LEARNING MADE EASY

Writing Sci-Fi, Fantasy, & Horror

for dummies®
A Wiley Brand

Design compelling story arcs

Craft characters with depth

Create out-of-this-world monsters

Rick Dakan
Ryan G. Van Cleave, PhD

Writing Sci-Fi, Fantasy, & Horror

by Rick Dakan and
Ryan G. Van Cleave, PhD
FOREWORD BY Ann VanderMeer

for dummies®
A Wiley Brand

Writing Sci-Fi, Fantasy, & Horror For Dummies®

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Foreword

You can discover many available books on the craft of writing, including specialty writing books that focus on works of science fiction, fantasy, and/or horror. Some of those books pick one of these genres, and many of these books are excellent. So why would anyone feel the need to buy and read yet another one? Well, let me tell you why. *Writing Sci-Fi, Fantasy, & Horror For Dummies* is different from all the rest in a few different ways:

Firstly, this book tackles all these genres at once. Oftentimes there is a crossover or melding of these genres, and so having a book that directly speaks to each of these genres individually as well as collectively can only benefit you, the writer.

Secondly, this book explores many other ways of creating beyond short stories and novels. Here you can find out more about writing a screenplay, collaborating on graphic novels, designing video games and/or tabletop games, and even creating a real physical haunted house. You can express science fiction, fantasy, and horror in many ways, and this book takes you on all these journeys.

Furthermore, this book provides brilliant examples in all these genres when exploring characterization, plotting, setting, and worldbuilding. Included are discussions on how to imagine monsters, aliens, other worlds and magic systems. Clear and precise examples help illustrate how you can do it effectively. Indeed, the examples are clever and imaginative and very entertaining!

You receive advice on seeking and receiving feedback and the editing process as well as the best use of subject experts and sensitivity readers. The book also offers information on the business of writing and creating, including how to submit your work, how to pitch a story idea, and the what the pros and cons of self-publishing are. Sections throughout deal with methods to overcome writer's block and how to jump-start the creative process.

In addition, you have the benefit of all of the real-world experiences of Ryan Van Cleave and Rick Dakan, who have spent years helping writers navigate the waters of creativity. They also have plenty of writing credits, so they clearly know what they're talking about.

I first became acquainted with Ryan and Rick when I was asked to speak at a Visiting Writers Forum virtual event with the creative writing department at Ringling College of Art and Design in Florida. I was honored to be asked and immediately said yes. This invitation came to me in 2020, when we were all staying home during the pandemic but still trying to move forward artistically and keep our sanity and sense of humor.

I had a blast during this event. Typically, these programs feature a writer, so as an editor, I was doubly honored to be asked. Presenting the editor's point of view to up-and-coming writers was important because too often they haven't had much experience with the editorial or publishing process. Ryan and Rick asked thoughtful and engaging questions, and I was struck by the depth of their knowledge, not just for my own books, but for the wide range of interest they have all over the writing spectrum. You can tell they have a pure love for all speculative genres, but more importantly, they're knowledgeable about things outside of genre as well. And clearly, they're passionate about sharing their knowledge and nurturing other writers. This only serves to improve the guidance they present in this book. More importantly, although the business of writing is serious, Ryan and Rick approach it from a more playful place, which makes this book such a pleasure to read and enjoy.

— Ann VanderMeer

Introduction

Writing a successful fantasy story is far more than just whipping up a regular story and dropping in an elf on page 13. It often requires comprehensive worldbuilding, cool magical beings, and other wonder-making efforts that, taken together, propel readers into an exciting realm that's never been imagined before.

That's true for science fiction and horror as well. Readers want stories that are informed by the time-honored conventions of those genres, but manage to avoid the boring tropes, stereotypical characters, and super-familiar plots.

If that sounds intimidating, it is . . . or at least it would be if you didn't have a book like this in your hands!

About This Book

Writing Sci-Fi, Fantasy, & Horror For Dummies is equally about demystifying the writing process and revealing exactly what it takes to create successful genre stories. Everything we share in this book is informed by decades of college-level teaching, writing, editing, and — perhaps more important — reading.

Our goal with this book is to give you a strong foundation that prepares you to write genre stories that stand out from the crowd. And along the way, we share advice and tips on the publishing industry so you know what to do with those stories after they're ready for audiences.

We envision that you'll use the ideas and techniques in this book to deliver story in one of three main ways:

- Prose (novels and short stories)
- Scripts (film, TV, comics, and graphic novels)
- Interactive (video games, roleplaying games, and other immersive experiences)

To keep things simple, we refer to the story's "audience" throughout this book, but by that, we mean reader, viewer, gamer, and so on as the case may be for the

medium you choose. Just remember: Each medium has its own inherent strengths, so when writing fiction, for example, really embrace the world of a character's interiority. With a film script, forget dialogue tags and lovely descriptions and instead focus on external action, sound, and dialogue. With a video game, you need to build amazing worlds that are ripe for conflict so a character — the player! — can have agency over the story's plot.

Here's good news: At the center of these modes of experiencing stories is the same core set of fundamental principles and reader expectations. As soon as you familiarize yourself with those, you can apply them to any storymaking enterprise that you see fit.

Foolish Assumptions

With 30-plus combined years of college-level teaching and running workshops at writing conferences, we've found that students of all ages often believe one or more of the following:

- You're either born a writer, or you're not.
- Writing comes easily to everyone but me.
- I should wait for inspiration to strike before writing.
- Good writers don't have to revise.
- Writers need to work in solitude.
- Getting published is more about who you know than what you write.
- Editors will fix the "little stuff" (like spelling and grammar) for me.
- I don't have enough time to write a novel/film script/TV series.

Plain and simple, each of these is false. We won't address why here because we cover all of these topics within the following chapters, but trust us to tell you the truth and make the appropriate arguments when it's time.

We do our best to reward your trust on every page. We promise.

We confess that we're making a few assumptions of our own about you as well, dear writing friend. In no particular order, they are as follows:

- Whether you're new to writing or a lifelong scribbler, you want to improve at writing.

- You really like genre stories, especially science fiction, fantasy, and horror.
- You want to write original stories that resonate with readers.
- You want to be on the pathway to publication.

If any of these sound like you, then the information in this book is specifically designed for you.

One more thing: We don't expect everyone to know every single story ever created or every author who ever wrote. We certainly don't know them all! So, we avoid referencing specific stories and authors in general, yet from time to time, we couldn't help ourselves. We're teachers, after all.

If you don't know a reference that we mention, that's fine. Ogres aren't going to bust down your door and pummel you with French dictionaries or anything. We swear. Just consider adding these stories and authors to your might-check-out-someday list because they have a lot to offer.

Icons Used in This Book

Books in the For Dummies series include helpful icons to ensure that key aspects, elements, and ideas get special attention. Without further ado, we use the following icons:

TIP

This icon notes the kind of thing that frequently produces an "Aha!" moments for writers. If you're looking for actionable ways to improve your writing, put these to work right away.

REMEMBER

This icon alerts you to something worthy of extra consideration. If you're skimming, make sure to slow down and really dig in when you see this alert.

TECHNICAL STUFF

This icon highlights bonus in-depth things that you can skip and still be fine. But if you're serious about writing, this insider information can help.

WARNING

This icon helps you steer clear of problem areas. The last things we want are for you to waste time, get frustrated, or smash face-first into a dead end.

EXERCISE

This icon points out hands-on activities you can try to spark your inspiration and start working on different elements of your written work.

Beyond the Book

For most readers, this book has all you need to succeed. But if you find yourself yearning for more ideas, insight, and inspiration, we have you covered!

Here are three additional resources beyond this book:

- **Cheat Sheet:** Go to `www.dummies.com` and search for "Writing Sci-Fi, Fantasy, & Horror For Dummies Cheat Sheet" to locate a handy reference guide for all three genres included in this book.
- **Double down with Dummies:** Couple this book with *Writing Fiction For Dummies* by Peter Economy and Randall Ingermanson and *Writing Young Adult Fiction For Dummies* by Deborah Halverson, or any other For Dummies title that grabs your interest. We won't be offended! The tips, tricks, and advice from our writing colleagues who've created other For Dummies books can absolutely support your journey to writing success.
- **Work with us:** Both of us teach, present at writing conferences, and do a bit of freelance writing, editing, and coaching. Visit us at `www.rickdakan.com` or `www.ryangvancleave.com` to see if any of those options work for you!

Where to Go from Here

If you're totally new to writing, we suggest you begin with the basics of story construction (Part 1). Part 2 on worldbuilding contains valuable advice that informs all three genres — you're more than welcome to go right into whichever specific genre or craft concerns that you most. Or if you're not sure where to start, scan the Table of Contents or flip through the index, find a topic that piques your interest, and turn to that chapter.

Remember, Dummies books are modular, so you can read any chapter in any order. Ultimately, this book is set up to reward you whether you dive in at Chapter 1 and read straight through, or you skip around as you see fit. Treat this book like a reference. Use it when needed, but be open to putting it aside and doing what writers want to do most — *write.*

1 Getting Started: The Basics of Story

IN THIS PART . . .

Build interesting, three-dimensional characters that genre-loving audiences will hope and fear for.

Select the best point of view to showcase the conflicts and themes in your story.

Plot your story with a focus on dramatic action and character arcs.

Create a seamless narrative by linking scenes through cause and effect.

Use high-powered story tension to keep audiences hooked.

Discover the best medium for your stories and use its inherent strengths to your advantage.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Meeting the genres: Sci-fi, fantasy, and horror
- Creating characters born for drama and story worlds built for conflict
- Succeeding as a writer is about more than writing

Chapter 1
Taking Journeys into the Imagination

This is a book designed to help writers tell stories better.

It's as simple and as complex as that.

Teachers, librarians, parents, and other fans of sci-fi, fantasy, and horror may get a lot from this book, too, but our goal is first and foremost to help writers tell their stories. Our areas of focus are the craft aspects and foundational considerations that increase a writer's ability to create sci-fi, fantasy, and horror stories that matter.

Because good stories matter — we firmly believe that.

Every well-told story is a wondrous journey into the human imagination. Stories are a shared enterprise that brings joy to authors and audiences. A symbiotic experience, we might suggest.

This chapter serves as your portal to the world of sci-fi, fantasy, and horror stories. If you want to create written works of these three genres, then you've come to the right place.

Looking Closer at the Big Three Genres

Three of the most popular creative writing classes we teach are Writing Science Fiction, Writing Fantasy, and Writing Horror. And in the other classes we offer, we frequently attract students who are looking to write and talk about stories with dark elf thieves, robot assassins, or hooded axe-wielding maniacs. Sometimes all in the same story!

TECHNICAL STUFF

Some people choose to group these three genres under one far larger umbrella called *speculative fiction*, which is a type of story that could've been generated from a "what if?" question because these stories include elements and aspects that don't exist in *consensus reality* (the things people generally agree on about how the world works). That's a fairly basic definition, but the term itself is slippery. Plenty of writers don't fully agree on what it means, which is one reason we don't use it in this book.

Even though other authors may be satisfied to lump sci-fi, fantasy, and horror together, we find it more useful to examine, understand, and appreciate the differences in each as a way to improve your ability to write effective stories. The lines between these genres do blur and overlap, but that's okay — we handle them separately in this book to keep things clear for you.

REMEMBER

And although the three genres do have clear distinctive characteristics, some of those characteristics can overlap in lots of interesting ways. Visit Chapter 27 for more ways to mix, match, and blend story elements to good effect.

One thing all these genres share is an emphasis on the art and craft of worldbuilding, which we cover in detail in Part 2. Chapter 5 explores the idea of creating a very specific world for your story. Chapter 6 combines research with imagination, and shares secret worldbuilding advice from Kenneth Hite, a top gamemaker. Chapter 7 helps you find ways to engage audiences on multiple levels versus sticking to a formula. Worlds can be so rich and robust that they're practically a character, too. That's the idea behind Chapter 8, which explains how worlds actively want something.

The following sections take a closer look at the three genres.

Imagining possible worlds — Sci-fi

Sci-fi stories offer audiences possible other worlds. It's based in or at least inspired by scientific reality as people know it at the time of the writing. The genre goes beyond that, however, to ask "what if?" questions about the future, new technologies, and humanity's place in the universe.

REMEMBER

Before writing your sci-fi story, answer the following questions:

- **What's the Big New Thing?** At the heart of a great sci-fi story is a science-based development that's vital to the narrative (that's your *Big New Thing*). What ideas do you have for a cool Big New Thing?
- **How would it change the story world?** Whether it's new tech or a scientific breakthrough, the world should be affected by its creation or use. If not, your Big New Thing probably isn't big enough to carry your story.
- **Who would care?** At least some people can't ignore the Big New Thing. They should be in awe, be fearful, or have some other significant reactions that will drive them to action.
- **What conflicts emerge?** Someone wants to corner the market, change the world, oppress those who need oppressing, or just make a quick buck. If someone wants something, someone else is going to try to stop them from getting it, and the Big New Thing should be central to resolving that conflict.

To blast straight into writing sci-fi, visit Part 3, which explores the other possible worlds of science fiction. From the huge "what if?" at the center of every sci-fi story (see Chapter 9) to spaceships and space travel (refer to Chapter 10) to aliens and every type of artificial life (flip to Chapters 11 and 12), it's all here. We even investigate ways to create other planets in general and other Earths in particular — that's Chapter 13. We also get into the idea of dystopias and utopias, two possible futures that audiences like to see come alive through stories.

Imagining wondrous worlds — Fantasy

Fantasy stories give audiences impossible other worlds. In the wondrous worlds of fantasy, consensus reality is shattered to exciting and entertaining ends, which makes room for magic spells, ancient artifacts, and fantastic creatures.

REMEMBER

Here we explore a few questions to help you write fantastic fantasy stories:

- **What's the impossible thing?** One of the things that makes your story fantasy is the inclusion of something that's impossible for the real world. Unicorns exist. Lightning bolts can be triggered from wands. All brown-eyed people can read minds. Start with one impossible thing and build from there.
- **What rules does it break and follow?** Thanks to being impossible, it can break all sorts of real-world rules, like physics or the need for sleep. But it can and should have its own rules. What cost does casting a spell require? What weak spot does the otherwise invulnerable dragon have? Limits make the impossible more interesting and dramatic.

- **How does your main character encounter it?** How the impossible thing manifests needs to matter. Does your character move from a mundane world into one rich with wonder? Is the wondrous all around from page one? Or does the wonder come barreling into the character's normal world, which really mucks things up?
- **How does the impossible thing relate to your antagonist?** If it's powerful, an antagonist surely wants it. Or maybe it's something that was simply theirs, and they want it back. In any event, wonderous, impossible things should only be included if they have meaning to characters and the story world. They shouldn't just be flavor text or props.

To transport audiences to carefully built worlds populated with rich characters and potential conflicts, fly on over to Part 4 where we peer into the wondrous world of fantasy. How do you get to the fantastic? Portals, intrusions, and immersions (see Chapter 14). How the @!#$! do you create a magic system? Think in terms of rules and costs (go to Chapter 15). Those fantasy worlds are intimidating, so how do you create a good one? The key is to think of what makes a story-rich world (refer to Chapter 16). What about those wild monsters and creatures they have? We cover those brutes in Chapter 17.

Imagining fearful worlds — Horror

Horror stories offer audiences terrifying worlds. Sometimes the scary stuff in a horror story could indeed happen (serial killers, plagues, cults, and ruthless corporations), whereas in some horror stories, it couldn't (demons, ghosts, zombies, and witches). Regardless of the pathway to terror a writer chooses, a quality horror story will make audiences quake with fear and plead to keep the lights on at night. Just in case.

REMEMBER

Here are some questions to get you thinking about a prevalent horror story type — the discovery plot:

- **What's the mystery that launches the story?** The key discovery of this mystery (a missing child? a murder? a stolen artifact?) launches the characters into a larger story where they need to confront and survive a horrible truth they've uncovered.
- **How does the mystery connect to your character's core want?** An easy way to do this is to make it personal — the missing child is their niece. Or the murder happened on their property. Or the artifact is their family heirloom. Regardless of your specific choices, the character should only be able to ignore it at great personal cost.