

It's Magic: Part II

A (continued) guide to writing as it applies to the Friendship is Magic universe
By Cereal Velocity

A word is not the same with one writer as with another. One tears it from his guts. The other pulls it out of his overcoat pocket.

Charles Peguy

I'm assuming if you're here that you've read and hopefully absorbed at least some of my previous guide to writing, because what I wrote in that guide contains one half of what I believe to be the absolute core of writing any fiction, which would be the conceptual half.

I purposefully left out the other half- actual writing mechanics- so that you could focus on the important stuff first. Now that you've got a story or two under your belt, it's time to focus on, well, focusing your writing into something that not only reads well, but looks good doing it. You could have the best plot and the best characters ever made, but if you can't properly communicate them, it's all for naught.

So let's not waste any time.

First Things First (Again)

To quote Kurt Vonnegut, the best writer can break every rule in the book, except one- your story must, above all else, use the time of a total stranger in a way that he or she will not feel as if that time was wasted. Remember this always.

One other thing I've always found that helps me is the fact that what you first put down on paper after letting an idea stew is often the truest writing you'll do. If you go back, second-guess, intellectualize what you've written, you often make it worse. Let the story idea you have ripen before you start, and just *write*. You'll thank yourself.

Pacing, Purple Prose, and Descriptions

These things are very, very easy for a beginner writer to trip up on, so I'll touch on them first.

The basic premise is this: you have a scene set up in your mind, and you know pretty much how you want it to go. Easy enough, right? You just write it out. Except most of the time it's not that easy. There are (exactly) one hundred and seven trillion ways to write every scene you can come up with, and most of them are not proper or even correct. Most of the time these theoretical scenes don't work is because of word choice and pacing and

not because of any particular problem with your setup. I will demonstrate with a simple action: Twilight crossing her library and picking up a book.

Twilight walked over to the far side of the library, and picked up the book.

Twilight Sparkle casually trotted over to the side of the darkened library most distant from her, and, using her magic, levitated up the black and gold leather-bound book she had been waiting to read for some time now.

Ignoring the soft pitter-patter of the hot summer rain impacting on her shuttered windows, Twilight Sparkle gently walked over to the darkened outlying candle-lit section of her library home, making a determined effort to keep her hoof volume to a minimum. Once she had reached her destination, she scanned, located, and magically levitated the dusty, not oft-used black and gold leather-bound book from the stack of volumes she kept separate from the rest of her reading material.

As you can see, it is extremely easy to draw out any action, no matter how simple, to the point of it being ridiculous and tiring to read. This is called writing 'purple prose', and it's a common amateur mistake. Meaningless details can certainly add length to a passage and make it look more formidable, but at some point you need to step back and ask yourself if all of the extra words you've thrown in there do anything to help the story along. If they don't, you can often safely remove them. Think of it as trimming the fat.

That said, there is sometimes a place for reserved purple prose, most often in exposition. The first sentence I wrote would fit well within a scene that's already moving, because it is non-obtrusive. The second sentence might start a paragraph within that same scene, but it is a little wordy. The third section is almost a paragraph in itself, chock full of unnecessary details- but, with a little trimming, it could be the beginning of a scene or an entire story, since it sets a mood and gives a brief description of the setting.

Excessive detailing can also be used as a technique in itself to purposefully slow down a scene, in order to impress a certain mood upon the reader. This is difficult to do in the best of situations, so practice writing brief scenes and work your way up if you want to utilize this method.

The take-away message is this: the most important thing to keep in mind when detailing a scene is momentum. Think of your scene like a train that you have to keep moving. If your reader has to stop at any point, for any reason, to re-read or slow down to read a passage, you're bleeding off momentum that can be hard to regain. If you run out of momentum, your reader runs out of patience and will be perfectly within their right to close your story and read something else, because you can't keep a story moving.

If what you're writing at the moment is pure description- and, if you've read my section on exposition, you should know this should be a rare thing- your main focus should be on keeping the section as brief as possible while still conveying the same information. Try to avoid things like excessive metaphors, which get silly, extremely simple adjectives (instead of 'dark forest', try 'imposing treeline'), and irrelevant information that adds nothing to the scene, which I have touched on already.

Basic Structure

This might be the section most people expected to see in my first guide. Well, here it is, buried in the second. I'll assume that you are familiar enough with basic English grammar and focus on the bigger picture.

Just like there are multiple viewpoints available for a writer to utilize, but more often than not most pick third-person, there are multiple ways to separate out and structure your paragraphs and carriage returns. That said, there's pretty much one de facto standard, which looks something like this:

Twilight peeked around the corner cautiously, and was quite surprised at what she saw; Rainbow Dash, Ponyville's best flier, outfitted with a pink baking apron, delicately decorating rainbow cupcakes, humming happily to herself. She couldn't contain her bark of laughter at the scene, causing the multi-colored pony to whip around in surprise.

"Twilight!" she exclaimed, blushing. After a heartbeat, she looked down at what she was wearing, feebly trying to cover it with her hooves. "Er- this isn't what it looks like."

Twilight just smirked. "Your secret is safe with me, but only if you let me have one."

The standard goes something like this: if a character speaks, you give them a new paragraph to do the speaking. If there's a little buildup before the actual speaking, like the character performing an action, that's fine- throw it in, but don't keep the reader waiting too long. Putting an extra carriage return in the middle of two paragraphs as I have done above is completely optional, but it's something I prefer as it keeps the story looking a little cleaner and directs the eyes a little better.

Some things to think about when you're deciding where to break paragraphs are total length and relativity. You don't want to a paragraph to be extremely long, because at some point the reader might have trouble easily following the end of a line to the beginning of the next, and that hurts story momentum.

Relativity refers to the fact that each paragraph should generally deal with one subject matter to avoid confusion, and end when the subject matter has been sufficiently addressed. This is, after all, one of the points of separating a story into paragraphs: to keep things nice and tidy. If this means you have to write a very short or very long paragraph, that's fine. Just don't keep it too brief, or too long. For example, a very short paragraph (one sentence) is against some general style rules, but it's something I like to do occasionally to really draw attention to that sentence. The thing is it's got to be a really important sentence for this rule to work, and if you do it too often it looks silly. In the same vein, if it's an inconsequential sentence, it'll look awkward.

Using Dialogue and Monologue

This section, though short, kind of ties into the first one as it also contains a lot of tricky subtleties that can trip new writers up. It also follows some of the same guidelines.

What this section will not do is tell you how to write dialogue. There are literally

entire books about how to do this, and it simply exceeds the scope of this guide. Instead, I'll discuss where using dialogue is appropriate.

A good rule of thumb to follow is this: if a line of dialogue doesn't advance the plot or reveal something about your character or their situation, it's probably not necessary, or can be replaced by a character action. This is a corollary of a rule you've probably heard somewhere which states 'show, don't tell'. While this rule applies more readily to film, it can also be adapted for fiction, even though by definition you are telling the reader everything. If your scene would be better served by a character doing something rather than saying something, ninety percent of the time the former is the better choice.

What I'm not trying to say is dialogue and monologue are ever bad choices. If your story contains neither, that's fine, but they're both excellent ways to subtly reveal information or break up a long section of character actions (or vice versa), even if it's just the character talking to themselves. Just keep both in moderation and know what you're writing is, above all else, effective. Nothing is more boring to read than a gigantic, unbroken block of dialogue.

For example...

"Twilight, are you all right?" Applejack whispered.

The purple mare swallowed. "I don't know, AJ," she replied tiredly in the same hushed tone.

... could easily be replaced by this:

Applejack wanted desperately to ask her friend if she was okay, but one look into her drained eyes was enough to tell her that maybe she didn't want to know the answer to that question.

The reverse is also true- they're interchangeable. The question you should ask yourself before you write either version is which one will convey more of an emotional impact on your reader. This of course can vary wildly from scene to scene and story to story, so it's up to you to figure out which one is more appropriate for your given situation.

If, conversely, you know for sure your scene will have some dialogue, here are a few tips to keep it manageable to read:

- Like the above example, try to mix character actions with dialogue whenever possible. This is fiction, not a transcript! Throw in some stuff that adds to the words, like somepony digging a hoof into the dirt, or making an expression.
- Don't have your characters constantly repeat each other's names if it's pretty obvious who's doing the talking. It sounds awkward- we don't talk that way in real life.
- If, on the other hoof, there are more than three characters conversing at the same time, it's okay to repeat names every so often to keep things straight. Another way to separate characters is to have them have recognizably different opinions.

- Even though I feel as if I'm repeating myself, it bears repetition: simple dialogue such as niceties and greetings can be safely summarized unless they're important or leading into something else.

Short and sweet this time, guys. As always, if you feel there's anything glaring I've omitted from this guide, or if there's a topic you'd like me to cover, be sure to let me know.

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