Spring Valley Writers Workshop

Workshop Guidelines

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In this document you will find a variety of things from general procedure to recommended practices to protect your intellectual property. At the end there is a lexicon to workshop-isms and gotchas. If you have questions or concerns email me at sandwriters@gmail.com.

The Group
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The Spring Valley Writer's Workshop is a free professional level read and critique group, that provides support and guidance to writers seeking to prepare and polish materials for publication. No fees or dues are collected. However, since we do not charge money, we do expect commitment. The group is about support and encouragement of your fellow creators, neither of which can happen if you don't actively and consistently participate.

Venue
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The workshop is conducted by mailing list and zoom meeting. Your email is kept private. While it is not essential, a webcam is a courtesy to other members. You will need a stable internet connection and a computer.

Schedule
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The group runs continuously with communication over the mailing list. Zoom meetings are held every other Saturday, 9:00am to 1:00pm PST* (project outward from Jan 11th 2025). To assure everyone gets to present, please log in by 9:00am. I usually have the zoom meeting open by 8:20am. We like to chit-chat, so the closer to 9:00am we all show, there's margin for socializing.

Please email the group if you are not coming. Please do this at least 24+ hours in advance. Many of us print our copies the night before. Advance knowledge of attendance is important for many aspects including scrubs (when attendance is too low).

The discussion list makes emailing the group simple. You can email a single address (**writers@svwriters.ringrealms.com**) and all the members will receive your post. When you are admitted to the group, you are placed on the list and gain permissions to use the group email. I will be actively maintaining that list, so if your email changes or you want mail sent to alternate addresses please email me a sandwriters@gmail.com.

On occasion, our current window of 4 hours may need to stretch to accommodate presenters. If you have tight schedule (or need to leave early) let us know in advance so we can make adjustments.

Attendance
=========
The group understands that people have lives and commitments. On the other hand, we want members to be serious and conscientious in their participation. If perfecting your work and honing your craft are low on your list of priorities, then you are doing yourself and the group a disservice.

We request that you discuss any scheduled absences, especially ones that last two or more meetings. If something supersedes your group commitment unexpectedly, please inform the discussion list.

Three or more unjustified absences in a row may be grounds for losing your seat in the group. A member missing six meetings in a year without sufficient justification will lose their seat, and subsequent right to attend if another member is found to replace them.

Materials
=========
In past, it used to be customary to bring copies to our in-person meetings. Nowadays we are paperless! Save the trees. All presentation materials are placed in google docs folders. I maintain an archive so members can (if they want) go back to catch up on earlier presentations.

I also maintain a document repository, so if you do have a calamity, I have a copy that you can refer to.

Conduct
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It should go without saying that this is a friendly group: no personal attacks, cursing, or suggestive behavior. Let me follow that with: *DUH!* That being said, this is a **writing** group. Depending on the genre, dialogue might be curse heavy. It is possible that there may be explicit depictions of violence, brutality, sex or deviance. File all of these under "potentially offensive".

Potentially offensive material is a two-way street. That means being both objective and receptive to other's sensibilities. If you have even an inkling of doubt that your piece might be offensive, error on the side of caution.

Put notes in the forefront of the document or in a presenting email the lays out that some of the content might be pose an issue. Often, when prepared, the readers can brace for it and still provide cogent feedback. If you feel that you might be offended by something to be reviewed please excuse yourself. Membership does not obligate you to be exposed to anything upsetting.

In the same vein, member interaction and material review should remain topically neutral. This non-bias includes gender arguments, politics, religion, sexual orientation and any other polarized or divisive subject material. Please be objective about this, if you feel any bias, especially strong argumentative bias, do NOT let that be reflected in your critique or with the other members. The more passionate you are about it, the more you should restrain yourself. If you feel your blood pressure rising and you feel like you can't hold your tongue... PLEASE just distance yourself-- take a walk. I admonish you to remember that works of fiction may not reflect the author's actual view, so attacking them for a fictional depiction is... well, just don't do it.
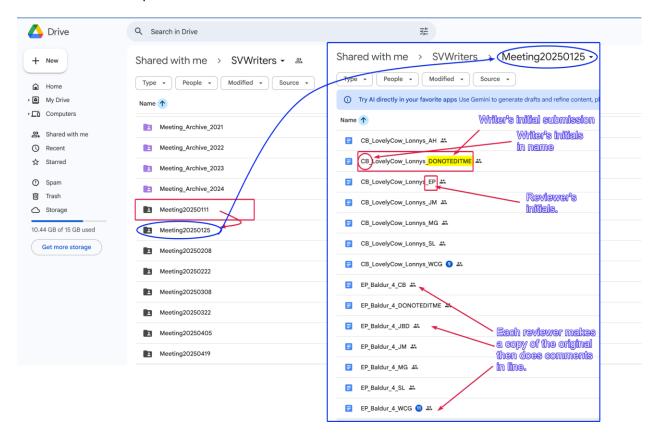
Protocol
=========
Summary
Immediately following the zoom presentations, preparation for the next session begins. Writers submit their material for group review in the google docs folder for the next meeting. So, immediately after the meeting on Jan 11th 2025, new materials for discussion on the 25th will be placed in that folder as shown in the screenshot below.

For efficiency and tidiness, there are some conventions. You always start the name of your submission with your initials. This means that when people copy your document and add their initials to the END… all your reviews are grouped together in the folder.

You will be expected to review. So, you will be opening the writer's DONOTEDITME version and making a copy of it to the same folder, adding your initials to the end to identify who is reviewing.

If all of this is unfamiliar and you've never used Google docs, no worries, we'll get you comfortable with it. The key thing here is that it's FREE. You can use any editor you want, docs will convert from just about anything.

So, by the time of the actual meeting you should have a review from all the other members.

The meeting itself is used to discuss what you were attempting to accomplish in this installment. Since the reviewers have ALREADY reviewed, what you reveal won't taint their reactions. Your presentation slot is used to build an understanding, takeaways, and consensus of reactions to your material.

Time

We give the presenter 5 minutes to set up what they are presenting. Then each reviewer will expand on their line edit notes with 5 minutes of commentary or questions.

The presenter should keep their comments to minimum. You can't listen if you're talking. Sometimes you will feel a huge urge to chime in. We understand, and we'll forgive you. It's just that the minutes ADD UP.

Use of time
If you are reviewing, get all your big ticket and nitpick items in your written notes to the presenter. Try to contain your remarks to specific solutions or guidance that would help the presenter make their work better. If you have more to say than time allows, email the person or catch them after group.

Breaks

When you gotta go, you gotta go. Head off unfortunate timing by preemptively eliminating during the review half of a presentation. Be mindful of the feedback order and don't be AWOL when your turn for response comes up. If an emergency strikes, you don't have to hold it until you turn blue, just cause as little disruption as possible.

Context

Be mindful that the other writers may not know anything about the conventions of your genre. In addition, assumptions about political, historical or geographical knowledge can be equally spurious. Presenting from the middle or out of order of a long work can widen the gaps in the reviewer's understanding. Poor or incomplete understanding can lead to lower quality feedback. If there are critical assumptions necessary to understand the work, make sure to set them up (typically in a note in the presentation document).

Continuity

A large portion of the material read in the group is long fiction. Appreciating these works requires investment in each writer's world, the overall plot, characters, and ongoing interactions.

Being present, paying attention and caring about the presented works is crucial to the shared experience of the group. If you're not there, whether it is physically or mentally, your contribution is minimized. Think of investing mindshare in these other works as broadening your horizons. Even if that material is "not your cup of tea" you can contribute to the piece's development and that writer's growth.

It goes without saying, the more you help others and show interest, the more they will reciprocate. Thus, keeping an open mind and embracing the diversity of the workshop is an all-around win. Helping others grow will inevitably reflect on your own skills and knowledge.

Reader participation

Prior to commencing the presentation do a quick setup of the material. The setup includes what draft the script is, any particular feedback you are looking for (Example: does the characterization work better in this version), and any salient continuity details the reviewers need to know. In theory, everyone has already read the material, so you will be hearing any adjusted reflection based on your setup.

Receiving Feedback

Fundamental rule: the work must **SPEAK FOR ITSELF**. The material must stand alone without further explanation or defense by you. When you've set up what you wanted the work to convey, refrain from talking back to the reviewers. Allow them to elucidate their feelings without bias or tainting from your explanations or outbursts. Do not argue, justify, and (if possible) react at all. If you are asked a direct question that you can answer succinctly-- do that. There are multiple reasons for this "be silent" directive.

1. Message Reception -- you can't listen if you're talking. You'll learn more if you remain receptive to what's being said. TAKE NOTES. Remember, one of the goals is to make your writing appeal to the widest possible audience. Your faculties should be focused on gleaning as much information from your reviewers as possible. This includes not only what they say, but what they DON'T say. What is each person's demographic and how do their responses reflect how your intended audience might receive the work.
2. Consensus -- a major function of the group is consensus. If you taint the reviewers, then you won't know whether some salient point was truly missed. If a majority of the group didn't understand something you intended, then most likely the issue is with the way it was written. You won't know if something worked if you blurt out what you were trying to do before everyone has responded.
3. Time -- arguing/explaining wastes time.

Reviewer participation

Discard any notion that genre is a barrier to your ability to provide meaningful feedback. Since your review should be based on engagement, story, plot, style, technique, setting, character, and clarity-- none of that is affected by the conventions of genre. Whether the story takes place on another planet, in a fairy castle, or the decaying crypts of some far flung metropolis, it is still bound by the same narrative rules.

The genre folks have an additional responsibility that non-genre reviewers should be mindful of: world building. The onus is on them to pull you into their setting. The more alien their world is, the more difficult it is for them to bring you in to it. It's already hard, don't make it harder by shutting down because this kind of writing is not "your thing". Shut off your bias and grant the writer the opportunity to put you in their world. If they can't accomplish that, the fault should be theirs, not yours.

The goal of the workshop is to help writers appeal to the largest possible audience. Each person can potentially represent a different readership demographic. It is not possible to appeal to all demographics. However, you can try to win people over with small adjustments to approach, technique and style. Learn what each writer does well. The things that work for them can work for you if you take the time and brainpower to deconstruct and understand what they are doing. Reviewing provides as much or more learning opportunities than reading. Developing your critique skills will improve your writing skills-- guaranteed.

Here are six primary questions writers need answered (these apply to ALL genres):

1. Were you hooked into the story at the start? (story hook)
2. Did the story keep you oriented (you knew where you were)? (sense of place)
3. Did the narrative keep you engaged? (tension, interest)
4. Did you empathize or feel for the characters, and was their portrayal believable to you? (characterization)
5. Were the scenes clear, and could you understand what was happening? (transitions)
6. Did anything read stand out as unbelievable or non sequitur? (support)

Generally, if your feedback includes these six things most writers will get something useful from what you say (or write down).

In Google docs it's strongly recommended you use SUGGESTION mode, then the presenter can see what existed before you made a change. You don't have to be as detailed as in this example, but everything you do will likely help.

Feedback admonishment. We are here to comment on plot, style, technique, characterization and narrative, not content. This goes back to my earlier remarks concerning conduct and polarizing topics. *Please* refrain (as much as possible) from biased commentary on the subject material.

Writing Technology
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All writers have their "process". Whatever that entails, the final product usually ends up in a computer. If you are not using a word processor for edits, you are wasting productivity on a large scale. True aspirations of publishing nowadays invariably involve a computer, word processing software, and some kind of digital document. Microsoft Word (PC or Mac) is widely used, but there are many free alternatives that include but are not limited to: Google Docs, LibreOffice, Kingsoft Office Suite Free, Open Office, and Office Web App. Regardless of what software floats your boat, your material should end up in files saved to some storage medium. If this seems like a very basic and generic presentation, I'm just trying not to scare the technophobes.

Where am I going with this? Picture it, a few days before group. "Oh damn, the *cursing* computer ate my chapter!" Has this ever happened to you? No? Yes?

As one with moderator responsibility, I cringe at these stories. I work on, with, and consult about computers in my day job. I have seen *many* nightmares. So, let me help you avoid disasters.

Email
Ever think of email as a back-up medium? Guess what, for small stuff it's great. Email yourself a copy. Most services like Gmail give you 15 gigabytes or more of storage. It's a great place to save interim and final document versions. If you are not confident with email... this is knowledge you should invest in.

Flash drives
Do you own a flash drive? No? Purchase at least one. A 32 gigabyte (32000 megabytes) drive can be purchased for as little as $5. *(Heck, they are often **free** promotional items)*. So, you can afford one. So there's no excuse for not owning a couple. If you're not a cheapskate, splurge for a little more capacity and durability. In all truth, you would have to be monstrously prolific to need more than 32 GB if you're only storing your writing.

The flash drive should serve as your offline storage. This is your backup if a meteor hits your computer or the far more mundane and annoyingly common computer virus trashes your machine. You should routinely back up your writing folders to the flash drive every time you make any time-consuming changes to your documents. If you don't know how, then do yourself a *huge* favor and learn. If you are paranoid (I am), make copies to two flash drives. This is because flash drives while RELATIVELY reliable can just up and DIE, taking their entire contents to unrecoverable cybernetic heaven.

Online (the cloud)
If you're not technophobic or techno-challenged, online services like Google Docs can serve as great archival mediums. You can upload your documents and get the additional utility of being able to access them from anywhere you have an internet connection. For myself, I use a combination of cloud storage, flash drives, and entire redundant computers for my backups. Okay, I'm *really* paranoid.

Collaboration and mark-up
Most word processors have a "track changes" feature. Collaboration is built into Google docs and all the major editing software. Familiarize yourself with these features. This is how you will be trading reviews with the other writers in the group.

Track changes can also be used to do a primitive form of version control with your document. The latest versions of Microsoft word automatically do this kind of draft management for you. It is helpful to understand and configure the software to do this in a way that makes sense to you.

Process security
Backups can save you, but bad organization can end up trashing your primary copy and all your backups.

Rule #1: **Segment your documents.**
Never EVER maintain a novel length work in a single document. Documents can get corrupted (more often in BIG documents). Documents can get messed up in non-obvious ways when they are large: copy and paste gone wrong, global find and replace, all manner of terrible calamities. The worst part is you may not know your work is damaged. The document opens fine... but your attention is on the end... somewhere else you've blown a giant hole in your foot. Worse, since you don't know something is wrong... you studiously copy that document to your back-ups. **That is a giant hair-pulling disaster.**

Keep each chapter segment in a separate numbered document (Example: booktitle001.doc). Note: Zero pad the chapter number, this helps with sorting and organizing.

When you get to your final draft, THEN assemble all the chapters into a single monolithic document. If you end up (and writers often do) swapping chapters around, you will be grateful you kept them in separate files. The monolithic document serves a few basic needs (like submission) but is needed for things like global search and replace and consistency checking.

Once assembled into a giant file, your novel work is very vulnerable. Once you are confident the assembled work is complete and ship shape, immediately save a copy to a baseline version file (Example: booktitle_rough.doc) then save another copy to a working document (Example: booktitle_work.doc). Always work on the WORK file. Each session, work on the latest document and save to a NEW file (Example: booktitle_work_20150515.doc). Note: If you use the date formatted like this, the documents will sort chronologically. As you do your final edits you will leave a trail of bread crumbs. If at any point calamity strikes... you have the previous edit file. Nowadays, disks are measured in terabytes (1000s of gigabytes). If this seems wasteful of disk space, don't worry. The size of even a large book will only be a few megabytes. A small hard disk nowadays is 500 gigabytes (half a million megabytes).

When you have a document that is THE one for submission, save THREE copies. (Example: booktitle_final_submit.doc , booktitle_final_revs.doc, booktitle_final_revs_work.doc). As before, always use the WORK document for doing edits. When you are confident that modifications to the document haven't caused something bad, save a copy to the revs file. Never touch the submit file. If you feel compelled to make changes, save to a copy and work on that. Never mess with your baseline version after you're confident it's your submission copy. Trust me, you will PRAISE all this paranoia the day it saves your tail from some unintended consequence.

Rule #2: **Don't mix your projects**

For purposes of back-ups and organization, create a single top-level folder for all your writing. Do NOT place your project documents in that root, have a separate folder for each large project or each document classification. There are technical reasons for this, but that goes beyond this discussion. Suffice to say it's just a good idea.

Example:
   Writing Root +
     - Project 1
     - Project 2
     - Stories
     - Submissions
     - Queries
     - Research

If your folders are organized like this, it's a simple matter to drag your "Writing Root" to a flash drive or back-up media. If you are submitting to publishers and there are changes, extend Rule #1 to folders.

Example:
   Writing Root +
    - Project 1 +
      - 2008_Submit
      - 2009_ReSubmit
      - 2010_3rdPrinting

Again, paranoia is your friend!

Rule #3: **Save now, save later, save like crazy!**

Non-savers remorse is irritating. (If you had just saved before the cat ran across the keyboard, you wouldn't be spending the next three days recomposing from memory). Even if you are working on something short (a story or chapter) start by making a _work copy of the document. Make all of your changes to that. When you are closing up for the day, verify you haven't screwed anything up, and then save back to the original. I am stupid paranoid, I work in the cloud on a Google Doc version of my file and then save down to disk when I'm confident it's a legit copy. You don't have to be as crazy as me, but caution will pay off eventually.

The next level of paranoia is face roll protection. (Face roll is an inclusive term that includes such situations as you falling asleep and planting your features in the keyboard, temporary stupidity, clumsiness, cats, dogs, small children and significant others). Do you know the save shortcut for the word processor you're working in? In Microsoft Word and many others it is CTRL+S. If you don't know, find out. I don't know of any modern software out there that does not have an easily typed save key combo. Memorize it and USE it. I hit this key combo at the end of every sentence. When my wife wants my attention, I hit it. When anything starts to distract me, I hit it. I hit it, hit it, hit it. Whack a mole, baby, every completed thought, save that sucker!

Save paranoia is a behavioral modification that will preserve your sanity. Develop it. You'll thank yourself later.

Technical support

I have over 30 years of experience working on computers from building them to programming them. If you have questions, ask. Our sergeant-of-arms, John Morris, who is a systems administrator is also very knowledgeable. Between the two of us we pretty much have the computer thing covered. This includes printers, wireless, networks, and all the other stuff. Before you spend money on computer consulting, or make a big computer purchase, asking us might save you some cash and/or headaches.

Terminology
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These are a few terms that you might not know if you've never been in a group or our group in particular.

Fearless Leader -- Nickname for Joan Oppenheimer.

Joan Oppenheimer -- Joan was the original group moderator (circa 1980). She was renowned for her ability to do detailed line edits at a speed just shy of a person reading aloud. Joan was extremely particular, and at times could write devastating critiques that could bring stout-hearted writers to tears. Every once in a while a member of the group would get a letter from her and you could always tell because of the way they stiffened up. Her original students called them the 'tough love' letters. It was for these documents and facing the unpleasantness of group politics that she got the nickname 'Fearless leader'.

Narrative: The inclusive story-telling fabric. In group ideology, narrative is immersive viewpoint-based story telling.

Peeve words / phrases: These were do-nothing words that Joan hated, and made the rest of us avoid. Examples: down, just, up, very. They included common redundant phrases such as: He nodded (his head) [do you nod anything else? This includes any other anatomical redundancy blinking eyes, pointing fingers, etc.]

Physical / emotional registers: These are depictions of character's physical feelings as a mechanism for SHOWING emotions (not telling).

Reader feeder : Also known as "info dumps". Large blocks of information spewed at read en masse. Sometimes writers try to cleverly disguise this as dialogue. It still stops the reader.

Registers: Shortening of Physical / emotional registers.

Show not tell : Common writer paradigm. Show or immerse the reader in the narrative, making them see and feel what is going on as opposed to just telling them.

Story: Catch all word for the fabric of a narrative.

Tension: Catch all for level of involvement and immersion generated by the narrative.

OPTIONAL READING

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This is a little additional perspective on work-shopping and insight into the common pitfalls of writing.

Article by Bruce Sterling ... has a science fiction focus but works for ALL writing.

People often ask where science fiction writers get their ideas. They rarely ask where society gets its science fiction writers. In many cases the answer is science fiction workshops.

Workshops come in many varieties — regional and national, amateur and professional, formal and frazzled. In science fiction's best-known workshop, Clarion, would-be writers are wrenched from home and hearth and pitilessly blitzed for six weeks by professional SF writers, who serve as creative-writing gurus. Thanks to the seminal efforts of Robin Wilson, would-be sf writers can receive actual academic credit for this experience.

But the workshopping experience does not require any shepherding by experts. Like a bad rock band, an SF-writer's workshop can be set up in any vacant garage by any group of spotty enthusiasts with nothing better to occupy their time. No one has a Copyright on talent, desire, or enthusiasm.

The general course of action in the modern SF workshop (known as the "Milford system") goes as follows. Attendees bring short manuscripts, with enough copies for everyone present. No one can attend or comment who does not bring a story. The contributors read and annotate all the stories. When that's done, everyone forms a circle, a story is picked at random, and the person to the writer's right begins the critique. (Large groups may require deliberate scheduling.)

Following the circle in order, with a minimum of cross-talk or interruptions, each person emits his/her considered opinions of the story's merits and/or demerits. The author is strictly required, by rigid law and custom, to make no outcries, no matter how he or she may squirm. When the circle is done and the last reader has vented his or her opinion, the silently suffering author is allowed an extended reply, which, it is hoped, will not exceed half an hour or so, and will avoid gratuitously personal ripostes. This harrowing process continues, with possible breaks for food, until all the stories are done, whereupon everyone tries to repair ruptured relationships in an orgy of drink and gossip.

No doubt a very interesting book could be written about science fiction in which the writing itself played no part. This phantom history could detail the social demimonde of workshops and their associated cliques: Milford, the Futurians, Milwaukee Fictioneers, Turkey City, New Wave, Hydra Club, Jules Verne's Eleven Without Women, and year after year after year of Clarion — a thousand SF groups around the world, known and unknown.

Anyone can play. I've noticed that workshops have a particularly crucial role in non-Anglophone societies, where fans, writers, and publishers are often closely united in the same handful of zealots.

This kind of fellow-feeling may be the true hearts-blood of the genre.

We now come to the core of this piece, the SF Workshop Lexicon. This lexicon was compiled by Mr Lewis Shiner and myself from the work of many writers and critics over many years of genre history, and it contains buzzwords, notions and critical terms of direct use to SF workshops.

The first version, known as the "Turkey City Lexicon" after the Austin, Texas writers' workshop that was a cradle of cyberpunk, appeared in 1988. In proper ideologically-correct cyberpunk fashion, the Turkey City Lexicon was distributed unCopyrighted and free-of-charge: a decommodified, photocopied chunk of free literary software. Lewis Shiner still thinks that this was the best deployment of an effort of this sort, and thinks I should stop fooling around with this fait accompli. After all, the original Lexicon remains unCopyrighted, and it has been floating around in fanzines, prozines and computer networks for seven years now. I respect Lew's opinion, and in fact I kind of agree with him. But I'm an ideologue, congenitally unable to leave well-enough alone.

In September 1990 I re-wrote the Lexicon as an installment in my critical column for the British magazine INTERZONE. When Robin Wilson asked me to refurbish the Lexicon yet again for PARAGONS, I couldn't resist the temptation. I'm always open to improvements and amendments for the Lexicon. It seems to me that if a document of this sort fails to grow it will surely become a literary monument, and, well, heaven forbid. For what it's worth, I plan to re-release this latest edition to the Internet at the first opportunity.

Some Lexicon terms are attributed to their originators, when I could find them; others are not, and I apologize for my ignorance.

Science fiction boasts many specialized critical terms. You can find a passel of these in Gary K Wolfe's CRITICAL TERMS FOR SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY: A GLOSSARY AND GUIDE TO SCHOLARSHIP (Greenwood Press, 1986). But you won't find them in here. This lexicon is not a guide to scholarship. The Workshop Lexicon is a guide (of sorts) for down-and-dirty hairy-knuckled sci-fi writers, the kind of ambitious subliterate guttersnipes who actually write and sell professional genre material. It's rough, rollicking, rule-of-thumb stuff suitable for shouting aloud while pounding the table.

Part One: Words and Sentences

Brenda Starr dialogue
Long sections of talk with no physical background or description of the characters. Such dialogue, detached from the story's setting, tends to echo hollowly, as if suspended in mid-air. Named for the American comic-strip in which dialogue balloons were often seen emerging from the Manhattan skyline.

"Burly Detective" Syndrome
This useful term is taken from SF's cousin-genre, the detective-pulp. The hack writers of the Mike Shayne series showed an odd reluctance to use Shayne's proper name, preferring such euphemisms as "the burly detective" or "the red-headed sleuth." This syndrome arises from a wrong-headed conviction that the same word should not be used twice in close succession. This is only true of particularly strong and visible words, such as "vertiginous." Better to re-use a simple tag or phrase than to contrive cumbersome methods of avoiding it.

Brand Name Fever
Use of brand name alone, without accompanying visual detail, to create false verisimilitude. You can stock a future with Hondas and Sonys and IBM's and still have no idea with it looks like.

"Call a Rabbit a Smeerp"
A cheap technique for false exoticism, in which common elements of the real world are re-named for a fantastic milieu without any real alteration in their basic nature or behavior. "Smeerps" are especially common in fantasy worlds, where people often ride exotic steeds that look and act just like horses. (Attributed to James Blish.)

Gingerbread
Useless ornament in prose, such as fancy sesquipedalian Latinate words where short clear English ones will do. Novice authors sometimes use "gingerbread" in the hope of disguising faults and conveying an air of refinement. (Attr. Damon Knight)

Not Simultaneous
The mis-use of the present participle is a common structural sentence-fault for beginning writers. "Putting his key in the door, he leapt up the stairs and got his revolver out of the bureau." Alas, our hero couldn't do this even if his arms were forty feet long. This fault shades into "Ing Disease," the tendency to pepper sentences with words ending in "-ing," a grammatical construction which tends to confuse the proper sequence of events. (Attr. Damon Knight)

Pushbutton Words
Words used to evoke a cheap emotional response without engaging the intellect or the critical faculties. Commonly found in story titles, they include such bits of bogus lyricism as "star," "dance," "dream," "song," "tears" and "poet," cliches calculated to render the SF audience misty-eyed and tender-hearted.

Roget's Disease
The ludicrous overuse of far-fetched adjectives, piled into a festering, fungal, tenebrous, troglodytic, ichorous, leprous, synonymic heap. (Attr. John W. Campbell)

"Said" Bookism

An artificial verb used to avoid the word "said." "Said" is one of the few invisible words in the English language and is almost impossible to overuse. It is much less distracting than "he retorted," "she inquired," "he ejaculated," and other oddities. The term "said-book" comes from certain pamphlets, containing hundreds of purple-prose synonyms for the word "said," which were sold to aspiring authors from tiny ads in American magazines of the pre-WWII era.

Tom Swifty

An unseemly compulsion to follow the word "said" with a colorful adverb, as in "'We'd better hurry,' Tom said swiftly." This was a standard mannerism of the old Tom Swift adventure dime-novels. Good dialogue can stand on its own without a clutter of adverbial props.

Part Two: Paragraphs and Prose Structure

Bathos

A sudden, alarming change in the level of diction. "There will be bloody riots and savage insurrections leading to a violent popular uprising unless the regime starts being lots nicer about stuff."

Countersinking

A form of expositional redundancy in which the action clearly implied in dialogue is made explicit. "'Let's get out of here,' he said, urging her to leave."

Dischism

The unwitting intrusion of the author's physical surroundings, or the author's own mental state, into the text of the story. Authors who smoke or drink while writing often drown or choke their characters with an endless supply of booze and cigs. In subtler forms of the Dischism, the characters complain of their confusion and indecision — when this is actually the author's condition at the moment of writing, not theirs within the story. "Dischism" is named after the critic who diagnosed this syndrome. (Attr. Thomas M. Disch)

False Humanity

An ailment endemic to genre writing, in which soap-opera elements of purported human interest are stuffed into the story willy-nilly, whether or not they advance the plot or contribute to the point of the story. The actions of such characters convey an itchy sense of irrelevance, for the author has invented their problems out of whole cloth, so as to have something to emote about.

False Interiorization

A cheap labor-saving technique in which the author, too lazy to describe the surroundings, afflicts the viewpoint-character with a blindfold, an attack of space-sickness, the urge to play marathon whist-games in the smoking-room, etc.

Fuzz

An element of motivation the author was too lazy to supply. The word "somehow" is a useful tip-off to fuzzy areas of a story. "Somehow she had forgotten to bring her gun."

Hand Waving

An attempt to distract the reader with dazzling prose or other verbal fireworks, so as to divert attention from a severe logical flaw. (Attr. Stewart Brand)

Laughtrack

Characters grandstand and tug the reader's sleeve in an effort to force a specific emotional reaction. They laugh wildly at their own jokes, cry loudly at their own pain, and rob the reader of any real chance of attaining genuine emotion.

Show, not Tell

A cardinal principle of effective writing. The reader should be allowed to react naturally to the evidence presented in the story, not instructed in how to react by the author. Specific incidents and carefully observed details will render auctorial lectures unnecessary. For instance, instead of telling the reader "She had a bad childhood, an unhappy childhood," a specific incident — involving, say, a locked closet and two jars of honey — should be shown.

Rigid adherence to show-don't-tell can become absurd. Minor matters are sometimes best gotten out of the way in a swift, straightforward fashion.

Signal from Fred

A comic form of the "Dischism" in which the author's subconscious, alarmed by the poor quality of the work, makes unwitting critical comments: "This doesn't make sense." "This is really boring." "This sounds like a bad movie." (Attr. Damon Knight)

Squid in the Mouth

The failure of an author to realize that his/her own weird assumptions and personal in-jokes are simply not shared by the world-at-large. Instead of applauding the wit or insight of the author's remarks, the world-at-large will stare in vague shock and alarm at such a writer, as if he or she had a live squid in the mouth.

Since SF writers as a breed are generally quite loony, and in fact make this a stock in trade, "squid in the mouth" doubles as a term of grudging praise, describing the essential, irreducible, divinely unpredictable lunacy of the true SF writer. (Attr. James P Blaylock)

Squid on the Mantelpiece

Chekhov said that if there are dueling pistols over the mantelpiece in the first act, they should be fired in the third. In other words, a plot element should be deployed in a timely fashion and with proper dramatic emphasis. However, in SF plotting the MacGuffins are often so overwhelming that they cause conventional plot structures to collapse. It's hard to properly dramatize, say, the domestic effects of Dad's bank overdraft when a giant writhing kraken is levelling the city. This mismatch between the conventional dramatic proprieties and SF's extreme, grotesque, or visionary thematics is known as the "squid on the mantelpiece."

White Room Syndrome

A clear and common sign of the failure of the author's imagination, most often seen at the beginning of a story, before the setting, background, or characters have gelled. "She awoke in a white room." The 'white room' is a featureless set for which details have yet to be invented — a failure of invention by the author. The character'wakes' in order to begin a fresh train of thought — again, just like the author. This 'white room' opening is generally followed by much earnest pondering of circumstances and useless exposition; all of which can be cut, painlessly.

It remains to be seen whether the "white room" cliche' will fade from use now that most authors confront glowing screens rather than blank white paper.

Wiring Diagram Fiction

A genre ailment related to "False Humanity," "Wiring Diagram Fiction" involves "characters" who show no convincing emotional reactions at all, since they are overwhelmed by the author's fascination with gadgetry or didactic lectures.

You Can't Fire Me, I Quit

An attempt to defuse the reader's incredulity with a pre-emptive strike — as if by anticipating the reader's objections, the author had somehow answered them. "I would never have believed it, if I hadn't seen it myself!" "It was one of those amazing coincidences that can only take place in real life!" "It's a one-in-a-million chance, but it's so crazy it just might work!" Surprisingly common, especially in SF. (Attr. John Kessel)

Part Three: Common Workshop Story Types

Adam and Eve Story
Nauseatingly common subset of the "Shaggy God Story" in which a terrible apocalypse, spaceship crash, etc., leaves two survivors, man and woman, who turn out to be Adam and Eve, parents of the human race!!

The Cozy Catastrophe
Story in which horrific events are overwhelming the entirety of human civilization, but the action concentrates on a small group of tidy, middle-class, white Anglo- Saxon protagonists. The essence of the cozy catastrophe is that the hero should have a pretty good time (a girl, free suites at the Savoy, automobiles for the taking) while everyone else is dying off. (Attr. Brian Aldiss)

Dennis Hopper Syndrome
A story based on some arcane bit of science or folklore, which noodles around producing random weirdness. Then a loony character-actor (usually best played by Dennis Hopper) barges into the story and baldly tells the protagonist what's going on by explaining the underlying mystery in a long bug-eyed rant. (Attr. Howard Waldrop)

Deus ex Machina or "God in the Box"
Story featuring a miraculous solution to the story's conflict, which comes out of nowhere and renders the plot struggles irelevant. H G Wells warned against SF's love for the deus ex machina when he coined the famous dictum that "If anything is possible, then nothing is interesting." Science fiction, which specializes in making the impossible seem plausible, is always deeply intrigued by godlike powers in the handy pocket size. Artificial Intelligence, virtual realities and nanotechnology are three contemporary SF MacGuffins that are cheap portable sources of limitless miracle.

The Grubby Apartment Story
Similar to the "poor me" story, this autobiographical effort features a miserably quasi-bohemian writer, living in urban angst in a grubby apartment. The story commonly stars the author's friends in thin disguises — friends who may also be the author's workshop companions, to their considerable alarm.

The Jar of Tang
"For you see, we are all living in a jar of Tang!" or "For you see, I am a dog!" A story contrived so that the author can spring a silly surprise about its setting. Mainstay of the old Twilight Zone TV show. An entire pointless story contrived so the author can cry "Fooled you!" For instance, the story takes place in a desert of coarse orange sand surrounded by an impenetrable vitrine barrier; surprise! our heroes are microbes in a jar of Tang powdered orange drink.
This is a classic case of the difference between a conceit and an idea. "What if we all lived in a jar of Tang?" is an example of the former; "What if the revolutionaries from the sixties had been allowed to set up their own society?" is an example of the latter. Good SF requires ideas, not conceits. (Attr. Stephen P. Brown)
When done with serious intent rather than as a passing conceit, this type of story can be dignified by the term "Concealed Environment." (Attr. Christopher Priest)

Just-Like Fallacy
SF story which thinly adapts the trappings of a standard pulp adventure setting. The spaceship is "just like" an Atlantic steamer, down to the Scottish engineer in the hold. A colony planet is "just like" Arizona except for two moons in the sky. "Space Westerns" and futuristic hard-boiled detective stories have been especially common versions.

The Kitchen-Sink Story
A story overwhelmed by the inclusion of any and every new idea that occurs to the author in the process of writing it. (Attr. Damon Knight)

The Motherhood Statement

SF story which posits some profoundly unsettling threat to the human condition, explores the implications briefly, then hastily retreats to affirm the conventional social and humanistic pieties, ie apple pie and motherhood. Greg Egan once stated that the secret of truly effective SF was to deliberately "burn the motherhood statement." (Attr. Greg Egan)

The "Poor Me" Story

Autobiographical piece in which the male viewpoint character complains that he is ugly and can't get laid. (Attr. Kate Wilhelm)

Re-Inventing the Wheel

A novice author goes to enormous lengths to create a science-fictional situation already tiresomely familiar to the experienced reader. Reinventing the Wheel was traditionally typical of mainstream writers venturing into SF. It is now often seen in writers who lack experience in genre history because they were attracted to written SF via SF movies, SF television series, SF role-playing games, SF comics or SF computer gaming.

The Rembrandt Comic Book

A story in which incredible craftsmanship has been lavished on a theme or idea which is basically trivial or subliterary, and which simply cannot bear the weight of such deadly-serious artistic portent.

The Shaggy God Story

A piece which mechanically adopts a Biblical or other mythological tale and provides flat science-fictional "explanations" for the theological events. (Brian Aldiss)

The Slipstream Story

Non-SF story which is so ontologically distorted or related in such a bizarrely non-realist fashion that it cannot pass muster as commercial mainstream fiction and therefore seeks shelter in the SF or fantasy genre. Postmodern critique and technique are particularly fruitful in creating slipstream stories.

The Steam-Grommet Factory

Didactic SF story which consists entirely of a guided tour of a large and elaborate gimmick. A common technique of SF utopias and dystopias. (Attr. Gardner Dozois)

The Tabloid Weird

Story produced by a confusion of SF and Fantasy tropes — or rather, by a confusion of basic world-views. Tabloid Weird is usually produced by the author's own inability to distinguish between a rational, Newtonian-Einsteinian, cause-and- effect universe and an irrational, supernatural, fantastic universe. Either the FBI is hunting the escaped mutant from the genetics lab, or the drill-bit has bored straight into Hell — but not both at once in the very same piece of fiction. Even fantasy worlds need an internal consistency of sorts, so that a Sasquatch Deal-with-the-Devil story is also "Tabloid Weird." Sasquatch crypto-zoology and Christian folk superstition simply don't mix well, even for comic effect. (Attr. Howard Waldrop)

The Whistling Dog

A story related in such an elaborate, arcane, or convoluted manner that it impresses by its sheer narrative ingenuity, but which, as a story, is basically not worth the candle. Like the whistling dog, it's astonishing that the thing can whistle — but it doesn't actually whistle very well. (Attr. Harlan Ellison)

Part Four: Plots

Abbess Phone Home
Takes its name from a mainstream story about a medieval cloister which was sold as SF because of the serendipitous arrival of a UFO at the end. By extension, any mainstream story with a gratuitous SF or fantasy element tacked on so it could be sold.

And plot
Picaresque plot in which this happens, and then that happens, and then something else happens, and it all adds up to nothing in particular.

Bogus Alternatives
List of actions a character could have taken, but didn't. Frequently includes all the reasons why. In this nervous mannerism, the author stops the action dead to work out complicated plot problems at the reader's expense. "If I'd gone along with the cops they would have found the gun in my purse. And anyway, I didn't want to spend the night in jail. I suppose I could have just run instead of stealing their car, but then … " etc. Best dispensed with entirely.

Card Tricks in the Dark
Elaborately contrived plot which arrives at (a) the punchline of a private joke no reader will get or (b) the display of some bit of learned trivia relevant only to the author. This stunt may be intensely ingenious, and very gratifying to the author, but it serves no visible fictional purpose. (Attr. Tim Powers)

Idiot Plot
A plot which functions only because all the characters involved are idiots. They behave in a way that suits the author's convenience, rather than through any rational motivation of their own. (Attr. James Blish)

Kudzu plot
Plot which weaves and curls and writhes in weedy organic profusion, smothering everything in its path.

Plot Coupons
The basic building blocks of the quest-type fantasy plot. The "hero" collects sufficient plot coupons (magic sword, magic book, magic cat) to send off to the author for the ending. Note that "the author" can be substituted for "the Gods" in such a work: "The Gods decreed he would pursue this quest." Right, mate. The author decreed he would pursue this quest until sufficient pages were filled to procure an advance. (Nick Lowe)

Second-order Idiot Plot
A plot involving an entire invented SF society which functions only because every single person in it is necessarily an idiot. (Attr. Damon Knight)

Part Five: Background

"As You Know Bob"
A pernicious form of info-dump through dialogue, in which characters tell each other things they already know, for the sake of getting the reader up-to-speed. This very common technique is also known as "Rod and Don dialogue" (attr. Damon Knight) or "maid and butler dialogue" (attr Algis Budrys).

The Edges of Ideas
The solution to the "Info-Dump" problem (how to fill in the background). The theory is that, as above, the mechanics of an interstellar drive (the center of the idea) is not important: all that matters is the impact on your characters: they can get to other planets in a few months, and, oh yeah, it gives them hallucinations about past lives. Or, more radically: the physics of TV transmission is the center of an idea; on the edges of it we find people turning into couch potatoes because they no longer have to leave home for entertainment. Or, more bluntly: we don't need info dump at all. We just need a clear picture of how people's lives have been affected by their background. This is also known as "carrying extrapolation into the fabric of daily life."

Eyeball Kick

Vivid, telling details that create a kaleidoscopic effect of swarming visual imagery against a baroquely elaborate SF background. One ideal of cyberpunk SF was to create a "crammed prose" full of "eyeball kicks." (Attr. Rudy Rucker)

Frontloading

Piling too much exposition into the beginning of the story, so that it becomes so dense and dry that it is almost impossible to read. (Attr. Connie Willis)

Infodump

Large chunk of indigestible expository matter intended to explain the background situation. Info-dumps can be covert, as in fake newspaper or "Encyclopedia Galactica" articles, or overt, in which all action stops as the author assumes center stage and lectures. Info-dumps are also known as "expository lumps." The use of brief, deft, inoffensive info-dumps is known as "kuttnering," after Henry Kuttner. When information is worked unobtrusively into the story's basic structure, this is known as "heinleining."

"I've suffered for my Art" (and now it's your turn)

A form of info-dump in which the author inflicts upon the reader hard-won, but irrelevant bits of data acquired while researching the story. As Algis Budrys once pointed out, homework exists to make the difficult look easy.

Nowhere Nowhen Story

Putting too little exposition into the story's beginning, so that the story, while physically readable, seems to take place in a vacuum and fails to engage any readerly interest. (Attr. L. Sprague de Camp)

Ontological riff

Passage in an SF story which suggests that our deepest and most basic convictions about the nature of reality, space-time, or consciousness have been violated, technologically transformed, or at least rendered thoroughly dubious. The works of H. P. Lovecraft, Barrington Bayley, and Philip K Dick abound in "ontological riffs."

Space Western

The most pernicious suite of "Used Furniture". The grizzled space captain swaggering into the spacer bar and slugging down a Jovian brandy, then laying down a few credits for a space hooker to give him a Galactic Rim Job.

Stapeldon

Name assigned to the voice which takes center stage to lecture. Actually a common noun, as: "You have a Stapledon come on to answer this problem instead of showing the characters resolve it."

Used Furniture

Use of a background out of Central Casting. Rather than invent a background and have to explain it, or risk re-inventing the wheel, let's just steal one. We'll set it in the Star Trek Universe, only we'll call it the Empire instead of the Federation.

Part Six: Character and Viewpoint

Funny-hat characterization

A character distinguished by a single identifying tag, such as odd headgear, a limp, a lisp, a parrot on his shoulder, etc.

Mrs. Brown

The small, downtrodden, eminently common, everyday little person who nevertheless encapsulates something vital and important about the human condition. "Mrs. Brown" is a rare personage in the SF genre, being generally overshadowed by swaggering submyth types made of the finest gold-plated cardboard.

In a famous essay, "Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown," Ursula K. Le Guin decried Mrs. Brown's absence from the SF field. (Attr: Virginia Woolf)

Submyth
Classic character-types in SF which aspire to the condition of archetype but don't quite make it, such as the mad scientist, the crazed supercomputer, the emotionless super-rational alien, the vindictive mutant child, etc. (Attr. Ursula K. Le Guin)

Viewpoint glitch
The author loses track of point-of-view, switches point-of-view for no good reason, or relates something that the viewpoint character could not possibly know.

Part Seven: Miscellaneous

AM/FM
Engineer's term distinguishing the inevitable clunky real-world faultiness of "Actual Machines" from the power-fantasy techno-dreams of "Fucking Magic."

Consensus Reality
Useful term for the purported world in which the majority of modern sane people generally agree that they live — as opposed to the worlds of, say, Forteans, semioticians or quantum physicists.

Intellectual sexiness
The intoxicating glamor of a novel scientific idea, as distinguished from any actual intellectual merit that it may someday prove to possess.

The Ol' Baloney Factory
"Science Fiction" as a publishing and promotional entity in the world of commerce.