

## Duncan R's review of "The Write Stuff"

(Organized in no particular order)

### **What I Did Wrong as a Reviewer:**

I regret that I started making comments as soon as I started reading. I feel like I should have read it through, front to back, before commenting on specific issues. I was trying to leave notes while the first impressions were still fresh in my mind. As a result, some of my comments may be superseded by what you find in the following summary.

I also feel I underestimated your writing ability. As a result, the section on Show-Don't-Tell may seem painfully obvious to you, and may clash with what I have to say about your choice of narrative voice. I may also mention stuff you know all about. It took a few pages before I realized that your story is better than it reads.

### **The Verdict:**

Alright, enough of this humility business. I'm trying to think of a way to sum up my primary concern using the fewest possible words. It's not easy, so please bear with me:

*Good story can forgive bad writing. Good writing cannot forgive bad story.*

Wait! Don't stop reading yet! Your plotline isn't actually \*bad,\* but I'm not going to lie to you: it felt very straightforward and predictable. In fact, your ending surprised me by being so unsurprising. This might have bothered me less if I'd paid more attention to your tags: [Normal] and [Slice-of-Life] obviously won't involve massive, canon-deforming plot twists. But even a canonical episode of the original series has surprises, quirks, and twists.

One problem is that you've written a story about writing a story. I won't argue that it's important to write what you know, and know what you write. But for some authors, the only thing they know is writing. More often than not, they write a story (about writing a story) that can only be appreciated by other writers. These writers, sir or madam, are your direct competition... and the majority of them have not set the bar particularly high.

You need to accomplish the very opposite: your story must be \*very\* accessible to non-writers. The good news is that you accomplish this.

### **About The Show Don't Tell:**

The bad news is that you do it in such a way that emphasizes "tell" while throwing "show" straight out the window. You cannot simply \*tell\* a reader what it's like to write. You need to craft

a scenario that causes the reader to experience it on their own. This leads nicely to my own personal, cardinal rule of writing:

*All reading is discovery. Let the reader discover.*

How? Show, don't tell. I'm pretty sure you already know all about this technique, but remember that your story is *\*not\** about "Dash writing a story for the first time." It's about "How dash feels when she writes a story for the first time." The difference is subtle, but vital. I'm emphasizing this because it is the premise of your story. Whenever you are in doubt, return to this premise.

The parts that engaged me the most involved Dash experiencing something new about writing: her visit to the publisher's shop was refreshing, and her clash with the concept of intellectual property and copyright infringement gave us a good antagonist. This pushed Dash out of her comfort zone and forced her to grow as a character.

With that in mind, let us continue.

### **About the Narrator:**

*Good story can forgive bad writing. Fantastic writing can, sometimes, forgive bad story.*

I noticed in many places that your choice of words (and sometimes tense) sounded odd or jarring. It took me awhile to figure it out: it sounds like you were trying to give the narrator an actual voice. I didn't realize until halfway through that you might be using Third Person Omniscient. I'm very unfamiliar with this perspective (as a writer and as a reader) so it caught me completely off guard.

I can't tell if this was done on purpose or if it's just the result of an over-exuberant willingness to describe. It felt like someone was hovering over my shoulder and reading the story to me. I'm used to my narrators being flat and emotionless observers: a transparent, empty window, facing a scene as it unfolds. That, or the narrator is an actual character in the story. If Third Person Omniscient wasn't what you intended, you have a great deal of editing to do: flatten the narrator and convert their observations into internal monologue for Rainbow Dash. Most of your "show don't tell" problems are caused by this overzealous narrator and his rampant abuse of omniscience. Unfortunately, fixing this oversight would require you to completely rewrite the entire story. And maybe cut it by a third.

But...!

If an overzealous narrator is exactly what you were shooting for, then go all the way with it! Darn the torpedoes! Seek refuge in audacity! Give the narrator both a voice and a personality, and bring them to life! Make it seem like story-time with lovable uncle Bob! Sit in an overstuffed comfy chair next to a crackling fireplace, and set me on your knee! Drape a cosy quilt around

my shoulders and put and a mug of hot cocoa in my hands! Boy, Dash was sure in a pickle!  
How's she get out of it this time, unca Bob?

Okay, so... perhaps I exaggerate. But you get the idea. The narrator either has a personality, or he doesn't. Don't make him an actual character with a name, backstory, etc, but do please continue to cultivate his tone and voice. To a great extent, you've already done this. But even so, you *\*still\** need to streamline your work to the highest standards possible. You may want to handle the Show-Don't-Tell in a different way, rather than throwing it out the window. The narrator should be expected to say certain things flat out while leaving other things to the reader's imagination. The way the narrator speaks, and what he speaks about, conveys something in itself.

In most first-person stories the narrator is also a main character, so of course they'll have a personality. A comfortable compromise might be to rewrite parts of the story from your various character's points of view (Thinking back, Smudge would be a *\*perfect\** candidate for a narrator). All of these options would involve a lot of work, so you may want to get a healthy dose of second opinion. In the end, it comes down to this: is the story itself more important to you than the manner in which you express it?

Hmm... if you *\*do\** decide to make Smudge the narrator, reveal it at the very end. That'd be a pretty cool surprise, actually.

### **I Know What You're Trying To Say Here, But:**

Regarding your story's flow and style: they hate each other. They are warring for the reader's attention. The smoothness of your writing is somewhat encumbered by the lumpiness of your descriptive prose. You have good intentions here, mind. Almost all of your sentences have a laudable purpose, but many of them either sounded clumsy or dragged on too long. They need to be streamlined. Refined. I know you have style. Now, you need flow. You can do this without sacrificing either.

There were quite a few I.K.W.Y.T.T.S.H.B moments where the underlying concept of the text was good, but it wasn't conveyed in a smooth and efficient manner. It seems like you've armed yourself with a very powerful weapon that you haven't been fully trained or disciplined with. Go the extra mile, and squeeze the stutters and hiccoughs out of every last sentence.

Fortunately, this is a "good" problem. You're trying to use a style that's slightly beyond your ability to execute. Pushing yourself is the best way to improve yourself, and the alternative is unthinkable: to knowingly settle for less than you're capable of. There were three paragraphs in particular that took me by surprise because of how well they were written: the words flowed seamlessly, engaged my emotions, and caused me to become invested in the story. This tells me you *\*can\** do this well.

As a note: The problem with this problem is that it's subjective. A turn of phrase that works fine for one reader might irritate another. I commented on everything that stuck out to me, but I surely didn't catch everything. And some of what I caught might not be wrong at all... especially if you cultivate the narrator's personality.

### **About the Introductory Excerpt:**

Stories within/about stories are not impossible to do well, but very nearly. They require a great deal of skill and tact. I considered starting my own story with a short excerpt from a Daring Do novel. In the end, I decided not to: it would have been fun to write, yes, and perhaps even entertaining, but it would've added nothing important to the story. It also would have thrown the reader for a loop right off the bat.

Your situation is different because your story excerpt serves a useful purpose: you want to imply that Rainbow Dash is no Ernest Hemmingbay. Unfortunately, you still have to convince \*your\* readers to stay the course. Real life publishers will often judge a book by its first two paragraphs alone. Brutal, yes. But that's the way it goes.

I have no clear solution in mind, but I don't think it needs to be cut entirely. My advice would be to make the introductory excerpt as good as possible in terms of spelling/punctuation/grammar/sentence flow. The story and dialogue can be as silly as you like, but it must read well. Consider changing it to "guilty pleasure" bad writing: pure, empty-calorie escapism, like a trashy romance or a cheesy action-adventure. A book you know is terrible, but you love it anyways! As long as you have other characters say "Wow, Dash, your story is filled with technical errors," you don't need to actually subject your \*real\* readers to the same poison. They'll take Twilight's word for it.

If you really want it to keep it as it is, you should at least shorten it by half. The reader has to see the real story on the horizon or they'll stop swimming for the shore. In the end, it's your story. You may want a second opinion on how to proceed.

### **About the Dialogue:**

I haven't finished the story yet, but need to make an early note. On a whim, I did a word-search. You used the word "said" twelve times. Twelve. Your story is over seven-thousand words long. Twelve is smaller than seven-thousand. And it should be smaller. But not by \*that\* much.

I was utterly, completely guilty of this myself for the longest time. I would avoid using the word "said" whenever possible. I would use adjectives. Like a-so:

*"Just a moment," Twilight frowned, and grabbed her book bag. "We'll need all the help we can get."*

...Or I would jump right into a descriptive action:

*"Just a moment." Twilight grabbed her book bag. "We'll need all the help we can get."*

If I had absolutely no other choice, I'd throw in a noun or verb just in case:

*"Just a moment," Twilight said with a frown, and grabbed her book bag. "We'll need all the help we can get."*

For the longest time, I thought 'It's not that bad. I don't have a problem. I don't see what all the fuss is about.' But eventually, I tried something else:

*"Just a moment," Twilight said, and grabbed her book bag. "We'll need all the help we can get."*

I am asthmatic. It was very troublesome when I was young, but has much improved since. I no longer need to carry a ventilator around, and can't even remember the last time I used it. My stories can now sympathize with me. When I started using "said," my writing could breathe. "Said" is an invisible word. It's like the black-clothed stagehands in Japanese kabuki theatre. The audience knows they're right there, in plain view... but they don't acknowledge them. The eyes gloss over them. They just don't register.

I'm not trying to be harsh or cruel about your said-isms (I'm not being... "said-istic." Cue chirping crickets). I'm just trying to offer you a better way. Take my hand... come with us. Let your writing breathe.

I do get the feeling that dialogue is not your strongest suit. Based on the quality of your narrator's voice, this might simply be a problem with casual-sounding dialogue. Even if the characters are being casual, you can't afford to loosen the reins as a writer. Casual banter, ironically, can be the most challenging to write.

I begin wonder how well you would handle more extravagant dialogue... Your narrator is certainly loquacious.

### **About the Characterization:**

There were a few points that seemed out of character, but these were small things: mostly bits and pieces of dialogue. I doubt Twilight would say "um" under any circumstances, unless she was well and truly flabbergasted. Most of my characterization problems were actually just dialogue problems.

Whenever I felt that characters were acting/speaking out of character, I made a note of it: consult the Google Docs comments for specific details.

### **Technical Errors:**

No problems here, refreshingly enough. As far as I can tell, your spelling and punctuation is

excellent. I'm not the best judge of grammar, but nothing stood out to me... your grammatical problems involved prose and pacing, rather than blatant errors.

As I've said before, unnecessary comma, I'm no spellign expert. I'd recommend getting a proper proofreader to comb over it. But the fact that my first read-through turned up nothing at all is encouraging.

Update: Actually no, there were a few instances of sentences being poorly distributed throughout a paragraph. Paragraphs should have any of the following formats:

“Dialogue,” narration.

Narration, “Dialogue.”

“Dialogue,” narration, “dialogue.”

Narration. “Dialogue!” Narration.

Whereas the following, is bad:

Narration. “Dialogue,” narration, “dialogue!” narration. “Dialogue,” narration.

### **In Summary:**

Not gonna lie to you. Your plotline is bland and predictable. There were no quirks or surprises. It's also fairly long for such a basic premise. It seems like you simply enjoy the sound of your voice... but if you have a beautiful, resonant, powerful voice, your audience will certainly forgive you for this. Perhaps your plotline doesn't have to be anything more than a hook upon which to hang your narrative prose. It seems like this could easily become your story's greatest strength, so I recommend you take it and run with it for all it's worth.

If you decide to rely on the quality of your narrative prose to carry the reader through to the end, you *\*need\** to streamline every single sentence. Read them aloud to yourself, and see how they flow. Split, shorten, punctuate, rewrite, or delete sentences without mercy. I know you can do this (I was trying to sound encouraging there, rather than sarcastic... imagine me placing a single, firm pat on your shoulder).

Your narrator's perspective threw me for a loop. Flattening him would require a major rewrite. Instead, make it clear from the beginning that the narrator is a storyteller with an attitude. Then cultivate that attitude.

Your choice of narrator won't solve your lack of "show-don't-tell," but I don't really have a solution for what will... the omniscient narrator tells us everything, leaving nothing left to show. This reminds me of old-timey stories like Little-Red Riding Hood: they had no show at all. That doesn't make them bad stories, though. If you can think of clever ways for the narrator to inject show, please do so.

### **Closing Thoughts:**

This isn't the sort of story I normally read. The plot was predictable and formulaic, whereas I prefer quirks and conflict. You used an omniscient (and verbose) narrator, whereas I prefer to discover on my own. Despite all this, I managed to get through your story without rolling my eyes and tossing it aside. A few parts even managed to engage me: no small accomplishment, considering how unruly and lazy most readers tend to be... they take every opportunity to leap off the page and escape the world you've created. I don't think I'd read it again, but I don't regret having read it once.

I keep wanting to say this is a bad story, but can't quite bring myself to in good conscience. It's not the sort of story I would normally enjoy, but that doesn't make it bad. Almost everything I complained about is either because of a personal preference on my part, or is a problem I think you can fix yourself with a bit of pruning and combing. My advice from here on out is to address the issues I've brought up, produce a refined second draft, and then find your true audience. Identify someone who likes this type of story and find what they think of it... not technical advice, but a general impression. That will be the true test of fire.

And, of course, get a second opinion. In fact, get a second opinion on whether or not you need a second opinion. Paranoia is strength!