SFWA PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

Adapting Writer Prompts

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Adapting Writing Prompts for Science Fiction/Fantasy
By Darek C. Baczewski

Stop me if you've heard this one: you're sitting in a creative writing class/seminar/group meet/etc., and you've paid nothing/hundreds of dollars/your second born/etc. to be mentored in the writing process by true professionals. You've got your pen and paper/laptop/tablet/etc. and hundreds of ideas; you're ready to go. The person leading the group offers up a writing exercise using a prompt. Something like this:

- Write about what you see out the window.
- Two people meet for the first time.
- Write about an event in your life.
- Think of a random object and tell its story.

All well and good, but you're a sci-fi/fantasy writer. You want to jazz it up a bit, add some of that magi-tech stuff. So, you throw in a dragon/elf/android/spaceship/etc. just so you're still writing within your genre. In time, you forget about the prompt and perhaps concentrate on that epic series you're hoping gets noticed.

This scenario happened to me repeatedly in all but one of my creative writing courses in both my undergrad and graduate studies. I graduated from the University of South Florida in 2016 with my BA in English, Creative Writing Focus, and from the University of Tampa in 2018 with my MFA in Creative Writing, Fiction Focus. In all but one of those courses, the writing prompts were bland, meant to generate just a general idea, not one tailored toward my own leanings. In nearly every scenario, I felt I had to work harder in order to get what I needed out of a writing prompt, or out of a course, because I had chosen to work in Genre fiction (not the capital "G"). The fact that I even preferred to write fantasy was often met with a look from professors that mixed patience, concern, and a small amount of haughtiness, as if perhaps my work was of lesser importance than, say, the next literary work that tackled a current cultural/personal crisis within an imagined setting using imagined characters and imagined situations based very solidly on real-world models, but for all that still a "fantasy" concocted by the author.

In the end, the courses and professors that benefitted me the most were those that embraced my love of fantasy and taught me through that love the lessons they had to give. Plus, that one course I keep hinting at? It was a creative writing course on speculative fiction, which included sci-fi/fantasy and provided writing prompts based on the genre works we read. All this led to a mindset that said, "Okay, if this is what you are willing/able to teach me, then I'll take you for everything you have and use it *my* way to *my* advantage."

This guide is meant to show how you can take those general prompts and lessons and how to apply it to your work and your world (or worlds).

As a small disclaimer, I need to bring up some critical points:

➢ All courses have *something* you can learn. Lessons on writing are nearly universal. Throughout my education, I excelled at world building, at descriptive writing, but my characters were often one-dimensional. The lessons on character building are true whether you're writing a human or a twelve-armed giraffe-crustacean (Oooh! I like that idea. I'm keeping it!). Only the flavors of writing are different.

➢ Even if your professor despises genre work as a rule, it is entirely possible to work within their guidelines and still create a beautiful work on your terms.

  o Many creative writing courses specialize in short fiction, primarily because of the limits of time—twenty 5–10 page stories ranging from average to horrible mean 100–200 pages that a professor must read, grade, and return to a student within a few days. So, I wrote short stories within the world of my novels; this helped me solidify aspects of my world and generated content that I could go back to later.
  o My graduate program was a low-residency MFA, which meant I had a mentor who I submitted work to monthly. I capitalized on it by writing what equated to one and a third novels in 20–25 page chunks over two years, thanks in no small part to one mentor who was eager to read work as much from the middle of a story as the beginning.

➢ While genre work has generally been looked down on within the academic/literary community—from whom most professors I have encountered seem to belong—the argument for the inclusion of genre work has gained great strides. Nearly every course I took mentioned Stephen King as a primary source for writing lessons, and I'm fairly certain he fits into our corner of literature. It is also not unheard of to enter a school and find special focus courses dedicated to a work of fantasy or science fiction, such as my speculative fiction course; at USF alone, there were a half dozen courses dedicated to *Harry Potter*, either focused in literature, social sciences, or, of all things, philosophy.

➢ If you're not in a course, it is possible this guide may not apply to you. However, if you are finding prompts that are bland, then this guide should still apply. Or perhaps you know someone who is attending a course or workshop—maybe this can be of use to them.

➢ Many creative writing prompts do naturally lean toward sci-fi/fantasy concepts, and if you are looking for prompts specifically in this field, a quick search online can find you hundreds. This guide is primarily meant to offer ways to modify those prompts that seem, for lack of a better term, bland and intractable toward genre work. Also, this is written in ink on paper (or pixel on screen), not carved in stone. In no way should this entirely supersede coursework or your own ideas.

With the preamble aside, here are a number of ways to get the most out of literary coursework and prompts for your sci-fi/fantasy creations:

➢ When presented with a prompt, consider what the prompt is meant to teach you about writing. Most prompts are designed with specific lessons in mind. For example: "Write about what you see outside your window" is designed to teach descriptive writing. What do you see? How does it look? How would you describe it? To best modify a prompt to your genre of work, knowing why the prompt exists will inform you on how to make it work for you. For example, these same lessons can apply to what you *imagine* as much as what is actually there. See a flower garden? Put it on Mars. You'll still have to describe what you see, but now the difficulty is increased to describe an alien world.

➢ When dealing with character-based prompts, the first instinct is to change the characters to something from your genre. For example, instead of two human people meeting for the first time, an orc and an elf have an interaction. While it is all well and good to supplement your human characters with otherworldly creatures, there is a danger of falling into stereotypes, resulting in flat characters. Again, consider the purpose of the prompt: building characters. So, when modifying your characters, keep character building as a primary focus. Instead of a stereotypical orc versus elf altercation, maybe they're a customer and a shopkeeper in a market or friends complaining about life's little aches and pains. Exploring how these characters interact as individuals is just as important as how they act as an orc and an elf.

➢ Another key aspect of modifying character-based prompts is to avoid stereotypical situations. Not every meeting between two characters has to be life or death, not every messenger is carrying vital intelligence or proclamations, and not every guard is an idiot, bigot, hotshot, or former adventurer (arrows involved or not). Sometimes, two people meeting can just be that. Except it's really a two-headed ogre, perhaps.

➢ Prompts that deal with plot points are possibly the trickiest to modify because they are so often specific to normal, "real-world" life. Or, they can be unexpected opportunities. As stated previously, not every situation has to be about saving the world or saving someone's life, particularly in short work. If you're asked to write about an event in your life, this is an opportunity for a bit of world building. For example, writing about a marriage or funeral might be a chance to explore these practices from a different perspective. How would robots perform a funeral, for example?

➢ Object-based prompts are almost too easy, which is the danger. You can easily write a prompt about a magical object, but the risk is that you'll end up within tried and true (and therefore cliché) stories about such objects. That being said, you can write about magical objects; magic rings have been in literature for hundreds of years, long before a certain beloved Anglo-Saxon scholar, but the use of such rings is what defines a story. So, your hero in the prompt finds a magic sword. Maybe the magic isn't that it can cut any object but that it's actually a psychologist, helping people through their problems. Finding little ways to twist a magical object into something unexpected can develop better stories from prompts.

➢ Another way to deal with object-based prompts is to use something completely boring and mundane. Instead of a magic sword, try a stapler, and find some other thing to twist. Maybe the stapler is being used by a giant. What are some of the challenges the poor creature might face trying to use a stapler?

➢ With every prompt twist, one goal is to blend the ordinary with the extraordinary. If the situation presented is ordinary, add something unexpected. If the situation is specific and extraordinary (or you have made it so), add something mundane.

➢ As stated before, feel free to create short fiction within your world. Including what I mentioned previously, short stories are a chance to learn more about your world(s) and character(s). I have a half dozen short stories set within my world, and though my writing has greatly improved since then, the ideas themselves have enough merit for me to clean them up. Plus, the first novel I wrote began life as a short story until I realized I had just too much to condense, so you never know what short idea you have can become something greater than you expected. Short stories as a market are sometimes easier to break into than novels, so having a few good stories planned that you can clean up and present to magazines is not a bad way to get used to the submission (and rejection) process.

➢ Never forget the primary focus of the prompt. If your prompt is focused on character building but you have shifted too far into describing the complex and totally important greeting practices of anthropomorphized pygmy squirrels, it is a missed opportunity to improve your writing. Prompts are primarily meant to stretch and exercise your abilities, so don't accidentally cheat yourself out of self-improvement.

To sum up the entire point of this guide, the primary trick of adapting any lesson or prompt is to first recognize the goal or point of the lesson *then* add your twist. The important thing is to understand what the prompt is designed to teach us. In this way, we can adapt anything thrown at us into whatever we need it to be to grow as writers.

Now, this guide may be a bit simplistic and seem not to cover every possible scenario. However, I'm a big believer in simplicity and believe that a simple solution is often best. Case in point, I'm going to offer up what I believe is the simplest and easiest prompt that applies across the board—it's also the key to my world building.

The prompt is to ask two questions:
➢ What if?
➢ How?

That's it. Two questions. Basically, come up with a premise or idea and then figure out how it works, and keep asking "How?" until you've solved all you need.

    Ex. What if mankind had evolved without knees? How would they dance the Hopak?

I hope that this guide, while long winded, has been of some use. If there are any questions, feel free to contact me at the email listed. If I don't have the answer, I'd be more than happy to discuss possible answers. After all, the wonderful thing about writers is that the growth and improvement of one writer ultimately improves the quality of all writers.

…at least in theory.

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