



*Chuck
Wendig*

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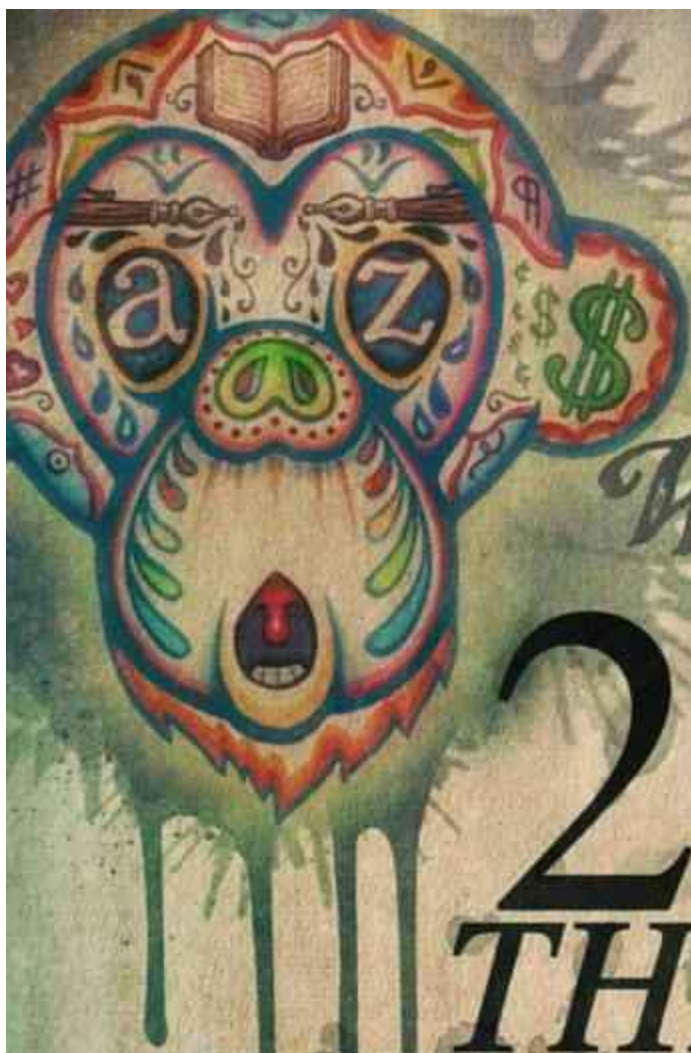
THINGS

YOU SHOULD

KNOW

ABOUT

WRITING



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PRAISE FOR CONFESSIONS OF A FREELANCE PENMONKEY AND CHUCK WENDIG'S WRITING ADVICE

"Chuck Wendig has done what so many authors desperately need and will never admit: offered a phenomenal book about the *real* world of writing, and made it reachable and readable by anyone. His **terribleminds** blog guided me through good days and bad, provided advice and much-appreciated laughter throughout the whole, often painful, process. I'm thrilled to have his brain trapped in *Confessions of a Freelance Penmonkey*, and I'll be referring to the squishy gray-matter of his brilliance often.

If it weren't for Chuck Wendig's advice, I'd have fallen off the writing map long ago. This is the book you want stapled to your chest when you march into the battle of authorship! An absolute must-read for anyone even thinking of dabbling with words for a living."

-- Karina Cooper, Author of **Blood of the Wicked**

"Chuck Wendig's *Confessions of a Freelance Penmonkey* is full of the kind of writing advice I wish I'd gotten in school. Practical, brutally honest, and done with the kind of humor that will make it stick in your brain. Whether you're a veteran writer or new to the craft, you'll find something useful in here.

Plus he says 'fuck' a lot, so, you know, there's that."

-- Stephen Blackmoore, author of **City of the Lost**

"In *Confessions of a Freelance Penmonkey*, Chuck Wendig hammers out writing and career advice that's always brave,

profane, creative, clever, and honest. And don't forget hilarious. You'll never laugh so hard learning so much."

-- Matt Forbeck, game designer and author of **Vegas Knights**

"These days, a kind word is regarded with suspicion. A supportive gesture is mistrusted. An altruistic move never is. We live in a time where cynics ignore the saccharine of Chicken Soup books and accept hugs only from Mother, and only when we're drunk and crying. When a writer hits cynical, drunken, mother-hugging rock bottom, that's when they need Chuck Wendig's raw, no-holds barred advice. This is not for the faint of heart. But then again, neither is writing."

-- Mur Lafferty, host of **ISBW (I Should Be Writing)** podcast, editor of **Escape Pod**, author of **Playing For Keeps**

"Despite being irreverent, vulgar, and funny, Chuck Wendig is also surprisingly profound. From one wordslinger about another, Chuck is the real deal and every prospective or working writer should read *Confessions of a Freelance Penmonkey*. Hell, the 'Writer's Prayer' alone is worth the price of admission."

-- Jennifer Brozek, Author of **The Little Finance Book That Could**

"No seriously, he's not fucking around, you really don't want to be a writer. But if you're mad enough to decide that you do, Wendig will be your gonzo-esque guide, from the technical advice about structure, query letters and submissions, to dealing with agents and editors and how to make your characters do as they're damn well told, he's just full of good advice. Like a cursing, booze-soaked Virgil to your Dante, let him show you around..."

Buy this book, your editor will thank you.”

-- Jenni Hill, Editor, **Solaris Books**

“About the only thing harder than being a writer is trying to capture the utter insanity that truly is the writer’s life. In *Confessions of a Freelance Penmonkey*, Chuck Wendig does just that. You’ll be laughing, crying, shouting and grimacing, but most of all, you’ll feel the deep resonance of hearing the truth in all of its sarcastic, profane and comedic glory. If you want to be a better writer, or just want to be inspired by one of the best takes on writing I’ve ever read, do yourself a favor and buy *Confessions*.”

-- Daniel Ames, author of **Feasting at the Table of the Damned**

250 Things To Know About Writing

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OTHER BOOKS BY CHUCK WENDIG

[Irregular Creatures: Nine Short Stories](#)

[Confessions Of A Freelance Penmonkey \(Writing Advice With Profanity\)](#)

[Double Dead](#) (Abaddon, November 2011)

Blackbirds (Angry Robot, May 2012)

Mockingbirds (Angry Robot, 2012/2013)

INTRODUCTION

Let's just get this right out of the way -

This book has 275 things to "know" about writing. Not 250.

I know. *I know*. Believe it or not, I can count. Even though I am not a registered *mathologist*, or even a certified *addition accounting therapist*, I can still add up numbers without the use of my fingers and toes. In fact, I have a lovely abacus over here. His name is "Steve."

It's just, I'm a writer. And as a writer, 250 sounds cleaner than 275. I don't know why that is. That latter 25 seems somehow like a crass little hangnail, doesn't it? It feels like, "Well, pfah, why didn't he just go to 300, then? Lazy dickwipe."

So, you bought this book expecting 250 tips. You're getting 275.

I can't imagine it's going to be another tear-stained pillow night for you over that niggling detail.

All right. Now that we've got *that* ticklish detail out of the way, it's time to address another *purposeful* inaccuracy. (We writers are nothing if not lying liar-faced stinky poo-poo deception machines, after all.)

This book is labeled "things you should know about writing," and features topics that again use that nomenclature - *things you should know*. As if I'm some kind of authority. I mean, I have a little bit. I've got a trio of novels coming out. I had a TV pilot deal and have a film in pre-production. I've been freelancing for a number of years now. So, I'm not completely mule-kicked. But even still - such gall of me to stomp in here and say, *these are the*

most important things ever regarding the topics I have chosen.

It's bullshit, of course. If this were properly named, it would be, "Things I Think About [Insert Topic Here.]" Only problem is, that just doesn't have the proper smell of authority (which, for the record, smells like equal parts *new car* and *chainsaw oil*). It sounds a bit flimsy, doesn't it? "Ehh, here's 250 things that may or may not be true about writing, I mean, okay, *I believe them*, but you certainly don't have to, no worries, no problem, don't hit me, not in the face." Wow. What a title *that* would make.

Far better to be all balls-out and cock-waving and say YOU SHOULD KNOW THIS SHIT OR YOU'LL DIE IN THE WATER AND BE EATEN BY TINY FISH AND CORPSE-RAPED BY AN OCTOPUS.

That gets eyes, after all.

And I want your eyes.

For my collection.

But I'll have those in time. For now, just go forth and read this collection, which is a compiled list of all the many things I believe about writing. Use them. Discard them. Crumple them up and smoke them in a glass bowl so as to inhale their *hallucinogenic vapors*.

If you like the book, please spread the word.

Thanks!

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25 Things You Should Know About... Being A Writer

1. You Are Legion

The Internet is 55% porn, and 45% writers. You are not alone, and that's a thing both good and bad. It's bad because you can never be the glittery little glass pony you want to be. It's bad because the competition out there is as thick as an ungroomed 1970s pubic tangle. It's good because, if you choose to embrace it, you can find a community. A community of people who will share their neuroses and their drink recipes. And their, ahem, "fictional" methods for disposing of bodies.

2. You Better Put The "Fun" In "Fundamentals"

A lot of writers try to skip over the basics and leap fully-formed out of their own head-wombs. Bzzt. Wrongo. Learn your basics. Mix up lose/loose? They're/their/there? Don't know where to plop that comma, or how to use those quotation marks? That's like trying to be a world-class chef but you don't know how to cook a goddamn egg. Writing is a mechanical act first and foremost. It is the process of putting words after other words in a way that doesn't sound or look like inane gibberish.

3. Skill Over Talent

Some writers do what they do and are who they are because they were born with some magical storytelling gland that they can flex like their pubococcygeus, ejaculating brilliant storytelling and powerful linguistic

voodoo with but a twitch of their taint. This is a small minority of all writers, which means you're probably not that. The good news is, even talent dies without skill. You can practice what you do. You practice it by writing, by reading, by living a life worth writing about. You must always be learning, gaining, improving.

4. Nobody Cares About Your Creative Writing Degree

I have been writing professionally for a lucky-despite-the-number 13 years. Not once -- seriously, not once ever -- has anyone ever asked me where I got my writing degree. Or if I even have one. Nobody gives two rats fucking in a filth-caked gym-sock whether or not you have a degree, be it a writing degree or a degree in waste management. The only thing that matters is, "Can you write well?"

5. Speaking Of Luck

Luck matters. It just does. But you can maximize luck. You won't get struck by lightning if you don't wander out into the field covered in tinfoil and old TV antennae.

6. This Is A Slow Process

Nobody becomes a writer overnight. Well, I'm sure somebody did, but that person's head probably went all asplodey from paroxysms of joy, fear, paranoia, guilt and uncertainty. Celebrities can be born overnight. Writers can't. Writers are made -- forged, really, in a kiln of their own madness and insecurities -- over the course of many, many moons. The writer you are when you begin is not the same writer you become.

7. Nobody "Gets In" The Same Way

Your journey to becoming a writer is all your own. You own it for good and bad. Part of it is all that goofy shit that forms the building blocks of your very persona -- mean Daddy, ugly dog, smelly house, pink hair, doting mother, bagger-bitch at the local Scoot-N-Shop. The other part is the industry part, the part where you dig your own tunnel through the earth and detonate it behind you. No two writers will sit down and tell the exact same story of their emergence from the wordmonkey cocoon. You aren't a beautiful and unique snowflake, except when you are.

8. Writing Feels Like -- But Isn't -- Magic

Yours is the power of gods: you say, "let there be light," and Sweet Maggie McGillicutty, *here comes some light*. Writing is the act of creation. Put words on page. Words to sentences, sentences to paragraphs, paragraphs to 7-book epic fantasy cycles with books so heavy you could choke a hippo. But don't give writing too much power, either. A wizard controls his magic; it doesn't control him. Push aside lofty notions and embrace the workmanlike aesthetic. Hammers above magic wands; nails above eye-of-newt. The magic will return when you're done. The magic is in what you did, not in what you're doing.

9. Storytelling Is Serious Business

Treat it with respect and a little bit of reverence. Storytelling is what makes the world go around. Even math is a kind of story (though, let's be honest, a story with too few space donkeys or dragon marines). Don't let writing and

storytelling be some throwaway thing. Don't piss it away. It's really cool stuff. Stories have the power to make people feel. To give a shit. To change their opinions. To change the world.

10. Your Writing Has Whatever Value You Give It

Value is a tricky word. Loaded down with a lot of baggage. It speaks to dollar amounts. It speaks to self-esteem. It speaks to moral and spiritual significance. The value of your wordmonkeying has a chameleonic (not a word, shut up) component: whatever value you give it, that's what value it will have. You give your work away, that's what it's worth. You hate your work, that's what it's worth. Put more plainly: what you do has value, so claim value for what you do. Put even more plainly: don't work for free.

11. You Are Your Own Worst Enemy

It's not the gatekeepers. Not the audience. Not the reviewers. Not your wife, your mother, your baby, your dog. Not your work schedule, your sleep schedule, your rampant masturbation schedule. If you're not succeeding at writing, you've nobody to blame for yourself. You're the one who needs to super-glue her booty to the chair. You're the one who needs to pound away at his keyboard until the words come out. It's like Michael Jackson sang: "I took my baby on a Saturday bang." ... no, wait, that's not it. "I'm talkin' 'bout the man in the mirror." Yeah. Yes. That's the one. [Shamon](#).

12. Your Voice Is Your Own

Write like you write, like you can't *help* but write, and your voice will become yours and yours alone. It'll take time but it'll happen as long as you let it. Own your voice, for your voice is your own. Once you know where your voice lives, you no longer have to worry so much about being derivative.

13. Cultivate Calluses

Put differently, harden the fuck up, soldier. (And [beard the fuck on](#), while we're at it.) The writing life is a tough one. Edits can be hard to get. Rejections, even worse. Not everybody respects what you do. Hell, a lot of people don't even care. Build up that layer of blubber. Form a mighty exoskeleton. Expect to be pelted in the face with metaphorical (er, hopefully metaphorical) ice-balls. It's a gauntlet. Still gotta walk it, though.

14. Stones Are Polished By Agitation

Even the roughest stone is made smooth by agitation, motion, erosion. Yeah, the writing life can be tough, but it needs to be. Edits are good. Rejections are, too. Write with a partner. Submit yourself to criticism. Creative agitation can serve you well. Embrace it. Look into that dark hole for answers, not fear. Gaze into the narrative vagina, and find the story-baby crowning there. ... okay, too far? Too far. Yeah.

15. Act Like An Asshole, You'll Get Treated Like An Asshole

Agitation is good. Being an agitator, not so much. Be an asshole to agents and editors, editors and agents will treat

you like an asshole. Be an asshole to other writers, they'll bash you over the head with a typewriter, or shiv you with an iPad in the shower. Be an asshole to your audience, they'll do a thing worse than all of that: they'll just ignore you. So, for real, don't be an asshole.

16. Writing Is Never About Just Writing

Writing is the priority. Write the best work you can write. That's true. But it's not all of it, either. Writing is ever an uncountable multitude. We *wish* writing were just about writing. The writer is editor, marketer, blogger, reader, thinker, designer, publisher, public speaker, budget-maker, contract reader, trouble-shooter, coffee-hound, liver-pickler, shame-farmer, god, devil, gibbering protozoa.

17. This Is An Industry Of People

They say it's "who you know," which is true to a point but it doesn't really get to the heart of it. That sounds like everybody's the equivalent to Soylent Green -- just use 'em up for your own hungry purpose. That's not it. You want to make friends. It means to be a part of the community. People aren't step-stools. Connect with people in your respective industry. Do not use and abuse them.

18. The Worst Thing Your Work Can Be Is Boring

You've got all the words in the world at your disposal, and an infinite number of arrangements in which to use them. So don't be boring. Who wants to read work that's as dull as a bar of soap?

19. No, Wait, The Worst Thing Your Work Can Be Is Unclear

Clarity is king. Say what you mean. You're telling a story, be it in a book, a film, a game, an article, a diner table placemat. Don't make the reader stagger woozily through a mire just to grasp what you're saying.

20. Writing Is About Words, Storytelling Is About Life

Everybody tells you that to be a writer, you have to read and write a lot. That's true. But it's not all of it. That'll get you to understand the technical side. It'll help you grasp the way a story is built. But that doesn't put meat on the bones you arrange. For that, you need everything *but* reading and writing. Go live. Travel. Ride a bike. Eat weird food. Experience things. Otherwise, what the fuck are you going to talk about?

21. Everything Can Be Fixed In Post

Stop stressing out. You get the one thing few others get: a constant array of do-overs. Writing is rewriting. You know the saying, "Drink till she's pretty/till he's handsome?" This is like that. Edit till she's pretty. Rewrite until it doesn't suck. You have an endless supply of blowtorches, hacksaws, scalpels, chainsaws, M80s, and orbital lasers to constantly destroy and rebuild. Of course, you can get caught in that cycle, too. You have to know when to stop the fiddling. You have to know when to get off the ride.

22. Quit Quitting

It's all too easy to start something and not finish it. Remember when I said you were legion? It's true, but if you want to be separated from 90% of the other writers (or "writers" depending on how pedantic you choose to be) out there, then just finish the shit that you started. Stop abandoning your children. You wouldn't call yourself a runner if you quit every race you ran halfway through. Finishing is a good start. Stop looking for the escape hatch; pretend your work in progress just plain doesn't have one.

23. No Such Thing As Bad Writing Advice

There's only: advice that works for you, and advice that doesn't. It's like going to **Home Depot** and trying to point out the "bad tools." Rather, some tools work for the job. Most don't. Be confident enough to know when a tool feels right in your hand, and when it might instead put out your eye.

24. Though, Nobody Really Knows Shit About Shit

We're all just squawking into the wind and nobody really has the answers. Except you, and those answers are only *for* you. Everybody else is just guessing. Sometimes they're right. A lot of times they're wrong. That's not to say such pontification isn't valuable. You just gotta know what weight to give it.

25. Hope Will Save You

The hard boot is better than the tickling feather when it comes time to talk about the realities of writing, but at the end of the day, the thing that gets you through it all is hope

and optimism. You have to stay positive. Writers are given over to a kind of moribund gloom. Can't let the penmonkey blues get you down. Be positive. Stay sane. The only way through is with wide-open eyes and a rigor mortis grin. Don't be one of those writers who isn't having any fun. Don't let writing be the albatross around your neck. Misery is too easy to come by, so don't invite it. If writing doesn't make you happy, you maybe shouldn't be a writer. It's a lot of work, but you need to let it be a lot of play, too. Otherwise, what's the fucking point? Right? Go push a broom, sell a car, paint a barn. If you're a writer, then write. And be happy you can do so.

25 Things You Should Know About... Writing A Novel

1. Your First And Most Important Goal Is To Finish The Shit That You Started

Let's get this out of the way right now: if you start a fucking novel, then plan to fucking finish that fucking novel. Your hard drive is not a novel burial ground. It's like building your own Frankenstein monster -- robbing a grave, stealing a brain, chopping up the body -- and then giving up before you let lightning tickle that sonofabitch to life. The true author finishes what he begins. That's what separates you from the dead-beats, from the talkers, from the dilettantes. Don't let dead metaphysical weight slow you down.

2. That Means Momentum Is Key

Say it five times fast: momentum-momentum-momentum-momentum-momentum. Actually, don't say it five times fast. I just tried and burst a blood vessel on the inside of my sinuses. The point remains: writing a novel is about gaining steam, about acceleration, about momentum. You lose it every time you stop to revise a scene in the middle, to look up a word, to ponder or change the plot. It's like a long road-trip: don't stop for hitchhikers, don't stop to piss, don't stop for a Arby's Big Beef and Cheddar. *Just drive.* Leave notes in your draft. Highlight empty spaces. Fill text with XXX and know you'll come back later.

3. The First Draft Is The Beach-Storming Draft

It's you and hundreds of other soldier-penmonkeys clawing their way up the enemy beach of the People's Republic Of Novelsvainya. Most of those other poor sots are going to take a stitching of bullets to the chest and neck and drop dead in the sand, flopping around like a fish, their bowels evacuating. Your only goal is to get up that beach. Crawl through mud, blood, sand, shit, corpses. It doesn't matter if you get up that beach all pretty-like. Or in record time. Nobody cares how your hair looks. Your first draft can and should look like a fucking warzone. That's okay. Don't sweat it, because you survived. Put differently, that first draft of yours has permission to suck. Go forth and care not.

4. Be Like The Dog Who Cloaks Himself In Stink

Find joy and liberation in writing a first draft without caring, without giving one whittled whit. It's like pouring paint on the floor or taking a sledgehammer to some kitchen counters. Get messy. Let it all hang out. Suck wantonly and without regard to others. Let that free you. Have fun. Don't give a rat's roasted rectum. You'll think that all you're doing is upending a garbage can on the page, but later, trust in the fact you'll find pearls secreted away in the heaps of trash and piles of junk.

5. The First Draft Is Born In The Laboratory

Take risks on that first draft. Veer left. Drive the story over a cliff. Try new things. Play with language. Kill an important character. Now's the time to experiment, to go moonbat apeshit all over this story. You'll pull back on it in subsequent drafts. You'll have to clean up your mess: all the beer bottles, bong water, blood and broken glass. But some of it will stay. And the stuff that does will feel priceless.

6. Writing Is Rewriting Is Rewriting Is Rewriting Is

Said before but bears repeating: writing is when you make the words, editing is when you make them *not shitty*. The novel is born on that first go-around but you gotta let that little bastard grow up. Do this through rewriting. And rewriting. And rewriting. As many times as it takes till it stands up and dances on its own.

7. You Have As Many Chances At-Bat As You So Choose --

A Marine sniper doesn't get infinite shots at his target. A batter only gets three strikes. A knife-thrower only has to fuck up once before he's got a body to hide. The novelist has it easy. You can keep rewriting. Adding. Fixing. Changing. Endlessly anon until you're satisfied.

8. -- But You Also Have To Know When To Leave Well Enough Alone

Seriously, you have to stop sometime. You whip mashed potatoes too long they get gluey. Comes a time when you need to stop fucking with a novel the same way you stop tonguing a chipped tooth. The perfect is the enemy of the good. Write till it's good, not till it's perfect. Because you don't know shit about perfect. Aim squarely for a B+, and then it's time to let others have a shot in getting the novel to that A/A+ range.

9. Know When To Bring In The Motherfucking A-Team

You're not Lone Wolf. You are not Ronin-Ninja-Without-Clan. A novel is a team effort. You need readers. One or several editors. Potentially an agent. True story: writers are often the worst judges of their own work. You spend so long in the trenches, it's all a hazy, gauzy blur: a swarm of flies. It's like being on acid. Sometimes you need a trip buddy. Someone to tell you, this is real, this is illusion. "The pink unicorn is just a hallucination. But the dead body in the middle of the floor, dude, that's real, WE GOTTA FUCKING GO."

10. Escape The Gravity Of The Hate Spiral

Every 10,000 words is a new peak or valley on this crazy-ass roller coaster ride. You loved the novel last week. This week you want to punch its teeth down its throat. That's normal. Write through it. The hate spiral will kill you in if you let it. It's one of the reasons we abandon novels. It's also nonsense. Sometimes your best work is your worst, your worst is your best. Everything is ass-end up. Fuck worry. Just write.

11. QFT

The other day on Twitter, the author J. Robert King said something that rang true: "No balanced person writes a novel." You sit down at the desk, shackle your mind to the project, wade into an imaginary swamp with made-up people. For days. Weeks. Sometimes even years. That's fucking batty.

12. Gotta Abandon Your Baby? Butcher Him For Spare Parts

Don't abandon your novel. Don't do it. Don't make me kick you in the nuts. There. I did it. I kicked your nuts. Taste that? In your mouth? Them's your nuts. Still. Sometimes it's going to happen. Hopefully not often, but it does: a novel just isn't working. Fine. *Fine*. But don't let it go without a fight. Chop it apart. Break it into its constituent parts. You put work into that. Take what works and apply it elsewhere. Build another robot using parts you stole from yourself. Eat your body to sustain your body.

13. You Can Write A Novel Pretty Fucking Fast

It's hard but not impossible to write, say, 5,000 words a day. A novel is roughly 80k. At 5k/day, you can finish a novel in about 16 days. Just know that it won't be good. Not yet. Can't write *and rewrite* that fast.

14. For Fuck's Sake, Say Something

A reader is going to spend those 80,000 words with you. Hours of his life, given to you. Make them count. Say something about anything. Have your novel *mean* something to you so it can mean something to them. Bring your guts and brains and passion and heart and for the sake of sweet Sid and Marty Krofft, a *message* to the table. Don't just write. Write *about* something. Do more than entertain. You're not a dancing monkey. You're a storyteller, motherfucker. Embrace that responsibility.

15. The Shape Of The Page Matters

A novel page shouldn't look like a giant wall of text. Nor should it look like an e.e. cummings poem. The shape of the

page matters. Balance. Equal parts emptiness and text. Void meets substance.

16. A Novel By The Numbers

The ideal novel is 48% action, 48% dialogue, and 4% exposition and description. I just made that up. Probably totally inaccurate. *Possibly* I might could maybe sorta be drunk right now. Drunk on words, or on [Tito's Vodka](#)? *You decide*. Point is, a novel gets bogged by boggy bullshit like heavy description and blathering exposition. A novel is best when it lives in the moment, when its primary mode of communication is *action* and *dialogue* linking arms and dancing all over the reader's face.

17. I Just Lied To You Back There, And For That, I'm Sorry

Dialogue *is* action. It's not separate from it. It *is* it. Action is doing something. Dialogue is talking, and talking is doing something. Even better when dialogue manifests while characters do shit: drive a car, execute some baddies, make an omelet, build a sinister dancing robot whose mad mechanical choromania will reduce the world to cinders. Characters don't just stand in one place in space and talk. They're not puppets in community theater. Find language with movement and motion.

18. Description Is About Signal To Noise

Description is best when subtle. Too much description is static. Paint in short strokes. A pinch of spice here. A delicate garnish there. Description is not a hammer with which to bludgeon the mooing herd. Pick one, two, or three

details and stop there. I've heard this said about large breasts and we'll reiterate it here for description: anything more than a mouthful is a waste.

19. The Reader Is Your Mule

Up to you whether the reader is a mule carrying your prospector gear up a canyon path or a mule carrying doody-balloons of hard drugs in his butt-pocket; the point remains the same. The reader wants to work. The reader doesn't know this, of course, so don't tell him. SHHH. But the reader wants to fill in the details. He wants to be invested in the novel and to make his own decisions and reach his own conclusions. You don't need to write everything. You can leave pieces (of plot, description, dialogue) out. The reader will get in the game. His imagination matters as much as yours. Make that fucker dance for his dinner.

20. Too Many Dicks On The Dance Floor

A novel can have too many characters. It's not a set number or anything. The number of characters you can have is limited by your ability to make them fully-realized, wholly-inhabited people. If you don't have the time or the room to give them a soul, to lend them wants and needs and fears and foibles, then fuck it, chop their heads off and wipe their blood from the page.

21. Genre Matters, Except When It Doesn't

A good story is a good story, and that translates to novels: a good book is a good book. You write the novel you gotta write regardless of genre. But eventually you have to think about it. Agents, publishers, bookstores, Amazon --

they care about genre. Your book has to fit somewhere. The secret is, it doesn't have to be a perfect fit. Close enough for horseshoes, hand grenades and hobo handjobs. Maybe not that last one.

22. Beware The Saggy Mushy Middle

The beginning's easy because it's like -- BOOM, some shit just happened. The ending's easy because -- POW, all the shit that happened just lead to this. The middle is where it gets all gooshy, like wet bread or a sloppy pile of viscera. Combat this in a few ways. First, new beginnings and early endings -- the peaks and valleys of narrative. Second, keep the pressure on the story and, by proxy, yourself. Third, treat the second act like it's two or three acts in and of itsownself.

23. Like I Said: Imagine A Long-Ass Road Trip

Variation. In scene. In character. In mood. In setting. In *everything*. A novel can't just be one thing. Mix it up. It's like a long car ride. Take an eight-hour trip down a bland mega-highway and you pretty much want to suck on the tailpipe. Take an eight-hour trip through scenic mountains and pretty burgs and ghost towns, you no longer want to eat gravel and die. Put differently: *don't be boring*. If the story buys a house and gets a job in Dullsville, you need to burn Dullsville to the ground and push the story down the road a ways.

24. No One Way Through The Labyrinthine Mire

Plotter. Pantser. Five-k a day. Two-k a day. In sequence or out. Nobody writes a novel the same way, all the way down

to [which font folks like](#). Individual novels have their own unique demands. You write it however it needs to be written. Nobody can tell you how. Only that it needs to get done. We each cut our own way through the dark forest. In the deepest shadows, look for your voice. Your voice is what will get you through.

25. Writing A Novel Is Easy, But Writing A Publishable Novel Is Hard

Writing a novel isn't hard. You throw words on a page, one atop another, until you've got a teetering Jenga tower of around 80,000 of the damn things. Same way that building a chair isn't hard: I can duct tape a bunch of beer cans and chopsticks together and make a chair. It won't look pretty. And it's an insurance liability. ("I'm suing you because I smell like beer, I have cuts on my legs and I've got two chopsticks up my ass, perforating my colonic wall.") But writing a good novel, an *original* novel that's all your own and nobody else's, well, there's the rub, innit? The way you do it is you tell the story like you want to tell it. You learn to write well and write clearly and put a pint of blood on every page until you've got nothing left but spit and eye boogers. Learn your craft. Learn your voice. Write it until it's done, then write it again.

25 Things You Should Know About... Storytelling

1. Stories Have Power

Outside the air we breathe and the blood in our bodies, the one thing that connects us modern humans today with the shamans and emperors and serfs and alien astronauts of our past is a heritage -- a *lineage* -- of stories. Stories move the world at the same time they explain our place in it. They help us understand ourselves and those near to us. Never treat a story as a shallow, wan little thing. A good story is as powerful as the bullet fired from an assassin's gun.

2. Effect Above Entertainment

We love to be entertained. Bread and circuses! Clowns and monkeys! Decapitations and ice cream! A good story entertains but a great story knows that it has in its arsenal the ability to do so much more. The best stories make us feel something. They fuck with our emotions. They make us give a flying fuck about characters and places and concepts that don't exist and won't *ever* exist. The way a story stabs us with sadness, harangues us with happiness, runs us through the gauntlet of rage and jealousy and denial and underoo-shellacking lust and fear (together, lust and fear may stir a "scaredy-boner") is parallel to none. Anybody can entertain. A juggler entertains. A storyteller makes us feel something. Makes us give a shit when we have no good reason to do so. *Fun* is not the last stop on the story train. The storyteller is master manipulator. The storyteller is cackling puppetmaster.

3. A Good Story Is A Good Story Regardless Of Genre Or Form

Segmentation. Checking off little boxes. Putting stories in the appropriate *story slots* and *narrative cubby-holes*. Is it a sci-fi TV show? A fantasy novel? A superhero comic? A video game about duck hunting? An ARG about the unicorn sex trade? We like to think that the walls we throw up matter. But they're practically insubstantial, and once you get them in your mouth they're like cotton candy, melting away to a meaningless slurry. Good story is good story. Those who cleave to genre and form -- whether as teller or as audience -- limit the truth and joy the tale can present. Cast wide and find great stories everywhere.

4. That's Not To Say Form Doesn't Matter

Story is also not a square peg jammed in a circle hole. Every tale has an organic fit. The medium matters in that it lets you operate within known walls and described boundaries.

5. Stories Have Shape, Even When They Don't Mean To

You put your hand in a whirling clod of wet clay, you're shaping it. Even when you don't mean to. Sometimes you find a shape the way a blind man studies a face. Other times you know the shape at the outset and move your hands to mold the tale you choose to tell. Neither way is better than the other. But the story never doesn't have a shape. A story always has structure, even when you resist such taxonomy.

6. The Story Is A Map; Plot Is The Route You Choose

A story is so much more than the thing you think it is. I lay down a map, that map has a host of possibilities. Sights unseen. Unexpected turns. The plot is just the course I... well, plot upon that map. It's a sequence. Of events. Of turns. Of landmarks. The story goes beyond mere sequence. The story is about what I'll experience. About who I'll meet. The story is the world, the characters, the feel, the time, the context. Trouble lies in conflating *plot* with *story*. (Even though I've done it here already. See how easy it is to do?)

7. On The Subject Of Originality

The storyteller will find no original plots. But original stories are limitless. It's like LEGO blocks. Go buy a box of LEGO bricks and you'll discover that you have no unique pieces -- by which I mean, these are the same pieces that everybody gets. But how you arrange them is where it gets interesting. That's where it's all fingerprints and snowflakes and unicorn scat. Plot is just a building block. Story is that which you build.

8. The Bridge Between Author And Audience

The audience wants to feel connected to the story. They want to see themselves inside it. Whether as mirror image or as doppelganger (or as sinister mustachio'ed Bizarroworld villain!). The story draws a line between the storyteller and the audience -- you're letting them see into you and they're unknowingly finding *you* inside *them*. Uhh, not sexually, of course. You little dirty birdies, you.

9. But Also, Fuck The Audience Right In Its Ear

The audience isn't stupid. It just doesn't know what it wants. Oh, it *thinks* it knows. The desires of the audience are ever at war with the story's needs, and the story's needs are, in a curious conundrum, the audience's needs. You read that right: this means it's the audience versus the audience, with the storyteller as grim-faced officiant. In this struggle, fiction is born. The conflict of audience versus writer and audience versus itself is the *most fundamental* conflict of them all. The audience wants the protagonist to be happy, to be well. They want things to work out. They want conflict to resolve. The story cannot have these things and still be a good story. Good story thrives on protagonists in pain. On things failing to go the way everyone hopes. On what is born from conflict and struggle, not merely from the resolution. The audience wants a safety blanket. It's the storyteller's job to take that safety blanket and choke them with it until they experience a profound narrative orgasm. ... did I just compare storytelling to erotic asphyxiation? I did, didn't I? Eeesh. Let's just pretend I said something else and move on.

10. No Tale Survives A Vacuum Of Conflict

Conflict is the food that feeds the reader. It's a spicy hell-broth that nourishes. A story without conflict is a story without story. As the saying goes, *there's no 'there' there*. The storyteller has truly profound powers, though: he can create conflict in the audience by making them feel a battle of emotions, by driving them forward with mystery, by angering them. The storyteller operates best when he's a little bit of a dick.

11. The Battle Between Tension and Release

Tension is how you ramp to conflict, how you play with it, how you maneuver around it, how you tap-dance up to the cliff's edge, do a perilous pirouette, and pull back from the precipice. You're constantly tightening the screws. Escalation of tension is how a story builds. From bad to worse. From *worse* to *it can't get any worse*. From *it can't get any worse* to, *no, no, we were wrong, it's still getting worse because now I'm being stampeded by horses that are also covered in burning napalm*. But it isn't just a straight line from bad to awful. It rises to a new plateau, then falls. Having just witnessed it, birth is a great (if gooey) analog. Each contraction has its own tension and release, but the contractions also establish a steady pattern upward. Some have said narrative arcs are sexual, ejaculatory, climactic. True, in some ways. But birth has more pain. More blood. More mad euphoria. And stories always need those things.

12. Peaks, Valleys, Slashes And Whorls

It's not just tension. All parts of a story are subject to ups and downs. Rhythm and pacing are meaningful. A good story is never a straight line. The narrative is best when organically erratic. One might suggest that a story's narrative rhythm is its fingerprint: unique to it alone.

13. In A Story, Tell Only The Story

The story you tell should be the story you tell. Don't wander far afield. That's not to say you cannot digress. Digressions are their own kind of peak (or, in many cases, valley). But those digressions serve the whole. Think of stories then not as one line but rather, a skein of many

lines. Lines that come together to form a pattern, a blanket, a shirt, a hilarious novelty welcome mat. Only lines that serve the end are woven into play. Digressions, yes. Deviations, no.

14. Big Ideas Do Well In Small Spaces

The audience cannot relate to big ideas. A big idea is, well, too big. Like the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man. Or Unicron, the giant Transformer-that-is-also-a-planet. (I wonder if anyone ever calls him "Unicorn," and if so, does that irritate him?) You must go macro to micro. Big ideas are shown through small stories: a single character's experience through the story is so much better than the 30,000-foot-view.

15. Backstory Is A Frozen Lake Whose Ice Is Wafer Thin

Backstory in narrative -- and, ultimately, exposition in general -- is sometimes a grim necessity, but it is best to approach it like a lake of thin ice. Quick delicate steps across to get to the other side. Linger too long or grow heavy in the telling and the ice will crack and you will plunge into the frigid depths. And then you get hypothermia. And then you will be eaten by an Ice Hag. True story.

16. Characters Are The Vehicle That Carry Us Into (And Through) The Tale

The best stories are the stories of people, and that means it's people -- characters -- that get us through the story. They are the dune buggies and Wave Runners on

which the audience rides. Like Yoda on Luke's back. Above all else, a story must have interesting characters, characters who the audience can see themselves in, even if only in a small way. Failing that, what's the point?

17. Villains Have Mothers

Unless we're talking about SkyNet, villains were children once upon a time. Which means they have mothers. Imagine that: even the meanest characters have mothers, mothers who may even have loved them once. They're people, not mustache-twirling sociopaths born free from a vagina made of fiery evil. Nobody sees themselves as a villain. We're all solipsistic. We're all the heroes of our own tales. Even villains.

18. Heroes Have Broken Toys

Just as villains see themselves doing good, heroes are capable of doing or being bad. Complexity of character -- *believable* complexity -- is a feature, not a bug. Nothing should be so simple as unswerving heroism, nor should it be as cut-and-dry as straight-up-malefic motherfuckery. Black and white grows weary. More interesting is how dark the character's many shades of gray may become before brightening.

19. Strip Skin Off Bones To See How It Works

A story can be cut to a thin slice of steak and still be juicy as anything. To learn how to tell stories, tell small stories as well as large ones. Find a way to tell a story in as few beats as possible. Look for its constituent parts. Put them

together, take them apart. See how it plays and lays. Some limbs are vestigial.

20. Beginnings Are For Assholes...

The audience begins where you tell them. They don't need to begin at the beginning. If I tell the story of a Brooklynite, I don't need to speak of his birth, or the origins of Brooklyn, or how the Big Bang barfed up asteroids and dinosaurs and a flock of incestuous gods. You start where it matters. You start where it's most interesting. You begin as late in the tale as you can. The party guest who comes late is always the most interesting one. Even still, it's worth noting...

21. ...If You Jump Too Fast Into Waters Too Deep And The Audience Drowns

Jump too swiftly into a narrative and the story grows muddled. We have to become invested first. Go all high-karate-action and we have no context for the characters who are in danger, and no context means we don't care, and if we don't care then we're already packing our bags in the first five minutes or five pages. The audience always needs something very early to get their hands around. This always comes back to the character. Give them reason to care right at the gate. Otherwise, why would they walk through it?

22. Treat Place Like Character

For setting to matter, it must come alive. It must be made to get up and dance, so shoot at its feet. It has a face.

It has a personality. It has *life*. When setting becomes character, the audience will care.

23. Always Ask, Why Do I Want To Tell This?

Storytellers tell specific stories for a reason. You want to scare the kids around a campfire. You want to impress your friends with your exploits. You want to get in somebody's pants. You hope to make someone cry, or make them cheer, or convey to them a message. Know why you're telling it. Know what it's about -- to you above all else, because then you can show everybody else what it's about. Find that invisible tether that ties you to the story. That tether matters.

24. It's Okay To Bury The Lede

Every story is about something. Man's inhumanity to man. How history repeats itself. How karate-ghosts are awesome and how you don't fuck with a karate-ghost. But you don't need to slap the audience about the head and neck with it. The truth of the story lives between the lines. This is why Jesus invented "subtext."

25. Writing Is A Craft, But Storytelling Is An Art

Writing isn't magic. Writing is math. It's placing letters and words and sentences after one another to form a grand equation. Writing is the *abracadabra* -- the power word made manifest -- but the story that results is the magic. That equation we piece together tells a tale and the arrangement that leads to that tale is where the true art lies, because it takes an ice scraper to pretense and throws

an invisible-yet-present tow line from present to past.
Writing is craft and mechanics. Storytelling is art and magic.

25 Things You Should Know About... Character

1. The Character As Fulcrum: All Things Rest Upon Him

Without character, you have nothing. Great plot? Robust storyworld? Potent themes? *Elegant font*? Matters little if your character is a dud. The punch might be delicious, but not if someone threw up in it. The character is why we come to the table. The character is our way through all those other things. We engage with stories because we relate to them: they are mirrors. Characters are the mirror-side version of "us" staring back. Twisted, warped, uncertain -- but still us through and through.

2. The Cure For All That Which Ails The Audience

A great character can be the line between narrative life and story death. She's a powerful Band-Aid, a strong swaddling of gauze to staunch the bleeding. Think of the character like duct tape: she can piece the whole thing back together. I will forgive your sins of a so-so plot, of muddy themes, of a *meh-ehhh-ehh* storyworld if you're letting me live for a while with a great character. But don't think character will close truly grievous injuries. A sucking chest wound -- meaning, poor writing, asinine plot or perhaps a duller-than-two-dead-goats storyworld -- will only swallow your great character into its gory depths.

3. And Yet The Character Must Be Connected

Don't believe that all those other aspects are separate from the character. The character is -- or should be -- bound inextricably to those other elements. The character is your vehicle through the plot. The character carries the story. Theme, mood, description: focus them through the prism of character, not vice versa. The character is the DNA in every goddamn cell of your story.

4. You Are The Dealer; The Character Is The Drug

The audience will do anything to spend time with a great character. We're junkies for it. We'll gnaw our own arms off to hang out once more with a killer character. It's why sequels and series are so popular: because we want to see where the character's going. You give us a great character, our only desire becomes to lick him like he's a hallucinogenic toad and take the crazy trip-ass ride wherever he has to go.

5. Tell Us What She Wants

It is critical to know what a character wants from the start. *She* may not know what she wants, but the audience must have that information. Maybe she wants: her enemies destroyed, freedom from oppression, her child returned to her, true love, the perfect falafel, a pet monkey, the ultimate wedding, a secret subterranean base on the motherfucking moon. She can want a number of things, and it's of the *uttermost* importance that we know what it is. How else will we know how far she's come? How else can we see the stakes that are on the table? How else will you frustrate the piss out of the audience by standing in her way?

6. Not About Likability But Rather, Livability

It doesn't matter if we "like" your character, or in the parlance of junior high whether we even "*like-like*" your character. It only matters that we want to live with him. We must see something that makes us want to keep on keeping on, following the character into the jaws of Hell and out through the Devil's lava-encrusted keister. For the record, the "Lava Keister" sounds like either a roller coaster or a **Starbucks** drink.

7. The Give-A-Fuck Factor

It is critical to smack the audience in the crotch region with an undeniable reason to *give a fuck*. Ask this up front as you're crafting the story: *why will the audience care about this character?* You have unlimited answers to this. Look to the narratives all around us to find reasons to care. Anything can fly. We love underdog stories. We love tales of redemption (and takes of failed redemption). We love bad boys, good girls, bad girls, good boys, we want to see characters punished, exalted, triumphant, rewarded, destroyed, stymied, puzzled, wounded. We gawk at car crashes. We swoon at love.

8. Rub Up Against Remarkability

You must prove this thesis: "This character is worth the audience's time." The character must deserve her own story -- or, at least, her own part within it. You prove this thesis by making the character in some way remarkable. This is why you see a lot of stories about doctors, detectives, lawyers, cowboys, bounty hunters, wizards, space rangers, superheroes... but you don't see quite so many about copier

repairmen, pharmaceutical assistants, piano tuners, or ophthalmologists. The former group is remarkable in part by their roles. The latter group can be just as remarkable, however, provided you discover their noteworthiness and put it on the page or the screen. What makes one remarkable can be a secret past, a current attitude, a future triumph. It can be internal or external. Infinite options. Choose one.

9. Act Upon The World Rather Than Have The World Act Upon Him

Don't let the character be a dingleberry stuck to the ass of a toad as he floats downriver on a bumpy log. We grow weary of characters who *do nothing* except react to whatever the world flings at their heads. That's not to say that characters shouldn't be forced to deal with unexpected challenges and left-field conflicts -- but that doesn't prevent a character from being proactive, either. Passivity fails to be interesting for long. This is why crime fiction has power: the very nature of a crime is about *doing*. You don't passively rob a bank, kill your lover, or run a street gang. Simply put: *characters do shit*.

10. Bad Decisions Are A Good Decision

Nobody ever said an active character had to be a *smart* character. A character can and perhaps should be *badly* proactive, making all the wrong moves and affecting the world with his piss-poor decisions. At some point a character needs to take control, even if it means taking control in the worst possible way. In fact...

11. This Is Why Jesus Invented Suspense

Tension is created when characters you love make bad decisions. They lie, cheat, steal. They break laws or shatter taboos. They go into the haunted house. They don't run from the serial killer. They betray a friend. Sleep with an enemy. Eat a forbidden fruit. Jack off in a mad scientist's gizmotron thus accidentally creating an army of evil baby Hitlers. Tension is when the character sets free his chickens and we know full well that those chickens will come to roost. But the chickens will come home changed. They will have knives. Prison tats. And evil wizard powers. Don't let tension wriggle free, soft and pliable, from external events. Let the character create the circumstances of suspense.

12. How You Succeed Is By Not Having Them Succeed

You as storyteller are a malevolent presence blocking the character's bliss. You must be a *total asshole*. Imagine that the character is an ant over here, and over *there* is a nugget of food, a dollop of honey, and all the ant wants is to trot his little ant-y ass over to the food so that he may dine upon it. Think of the *infinite ways* you can stop him from getting to that food. Flick him into the grass. Block his path with twigs, rocks, a line of dish soap, a squeeze of lighter fluid set aflame. Be the wolf to his little piggy and huff and puff and blow his house down. Pick him up, put him in the cup-holder in your car, and drive him 100 miles in the opposite direction while taunting him with insults. The audience will hate you. But they'll keep on hungering for more. *Will the ant get to the food? Won't he? Will he find his friends again? Can he overcome?* Primal, simple, declarative problem. You are the villain. The character is the hero. The audience thirsts for this most fundamental conflict of *storyteller versus character*.

13. The Code

Just as a storyworld is beholden to certain laws, norms, and ways, so too is a character: every character has an internal compass, an invisible set of morals and beliefs that comprise their "code." The audience senses this. They know when a character betrays his own code and violates the program -- it's like a glitch in the Matrix, a disturbance in the dream you've crafted. That's not to say characters can't change. They can, and do. But a heroic fireman doesn't one day save a cat from a tree and the next day decide to cook and eat a baby. Changes in a character must come out of the story, not out of thin air.

14. A B C

The law of threes. Find three beats for your character -- be they physical, social, emotional -- with each beat graphing a change of the character of the course of a story. *Selfish boy* to *exiled teen* to *heroic man*. From *maiden* to *mother* to *crone*. Private, Lieutenant, General. Knows everything, everything in question, knows nothing. Birth, life, death. Beginning, middle, end.

15. Boom Goes The Dynamite

Blake Snyder calls this the "Save The Cat" moment, but it needn't be that shiny and happy. Point being: every character needs a kick-ass moment, a reason why we all think, "Fuck yeah, that's why I'm behind this dude." What moment will you give your character? Why will we pump our fists and hoot for him?

16. Beware The Everyman, Fear The Chosen One

I'm boring. So are you. We don't all make compelling protagonists despite what we feel in our own heads, and so the Everyman threatens to instead become the eye-wateringly-dull-motherfucker-man, flat as a coat of cheap paint. The Chosen One -- arguably the opposite of the Everyman -- has, appropriately, the opposite problem: he's too interesting, a preening peacock of special preciousness. Beware either. Both can work, but know the danger. Find complexity. Seek remarkability.

17. Nobody Sees Themselves As A Supporting Character

Thus, your supporting characters shouldn't act like supporting characters. They have full lives in which they are totally invested and where they are the protagonists. They're not puppets for fiction.

18. The Main MC, DJ Protag

That said, they don't call your "main character" the MC for nothing. Your protagonist at the center of the story should still be the most compelling motherfucker in the room.

19. You Are Not Your Character, Except For When You Are

Your character is not a proxy for you. If you see Mary Sue in the mirror, put your foot through the glass and use *that*

reflection instead. But that old chestnut -- "write what you know" -- applies. You take the things that have happened to you and you bring them to the character. Look for those things in your memory that affected you: fought a bear, won a surfing competition, lost a fist-fight with Dad, eradicated an insectile alien species. Pull out the feelings. Inject them into the face, neck, guts, brain and heart of the character.

20. Fugged Up

Everybody's a little fucked up inside. Some folks more than that. No character is a saint. Find the darkness inside. Draw their imperfections to the surface like a bead of blood. You don't have to give a rat's ass about Joseph Campbell, but he was right when he said we love people for their imperfections. Same holds true for characters. We love them for their problems.

21. A Tornado Beneath A Cool Breeze

A good character is both simple and complex: simplicity on the surface eradicates any barrier to entry, and complexity beneath rewards the reader and gives the character both depth and something to do. Complexity on the surface rings hollow and threatens to be confusing: ease the audience into the character the way you'd get into a clawfoot tub full of steaming hot water -- one toe at a time, baby.

22. On The Subject Of Archetypes

You can begin with an archetype -- or even a stereotype - - because people find comfort there. It creates a sense of intimacy even when none exists. But the archetype should

be like the leg braces worn by Forrest Gump as a kid -- when that kid takes off running, he blasts through the braces and leaves them behind. So too with the "type." They'll help the character stand on his own until it's time to shatter 'em when running. Oh, and for the record, Forrest Gump was a fucking awful movie. In short: worst character ever.

23. Dialogue Over Description, Action Over Ruminati

Don't bludgeon us over the head with description. A line or three about the character is good enough -- and it doesn't need to be purely about their physical looks. It can be about movement and body language. It can be about what people think, about what goes on in her head. But throw out a couple-few lines and get out. Dialogue is where a character is revealed. And action. What a character says and does is the sum of her being. It doesn't need to be more than that: a character says shit, then does shit, then says shit about the shit she just did. In there lurks infinite possibilities -- a confluence of atoms that reveals who she is.

24. Take The Test Drive

Write the character before you write the character. Take her on adventures that don't count. Canon can go suck itself. Fuck canon. Who cares about canon? Here I say, "to Hell with the audience." This isn't for them. This is for you. Joyride the character around some flash fiction, a short script, a blog post, a page of dialogue, a poem, whatever. Test her, try her out. That sounds porny, but what I mean to say is: *cut off her skin, wear it, and dance around the goddamn room.* Which leads me to...

25. Get All Up In Them Guts

Know your character. Every square inch. Empathize, don't sympathize. Understand the character but don't stand with the character. Get in their skin. The closer you get, the better off you are when a story goes sideways. Any rewriting or additional work comes easy when you know which way the character's gonna jump. Know them like you know yourself; when the character does something under your watch, you know it comes justified, with purpose, with meaning, with intimate knowledge that the thing she did is the thing she was always supposed to motherfucking do. Unrelated: I really like the word "motherfucker."

25 Things You Should Know About... Plot

1. What The Fiddly Fuck Is "Plot," Anyway?

A plot is the sequence of narrative events as witnessed by the audience.

2. The Wrong Question

Some folks will ask, incorrectly, "What's the plot?" which, were you to answer them strictly, you would begin to recite for them a litany of events, each separated by a deep breath and the words, "*And then...*" They probably don't want that. What they mean to ask is, "What's the story?" or, "What's this about?" Otherwise you're just telling them what happened, start to finish. In other words: *snore*.

3. A Good Plot Is Like A Skeleton: Critical, Yet Invisible

A plot functions like a skeleton: it is both structural and supportive. Further, it isn't entirely linear. A plot has many moving parts (sub-plots and pivot points) that act as limbs and joints. The best plots are plots we don't see, or rather, that the audience never has to think about. As soon as we think about it, it's like a needle manifests out of thin air and pops the balloon or lances that blister. Remember, we don't walk around with our skeletons on the outside of our body, which is good because, *ew*. What are we, ants? So don't show off your plot. Let the plot remain hidden, invisible.

4. Shit's Gotta Make Sense, Son

The biggest plot crime of them all is a plot that doesn't make a lick of goddamn sense. That's a one way ticket to plot jail. Do not pass GO. Do not collect \$200 dollars. Do not drop the soap. The elegance of a great plot is that, when the events are all strung together, there exists a natural order as if this was the *only way* they could fit together. It's like dominoes tumbling. Your plot is not a chimera: random parts mashed together because you didn't think it through. Test the plot. Show people. Pull the pieces apart and ask, "Is there a better way?" Nonsense plots betray the potency of story.

5. The Quintessential Plot

The simplest motherfucker of a plot is this: things get worse until they get better. A straight-up escalation of conflict. It goes from "Uh-oh, that's bad," to, "Uh-oh, it's getting worse," to "Oh, holy shit, it can't *get* any worse," to, "I think I maybe fixed it, or at least stopped it from being so totally and completely fucked." When in doubt, just know that your next step as a storyteller is to bring the pain, amp the misery, and escalate the conflict. That's what they mean by the advice, "Have a man with a gun walk through the door." You can take that literally, sure, but what it means is: the bad news just got worse.

6. In Life We Avoid Conflict, In Fiction We Seek It

Fiction is driven by characters in conflict, or, put differently, the flame of *fiction* grows brighter through *friction*. A match-tip lights only when struck; so too is the mechanism by which a gun fires a bullet. Impact. Tension. Fear. Danger. Need to know what impels your plot forward?

Look to the theme of Man Versus [fill-in-the-blank]. Man versus his fellow man. Woman versus nature. Man versus himself. Woman versus an angry badger riding a unicorn. Find the essential conflict and look for events that are emblematic to that.

7. Want Versus Fear

Of course, the essence of the essential conflict -- the one below all that Wo/Man versus stuff -- is a character's *wants* versus a character's *fears*. Plot grows from this fecund garden. The character wants life, revenge, children, a pony - - and that which he fears must stand in his way. John McClane must battle terrorists to return to his wife. Indiana Jones must put up with snakes and irritating sidekicks to uncover the artifact. I must put up with walking downstairs to make myself a gin-and-tonic. Everything that stands in a character's way -- the speedbumps, roadblocks, knife-wielding monkeys, ninja clones, tornadoes, and sentient Krispy Kreme donuts sent from the future to destroy man via morbid obesity -- are events in the greater narrative sequence: they are pieces of the plot.

8. Grow The Plot, Don't Build It

A plot grows within the story you're telling. A story is all the important parts swirling together: world, character, theme, mood, and of course, plot. An artificial plot is something you have to wrestle into place, a structure you have to bend and mutilate and duct tape to get it to work -- it is a square peg headbutted into a circle hole, and you're the poor bastard doing all the headbutting.

9. The Tension And Recoil Of Choice And Consequence

An organic plot grows like this: characters make decisions -- sometimes bad decisions, other times decisions whose risks outweigh the rewards, and other times still decisions that are just plain uncertain in their outcome -- and then characters must deal with the consequences of those decisions. A character gives up a baby. Or buys a gun. Or enters the dark forest to slay Lady Gaga. Anytime a character makes a choice, the narrative branches. Events unfold because she chose a path. That's it. That's plot. Choice and consequence tighten together, ratcheting tension, creating suspense. Choice begets event.

10. Plot Is Promise

Plot offers the promise of Chekov and his gun, of Hitchcock and his bomb under the table. An event *here* leads to a choice *there* which spawns another event *over there*. Foreshadowing isn't just a literary technique used sparingly: it lurks in the shadow of every plot turn. Plot promises pay-off. A good plot often betrays this promise and does something different than the audience expects. That's not a bad thing. You don't owe the audience anything but your best story. But a plot can also make hay by doing exactly what you expect: show them the gun and now they want to see it fire.

11. Let Characters Do They Heavy Lifting

Characters will tell you your plot. Even better: let them run and they'll goddamn *give it to you* on a platter. Certainly plot can happen from an external locus of control -- but

you're not charting the extinction of the dinosaurs or the lifecycle of the slow loris. Plot is like Soylent Green: *it's made of people*. Characters say things, do things, and that creates plot. It really can be that simple. Authentic plot comes from internal emotions, not external mechanics.

12. Chart The Shortest Point Between Beginning And End

One way to be shut of the nonsensical, untenable plot is to cut through all the knots. If we are to assume that a plot is motivated by the choices and actions of characters -- and we must assume that, because who else acts as prime mover? -- then we can also assume that characters will take the most direct path through the story as they can. That's not to say it'll be the *smartest* path, but it will be forthright as the character sees it. No character creates for himself a convoluted path. Complex, perhaps. Convoluted? Never. Characters want what they want and that means they will cut as clear a path to that goal as they can. A convoluted, needlessly complex plot is just the storyteller showing off how clever he is. And no audience wants that. Around these parts, we hunt and kill the preening peacocks and wear their tail-feathers as a headdress.

13. On The Subject Of "Plot Holes"

Plot holes -- where logic and good sense and comprehensible sequence fall into a sinking story-pit -- happen for a handful of reasons. One, you weren't paying attention. Two, your plot is too convoluted and its untenable nature cannot sustain itself. Three, you don't know what the fuck is happening, and maybe also, you're drunk. Four, the plot is artificial, not organic, and isn't coming out naturally

from what the characters need and want to do. Five, you offended Plot Jesus by not sacrificing a goat. You can't just fix a plot hole by spackling it over. It's like a busted pipe in a wall. You need to do some demo. Get in there. Rip out more than what's broken. Fill in more than what's missing.

13. If The Characters Have To Plan, So Do You

Many writers don't like to outline. Here's how you know if you should, though: if your characters are required to plan and plot something -- a heist, an attack on a moon bunker, a corporate take-over -- then you're a fool if you think *these imaginary people* have to plan but you don't. This is doubly true of genre material. A murder mystery for example lives and dies by a compelling, sensible plot. So plan the plot, for Chrissakes. This isn't improvisational dance. Take some fucking notes, will you?

14. Set Up Your Tentpoles

A big tent is propped up by tentpoles. So too is your plot. Easy way to plan without getting crazy: find those events in your plot that are critical, that must happen for the whole story to come together. "Mary Meets Gordon. Belial Betrays Satan. An Earthquake Swallows Snooki." Chart these half-dozen events. Know that you must get to them somehow.

15. The Herky Jerky Plot Shuffle Pivot Point Boogie

[You've seen Freytag's Triangle](#). It's fine. But it doesn't tell the whole story. This is the Internet. This is the *future*. We have CGI. We have 3-D. Gaze upon the plot from the top-down. It isn't a linear stomp up a steep mountain. It's a

zig-zagging quad ride through dunes and jungles, over rivers and across gulleys. You're a hawk over the quad-rider's shoulder -- watch it jerk left, pull right, jump a log, squash a frog. More obstacles. Greater danger. Faster and faster. Every turn is a pivot point. A point when the narrative shifts, when the audience goes right and the story feints left.

16. Plot Is The Beat That Sets The Story's Rhythm

Plot comprises beats. Each action, a new beat, a new bullet point in the sequence of events. These establish rhythm. Stories are paced according to the emotions and moods they are presently attempting to evoke. Plot is the drummer. Plot keeps the sizzling beat. Like Enrique "Kiki" Garcia, of Miami Sound Machine.

17. Every Night Needs A Slow Dance

I know I said that plot, at its core, is how everything gets worse and worse and worse until it gets better. Overall, that's true. But you need to pull back from that. Release the tension. Soften the recoil. Not constantly, but periodically. Learn to embrace the false victories, the fun & games, the momentary lapses of danger. If only to mess with the heads of the audience. Which, after all, is your totally awesome job.

18. The Name Of My New Band Is "Beat Sheet Manifesto"

You can move well beyond the tentpoles. You can free-fall from the 30,000 foot view, smash into the earth, and get a

macro-level micro-view of all the ants and the pill-bugs and the sprouts from seeds. What I mean is, you can track every single beat -- every tiny action -- that pops up in your plot. You don't need to do this before you write, but you can and should do it after. You'll see where stuff doesn't make sense. You'll see where plot holes occur. Also: wow. A Meat Beat Manifesto joke?

19. Beats Become Scenes Become Sequences Become Acts

Plot is narrative, and narrative has units of measurement: momentary beats become scenes of a single place, scenes glom together to form whole sequences of action and event, and sequences elbow one another in the giant elevator known as an "act," where the story manifests a single direction before zig-zagging to another (at which point, another act shifts). Think first in acts. Then sequences. Then scenes. And finally, beats. Again, take that 30,000 foot view, but then jump out of the plane and watch the ground come to meet you.

20. Your Sexy Mistress, The Subplot

In real life, don't cheat on your spouse or lover. Not cool, man. *Not cool*. As a writer, you don't cheat on your manuscript, either: while working on one script or novel, don't go porking another one behind the shed. But inside the narrative? The laws change. You *need* to cheat on your primary plot. Have dalliances with sub-plots -- this is a side-story, or the "B-story." Lighter impact. Smaller significance. Highlights supporting characters. But the sub-plot always has the DNA of the larger plot and supports or runs parallel

to the themes present. Better still is when the sub-plot affects, influences or dovetails with the larger plot.

21. Beneath Subplot, A Nougaty Layer Of Micro-Plot

Every little component of your story threatens -- in a good way, like how storms threaten to give way to sun, or how a woman threatens to dress up as your favorite **Farscape** puppet and sex you down to galaxy-town -- to spin off into its own plot. Your tale is unwittingly composed of tiny micro-plots: filaments woven together. A character needs to buy a gun but can't pass the legal check. His dog runs away. He hasn't paid his power bill. Small inciting incidents. Itty-bitty conflicts. They don't overwhelm the story, but they exist just the same, enriching the whole. A big plot is in some ways just a lot of little plots lashed together and moving in a singular direction. Like a herd of stampeding marmots.

22. Exposition Is Sand In The Story's Panties

Look at plot construction advice and you'll see a portion set aside for "exposition." Consider exposition a dirty word. It is a synonym for "info-dump," and an info-dump is when you, the storyteller, squat over the audience's mouth and expel your narrative waste into their open maw. Take the section reserved for exposition and fold it gently into the rest of the work as if you were baking a light and fluffy cake. Let information come out through action. Even better: withhold exposition as long as you can. Tantric storytelling, ladies and germs: deny the audience's expectation ejaculation until you can do so no longer.

23. On The Subject Of The "Plot Twist"

A plot twist is the kid who's too cool for school -- ultimately shallow, without substance, and a total tool. It's a gimmick. Let your story be magic, not a magic trick. Not to say plot twists can't work, but they only work when they function as the only way the story could go from the get-go. Again: organic, not artificial.

24. The Ending Is The Answer To A Very Long Equation

Plot is math, except instead of numbers and variables it's characters, events, themes, and yes, variables. The ending is one such variable. An ending should feel like it's the only answer one can get when he adds up all parts of the plot. This actually isn't true: you can try on any number of endings and you likely have a whole host that can work. But there's *one* ending that works for *you*, and when it works for you, it works for them. And by "them" I don't mean the men in the flower delivery van who are watching your every move. I mean "them" as in, the audience. P.S., don't forget to wear your tinfoil hat because *the flowers are listening*.

25. Plot Is Only Means To An End

Speaking of ends, plot is just a tool. A means to an end. Think of it as a *character- and conflict-delivery-system*. Plot is conveyance. It still needs to work, still needs to come together and make sense -- but plot is rarely the reason someone cares about a story. They care about characters, about the way it makes them feel, about the thing you-as-storyteller are trying to say. Note, though, that the opposite

is true: plot may not make them love a story, but it can damn sure make them hate it.

25 Things You Should Know About... Dialogue

1. Dialogue Is Easy Like Sunday Morning

Our eyes flow over dialogue like butter on the hood of a hot car. This is true when reading fiction. This is true when reading scripts. What does this tell you? It tells you: you should be using a lot of dialogue.

2. Easy Isn't The Same As Uncomplicated

We like to read dialogue is because it's easy, not because it's stupid. Dialogue has a fast flow. We respond to it as humans because, duh, humans make talky-talky. Easy does not translate to uncomplicated or unchallenging. Dialogue isn't, "I like hot dogs," "I think hot dogs are stupid," "I think you're stupid," "I think your Mom's stupid," "I think your Mom's *vagina* is stupid." Dialogue is a carrier for all aspects of the narrative experience. Put differently: it's the spoonful of sugar that makes the medicine go down. I think I'm supposed to add "motherfucker" to that. I'll let you do it. I trust you.

3. Sweet Minimalism

Let's get this out of the way: don't hang a bunch of gaudy ornaments upon your dialogue. In fiction, use the dialogue tags "said" and "asked" 90% of the time. Edge cases you might use "hissed," "called," "stammered," etc. These are strong spices; use minimally. Also, adverbs nuzzled up against dialogue tags are an affront to all things and make Baby Jesus pee out the side of his diaper, and when he does that, *people die*. In scripts, you don't have this problem but

you can still clog the pipes with crap if you overuse stage directions. Oh, heavy dialect and slang? Just more ornamentation that'll break the back of your dialogue.

4. Uh, You Do Know The Rules, Right?

Learn the structure of dialogue. If a screenplay, know the format. Capitalized name, centered above parenthetical stage direction and the line of dialogue. VO, OC, OS, contd:

SCOOTER (VO)

(shouting)

I always said that life was like a box of marmots. You never know which one's gonna nibble off your privates.

In fiction, know when to use a comma, when to use a period, know where the punctuation goes in relation to quotation marks, know that a physical gesture (*nodded*, *f'rex*) is not a dialogue tag.

"Fuck that monkey," John said.

"But," Betty said, "I love that dumb chimp."

John nodded. "I know, Betty. But he's a bad news bonobo, baby. *A bad news bonobo.*"

5. Use It To Set Pace

You want a pig to run faster, you grease him up with Astroglide and stick a NASA rocket booster up his ass. You want your story to read faster, you use dialogue to move it along. Like I said: dialogue reads easy. Dialogue's like a waterslide: a reader gets to it, they zip forth fast, fancy and free. Want to slow things down? Pull away from the

dialogue. Speed things up? More dialogue. Throttle. Brake. Throttle. Brake.

6. Shape Determines Speed

Short, sharp dialogue is a prison shiv: moves fast 'cause it's gotta, because T-Bone only has three seconds in the lunch line with Johnny the Fish to stitch a shank all up in Johnny's kidneys. Longer dialogue moves more slowly. Wanting to create tension? Fast, short dialogue. Want to create mystery? Longer, slightly more ponderous dialogue. Want to bog your audience in word treacle? Let one character take a lecturing info-dump all over their heads.

7. Expository Dialogue Is A Pair Of Cement Shoes

One of dialogue's functions is to convey information within the story (to other characters) and outside the story (to the audience). An info-dump is the clumsiest way to make this happen. Might as well bludgeon your audience with a piece of rebar. And yet, you still gotta convey info. You have ways to pull this off without dropping an expository turd in the word-bowl. Don't let one character lecture; let it be a conversation. Question. Answer. Limit the information learned; pull puzzle pieces out and take them away to create mystery. Let characters be reluctant to give any info, much less dump it over someone's head.

8. Showing Through Telling

And yet, you have to do it. Dialogue is a better way of conveying information than you, the storyteller, just straight up telling the audience. The curious nature of dialogue,

however, is that it would *seem* to rectally violate that most sacred of writing chestnuts -- *show, don't tell*. I don't open my mouth and project fucking holograms. I tell you shit. And yet, the trick with dialogue is to *show through telling*. You reveal things through dialogue without a character saying them. This means it's paramount to avoid...

9. The Wart On The End Of The Nose

"On-the-nose" dialogue is dialogue where a character says exactly what he feels and what he wants for purposes of telling the audience what they need to know. When a villain spoils his own sinister plan, that's *on-the-nose*. When a protagonist says, "I cannot love you, elf-lady, because an elf once touched me in my no-no hole," that's *on-the-nose*. Trust me, we'd live in a better, happier world if real world dialogue was all on-the-nose. On the other side, we'd experience duller, shittier fiction. Characters -- and, frankly, real people -- reveal things *without* saying them.

10. The Words Beneath The Words

Text versus sub-text. On-the-nose dialogue versus dialogue that is deliciously *sub rosa*. Meaning exists beneath what's said. The best real world example of this is the dreaded phrase spoken by men and women the world around: "I'm fine." Said with jaw tight. Said with averted eyes. Said in sharp, clipped tongue. Never before have two words so clearly meant something entirely different: "I'm fine" is code. It's code for, "Yes, something is fucking wrong, but I don't want to talk about it, but actually, I *do* want to talk about it but I want you to already know what's wrong, and what's wrong is that you had sex with my mother in a

New Jersey rest-stop and put it on Youtube *you giant unmerciful cock-waffle.*"

11. Pay No Attention To The Dead Man Behind The Curtain

Put differently: pretend that dialogue is more about hiding than it is about revealing. The things we the audience want to know most -- who killed his wife, why did he rob that bank, did he really have a romantic dalliance with that insane dancing robot -- are the things the character doesn't want to discuss. Dialogue is negotiating that revelation, and it's a revelation that should come as easy as pulling the teeth out of a coked-up Doberman. Meaning, not easy at all.

12. Where Tension, Suspense And Mystery Have A Big Crazy Gang-Bang

The fact that characters lie, cheat, conceal, mislead and betray all in dialogue tells you that dialogue is a critical way of building tension and suspense and conveying mystery. [Characters are always prime movers.](#)

13. Quid Pro Quo, Clarice

Hannibal Lecter susses out the truth through dialogue. (Oh, and he also eats people.) But he's also performing meta-work for the audience by sussing out *character* through dialogue. Clarice Starling is painted in part by Lecter's own strokes. A character's blood, sweat, tears, ball-hair and breast-milk lives inside their dialogue. How they speak and what they say reveals who they are, though only obliquely. After writing a conversation, ask yourself, "What

does this say about the characters? Is this true to who they are?"

14. Let The Character Sign Their Own Work

Each line of dialogue from a character is that character's signature. It contains their voice and personality. One speaks in gruff, clipped phrasing. The other goes on at length. One character is ponderous and poetic, another is meaner than two rattlesnakes fucking in a dirty boot. Don't let a character's voice be defined by dialect, slang, or other trickery. It's not just how they speak. It's also what they say when they do.

15. Dialogue Is A Theme Park

Theme is one of those things you as the author don't really speak out loud -- but sometimes *characters* do. They might orbit the theme. They might challenge it. They might speak it outright. Not often, and never out of nowhere. But it's okay once in awhile to let a character be a momentary avatar of theme. It's doubly okay if that character is played by Morgan Freeman. God, that guy's voice. He could say anything -- "Beans are a musical fruit" -- and I'm like, "There it is! Such gravitas! Such *power*. It's the theme. *It's the theme!*"

16. Dialogue Is Action

We expect that dialogue and action are separate, but they are not. Speak is a verb. So's talk. So's discuss, talk, argue, yell, banter, rant, rave. Verb means action. That means, *duh*, dialogue is action, not separate from it. Further, dialogue works best when treated this way. Don't

stand two characters across from one another and have them talk at each other like it's a ping-pong game. Characters act while speaking. They walk. Kick stones. Clean dishes. Load rifles. Pleasure themselves. Build thermonuclear penile implants. Eat messy sandwiches. This creates a sense of dynamism. Of an authentic world. Adds variety and interest.

17. The Real World Is Not Your Friend

I'm not talking about the MTV reality show, though one supposes there the lesson is the same (*so* not your friend). What I mean is, if you want to ruin good dialogue, the fastest path to that is by mimicking dialogue you hear in the real world. Dialogue in the real world is dull. It's herky-jerky. Lots of um, mmm, hmm, uhhh, like, y'know. If you listen really hard to how people speak to one another, it's amazing anybody communicates anything at all.

18. For The Record, You're Not David Mamet

Yes, yes, I know. David Mamet writes "realistic" dialogue. Everyone interrupts everyone. They say inexplicable shit. They barely manage to communicate. *Subtextapalooza*. It's great. It works. You're also not David Mamet. I mean, unless you are, in which case, thanks for stopping by. Would you sign my copy of **Glengarry Glen Ross**? All that being said...

19. Again: Not A Ping-Pong Match

Characters don't stand nose to nose and take turns speaking. People are selfish. So too are characters. Characters want to talk. They want to be heard. They don't

wait their turn like polite automatons. They can interrupt each other. Finish one another's sentences. Derail conversations. Pursue agendas. Dialogue is a little bit jazz, a little bit hand-to-hand combat. It's a battle of energy, wits, and dominance.

20. Conversation Is Conflict

Dialogue can represent a pure and potent form of conflict. Two or more characters want something, and they're using words to get it. Before you write conversation, ask: what does each participant want? Set a goal. One character wants money. Another wants affirmation to justify her self-righteousness. A third just needs a fucking hug. Find motive. Purpose. Conscious or not. Let the conversation reflect this battle.

21. Authenticity Trumps Reality

"But it really happened," is never an excuse for something to exist in fiction. Weird shit happens all the time in reality. Ever have something happen where you say, "Gosh, that was really convenient?" You put that in your story, the audience is going to kick you in the gut and spit in your cereal. Dialogue suffers from similar pitfalls. Just because you hear it in reality doesn't mean it works in the context of story. Story has its own secret laws. You can make dialogue *sound* real without mimicking reality. One might term this "natural" dialogue; authenticity is about feeling real, not about being real.

22. Sometimes, You Just Gotta Babble That Shit Out

Writing dialogue sometimes means you just let two characters babble for awhile. Small talk, big talk, crazy talk. Let 'em circumvent the real topic. Give them voices. Open the floodgates to your sub-conscious mind. And let the conversation flow. Write big, write messy, write long. Cut later in comfort.

23. Nothing Wrong With Banter

You might write two characters just sitting down and shooting the shit and think, "I'll cut this down later." But don't be so sure. Sometimes characters just need to chat, babble, mouth off. Who they are can be revealed in two people just fucking around, seeing what comes out of their heads. That can work if it's interesting, if it puts the character on the map in terms of the audience's mental picture, and if it eventually focuses up to be something bigger than how it began. Oh, and did I mention it has to be interesting?

24. The Greatest Crime Against Humanity Is Writing Boring Dialogue

Like I said, dialogue is easy to read. Or, it's supposed to be. Anybody who writes dialogue that's dull, that doesn't flow like water and pop like popcorn, needs to be taken out back and shaken like a baby. Find the boring parts. The unnecessary stuff. The junk. Anything that doesn't feel a) necessary and b) interesting. Stick it in a bag and set it on fire. Want to read great dialogue? Sharp, fast, entertaining, witty-as-fuck, with a lot going on? Go watch the TV show **GILMORE GIRLS**. No, I'm not kidding. Stop making that face.

25. Double-Duty Dialoguing

Heh, "duty." Heh, "/og." Shut up. If you take one thing away from these 25 ~~nonsense nuggets~~ gems of wisdom, it's this: let dialogue do the heavy lifting and perform double- or even triple-duty. Dialogue isn't just dialogue. It's a vehicle for character, theme, mood, plot, conflict, mystery, tension, horror. Dialogue does a lot of work in very short space: it's the goddamn Swiss Army knife of storytelling. Or MacGyver. Or Trojan Horse. Or MacGyver hiding in a Trojan Horse carrying a Swiss Army knife. Didn't I tell you to shut up already? Where's Morgan Freeman when you need him? He'll tell you to shut up and *you'll listen*.

Corollary: "Everything Is Dialogue"

Part of why dialogue reads so easy is because it's conversational, and conversation is how we interact with other humans and, in our heads, with the world. We talk to inanimate objects, for fuck's sake. (What, you've never yelled at a stubborn jar of jelly? SHUT UP HAVE TOO.) There's a secret, here, and that is to treat *all* your writing like it's dialogue. Write things conversationally. Like you're talking to the audience. Like you and the audience? *Real BFFs*. You can abuse this, of course, but the point is that in conversation you'll use straightforward, uncomplicated language to convey your point -- no value in being stodgy and academic when you're just talking. So too is it with writing, whether it's description in a screenplay or in fiction, you'll find value in straightforward, uncomplicated, even talky language. Talk with the audience, don't lecture at them. Everything is dialogue. Some of it's just one-sided, is all.

25 Things You Should Know About... Description

1. Description Is A Misleading Term

Consider: if I were to say to you, "describe for me this lamp," you would begin listing off its traits in earnest. "Base made of iron-wood, 60 watt light-bulb, fraying electric cord, lampshade made of human skin," and on and on. But that is not what you do in fiction. I don't want you to describe every detail. I don't seek an accounting of all the brass tacks. First lesson is: don't describe everything. Knowing how to write description is often about know what *not* to describe.

2. Bowling A Spare

Less isn't exactly *more*, here -- less is less, but that's the side on which you should err. Better to make the reader hunger for more detail than be bludgeoned about the head and neck with it. A reader who wants to know more keeps reading. A reader who knows too much will put that book or script down and have a nap as if he just ate a whole plate of carnival food. (Sidenote: I'd shank a dude in the kidneys for a bite of funnel cake.)

3. The Reader Came Here To Work

The reader doesn't realize this, but he wants to get his hands dirty. Or, his brain-hands, at least. I'm paraphrasing the brilliant Rob Donoghue here, but it's like this: when Betty Crocker first starting selling mixes, they were super-easy to make. Packet of powder, add water, bake. But they didn't sell -- in part because they were too easy. It felt like a

cheat. So, Crocker chose to leave out the egg -- meaning, a housewife had to *add* an egg, an extra step. And bam! They sold like a sonofabitch. The lesson is that, your audience wants to work. When they work, they feel invested. Hand them a pick-ax, a pith helmet, and a backpack sprayer filled with sex-lube. Don't give them all parts of the description -- let them fill in details with their imagination. Let them add the egg.

4. Your Bloated Ego Makes For Swollen Description

The author likes to be in control. And you are. But you have to cede some intellectual and imaginary control to the audience. You don't need strict autocracy over description. You only need agency over those details that are critical for the story to be what you want the story to be. Leave everything else to the reader to invent inside their crazy head-caves.

5. Zelazny's Rule Of Three

This reportedly goes back to Roger Zelazny, who said you should stop at three details in description. People aren't going to remember much more than that, anyway. It's a good rule, though I don't think you need to be quite this mathematical about it. Rather, like with most writing advice, the tenet and the *practice* of that tenet are a bit divergent. (After all, does he mean three details about one character? All characters? The room? A lamp? The heating vent? If I'm allowed three details *per item in the room*, then suddenly I'm writing 1,436 details. I think it just means, "keep the details to a minimum, asshole.")

6. Describe What Matters

Describe only what matters to the story. If the reader must know something, then ensure she knows it. I don't give a fuck about your lamp. Or what leaf-rot is on the oak tree outside. Or what the tag on the dog's collar looks like. If you choose to describe these things, it should be because I need to know them. A character is going to brain another with the lamp. The leaf-rot is part of a larger plot point about some sort of botanical *doom-fungus*. The tag on the dog's collar is shaped like a lucky four-leaf clover because his owner is William "Irish Billy" McArdle, an ex-IRA bomber turned merc thug, and the clover is his signature.

7. Speedbumps And Slammed Doors

Over-description slows down the pace of reading -- and, if it's truly too egregious, the reader will slam the door and walk away. (In Internet parlance? *tl;dr* -- "too long, didn't read.") This is true when writing scripts, too -- description separates out action and dialogue, and those two things keep a script's story moving. Heavy description can kill a script like a hammer-blow to the skull.

8. That's Not To Say Fat Is Not An Essential Flavor

That's not to say a reader won't find detail compelling. Fat can be flavorful. Simply describing the antagonist's Dodge Charger as "cherry red" seems like a non-essential detail. But always look for the ways that description can do double-duty. The fact that the muscle car is *cherry red* suggests deeper meaning. We know that red cars are likely to be pulled over. We intuit that red is a color of anger,

blood, fire. The character's choice of color can tell us something about that character. Thus, the detail seems fatty, and it is -- but it's also an *essential* fat. Like what you get from olive oil, or avocados, or the unctuous barnacles scraped from the thighs of Oprah Winfrey.

9. That Goes For The Goddamn Weather, Too

Fuck weather. Too many writers go straight to describing the weather. I think it comes from that old saw, "It was a dark and stormy night," except everyone seems to forget that it comes from a laughably bad book. Describe the weather only if it matters. If a storm has physical effects on the plot, describe it. A miserably cold day might cause a car accident (ice) or lost visibility (blizzard). If the weather matters, tell us. Pro-tip: it usually doesn't matter.

10. Well, Somebody's A Moody Bitch

You can use description to create or enhance mood, sure. That is, I think, why some writers try to describe the weather -- "Oh! It's thundering, and so I'm creating a mood of *impending doom*." Really? You can't do any better? It's thunder or nothing? Here's the thing: you can describe something in a way that is both meaningful to the story *and* conveys mood. Were you interested in stirring up a pervasive mood of *rot and decay*, you could describe the rust on the character's gun, or some skin disorder he's suffering. Those things can affect the plot (the gun eventually jams, the skin disorder worsens). Description there serves both mood *and* story.

11. Time To Take A Test

Walk into a room. Preferably one with which you're not intimately familiar. Look around for 30 seconds. Time that shit. Don't wing it. Then walk out. Wait five minutes. Make some toast. Pour a drink. Pet the dog. Masturbate wantonly. After five minutes, write down those details you believe are *essential* to capturing the "roomness" of that room. Write down as many details as you'd like. By the end, cut it down to three. Then cut it down to one. Just to see. How'd you do? You failed. F+. I'm kidding. I could never fail you. Not as long as you keep sending me checks.

12. Don't Bury The Lede

Stories often rely on critical details that come out through description. A facial tic. A bomb under the table. A mysterious artifact known as the "Astronaut's Anal Beads." But some writers bury critical details in a mushy glop of description. Don't bury the things the audience needs to know. Highlight them. Make them stand out. I don't want to get to page 156 and say, "Whoa whoa whoa, the antagonist only has one hand? Shouldn't I have known that?" and then it turns out that yes, you told me back on page 32, but you told me in the middle of a generally descriptive paragraph. Blah blah blah, red hair, nice shoes, one hand, big belt buckle, fat thumbs, blah blah blah.

13. Here's The Truth: I Might Just Skip That Descriptive Shit You Wrote

My eyes catch onto dialogue like a hangnail on a fuzzy sweater. My eyes slide over big patches of description like a fat guy going down a log flume greased with bacon fat. Description is like sex with someone unpleasant: get in, get the job done, get out. We call that a "combat landing."

14. Break Description Apart With Your Word-Hammer

No, “word-hammer” is not a euphemism for your penis. My penis, yes. Your penis, no. What I’m saying is, shatter descriptive passages like toffee -- break it into pieces. Incorporate it into dialogue and action. Description doesn't need to exist as if time stands still so the protagonist can “take it all in.” He can be running, talking, scheming, hiding -- the details he notices are the details *he has to notice*, and thus, are the details the reader must notice, too.

15. Pricking The Reader's Oculus With This Grim And Gleaming Lancet

Purple prose is the act of gussying up your words so that they sound more poetic. (Of course, that misunderstands poetry as some flowery, haughty thing.) If you dress up your language in such frills and frippery, you stand in the way of your own story. You do nothing but sound haughty, ludicrous, or some combination of the two. And yes, I said “frrippery.” If that's too purple for you, then pretend I said, “If you dress your language up in a bedazzled prom gown and give it a gaudy spray-tan...” Put differently: use the words that live inside your head. And if the words that live inside your head are those of an sentimental Victorian troubadour, then please close your head in a door jamb until you kill all that overwrought prose in an act of brain damage.

16. "The Thing Is Blue, The Dog Is Making Sound"

If you need to take the time to describe something, then aim for specifics. You can't just tell me it was a *dog*. I don't

know what to do with that. Big dog? Little dog? Mutt? Pit bull? Rat terrier? Big-balled bulldog? Just telling me *what the thing is* goes a long way toward helping me place that object, character, or situation into the context of the story you're telling. Was she a leggy blonde? Was he a dumpy child? Description doesn't need to be long or drawn out to matter. It just needs to be specific.

17. Metaphor Is The Tendon Connecting Muscle To Bone

See what I did there? I used *metaphor* to describe metaphor. That's how a writer does things. That's some hard-ass penmonkey trickery, son. What? *What?* You gonna step? You gonna front all up in my face-grill? Ahem. Sorry. Where was I? Right. Metaphor takes a *mundane part of the story* and connects it to the *larger experience of the audience*. It says, "this little thing is like this bigger thing, this *other* thing." Metaphor is less about fact and more about feel.

18. Metaphors Are Always Wrong

They're not wrong to *use*. But like I said, metaphors aren't about fact. They provide inaccurate information, but offer instead keen artistic and figurative data. When I say, "On our sales team, Bob's the last sled dog in the line -- always got a butthole view of the world," nobody really expects that Bob is a dog, or that during a sales conference he's staring down the poop-chute of a snow-covered Malamute. Metaphors have power *because* they're wildly inaccurate, because they take two very unlike things and bring them together in the reader's mind.

19. And Yet Metaphors Must Find Essential Truth

A metaphor has to make some motherfucking sense. "Man, working night-shift is a real can of ear-wax, isn't it?" What? What does that mean? That doesn't mean anything. Maybe *you* mean something, maybe *you* have some keen understanding of night work and... cans... of ear-wax (can you buy ear-wax in cans?), but the reader doesn't grok your lingo. That's why a metaphor bridges a part of the story with the *reader* experience, not with *your* experience as an author. Everybody needs to get the metaphor. The Thing That Is Like Another Thing must share an essential truth. That's the connective tissue.

20. Everything Cannot Be Metaphor

Metaphors allow description to transcend a mere accounting, but even still, sometimes I just want to know if the girl has long legs or if the gun is loaded. Not everything needs to be a metaphor.

21. Clichés Are A Brick Wall You Make The Reader Crash Into

Using clichés makes Description Jesus turn water not into wine, but into starving ferrets that crawl up inside your bowels and eat your body from the inside out. "He ran like the wind?" Yeah, well, I kicked your nuts like a soccer ball. You're a writer. It's your job to avoid clichés, not run into them with your head.

22. Tell Me What The Donkey Smells Like

You don't need to rely on visuals. Many writers do. So you shouldn't. You have four other senses and so do your characters, so use them. Actually, there's a sixth sense, too: common sense. Common sense says you shouldn't overdo the "other senses" thing, and further, should only do so when it's appropriate. You might see or smell a donkey, but you don't taste it. Or you might touch it. Mmm. Yeah. Yeah, baby. Touch the donkey. Go on. Do it. What? Ohh. Uhh. Nothing. Please don't call the police.

23. The Hardest Description Is When You Invent Stuff Out Of Thin Air

Creating a new monster out of nothing? Inventing some wretched clockwork gewgaw whose flywheel mechanism could destroy the world? Unfolding a whole new fantasy realm or planetary scape? This is when it becomes tempting to hunker down and *describe the unholy shit* out of stuff. Resist this temptation. I know. You're thinking, "But how will the audience know what I'm talking about? This creature, the Dreaded Horvasham Gorblim, has *never before existed*. The audience won't know that his horns are studded with thorns, or that his nipples look like crispy pepperoni. I have to build this monster for them. On the page. *Inside their head*." No, seriously, resist the urge. By not going much further than "thorny horns and crispy pepperoni nipples," you've already created an image in your head of the beast. So too have you pictured the wretched clockwork flywheel gewgaw. Like I said: the audience is willing to work. They will carry your water.

24. Novelists, Read Screenplays (And Screenwriters, Read Novels)

Novelists could learn a thing or two from the brevity of description found in screenplays. Therein you will find short collapsed descriptive nuggets that still manage to paint the picture and get the story moving. Further, screenwriters could learn a thing or two from novelists. Remember, screenwriters: your script needs to be *readable* before it needs to be *filmable*. It lives in the reader's head before it ever makes it to screen. Description must feel alive.

25. Like With All Things: Everything In Moderation

That's an old Greek idea, right? "Everything in moderation?" Of course, those guys were all huffing Zeus juice and banging pegasuses. Pegasi? Fuck, I don't know. Point is, description is a powerful tool in your narrative kit because, as it turns out, readers like you to help set the stage inside the theater of their minds. You can underdo it. You can overdo it. You need to walk the line, look at the shape of your page. Sentences or small paragraphs punctuated by stretches of dialogue and/or action is certainly a good shape for which to strive. Find the middle path and you shall appease the reader.

25 Things You Should Know About... Editing, Revising, And Rewriting

1. Forging The Sword

The first draft is basically just you flailing around and throwing up. All subsequent drafts are you taking that throw-up and molding it into shape. Except, ew, that's gross. Hm. Okay. Let's pretend you're the Greek God Hephaestus, then. You throw up a *lump of hot iron*, and that's your first draft. The rewrites are when you forge that regurgitated iron into a sword that will slay your enemies. Did Hephaestus puke up metal? He probably did. Greek myths are weird.

2. Sometimes, To Fix Something, You Have To Break It More

Pipe breaks. Water damage. Carpet, pad, floor, ceiling on the other side, furniture. You can't fix that with duct tape and good wishes. Can't just repair the pipe. You have to get in there. Tear shit out. Demolish. Obliterate. *Replace*. Your story is like that. Sometimes you find something that's broken through and through: a cancer. And a cancer needs to be cut out. New flesh grown over excised tissue.

3. It's Cruel To Be Kind

You will do more damage to you work by being merciful. Go in cold. Emotionless. Scissors in one hand, silenced pistol in the other. The manuscript is not human. You are free to torture it wantonly until it yields what you require. You'd be amazed at how satisfying it is when you break a manuscript and force it to kneel.

4. The Aspiration Of Reinvention

I'm not saying this needs to be the case, and it sounds horrible *now*, but just wait: if your final draft looks nothing like your first draft, for some bizarre-o fucking reason you feel really accomplished. It's the same way I look at myself now and I'm all like, "Hey, awesome, I'm not a baby anymore." I mean, except for the diaper. What? It's convenient. Don't judge me, Internet. *Even though that's all you know.* *sob*

5. Palate Cleanser

Take time away from the manuscript before you go at it all tooth-and-claw. You need time. You need to wash that man right out of your hair. Right now, you either love it too much or hate its every fiber. You're viewing it as the writer. You need to view it as a reader, as a distant third-party editor flying in from out of town and who damn well don't give a fuck. From subjective to objective. Take a month if you can afford it. Or write something else: even a short story will serve as a dollop of sorbet on your brain-tongue to cleanse the mind-palate. Anything to shift perspective from "writer" to "reader."

6. The Bugfuck Contingency

You'll know if it's not time to edit. Here's a sign: you go to tackle the edit and it feels like your head and heart are filled with bees. You don't know where to start. You're thinking of either just walking away forever or planting a narrative suitcase bomb in the middle of the story and blowing it all to H-E-Double-Hockey-Sticks. That means you're not ready.

You're too bugfuck to go forward. Ease off the throttle, hoss. Come back another time, another way. Cool down.

7. The Proper Mindset

Editing, revising, rewriting requires a certain mindset. That mindset is, "I am excited to destroy the enemy that resists good fiction, I am ready to fix all the shit that I broke, I am eager to shave off barnacles and burn off fat and add layers of laser-proof steel and get this motherfucker in fit fighting shape so that no other story may stand before it." You gotta be hungry to fuck up your own work in the name of good storytelling.

8. Go In With A Plan Or Drown In Darkness

You write your first draft however you want. Outline, no outline, finger-painted on the back of a Waffle House placemat in your own feces, I don't care. But you go to attack a rewrite without a plan in mind, you might as well be a chimpanzee humping a football helmet. How do you know what to fix if you haven't identified what's broken? This isn't time for intuition. Have notes. Put a plan in place. Surgical strike.

9. Don't Rewrite In A Vacuum

You write the first draft in isolation. Just you, your keyboard, a story, some industrial lubricant and a handgun. All other drafts are part of a team initiative. SWAT, kicking in windows, identifying perps. Beta readers, editors, agents, wives, friends, itinerant strangers, hostages, whatever. Get someone to read your nonsense. Get notes. Attend to those notes. Third parties will see things you do not.

10. Embrace The Intervention Of Notes

You get notes, it's tough. It's like coming home and being surrounded by friends and family, and they want you to sit down and listen as they talk about getting you unfettered from your addiction to obscure 80s hair-bands and foul Lithuanian pornography. But listen to those notes. They may be hard but they're both *instructive* and *constructive*. They are a dear favor, so do not waste them.

11. But Also, Check Your Gut

When someone says "follow your gut," it's because your intestinal tract is home to an infinite multitude of hyper-intelligent bacterial flora. It knows what's up if you can tune to its gurgling frequency. You get notes and they don't feel exactly right, check the gut. Here's the thing, though. Notes, even when you don't agree, usually point out *something* about your manuscript. It may highlight a flaw or a gap. But it can also be instructive in the sense that, each note is a test, and if you come up more resolute about some part of your manuscript, that's okay, too. Two opinions enter, one opinion leaves. Welcome to Chunderdome.

12. When In Doubt, Hire An Editor

Editors do not exist to hurt you. They exist to hurt your manuscript. In the best way possible. They are the arbiters of the toughest, smartest love. A good editor shall set you -- and the work -- free.

13, Multitasking Is For Assholes

It is the mark of the modern man if he can do multiple things at once. He can do a Powerpoint presentation and mix a martini and train a cat to quilt the Confederate Flag all at the same time. Your story will not benefit from this. Further, it's not a "one shot and I'm done" approach. This isn't the Death Star, and you're not trying to penetrate an Imperial shaft with one blast from your Force-driven proton penis. You have to approach a rewrite in layers and passes. Fix one thing at a time. Make a dialogue pass. A description pass. A plot run. You don't just fix it with one pull of the trigger, nor can you do ten things at once. Calm down. Here, eat these quaaludes. I'm just kidding, nobody has 'ludes anymore.

14. Not Always About What's On The Page

Story lives beyond margins. It's in context and theme and mood -- incalculable and uncertain data. But these vapors, these ghosts, must line up with the rest, and the rest must line up with them.

15. Content, Context, Then Copy

Behind, then, the layer cake of editing. Start with content: character, plot, description, dialogue. Move to context: those vapors and ghosts I just told you about. Final nail in the revision coffin is copy: spelling, grammar, all those fiddly bits, the skin tags and hangnails and ingrown hairs. Do these last so you don't have to keep sweeping up after yourself.

16. Evolution Begins As Devolution

Two steps forward, one step backward where you fall down the steps and void your bowels in front of company. Here is a common, though not universal, issue: you write a draft, you identify changes, and you choose a direction to jump -- and the next draft embodies that direction. And it's the wrong direction. Second draft is worse than the first draft. That's fine. It's a good thing. Definition through negative space. Now you can understand your choices more clearly. Now you know what *not* to do and can defend that.

17. Two Words: Track Revisions

You know how when there's a murder they need to recreate the timeline? 10:30AM, murderer stopped off for a pudding cup, 10:45AM, victim took a shit in the ball pit at Chuck E. Cheese, etc? Right. Track the timeline of your revisions. Keep a record of them all. First, if your Word processor allows you to track changes and revisions, do that. If your program doesn't (Word and Final Draft both do), then get one that does. Second, any time you make a revision change, mark the revision, save a new file every time. I don't care if you have 152 files by the end of it. You'll be happy if you need to go back.

18. Fuck Yeah, Spreadsheets

Spreadsheets seem anathema to writing, because writing is "creative." Well, *rewriting* is clinical and strategic. A spreadsheet can help you track story beats, theme, mood, characters, plot points, quirks and foibles, conflicts, and so on. Any narrative component can be tracked by spreadsheet. Here's one way: track narrative data per page or word count. "Oh, this character drops off the map for these 10 pages of my script." "This plot needs a middle bit

here around the 45,000 word mark." "Not nearly enough laser guns and elf-porn at the turn of the third act."

19. A Reiteration Of Opinion Regarding "Creativity"

If you looked at that note about spreadsheets and thought something-something blah-blah-blah about how it will destroy your creativity and ruin the magic of the story, then form hand into fist and punch self in ear. If you need every day of writing to be a nougat-filled boat-ride through Pez-brick tunnels, you're fucked. Rewriting is hard. Creative comes from "create," and often, revision is about destruction. In other words: harden the fuck up, Strawberry Shortcake, 'cause the boat ride's about to get bumpy.

20. Put The Fun In Fundamentals

You can't revise if you don't know how to write. Same if you don't know the tenets of good story. How would you fix basic fucking problems if you can't find them in the first place?

21. A Trail Of Dead Darlings

Don't misread that old chestnut, "Kill your darlings." Too many writers read this as, "Excise those parts of the work that I love." That would be like, "Beat all the positive qualities of your child out of him with a wiffle ball bat." You should *leave in* the parts you love... *if they work*. Killing your darlings is about that word: "darling." Elements that are precious preening peacocks, that exist only to draw attention to themselves, those are the components that deserve an ice-axe to the back of the brain-stem.

22. Look For These Things And Beat Them To Death, Then Replace

In no particular order: Awkward and unclear language. Malapropisms. Punctuation abuse. A lack of variety in sentences. A lack of variety in the structure of the page. Plot holes. Inconsistency (John has a porkpie hat on page 70, but a ferret coiled around his head on page 75). Passive language. Wishy-washy writing. Purple prose. An excess of adverbs. Bad or broken formatting. Clichés. Wobbly tense and/or POV. Redundant language. Run-on sentences. Sentence fragments. Junk language. Cold sores. Mouse turds. Light switches that don't turn anything on. Porno mustaches. Dancing elves. Or something. I need a nap.

23. Clarity Above Cleverness, Or, "How Poetry Lives In Simplicity"

Poetry gets a bad rap. Everyone always assumes it's the source of purple, overwrought language, like it's some kind of virus that infects good clean American language and turns it into something a poncey 11th grade poet might sing. Poetry lurks in simple language. Great story does, too. You don't need big words or tangled phrasings or clever stunting to convey beautiful and profound ideas. In subsequent drafts, seek clarity. Be forthright in your language. Clarity and confidence are king in writing, and the revision process is when you highlight this. Write with strength. Write to be understood. That doesn't mean "no metaphors." It just means, "metaphors whose beauty exists in their simplicity."

24. Don't Make Me Say It Again: Read. Your Shit. Aloud.

I don't care if the dog is looking at you like you're crazy. If you're on the subway, hey, people think you're a mental patient. *Oh well.* Seriously though, I hate to repeat myself but I am nothing if not a parrot squawking my own beliefs back at you again and again: Take your work -- script, fiction, non-fiction, whatever -- and read it aloud. *Read it aloud.* READ IT ALOUD. When you read your work aloud, you'll be amazed at the things you catch, the things that sound off, that don't make sense, that are awkward or wishy-washy or inconsistent. Read it aloud read it aloud read it aloud read that motherfucker aloud.

25. Loose Butthole

Ultimate lesson: clinging to a first draft and resisting revision is a symptom of addiction -- you may be huffing the smell coming off your own stink. The only way you can get clean is when you want to get clean, and the same goes with revisions: you're only going to manage strong and proper revisions when you're eager and willing to do so. Relax your mind. Loosen your sphincter. And get ready for war. Because revising and rewriting is the purest, most fanfuckingtastic way of taking a mediocre manifestation of an otherwise good idea and making the execution match what exists inside your head. Your willingness to revise well and revise deep is the thing that will deliver your draft from the creamy loins of the singing story angels.

25 Things You Should Know About... Getting Published

1. Publishing, Like Barbecue, Takes Time

Publishing should never happen quickly. If it does, get worried. You know how in stories a character experiences a false victory and is all like, "That was too easy?" Yeah. This is like that. Publishing anything takes effort, and effort requires time. Drafts and editors and beta-readers and agents and submissions and such. Even self-publishing needs a heavy foot on the brake. Take time with it. Make sure it's right before you ejaculate a bunch of nonsense into the eyes of readers. Let your work -- and its emergence into the world -- come low and slow until it tastes so good you can't feel your legs.

2. The Dog You Choose To Be

This probably sounds dismissive, until maybe you realize I like dogs. Either way: "legacy" publishing is about being a kept dog. A pet, of sorts. You're cared for and fed, and as long as you perform as expected, nobody's taking your ass to the pound. The self-published dog is on his own -- free to roam alone or form packs, free to hunt up his own food, free to pee where he wants to pee. This sounds like an easy decision, but keep in mind: many kept dogs are quite happy, and many free dogs go feral or get dead.

3. The First Way: Trod The Old Paths

Like it or not, they call it "legacy" or "traditional" publishing for a reason: because this is the system that's

been in place since Jesus came down from space and taught the Egyptians how to make toast. Or something like that. Point is, this remains the primary path. Has many advantages. Your mother will buy it. It'll be in bookstores (all seven of them). You'll get to have a hardcopy. Someone will pay you an advance. You're also likelier (though not guaranteed) to end up with a more professional, polished product. But this path has disadvantages, too. You lose control over the product. You also lose control over the timeframe -- legacy publishing moves with all the get-up-and-go of a glacial epoch. Your percentage per book is likely worse, too.

4. The Second Way: Hack Your Own Path Through The Jungle

Self-publishing is, well, duh, when you publish something yourself. Did I really need to spell that out? Some call it "indie," but others hate that because "indie" indicates a publishing company not owned by a Big Wordmongering Biblioconglomerate (aka "The Uber-Pubs" or "The Big Six"). I think of it as micro-publishing. It's you, the story, and an outlet. It's both easier and harder than you think. Easier because, in the time it takes to move your bowels, you could upload something, *anything*, to Amazon and put it in the Kindle Marketplace queue. Harder because, here you are thinking you're a writer but now you're a publisher with all the burdens of *being* a publisher. There's your disadvantage right there. But if you're willing to dance for your dinner you can start earning out faster than with traditional publishing. Maybe more money. Probably less respect. For now.

5. I Hear You Go Both Ways

Which path to choose? That's between you and your heretic gods, but if you subscribe to my gospel, you'll do both. *One for you, one for you.* Self-publish one thing. Reserve another thing for the legacy route. Some material just won't sell well to publishers, and that's what you put out there yourself. Some stuff is primed for the bigger market, and that's the meaty gobbet that goes to the bigger dogs. The great thing here is, the legacy publishers are no longer bulletproof and the micro-publishers are no longer a crap-stink of tangled pubic hairs wadded up in the bathroom drain. Both are legitimate paths. So walk both to gain the advantages of each.

6. Distrust Zealots

Some will tell you legacy publishing is for chumps. Others will tell you self-publishing is for the talentless and forever guests of the slush pile. Wrong on both counts. Never judge another for their choice of publication. Writers are part of an ecosystem and diversity is a feature, not a bug. You see a zealot, brand them with a hot iron and kick them down the cellar steps. Where the dragon will eat them and then lay dragon eggs in their corpse orifices.

7. Crap Still Floats

Micro-publishing means a flood of new material in the marketplace. Crap floats. I watched a self-published certifiable piece of shit with six reviews -- all one-star ratings -- sit on the top ten at Amazon Horror for a good week. Self-pubbers don't like to admit this to be true. But legacy publishers don't like to admit that it's true for *them*, too -- let us remind them that they published a book by Snooki. Which is like letting a baby chimp teach a class or

allowing some kind of sewer-dwelling goblin-folk to babysit your children. Whatever the case, crap floats in all arenas. Self-publishing. Legacy publishing. Television. Film. (How big a box office draw is the **Transformers** franchise? Yeah.) Just because its buoyant doesn't mean it's good. Your job is to be both good *and* buoyant.

8. Proxies And Avatars

Publishing is a team effort. You need editors. You want an agent. You can do it without an agent, sure. You can also sell your house without a real estate agent, you can drive your car without a seat-belt, and you can have sex with a bucking centaur without wearing a helmet. An agent can help even the self-published author -- after all, certain rights remain open for most self-pubbers. Print, foreign, film. Also: your right to party. Nobody can take that away from you.

9. Gatekeepers Do The Reading Body Good

Don't hate the gatekeepers. Even in the legacy publishing world they usually represent a modicum of standards. Readers want quality, not undercooked narcissistic bullshit. In any situation you can put your own gatekeepers in place: someone who will challenge the work and make sure it's worth publishing -- and, if it's not worth publishing, you either fix it, or say fuck it.

10. You Get Fucked, It's By Your Own Ignorant Hand

Here, see this jar? It's got bees in it. But I've labeled it, "FREE MONEY." You're right if you don't see any money in there. It's seriously just a jar of bees. But if you stick your

hand in there anyway thinking you're going to get some unclaimed cash, you're going to get stung. Because you're a dummy. In publishing, if you get screwed over, it's your own fault. Get an agent. Manager. Lawyer. Somebody to read contracts.

11. Don't Fear The Query

Sung to the tune of, "Don't Fear The Reaper." (More cowbell?) Writing a query can be a misery. Practice writing them. Learn how to sum up your work in a single sentence, a single paragraph, and three paragraphs. You want to know not just what happens, but be able to explain what it's *about*. Agents and publishers want to know why it's awesome, *not* why it's like everything else.

12. Your Default State Is A State Of Rejection

You're going to get a lot of rejection. From agents, from publishers. It's par for the course. Rejections are good. Treat them like battle scars: proof you fought the good fight and didn't just piss around on the sidelines. My upcoming book **BLACKBIRDS** was lucky to get picked up by an agent after one month, but not before a handful of rejections and a lot of no-shows. Then it took a year and a half to get published. Dozens of rejections. All of them arrows to my heart. But where each arrow punctures, the heart grows scar tissue, gets tougher as a result.

13. Your Best Bet Is A Book That Doesn't Suck Resemble A Prolapsed Anus

Everybody's got tips and tricks to get published. *It's who you know. Get a good blurb. Get a rockstar agent. Consume*

the heart of a stillborn goat in a ritual circle made of shattered Milli Vanilli CDs. The biggest and best chance you have to get published is to write something that not only doesn't suck, *but is actually pretty goddamn good.* Go figure.

14. Even Still, A Good Book Isn't Enough

I'd be a naive douchematron (a robot that sprays vinegar and water from his face-nozzle) if I sat here and told you, "The only thing you need is a great book. Write it, stick it in your drawer, *and the publishing fairy will come and sprinkle his jizzy magic seed all over it.*" You do have to know how to market the book. How to put it out there. How to get it in front of agents, publishers, and readers.

15. Grim Taxonomy

You may not be concerned about genre, but the publishing industry is. They want to know on what shelf it goes, and under what Amazon category. So that means *you* need to know, too. Though, let me be clear: this is not a precise equation. These are not well-defined margins. Get close enough for horseshoes and hand grenades. I know many authors whose books were one thing but then were labeled as something entirely different for marketing purposes. Just make a stab at it. Don't freak out.

16. Never Give Someone Money To Get You Published

The old saying is, "The money flows *to* the writer, not *away from* the writer." This is still true, though self-publishing has complicated this snidbit of advice (*snidbit* =

snippet + tidbit). In DIY publishing, you may have to shell out the capital for an editor, or a book cover, or e-book design. But that's not you spending money on getting published. You're not placing cash in the hands of some charlatan. You're spending money on the book in order to get it ready for publication. You're still the one putting it out there. And money should still flow toward you once that occurs.

17. Dudes With Guns, Chicks With Swords

If you are traditionally published, you have a 37% chance of ending up with a book cover featuring some bad-ass holding a gun or some hot chick holding a sword. Or maybe a battle-axe. She's probably facing away from you and showing you one, maybe both, buttocks. Those buttocks are probably in very tight pants. Your book may be re-titled to something like DEMON SLUT or THE EDGE OF STEEL.

18. Trends Move Faster Than You, So Run The Other Way

You know what's hot right now? Stripper Frankensteins. You know what'll be hot next week? Occult epistolaries. The week after that? Pterodactyl erotica. You don't know what's going to be hot by the time you finish that book and get an agent and the agent starts shopping that book around. So just write what you want to write, and make it the best damn book anybody's ever read.

19. Yeah, A Sock Full Of Quarters, Bitch! Woo!

What I'm saying is, you won't get rich in publishing. But you can make a passable living. Feed your kids. Pay your

mortgage. Long as you're willing to write like a motherfucker. You think you can live on one book a year, then you clearly believe your name rhymes with K. J. Schmowling. And I bet it doesn't.

20. The Midlands Of The Midlist

"Midlist" isn't a dirty word. They may not be bestsellers, but they justify their existence. Midlist is a sign of a working author. An author who puts herself out there. Respect to the midlist. *pours toner ink on the curb for my homies*

21. All About Maneuverability

Small publishers don't move faster than big publishers -- but they can turn on a fucking dime. Same way a little boat can drive circles around a steamship. This is worth considering.

22. Publishing Is Just The Beginning

You get published, you're not done. You've got more books to write. Promo to do. Interviews. Book signings. It's just the start of it. That's a good thing, though. Makes sure you do more than sit in your cave and bleed words from your eye-holes. That said, you still need to get back in that cave and cry out more words. Otherwise, who are you, Harper Lee?

23. Stare Too Long Into The Publishing Abyss, The Publishing Abyss Pees In Your Eye

The publishing industry is the lava-eye of Sauron, the sucking sandy mouth of the Sarlacc pit (both of which look like sinister hell-vaginas, since we're being honest with one another). You gaze too long or get too close it'll suck you in. At the end of the day, your job isn't to be distracted by the industry because that will start to eat your soul. Your primary identifier is still *storyteller*, so that's what you do at the end of the day. I mean, unless you're that guy who sells ONE MILLION E-BOOKS, because that guy's not a storyteller, he's a human spam-bot.

24. What I'm Trying To Say Is, Lie Back And Pump Out Those Word-Babies

Your job is to write. Write like you don't give a damn about the publishing industry. Because you can. Write like that -- write like you *fucking mean it* -- and you'll find success. Love what you write and write what you want and you'll find the words come easy and the story comes correct. Don't worry right now so much with the publishing. Worry about writing. The other part will always come after, but by god, the writing has to come first.

25. Oh, And One Last Thing: Never Give Up

Publishing won't happen overnight. Self-publishing, er, *does*, but the epic sales don't happen overnight. Embrace patience, perseverance, stick-to-itiveness. Gotta have a head like a wrecking ball, a spirit like one of them punching clown dummies that always weeble-wobbles back up to standing. This takes time. Stories need to find the right home, the right audience. Stick with it. Push like you're pooping. Quitting is for sad pandas. And this jar of bees is for quitters only.

25 Things You Should Know About... Writing A Fucking Sentence

1. A Sentence Has One Job Above All Others

That job is to convey information. It's job is not to be clever. It's job is not to sound nice. It's primary task is to present information. That's not to say it can't, or shouldn't, sound nice. Or be clever. But those are *value adds*. A sentence has another, more important job, and that is as an *information delivery system*.

2. It Is A Fundamental Building Block

Sentences comprise all that you write. They chain together to form ideas. Learning how to write a sentence properly, with clarity, and in a way that engages the reader or listener is the cornerstone of good writing. Sentences are made up of words and clauses (a clause being *subject* and a *verb*).

3. This Noun Is Going To Verb You In The Naughtyhole

The simplest sentence is a nearly naked clause of: *subject verb*. Becky ran. The dog barks. The robot will dance. Never be afraid to use a simple construction. It's short. Sharp. Punchy. Equal parts "flick to the ear" and "grenade going off under your chair." Throw in a direct object in there (and maybe an indirect object, to boot), and now we're cooking with a deadly biotoxin. I mean, "gas." Just gas. Definitely not making bathtub biotoxin over here. You didn't see anything.

4. Some Clauses Still Live At Home With Their Parents

...while others go out and strike out on their own. Meaning, some clauses are independent, others are dependent. The former stands on their own. I'm not going to get into a whole compositional lesson here, but sentence construction relies on you knowing that dependent clauses cannot form their own sentences because they are immature assholes. They are subordinate, and like the remora fish must cling to the shark-like independent clause to survive. Independent clauses can come together to form sentences, if you care to do that. "Hiram likes cheese, but he thinks milk is for dickheads." Two independent clauses, connected by that little word, "but." ("And" works, too.) If I were to instead write, "Hiram likes cheese more than he likes milk," then you can see that *more than he likes milk* is the dependent clause because it cannot stand by its lonesome.

5. On The Subject Of Sentence Fragments

Sentence fragments are generally a no-no. And yet, I use them. They work when they help to establish flow in the ear of the reader, and they fail when they break that flow. Nine times out of ten, they break the flow. But roughly 10% of the time, they allow your prose to pop. Use. But use sparingly.

6. Simplicity Is Not The Enemy Of A Strong Sentence

In fact, simplicity is the good neighbor of a strong sentence. He mows his neighbor's lawn. Picks up the mail.

Doesn't tell the other neighbors about the weird bleating coming from the basement. A simple sentence can be thought of as "dumbed down," but that's not true, not true at all. Elegance and profundity may lurk within simplicity. Consider these two words: "John died." That's heavy. Two words like lead fists in your gut. *John died.* Oh, shit.

7. Simplicity Begets Mystery

John died. Two words. Not a lot of information. But that's okay. Because the reader wants that information. It creates in his mind an open variable in the story equation you're building. John died, yes, but how why when where? (Probably of bathtub biotoxin. In my basement. Ten minutes ago. Because he was an asshole who couldn't keep his mouth shut *about the goddamn biotoxin.*)

8. Go Read A Kid's Book

Children's books are written for, duh, children. The sentence construction in those books is about as simple as it can get, and admittedly, some of the stories are simple, too. But some of those stories can be quite complex, with a bubbling sub-layer of biotoxin... er, I mean, profundity beneath the surface of those basic, straightforward sentences. You want to get back to the heart of learning how to write a fucking sentence, you could do worse than by nabbing a couple kiddie books and studying their elegance.

9. Clarity Defeats Confusion

Whenever I do development or editing work, the most troubling thing I see are sentences I must mark with the dreaded three-word-abbreviation of AWK. Which, admittedly,

sounds like the cry of a petulant sea-bird, but no, it stands for *AWKward*. As in, this sentence sticks out like a hammerstruck boner. Something about it is positively Lovecraftian: it unsettles the mind, it curdles the marrow. *Its angles do not add up*. What I'm really saying with that tag is, "This sentence doesn't make nearly enough sense." And frequently that confusion stems from a poorly-constructed and often over-complicated sentence. You must strive for clarity. As mentioned, a sentence must convey information, and information is not properly conveyed if I don't know what the fuck you're talking about.

10. How A Sentence Gets Lost

Long sentences reduce comprehension in readers. The longer and more convoluted the sentence, the greater chance you will lose the reader's attention and understanding.

11. The Forrest Gump Of Sentences

A run-on sentence is a technically a sentence that takes a bunch of independent clauses and smooshes them together like melting gummi bears without the pleasure of punctuation or conjunction. In practice, just know that a run-on sentence is one that goes on and on and on. Feels rambly. Loses cohesion. Run-on sentences are loose butthole. Concise sentences are tight butthole.

12. I Want To Buy The Semi-Colon A Private Sex Island

I love those winking little cheeky fuckers like you wouldn't believe. You can't use them too often, but when you do, you use them *in general* to link two independent

clauses without a word like "but" or "and." Mmm. Semi-colons. Come to me, semi-colon. Wink at me. Touch my man-parts. Don't tell my wife. Wink. ;)

13. Destroy, Rebuild

The way to fix a fucked-up sentence is the same way we'll end up fixing civilization: you have to destroy it and rebuild it. Break it down into its constituent parts and just rewrite that slippery sonofabitch. The real secret here? Most times, you'll end up breaking the sentence in twain as if you were Solomon. One boggy, busted-ass sentence is almost always made better when it becomes two leaner, meaner sentences. Bisect those bitches.

14. Sentences Rarely Exist In Isolation

Novels, scripts, blog posts, ransom notes -- whatever the body of writing, you will find more than one sentence living together. And so, writing a good sentence isn't just about nailing one sentence, but about nailing the sentence before it, and after it. They live in colonies, these goddamn things, like termites, or ants, or polyamorous space marines. It's like what they say about roaches: you find one, you know there's bound to be a whole lot more behind the walls.

15. The Dancing Diagram Where The Sentence Shakes Its Word-Booty

Each individual sentence has a rhythm, and you can diagram it -- Shakespeare was quite concerned with this, what with all that *iambic pentameter*. You can see it too in children's verse. Or even in unmetered poetry -- read free verse aloud and you'll find the rhythm, the way each word

and idea flows into the next. And that's the key, right there - - "into the next." Each sentence establishes a rhythm with the one before it and the one after it. They flow into each other like water -- calm water here, rapids here, waterfall there, back again to still waters. We think of sentences as being written down and thus related to the eyes, not the ears -- but good writing *sounds* good when spoken. Great writing is as much about the ear as it is about the eye.

16. The Doctor Sentence Q. Sentenceworth Variety Hour

Each sentence must be different from the last. Variety creates a chain of interest. If I gaze upon a wallpaper with an endless pattern, my eyes glaze over and I wet myself. But look upon a wall with variety -- a photo, a painting, a swatch of torn wallpaper, a dead hooker hanging on a hook (*that's why they call them "hookers"*) -- and your eye will continue moving from one thing to the next. Sentences work like this. Vary your usage. Short sentence moves into a long sentence. Sentence openings never repeated twice in a row. Simplicity yields to complexity. Each sentence, different in sound and content from the last.

17. Each Sentence Is A Gateway Drug

Like I said earlier, a good sentence begets mystery. It makes you want to get to the next sentence. No one sentence should try to say it all. Think of each sentence like a tiny iteration of a cliffhanger. Each is an opportunity to convince the reader to keep on reading.

18. Is "Is?" Or Isn't "Is?"

Some folks suggest that cutting any and all instances of the verb "to be" from your work will make that work stronger. They're probably not wrong, because "is" ends up fairly limp-dicked far as verbs go. Like with all things: find moderation. Don't go psycho on every iteration of the verb. If you see a sentence that uses some form of "to be" and you think, *dang, this sentence could be stronger*, then rip out that verb and dose it up with the corticosteroid of a tougher, more assertive verb.

19. Passive Constructions Were Killed By Me, In The Study, With A Lead Pipe

See what I did there? Yeah. You see it. Avoid passive constructions. They *wussify* your sentences. What makes a sentence passive? When the actor in a sentence is not the subject of that sentence. "Bob strangles Betty." Bob is the actor and the subject. But if you rewrote that to be, "Betty was strangled by Bob," you've made the subject of the sentence separate from the actor. You can spot passive language generally with the verb "to be" bound up with the past participle ("was strangled by").

20. I Murders The Nasty Adverbses!

An adjective modifies a noun, an adverb modifies a verb. Adjectives seem okay, and yet adverbs get a bad rap. What's the deal? Adverbs alone are not poison. They do not by themselves sink a sentence. In fact, what people often identify as adverbs is a small subset of the whole pie. For instance, that word I just used -- "often" -- is an adverb. It modifies "identify" as an element of frequency. If I say, "John lives here," then know that "here" is an adverb (modifying "lives" -- he lives where? Here.) How do you know if an

adverb belongs? Read the sentence aloud. "Gary giggled delightedly" has two problems -- first, *giggling* already indicates *delight*, and second, *delightedly* sounds clunky when you speak that sentence aloud. You notice it when you speak it. Again: we read with our ears as well as our eyes.

21. Beware The Sentence With A Big Ass

What I mean is, you don't want a sentence with a lot of junk in the trunk. Junk language, like junk food, is both easy and delicious. Writing a good sentence is often about what to omit as much as it is about what goes into the mix. Beware: clichés, redundancies, pleonasm, needlessly complicated clauses, bullshit intensifiers (*really, actually, truly, severely, totally*), euphemisms, and passive constructions.

22. Though, Sometimes We Like A Big Ass

Like I said -- avoid all those things. Except when you don't. Horrible and confusing, I know, but here's the deal: you have to know the rules and then, from time to time, slap those rules like a red-cheeked parking attendant. Sometimes, we want to look at Kim Kardashian's massive pork roast behind because, well, *we just do so shut up about it*. Adding in rare junk language *can*, if done right, add a conversational feel to your writing. If that's what you seek.

23. My Greatest Foe: The Expletive Construction

You might think I'd love the expletive construction, what with me being such a fan of, well, *expletives*. But this isn't that. No fuck shit sonofadamnbastard here, I'm afraid. Nay,

the expletive construction is when you begin a sentence with "there is." (Found quite frequently in movie trailers, or in the opening lines of novels.) This construction is often both lazy and passive. Don't use it. Your sentence is better than that. Here's why: you can always rewrite a "there is" sentence in a better, more confident manner. "There is a fly in my soup" sounds much better when written as, "A fly flew into my soup," or, "I see a fly in my soup," or, "Why the fuck is there a fly in my soup, get me your manager, I want to watch him eat the fly in front of all the other restaurant patrons, because if he doesn't, I'm going to deliver an epic testicular kicking to all parties present." Or something like that.

24. You Have 15,000 Chances To Fuck It Up

But, you also have as many chances to make it sing. What I'm saying is, the average novel has 15,000 sentences. Each one can't be poetry. Not unless you're willing to commit years to a single book. What you can do is make sure they're right from the get-go. Know how to write the right sentence. Learn the tips above. Find your own tricks to write a mean-ass motherfucker of a sentence -- a sentence that sings, a sentence that bites. A sentence that conveys information clearly and without confusion and with a cadence beating in its heart.

25. You Don't Need To Be A Compositional Grammar Nerd To Write A Cracking Good Sentence

A sentence is home to endless possible complexities. The entire power of language composition lives inside a sentence. You should know how to write. Know where

punctuation goes, know what works and what doesn't. But you'll eventually hit a limit of when it becomes useful and when it just becomes obsessive. Do you need to know about the nominative case? Do you need to know what a "predeterminer" is? What about a subordinating conjunction? Or a bearitive grotanical modifier? I might've made that last one up. The point is, knowing those things isn't bad. It's just not always that helpful. You're not trying to get your doctorate, here. You're free to get a little crazy. But not "hobo genius mathematically solving the world's troubles with sidewalk chalk and fecal smears" crazy.

25 Things You Should Know About... Writing A Screenplay

1. Just A Blueprint

A novel is a finished product. A film is a finished product. A screenplay is just a blueprint. It's just a template. You're creating the *possibility* of a film, not the final product. Let that free you.

2. Writing To Be Read Before Writing To Be Seen

A script has to read well before it ever makes it onto a screen. Nobody reads a shitty script and says, "This sucks out loud on the page, but boy, it's going to look awesome on the screen." Well, okay, Michael Bay might say that. But then he rides his cyborg tiger into the heart of an atomic cloud to the tune of some Aerosmith song. You can't hold that guy's attention for long.

3. Story Is King, And The Characters Serve As His Pleasure

A screenplay fails first because of its crapgasmic story. Not just plot: but story. Story is all of it: plot, characters, theme, mood. You're trying to say something, trying to tell a cracking good tale. Characters are the vehicle for that story. We're going to spend two hours with, what? Boring characters? Dull story? Unlikable and unbelievable plot?

4. The Three-Act Structure Matters

I know. You want to fight against the three-act structure. You want to kick and spit and break the bonds of this straitjacket The Man has slapped you into. Don't. The three-act structure is here to stay. Trust me when I say, producers and directors *look for it*. They seek those act breaks. Here's the trick, though: the three acts are nowhere near as limiting as people believe. They're very easy and translate roughly to Beginning, Middle, and End. And out of each act is a turn, a pivot point of change and escalation. Hit those acts at 25%, 50%, and 25% of your script's total length (Act I, II, and III, respectively) and you're golden.

5. The Secret Act Break Smack In The Middle Of The Script

Don't tell anybody else. I'm sharing this just with you. Take off your pants and I'll tell you. Are they off? Sweet. HA HA HA HA JUST KIDDING NOW YOU'RE PARTLY NAKED AND VULNERABLE AND NOW I WILL ATTACK YOUR PRIVATE PARTS WITH BEES. ... okay, that was weird. I'm so sorry. Anyway. Here's the secret: the second act can really be *two acts* with the act turn smack dab at the midpoint of the whole script. Treat these like any act: escalation leads to an act turn which means some kind of pivot or change, both external and internal. Ta-da! That'll help you fight the sagging mushy gushy lardy middle of your screenplay.

6. 90-110

Your script should be between 90-110 pages. Especially if it's a spec script. Going to 120 pages is... regrettable, but doable. Going above 120 or below 90 can be death for your script.

7. Search Your Heart For Truth, Sacred Cricket

You're committing time and energy to writing this thing, so figure out why. Figure out what you're trying to say and what kind of story you want to tell. Know the reason your script must exist. "I want to write a tragic love story set in space." "I want to highlight the horrific industry of dolphin-killing." "I HATE MY DAD AND I WANT THE WORLD TO KNOW IT." Whatever, man. Just find your reason. Let it live at the throbbing heart of the script.

8. Too Many Characters Foul The Orgy

A script with too many characters feels hazy and crazy. It's like making a soup with too many spices or having an orgy with too many participants. Then it just becomes a greasy, smelly game of Twister. "Left leg, some guys pubic tangle. Right leg, shellacked with a heady broth of somebody's man-seed. AH HH DICK IN MY EYE." Keep major characters to about five. With maybe another 10 to 15 lesser characters if need be. But remember: they all need to be fully realized, at least in your own head.

9. Babar, Meet Rebar, And His Brothers, Robar, Zadar, And Radar

If your two lead characters are Gary and Mary, or Bob and Rob, the reader is going to get confused. I know, you're saying, "What kind of asshole can't figure out the difference between Bob and Rob?" The kind that reads hundreds of scripts per day and has suffered irreparable eye and soul damage from reading the unmerciful shit-fuckery submitted to them by subpar screenwriters, that's who.

10. Narrative Rejiggering

Some screenplays suffer from a necessary slow build, but a slow build threatens to derail the reader's attention. So go mess with the narrative flow -- change the time-line. Start at the ending. Or in the middle. Somewhere dramatic. Break the narrative up into a switchback flow, ala **21 Grams** or **Reservoir Dogs**. You can play with the timeline in order to adjust the revelation of plot. What happens then is revealed now. What happens now is revealed later.

11. Atmospheric Description Burns Like Alien Syphilis

Fuck your big bulky description right in the ear. It makes one a very angry chimp when reading giant blocks of descriptive text. You're not writing a book. You write big fat curtains of description, you get the hose again.

12. In Fact, Go At Your Description With A Camping Hatchet

Want to trim up your script? Description goes first. Get in there with a hatchet, start choppity-chopping away. Hack away big portions of muscle and fat. Only way to kill the cancer is to *cut it out*. Go mean or go home. Because here's the thing: the more story you can pack on the page, the more story gets to live on those 90-110 pages. Don't. Waste. Space. Think of it as Manhattan real estate. *Prime value*. You need to build up in layers, not across like a spreading pool of baby diarrhea.

13. Needs To Read Like A Bullet Whizzing Past

A novel is messy. It's a hail of bullets -- a machine gun chatter. You fire 80,000 words over 350 pages, one of them is bound to hit. A script must be far leaner. It has to fire on all cylinders. Has to hit like a single sniper's bullet. Miss your shot? You've missed the reader.

14. A Script Is Not Equivalent To A Novel

It's worth mentioning that, too often, writers assume a 1:1 ratio where a screenplay's story is equivalent to a novel's story. Not likely. Not unless the novel was a lean mean motherfucker, some 60k power-punch of crime or YA or whatever. A screenplay is more like a short story or novella -- you have only *two hours* to tell a whole story.

15. That First Page Is Key

Your hook lives on that first page. Has to, or somebody will put it down. Sure, that's a dick move, but nobody said this business is fair. You want *fair*, go drink imaginary tea with the 8-year-old goblin child next door. That first page sells the script -- or sinks it.

16. Backstory Lives Off The Page

Backstory and exposition just clog the plumbing. *You* should know all the backstory. But it needs to exist off the page and only come bleeding in -- drops and dribs, spits and spatters -- when absolutely necessary. The one way around that is utilizing flashbacks, but if you go that way, it better count -- flashbacks run the risk of reeking of amateur hour flossweat.

17. Each Scene Has Purpose, And Each Purpose Is Complicated By Conflict

Every scene must justify its own existence. Scenes of redundancy don't belong. THIS IS CINEMADOME. Two scenes enter. One scene leaves. How a scene creates a place for itself in your script is by having a purpose -- no, not a porpoise, *put that dolphin down*. Dolphins are for closers only. Purpose, I said. A reason. And that purpose must be many-tiered: it must move the plot forward *and* develop character in equal measure. *And* that plot and those characters must be going through and challenged by external conflict, internal conflict, or some combo-pack of both.

18. The Transubstantiation Of Trope

Every genre has its tropes, and every trope exists because someone created it and other people aped it. If **ALIEN** had Ripley beat the creature down with a double-headed dong, then you probably would've seen that in at least three other copycat films. Point is, tropes work to signal to the reader what genre you're in, but it's just as important to subvert existing tropes and come up with your own. Screenwriting is all about knowing the pattern and then changing the pattern in a handful of meaningful ways so your story owns the genre - rather than genre owning your story.

19. Victory As Defeat, Loss As A Win

Know the joy of the false victory and the false defeat. Up until the end of the script, most victories will be short-lived or illusory, and same goes with defeats. A character reaches

his lowest point or his highest -- so he thinks -- but it's all a ruse, a sham, a lie. Because fate has *other plans*. *cue dramatic music*

20. Learn How To Outline, Because Somebody's Going To Ask

This is not a joke. Learn to outline. Let me say that again: Learn. To. Motherfucking. Outline. Motherfucker. (One too many "motherfuck?" Dang. *Dang*.) Trust me, I get it. You're a glittery pony, a dancing snowflake caught in a beam of the sun's most precious light, and further, I know that outlining will give you hemorrhoids. Doesn't matter. Someone is going to ask for an outline. Or, replace "outline" with *treatment, beat sheet, synopsis, logline*. Know all of those. Practice them until you get your own system and style. Don't be afraid to put your own voice into each.

21. Read Lots And Lots (And Did I Say "Lots?") Of Screenplays

Collect a buttload of screenplays. Not just from films you like, but films you hate. From films *you've never even seen*. Read them. Study them. Try to see how they do things differently. Or the same. *Then* watch the films that correspond to them. *Then* listen to the commentary tracks that come from the screenwriters. Then do it all over again. And again and again until the earth tumbles into the sun.

22. Use The Correct Format

Screenplays exist within the rigors of a specific format. I'm not going to sit here and go over it, I'll only say that proper screenwriting software is a critical investment. I use

Final Draft, even though it makes me want to sometimes chew my arms off at the elbows so I never have to write another screenplay in that program again. *You* may use **Movie Magic**. I don't care. But these programs will auto-format the script for you -- you still have to know how each stylistic component works, but you don't have to wrestle with some kludgy crap-stink of a Word template.

23. Write Fast, Rewrite Slow

The great thing about screenplays is how *fast* you can write them. I say this as a novelist, where you feel like it's a game of inches, where it feels like you're trudging uphill through gloppy coal-silt with bricks tied to your feet. A screenplay flies like a hummingbird. Three pages a day, easy, will get you a script in about a month. The rewrite needs time, of course. The brownies need to finish baking. But when putting fresh words on a page, run fast, run free. Then use your excess time on the rewrite.

24. Expect It All To Change

Films are a major team effort. A screenwriter isn't the one dictating the story. The screenwriter is the one helping to set the course for the story -- but other hands hold the wheel. Producers. The director. Other writers. Whatever mule-kicked marmot they put in charge of the studio. (I kid, I kid.) The story will shift and twitch and grow new limbs and have new dreams and sometimes it'll be made better, sometimes it'll be made worse, and other times it'll just be made *different*. All of this needs to be okay. Let that stress of egomaniacal autocratic storytellerism leave your body. Expect it all to change. Find comfort -- and, in fact, freedom -- from the fact that it will one day escape your hands.

25. Spec Sales Are Up, By The Way

In case you think this just isn't a viable career choice, remember: spec sales are way up in 2011 over 2010. Film and television isn't going anywhere. This is a viable path for you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuck Wendig is a novelist, a screenwriter, game designer, and all-around freelance penmonkey.

He has contributed over two million words to the roleplaying game industry, and was the developer of the popular **Hunter: The Vigil** game line (White Wolf Game Studios / CCP).

He, along with writing partner Lance Weiler, is a fellow of the Sundance Film Festival Screenwriter's Lab (2010). Their short film, *Pandemic*, will show at the Sundance Film Festival 2011, and their feature film *HiM* is in development with producer Ted Hope. They both wrote the digital transmedia drama **Collapsus**, which was nominated for an International Digital Emmy and a Games 4 Change award.

Chuck's novel **Double Dead** will be out in November, 2011 with Abaddon. **Blackbirds** and **Mockingbirds** will both come out in 2012 under Angry Robot Books. Chuck is apparently popular in England.

He is also the writer behind short story collection **Irregular Creatures** and *another* big ol' book of writing advice. **Confessions of a Freelance Penmonkey**.

He's written too much. He should probably stop. Give him a wide berth, as he might be drunk and untrustworthy. He currently lives in the wilds of Pennsylvtucky with a wonderful wife, a newborn son, and a taco terrier. He is represented by Stacia Decker of the Donald Maass Literary Agency.

You can find him at his website, [terribleminds](http://terribleminds.com), where he is busy dispensing dubious writing advice and publishing wisdom.

