Feedback Guide

This guide is to *provoke thought* on a given story. Whilst it can be used similar to a form, it is not intended to be approached like one. Do not feel that you are required to answer every question, nor that a 'checklist approach' to a story will be all that useful. These are prompts, and should be taken as such.

This is a *live document*. If you feel that sections are missing or could be added to, make suggestions. They will then be incorporated.

As a final point, this document is intended to be of use *over the entire course of the program*, if you find questions that don't seem to be useful to a given act, that's probably because they aren't.

Overall Reading Experience	
What is the *best* aspect or feature of this story at the present moment? What has the writer done well?	
What is the major "next step" for this story? What can the writer do *right now* in order to take it to the next level?	

General Storytelling Techniques	
🎣 **Narrative Hook / Inciting Incident**	*A really good first line can do so much to establish that crucial sense of voice—it's the first thing that acquaints you, that makes you eager, that starts to enlist you for the long haul.* ~Stephen King ● Does the first line grab your attention, or is it otherwise memorable? ● Do the first scenes provide enough to keep you reading?

- Does it begin *in media res*? Is this an appropriate choice?

- Does it start in a good place? Is there a better starting place?

- Does the inciting incident come at an appropriate time?

- Is the scope of the inciting incident sufficient to carry the plot?

- Can you identify what the plot is?

- Are the events of the plot distinguishable from the everyday events of the world?

Conflict and Tension

Be a sadist. No matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them. ~Kurt Vonnegut

- If the story centres a larger conflict to drive the plot, have its stakes been established?

- Is there an overall common source of tension that carries through to the end of the narrative?

- Is there a source of tension driving you through each scene, be it internal or external?

- Are moments of conflict (scenes) balanced with processing / planning (sequels)?

- Does the pacing allow moments of genuine conflict to stand out?

- Are moments of tension, or moments of lull, purposeful and necessary?

- Does the MC have clear motivations—both practical and emotional?

- Do the other characters have clear motivations?

- Are both *internal* (self-doubt, indecision, mental strain) and *external* conflict (interpersonal, social, environmental, etc.), affecting the MC, building toward their later transition from *reactive* to *proactive*?

	● What does the pacing suggest about the overall story length? Will this be a novelette? A novella? A full novel?
Setting / Worldbuilding	*Places are never just places in a piece of writing.* ~Carmen Maria Machado ● Do details effectively transport you to the story's setting? ● Does the time, place, season, or weather influence the action or atmosphere? Do they contribute to the overall effect of the story? ● Does the choice of setting suit the mood or theme that is to be conveyed? ● Does the breadth of worldbuilding make the setting feel realistic? Do any details break immersion: anachronisms, character reactions, implications of society or technology, etc? ● Does the worldbuilding make use of audience genre familiarity? ● If audience understanding of the plot relies on understanding the world, has it been adequately established? ● Are any worldbuilding choices concerning? (Problematic depictions, overused tropes, etc)
Plot	*The most important rule to remember in fiction (and in art in general) is a simple one: Don't be boring.* ~Joyce Carol Oates ● Does the structure and interrelation of events best serve the overall effect of the story? Are events told in their most impactful order, and in such a way that they bolster the emotional and thematic takeaway of the narrative? ● Does each scene make sense in relation to those surrounding it,

whether through direct building of events or interrelation of themes?

- If present, are flashbacks effectively used at appropriate times to add depth and intricacy to the plot?

- Are there twists, turns, and misdirections that keep you guessing? Are they appropriately used? Have these twists been properly established to avoid *deus ex machina* resolutions?

- Could you follow the thread of the plot without substantive effort?

- Has the writer made good use of established details, or story constructions such as "Chekov's Gun"?

- Are there any significant details that the writer set up, but never used or resolved? Like an unused "Chekhov's Gun"?

- Does the writer effectively use intercutting to show passing of time (such as jumping between flashback and present—never returning to the same present they left)?

- Does the story suit its temporal mode? Is it suited to being a linear or nonlinear narrative?

Characters

Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water.

~Kurt Vonnegut

- Is it clear who the protagonist / main character will be?

- Have you developed a first impression of the MC, and does it fit with the story?

- Has the MC been set up for an emotional arc, or given character flaws to address over the course of the story?

- Does the MC's emotional arc appear to relate to the theme or plot arc?

- Does the story have more than one MC? Are they distinguishable from each other? Do they each have distinguishable goals and

emotional arcs?

- Are characters complex? Relatable?

- Do characters possess contradictory traits that mirror those of actual human beings, or have they been archetyped?

- If archetypes *are* used, are they being used effectively and purposefully?

- Are character decisions consistent with their established behaviour? Did any decisions stand out as being "out of character"?

- Are different methods of characterization used to fully develop the MC? (narrator's judgments, physical appearance, dialogue, internal thoughts, impressions on other characters, behavior)?

- Is something at stake for the MC, and do they have the agency to make choices and influence the outcome? (Note: how stakes are handled and the scope of influence can vary, but they should be there *somewhere*, if only internally.)

- Are there complex relationships between the MC and other characters that increase the overall effect of the story?

- Are other key characters introduced in the story? Is their relationship to the MC or the plot clearly defined?

- Is there an antagonist that is characterised? If not, should there be one? Is the antagonist a complex character as well?

- Does the MC have a foil? If not, should there be one?

- Have characters other than the MC undergone development over the course of the story?

- Are characters believable in their roles?

- Are their characters you particularly like? How about particularly dislike? Are these reactions appropriate to the story's message or theme?

Don't write about the character, write from within the character.

~Chuck Palahniuk

- Can you tell what PoV this story is told from (first person, second person, third person limited, third person objective, or third person omniscient)?

- Is the PoV consistent throughout the story?

- Does the PoV work well, or would this story be better presented from a different perspective?

- If from first person: does the perspective have a relatable and authentic human voice? Does it over or underuse techniques such as intrusive thoughts or internal monologues? How subjective is the narrator? Does the character's voice use class, racial, or cultural idioms that aid immersion?

- If from second person: does the perspective have a sense of urgency, tension, or other sense that the reader must follow their described behaviour? Is the audience required to assume a given character role? Is that role clearly communicated?

- If from third person: are changes in perspective clear? Are available details consistent with what information should be accessible to a given character? Does head hopping occur? Is dialogue and action clearly attributed to given characters within a scene? Do perspective slips occur (particularly between omniscient and limited)?

- Does the story take on a narrational tone? If so, can you tell who the narrator is?

- Is the audience addressed by the narrator? If so, is the audience role clear?

- Does the story have reasons for *who's* telling it, *where* they're telling it, and *why* they're telling it?

- Is the voice of the narrator consistent? Is their tone and use of language appropriate for their character (if characterised) or the story itself (if not)?

- Does the form of delivery for the story suit its themes and content (narrator tone, use of casual or formal language, use of ergodic fiction themes, etc)?

POV / Perspective

	- If present, has good use been made of alternate communication of information (letters, texts, logs, etc)? - If perspective switching occurs, are those perspectives distinct? - Are the switches themselves clear? - Is the number of perspective characters appropriate to the story being told? - Do characters offer unique views on events in question? - Would a particular event in the story be better observed from a different perspective? - Does the combination of perspectives give the reader a sufficient view of the world to take in the story's scope? - Is this story told in the present tense, past tense or future tense? - Is the tense consistent throughout? - Does the tense work? Could a different tense work better?
Dialogue	*If you are using dialogue—say it aloud as you write it. Only then will it have the sound of speech.* ~John Steinbeck - Does dialogue aid conflict and tension between characters? - Does the dialogue move the plot forward? - Is it interspersed with movement and details? Do characters use non-verbal cues and physical action as attributions that either underscore or undermine their dialogue? - If exposition takes place through dialogue, is that exposition realistic to the situation at hand? - Has effort been made to make the forms of dialogue appropriate to the setting and world? - Whilst realism in dialogue is a complex issue, does the dialogue feel *real to the characters in question*?

	● Is the dialogue easy to follow? Can you tell who's saying what? ● Is subtext well balanced with meaning? ● Did any sections of dialogue stand out as needlessly vague? How about overly explanatory? ● If dialogue takes place through modes of communication other than speech (text, calls, telepathy, etc) is that change obvious on the page and did it add to the scenes in question? ● Are any plot holes or discrepancies generated through dialogue? Do these add to characterisation (lying, delusion, etc), or do they detract from the overall plot? ● Is anachronistic use of language present? Are the concepts spoken about true to the developmental stage of the world presented?
  Climax / Resolution / Denouement	*[E]very plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its dénouement before anything be attempted with the pen. It is only with the dénouement constantly in view that we can plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points tend to the development of the intention.* ~Edgar Allen Poe ● Does the MC reach their lowest point before reaching the climax? ● Does the MC have a moment of catharsis, or newly obtained knowledge/understanding about themselves, the world, or the plot, leading into the climax? ● Is the payoff worth the buildup? ● Does the story end in the right place? ● Are you satisfied by the resolution? ● Are some questions skillfully left unanswered? ● What do characters learn from the events of the story? Was this lesson properly telegraphed through the story? ● Is the scope of change presented in the ending consistent with the

	events of the plot?
	● Was anything forgotten that impacts your enjoyment of the work? Loose threads, missing characters, significant details?
	● Do core characters complete their respective character arcs?
	● Was this a journey for all characters, or just a lone protagonist?
	● Is the message or theme communicated by the ending consistent with the mood, atmosphere, and presentation of the story?
	● What mood, or emotional takeaway did the ending leave you with?
	● Do you want the story to continue?
	● Is there scope for a sequel?
	● Conversely, was the ending affected by the setting-up of a sequel?
	● Were the stakes met?
	● Was the transformation of the characters and world clear from the closing image?

Effective Use of Genre	
⚠️ **Tropes and Tribulations**	*Tropes are the dreams of speech.* ~Vladimir Nabokov ● Does the use of tropes suit the story told? ● How do the tropes, ideas, and motifs presented interact with the expectations of the intended genre? ● Without looking at the writer's outline, would your assessment of the genre have differed from theirs?

- Do any of the plot devices or tropes slip into cliche?

- Are there any particularly impressive new twists or takes?

- Does the writer appear to be aware of the driving forces of their genre? (The emotions of fear for horror, the presence of scientific affect for sci-fi, etc etc) Have they utilised them effectively?

- If subversion has been attempted, what impression did it create?

- What, if anything, did the choice of tropes say about the author's view of their genre? What did they say about the author themselves?

- Does the story presented particularly remind you, as a consumer, of an established property, be that a book, film, game, or other? If so, why?

- If you have a background with non-US/Western tropes, how would this story be viewed in your culture? Has the author made correct use of representations if they have chosen to use any?

- Do any characters (or the narrator) appear to be genre- or trope-savvy?

- Do any characters (or the narrator) break the fourth wall?

- If meta-fictional elements are included are they appropriate? Are they effective?

Beyond Reality

"You're a storyteller. Dream up something wild and improbable," she pleaded. "Something beautiful and full of monsters." ~Laini Taylor

It was better, he thought, to fail in attempting exquisite things than to succeed in the department of the utterly contemptible. ~Arthur Machen

- Does the story take place in a setting linked to this reality, or entirely separate to it?

- Is there a single violation of reality at the story's center, with all other supernatural/weird elements stemming from that violation?

- Does the writer avoid overexplaining the supernatural/weird element so that readers can use their imaginations?

- Where violations of expected reality are present, do they aim for soft or hard worldbuilding?

- Is this approach suitable for the story?

- Is a systemic understanding of elements such as magic or technology necessary for enjoyment of the story?

- Are these elements sufficiently understood for the plot to make sense?

- Did you struggle with understanding the reasoning for any decisions or plot progressions due to a lack of understanding of the alternate world?

- Within its own constraints, is the world presented believable and consistent?

- Does the representation of this alternate reality dovetail with the story's intent?

- What does the representation of the fantastical say about our reality?

- Is that message well presented? Is it apposite or banal?

- How do the themes explored through the story's fantastical elements interact with genre expectations? Are they passe? Innovative?

**Painting With the Primary Colors of Your**

Don't classify me, read me. I'm a writer, not a genre. ~Carlos Fuentes

This section is atypical. If you have an academic understanding of the genre you are critiquing, use this section to assess how the story in question knowingly interacts with the form and limitation of its genre, if it chooses to do so.

[Over the course of the program, I will try to find links to appropriate articles for this section.]

Genre	
  Theme / Emotional Core	*I don't want to be at the mercy of my emotions. I want to use them, to enjoy them, and to dominate them. ~Oscar Wilde* ● Does the story present a clear theme? Can the theme be more clearly presented? ● Does the theme fit with the genre, character arc and plot? ● Does the author write from an emotional core? ● Is the overall affect of the story happening inside the character's head? Is it echoed in other ways? ● Does the writer provide both physiological and psychological reactions of the character to the situations in which they find themselves? ● Does the emotional core intertwine with (or contrast against) the plot, setting, conflict, etc.? ● Does the emotion suit the theme? ● What emotion were you left with at the end of reading? ● Is there a character or set of events that failed to emotionally engage you? ● What does the presentation of emotions say about the characters? What about the writer?

Appropriateness
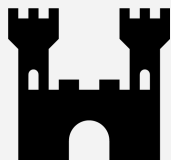
Chosen Setting	*The house smelled musty and damp, and a little sweet, as if it were haunted by the ghosts of long-dead cookies.* ~Neil Gaiman ● Is it believable that the story could occur in the setting that has been chosen? ● Does the writer effectively blend any of the various subgenres of their chosen area with a convincing portrayal of their chosen setting and culture? ● Does the story feature elements from folklore or the writer's own invention that fit with the aesthetic presented? ● Does the writer present good knowledge of the setting or ideas they have chosen to represent? ● Does the setting mirror the character arc? ● Is the setting period or genre appropriate?
Subversion and Representation	*The first duty of a revolutionary is to get away with it.* ~Abbie Hoffman ● Tropes can be more than ideas. What guiding philosophy is espoused by the story? ● Have expectations been addressed, met, or challenged? ● Writing cannot be separated from the time and place that birthed it. What views on reality are implied? ● Genres are ever-changing. Has the writer attempted their own change? ● Do you particularly like the writer's attempt to challenge any established norms? ● Conversely, do you think any ideas or opinions are poorly formed or delivered?

Sensitivity and Fair Portrayals	*Being good is easy, what is difficult is being just.* ~Victor Hugo Are there any potential areas of concern with the following issues? ● Stereotypes or unfair portrayals of class, age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, ability, and other demographics ● Sexual assault or any other exploitation of trauma merely for shock value, or as a shorthand for character development ● Problematic language ● Political soapboxing