

It's Magic: Part III

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

I try to leave out the parts that people skip.
Elmore Leonard

Here's where things start to get a little esoteric. My previous two guides (which I consider to be extensions of each other) are all pretty much filled with common literary practices- things and techniques I can recommend that anyone follow at all times.

Now, though, I want to touch on a few things that you may or may not have come across in writing your fiction. If you haven't come across these things yet, you eventually will if you write long enough, or, if you write for other universes, including those that you create yourself. These things are all a matter of personal taste; or, if you prefer, they are all about the taste that you leave in the reader's mouth.

You may find yourself never worrying about them, but they are powerful tools. As such, I'll try to stick to well-known literary and film examples to explain most of them, but these topics do lend themselves to discussion and (sometimes, my personal) opinions, conjectural as they can be.

In short, I have already discussed with you how to construct a story. Today, I will be discussing with you how to *tell* a story.

First Things First

Let me ask you something: what is a story?

You can probably point me to a few pieces of fiction that qualify as stories. But, really, what is a story? How can we break it down into elements that we can quantify? Can we do that?

Yes, we can. A story is conflict.

It's not something that comes to conscious thought when you read a story, but what you are reading is conflict. Writing is not a story unless it has a conflict. This conflict can take many forms, and it can hide under all the layers it wants, but every story has one. The Lord of the Rings is a sweeping epic of grand proportions, and it has within it many stories, but it all starts with a simple conflict- Frodo must return The One Ring to Mount Doom to destroy it, braving everything that stands in his way.

Happy, funny stories can absolutely be good stories, but they will also have a conflict. If you take out the conflict, you don't have a bad story: you have a non-story, a lack of a story. I would not call a blank canvas a painting, because there is no paint, nor a video of a black wall a film, because there is no action. In that same vein, a story is not a story unless conflict can drive it.

You could write a novel-sized piece about Twilight Sparkle's inner musings, filling it with wonderful descriptions and metaphors and insights that will escape the fandom and be published and be remembered for hundreds of years. But unless there is a conflict that is resolved in it, what you have written is not a story.

Remember this always. It will always be true.

Story Types and the MICE Quotient

So, let me ask you another question: what kind of story have you just written?

This is a little less theoretical. Most writers will, without realizing it, write their stories to fit within something called the MICE quotient. Being aware of this structure, though, you can more easily manipulate it.

MICE stands for Milieu, Idea, Character, and Event. All fiction contains these four elements to some degree, but one generally outshines the other three. Which one that does this is up to you, but it will often be the one that you care about the most.

As an overview example, Orson Scott Card's science fiction novel *Ender's Game*'s milieu is the near future, its idea deals with concepts in leadership, its character is mainly Ender, and the event is a retaliatory invasion. However, Card arguably wrote it as an event story. I'll go over each of the elements in turn with its relationship to our pony universe.

Milieu

A milieu is simply the world you've created. In our case, our milieu is Equestria, though you are perfectly capable of stepping outside that boundary if you wish.

Sticking with what we know, though- are you fascinated by the world of Equestria? Its technology, its natural wonders, its rather unorthodox cycle of nature? You might want to write a milieu story about it. These stories will feature characters, and events will happen within them, and they will all be important, but these things will generally take a backseat to your discussions about the world itself. Your objective with a milieu story is to impress your character and the audience with your world, and make it either a place they respect from a distance or would want to visit. In most milieu stories, the main character experiences the world and either returns to his old one a better man, or with regret, wishing he could have stayed.

The Lord of the Rings is a milieu story, though you might not think so. Everyone is familiar with the plot itself, but anyone who has read the books will no doubt notice how often Tolkien stops the action to describe a part of Middle Earth. He has built a massive world and he wants us to notice it, and Frodo's journey is a good vehicle for him to use to do so.

In the realm of fan fiction, a-human-comes-to-Equestria stories have the potential to be milieu stories, though I've yet to see one take this route.

Idea

Idea stories are the stuff of murder cases. They involve a quest for knowledge, or an answer to a question. This is why mysteries generally follow the idea story path, but science fiction writers have also been known to use it to explore man's relationship to God and the cosmos.

If you read my previous guide, you might remember I mentioned that when constructing a plot, one might take the approach of asking a question at the beginning of the story and ending the story shortly after the question had been answered. This is exactly what you would do if you were writing an idea story. Your main or viewpoint character thirsts to answer this question. He or she might utilize the scientific method or some other way to find it, but find that the path to the answer is fraught with difficulty and perils.

The film 2001: A Space Odyssey is an idea story. It revolves around the monolith and the mysteries surrounding it, driving the story forward. In terms of the show, Feeling Pinkie Keen is also an idea story, because Twilight spends the episode trying to figure out a rational reason behind Pinkie Pie's twitching.

Character

Character stories are exactly what you think they are. If you're writing for one of the three other fiction types, you may or may not spend a lot of time and effort to really flesh out your characters. For those story types, deep characterization is optional, but not always recommended. For a character story, it's required.

A character story deeply investigates a character and his struggle to correct an imbalance with himself. This imbalance may take many forms, but, to put it as generally as I can, this type of story begins when your character becomes so angry or impatient or restless with his current situation that he sets out to rectify it. The story then ends when he has either done so, or resigned himself to his former state of affairs.

Flowers for Algernon is very much a character story, and, opposite that, Ian Fleming's James Bond novels are definitely not. While Flowers delves deeply into the mind of Charlie and his struggle with himself, Fleming's books never go too deeply into the character of James Bond. He is simply a secret agent acting as a secret agent will in a given set of circumstances. In pony fan fiction, most Trixie stories seem to confirm to this story type, since we were not given any indication as to her motivations for her actions in Boast Busters, and writers tend to make them up.

Event

The vast majority of fiction written take the form of event stories. Event stories are no less complicated and require no less planning than the other three, but many find they are easier to conceptualize and write.

An event story is about a flaw in the fabric of the universe. Throughout an event story, your main character will attempt to fix the flaw and restore balance to the world. As

the previous section of my guide mentioned, a good place to start an event story is where your main or viewpoint character gets involved in the conflict to restore balance, and should end shortly after said balance has been restored.

The original Star Wars trilogy is the archetypal event story. In keeping with good storytelling practice, Lucas doesn't begin A New Hope with the fall of the Republic. He begins it with two droids and the plans for a super weapon, and their path towards our viewpoint character, Luke Skywalker, whom we spend the story with as he ventures out to fix the universe and vanquish the Empire (I could make the argument that the *main* character in the original trilogy was Vader and not Luke, since all the events of the movies revolve around him, but that's irrelevant to this guide).

In relevance to our pony universe, Dragonshy was an event story, as was the pilot episode.

These story types should not directly interfere with or influence how you come up with your story, but rather how you tell it. Let's say you want to tell a story about Trixie and her magic show in a major city. You could take the event story route and make the story about the show itself, as something she looks forward to nervously but ultimately triumphs at through careful planning and showmanship. You could also make the story more personal with the character story route- maybe Trixie has been to this city before, and maybe she has some issues with returning.

It's up to you and what kind of story you like telling the most.

Narrative Tone and Choice of Words

By the way, in case I hadn't already beaten this into your skull, there are a zillion ways to tell every story. How you do so depends on who's gonna read it and the stuff they expect to go down in said story. Your narrator's tone of voice will also vary a whole bunch based on the content and the mood you're trying to set.

Take the above paragraph, for example. Since this guide is fairly conversational most of the time, my choice of words was not out of place, but I'm sure you unconsciously (or consciously, depending on if you were paying attention) noticed a bit of a change in my normal diction. My choice of words was almost too informal, and it was jarring.

You want to avoid this in your storytelling.

Sticking to a certain set of words and a particular tone for a particular story is something that is very hard to learn, but it's crucial if you want your writing to flow well. I've read stories in a serious vein that were no less careless with their choice of words than I was above. Words like 'zillion' are, of course, a major detractor to any serious sentence, but even smaller things like 'stuff' and campfire-esque insertions like 'by the way' are equally as bad, unless you're deliberately trying to be funny. Even then, they don't often work because they are not subtle in the slightest. Case in point, the paragraph was not funny. It was awkward. Never assume your readers won't catch a joke- they're not dumb. If they cared enough to start reading, they'll care enough to get the jokes you throw in.

The best advice I can give here is to keep it simple. Write normally and with clarity. Don't try to force a particular tone in a story unless it's to your advantage, but also try to

keep in mind what your natural diction is for any given circumstance. For example, I have been told that my normal narrative voice is littered with dry humor and can be quite cynical sometimes. I don't do this on purpose, so it was a surprise to me to hear this. I know now to keep this in mind when I write and deliberately avoid it when the situation doesn't call for it. Have someone read your writing and get their honest feedback on how you tend to write. They will often see things that you are blind to, and once you know about them, you'll be able to control them better.

One final word on this topic, and that's the use of swearing in a story. There are no real rules about its use, but you want to keep in mind your audience. If one of your characters swears occasionally, you're communicating that that character is brash and, perhaps, a bit crude. If they swear all the time to the point of it being distracting, you're overdoing it and probably turning off a lot of potential readers in the process. Don't use curse words if they're not necessary, or, alternately, do something like this:

Gilda felt a sharp pain as she stubbed her paw on the table. "Fuck!" she yelled, perhaps a little too loudly. Rainbow Dash gave her an oblong look.

Gilda felt a sharp pain as she stubbed her paw on the table. She swore loudly, kicking the table again in anger. Rainbow Dash gave her an oblong look.

Similar sentences, but personally I prefer the second. It's something to keep in mind. One thing I would never recommend doing, though, is replacing curse words with nonsense words. This rarely works and just comes off as silly. I can count on one hand the frequency of times that I have seen this technique work in any medium; Battlestar Galactica's 'frak' being one of them, and that barely counts because it is so similar to word it was replacing. Just don't do it.

(Un)Reliable Narration

So, stories are told by narrators. But, how can you tell if a narrator is reliable or not? How can you know whether you're getting the right facts? Sometimes that's the point.

Unreliable narration is a relatively new literary term. It refers to the fact that whoever is telling the story may not be telling the story correctly. If you have ever seen the film *Rashomon*, you'll recall that each witness to the samurai's death told a different story each time, each with sincerity. A more recent example might be the episode *Three Stories* from the medical drama *House, M.D.*, wherein the titular character gives a lecture to med students about leg pain, disguising the fact that one of his theoretical patients is actually himself.

All this time I've spent harping on about how you should keep your narration simple and reliable shouldn't be thrown in the wastebasket, though. Used sparingly, this technique can make for an excellent story. Keep in mind, though, that to get the most use out of it, your audience has to be clued in at some point that they've been deceived. This may seem pretty obvious, but if you never tell them, or you tell them in a way that is ineffective, you've squandered the story's potential completely.

It is also worth noting that in film and video, this technique can be pulled off from

the third person. In fiction you are more limited in that you are mostly stuck to using first person in order for it to have the full impact you intend.

Using a pony example, one might tell a story from the perspective of Rarity spying on Twilight doing magic. Throughout the story, Rarity becomes more and more convinced that Twilight is preparing some kind of disastrous, horrifying spell, and confronts her at the end of the story, only to learn that she was actually preparing the greatest cake-making spell ever. In this case, Rarity was a pretty unreliable narrator, and, frankly, telling the story from Twilight's perspective would have been boring. You just need to pull off the ending right and you've got a good story.

Stream of Consciousness Narration

For those who enjoy writing darker fiction, take note- stream of consciousness narration can be a powerful tool. It is innately confusing to read and delivers a sense of unease and unsettles the reader if used correctly.

The concept is simple. This form of narration seeks to replicate our internal thought processes, however disjointed and chaotic it may be. For short passages, you can throw grammar out the window and ignore most sentence rules. It might look something like this:

I just kept running. I don't remember how far or fast I ran but I just kept running. Hoofbeats in my head, heartbeats in my throat, pain in my legs, I had to ignore it all and just keep running. I could hear the thing behind me, closing on me, I could feel it's breath on my neck, and every time I did I just kept running faster, faster, as fast as I could possibly bear, until I felt my hoof clip a rock or something hard, I can't remember, but I stopped running. I hit the ground; I turned towards the sky, and saw nothing but death in his eyes.

The trick is to write as you think. Don't stop for descriptions beyond what you might think to yourself if you were in that situation. Leave out unnecessary words, but repeating yourself is acceptable- after all, we repeat ourselves a lot in our heads. Most importantly, have fun with this mode. It's very free and enjoyable to write.

Phew. This was a little long-winded, but I had a lot to say. I hope, as always, that this helps somepony in their writing endeavors.

Questions? Comments? Let me know.

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