex compound sentences.

People who aren't educated will not structure their thoughts.

Intelligent people will also talk back and forth, really fast, referencing obscure things (e.g., pop culture references). They also make really witty puns.