
Five Fiction Mistakes that Spell Rejection :: by Moira Allen

copyright © 2004

<http://www.scifieditor.com/moira2.htm>

Ask most fiction editors how to avoid rejection, and you'll hear the same thing: Read the guidelines. Review the publication. Don't send a science fiction story to a literary magazine, and vice versa. Don't send a 10,000-word manuscript to a magazine that never publishes anything longer than 5,000 words. Spell check. Proofread. Check your grammar. Format your manuscript correctly. Be professional. Failure to observe these basics, many editors say, accounts for more than 80% of all short fiction rejections.

But what if you've done all that, and your stories are still coming back with polite, form rejection letters? I asked nearly 50 fiction editors -- from traditional literary publications to flash fiction ezines -- what types of problems resulted in the other 20% of rejections. These are the problems that plague stories that meet all the basic requirements, but still don't quite "make the grade."

Bad Beginnings

"A story needs a beginning that grabs the reader and pulls him into the story," says Lida Quillen of *Twilight Times*. If you can't hook the editor with your opening line or first paragraph, the editor will assume it won't hook the reader either. "You simply must grab me in those first few sentences," says Ian Randall Strock of *Artemis*. Dave Switzer of *Challenging Destiny* looks for "something new -- something I haven't seen before -- on the first page. Something unique about the character or situation that makes me want to continue reading."

One source of weak beginnings is "taking too long to cut to the chase," according to Diane Walton of *ON SPEC*. "When the writer spends three pages explaining the entire history of the planet, we know we are in trouble." Doyle Wilmoth Jr. of *SpecFicWorld.com* agrees, defining a slow-starting story as one in which "the writer feels that she/he needs to explain every little detail for the reader to understand."

A story must do more than begin well; it must also fulfill the promise of that beginning. "Some new fiction writers create a very good beginning, but then do not fulfill the expectations of the reader," says Lida Quillen. "As a writer, you want to raise the reader's expectations, create a need to know what happens next and then satisfactorily fulfill that need." Once you've "grabbed" the editor with your first sentence, your second has to keep him reading -- right on to the end of the story. Andrew Gulli of *The Strand Magazine* notes: "The writers I resent are those who hook you with first sentence then whole stories turn out to be boring. Often writers will write something with a beginning and ending. There is no middle." Anne Simpson of *Antigonish*

Articles

Review feels that "Generally speaking, a weak opening is more forgivable than a weak ending, but both should be strong for the story to work."

Wordiness

Another pervasive problem editors cited was too many words. Many suggested that new writers learn to cut their stories by 10 to 50 percent. "The most obvious error we encounter in fiction is overwriting," say Anthony Brown and Darrin English of *Stickman Review*. "Young writers, full of energy, throw everything and the kitchen sink into their work to impress editors." Excess verbiage can result from several fundamental writing errors.

- Too many adjectives and adverbs. "When the yellow, round orb of the sun stealthily and smoothly creeps into the azure blue early morning sky, one may wonder why the sun didn't simply rise; it would have saved a good deal of trouble for all concerned," says Max Keele of *Fiction Inferno*. If you feel the need to modify every verb with an adverb (or two), or every noun with an adjective, chances are you're not picking the right words. Look for strong nouns and stand alone verbs that convey your meaning without modification.
- Using "big" words when simple ones would do. "To me, 'ascended' sounds inappropriate to describe a man walking up a few steps," says Adam Golaski of *New Genre*. Seeking alternatives to "said" is another common error; too often, characters "expostulate" or "riposte."
- Too much detail or backstory. Many writers fall into the trap of adding too much detail or description. "Describing the color and length of a protagonist's hair is great if it's relevant; otherwise it's fluff you can cut," says Don Muchow of *Would That It Were*. Diane Walton of *ON SPEC* deplors "long exposition 'lumps' that stop the action dead in its tracks, so one character can explain to another that their society has been operating in a certain way for centuries, or the long speech where the bad guy explains why he has to kill the good guy."

The solution? Put your story aside for at least a week after writing it; then go back over it and search for "flab." "Every word has to do a job; if it's goldbricking, out it goes," says Robbie Matthews of *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*. Hunt down those excess adverbs and adjectives. Look for stronger nouns and verbs. Set a goal of trimming your final draft by at least 10%.

Undeveloped Characters

Articles

Your story may begin with an interesting idea (e.g., "What would happen if?"), but the characters keep people reading. Most editors agreed they look for stories driven by interesting, believable characters. "Could you imagine the movie *Gladiator* without the scene where Maximus loses his family?" asks Doyle Wilmoth Jr. "*Gladiator* has action, but we also have a character that moves us deeply. Someone we want to cheer for."

Problems with characters include:

- Characters the reader won't care about. "It is especially bad news when the protagonist is someone with no redeeming social value, because we have to care about what happens to someone in the story, or why bother to read it?" says Diane Walton.
- Characters who do not grow or learn. Several editors complained of "cardboard" characters whose motivations were unclear, or who simply reacted to story events rather than being the source of the story's plot or conflict. "Ultimately the main character must decide his or her own fate; it can't be decided for them," says David Felts, former editor of *Maelstrom Speculative Fiction* and current editor of *SFReader.com*. Skylar Burns of Ancient Paths notes that "an even greater problem is the character that undergoes a rapid and unrealistic transformation in a very short span of prose." Marcia Preston of *Byline* notes that too many stories feature characters who lack any apparent goal, or a compelling reason to want a particular goal -- a flaw that results in stories with no significant conflict.

Stereotypes. "Why can't a rich business man be kind and compassionate? Why are unemployed men always lazy and sit around in their vests swigging out of cans? Why can't one or two learn Latin or take up line-dancing?" asks Sally Zigmund of *QWF Magazine*. Rhonna Robbins-Sponaas of Net Author notes that when a character is a stereotype, the story often needs a complete rewrite to turn the character into a living, breathing, three dimensional being.

The solution? "Know your characters, particularly the narrator," suggests Victoria Esposito-Shea of *HandHeldCrime*. You don't have to give the reader every detail of your character's history, but you should know the history yourself. "That's where voice is going to come from, and should also drive the plot to a large degree."

"Remember that each person on this planet is an individual, possessing a separate combination of traits that distinguish him or her from everyone else," says Bill Glose of *Virginia Adversaria*. "Be specific. Instead of saying, 'The bar patron was obnoxious,' say, 'The skin around his mouth glowed, gin blossoms reddening his puffy cheeks and seeping into the overlapping chins. When he spoke, his speech was slurred and the words had an edge to them.'" Glose recommends using action to illustrate a character's traits.

Poor Plots

Articles

Editors complained of two basic plot problems: Trite, hackneyed plots, or no plot. Ian Randall Strock says many of his rejections are the result of "the author sending me a really old, lame idea that's been done to death for decades, and the author hasn't done anything new with it." Many felt too many writers were deriving their plots from television rather than real life. "We don't want last week's Buffy plot," says Diane Walton.

David Ingle of *The Georgia Review* says at best, only ten stories in a thousand that cross his desk manage to escape "the doldrums of convention." The most beautiful prose in the world, he notes, can't compensate for stock characters and plots. "My main gripe is with the so-called 'domestic' story -- stories of bad childhoods, bad parents, abusive or straying spouses." He asks writers to make their stories stand out from the pile on the editor's desk. "Instead of another divorce story narrated by a despondent spouse, how about one narrated by the couple's favorite chair?"

While some stories have bad plots, others have no plot. "One I received was about a woman shopping for a hat. That was it," bemoans Paul Taylor of *Cenotaph*. Alejandro Gutierrez of *Conversely* complains of "stories that just begin and end with nothing important happening or being resolved by the main characters." Some plotless stories ramble from one event to another; others are a hodgepodge of action with no emotional content to involve the readers. The solution? Ironically, most editors felt the way to resolve "plotless" or "hackneyed" stories was to focus on characters. If the characters are believable, with interesting goals and motivations, their interactions will drive the plot. "Most of the ideas for stories have already been used; it's up to the writer to put a new spin on it to make it fresh," says David Felts. "If the characters are real enough then a recycled plot can work, because if the character is new, the story is too."

No Point

Editors -- and readers -- aren't just looking for great action and strong characters. They also want a sense of "why." Why should I read this? Why did you write it?

"This is not to say every work should address an Aesopish moral or a grand theme, but rather every story should contain at its core a reason to be," says Max Keele. "In fact, that is my single personal demand from a story: That it add up to something. That it shock me, scare me, unnerve me, make me think, or cry, or vomit. Something."

Ellen Datlow of *SciFi.com* says she reads far too many stories with no apparent reason for being. "I have no idea why the writer bothered to write the story -- no passion, no unusual take on the subject, dull, unbelievable characters. A story has to have something special to make me want to buy it."

A story without a point tends to be "flat," according to Rhonna Robbins-Sponaas. "If we come away with the peculiar feeling that we don't really know why we've just read what we've read, or our first thought is that the washer has finished and the clothes are ready to be put in the dryer, then the writer hasn't conveyed the 'why' of the story as strongly as she could have and should have."

Articles

The solution? "Were I to tell a writer one thing, I'd tell her to go back and be certain what her story is, then be sure that she's answered the 'why' of the story so that the reader comes away from the experience with as much a sense of its importance as the writer had," says Robbins-Sponaas. Brown and English of *Stickman Review* urge writers to "Write sincerely. Write stories about those things that matter the most to you. If you're writing about something you don't really care about, it'll be obvious to your readers, and they won't care either."

What Can You Do?

The one piece of advice nearly every editor had to offer was "Read, read, read." Read the authors who have won awards in your genre or field. Read classic literature to find out what has been done, so you don't offer up old, trite plots without realizing it. "Study the work of authors whose fiction you love and respect and admire and try to figure out what it is about that author's fiction that works and why," suggests Ellen Datlow. "Read about three tons of short stories by different authors who've written in the past 50 years, until you find someone whose work and style turns you on and you'd like to emulate and do it!" says Ray Foreman of *Clark Street Review*.

"Write!" says Max Keele. "And keep writing. And write some more. Rejected? So what. Write another story. Rejected again? Who cares, write two this time."

When you're finished, "Let the story sit for a few days or a week," says Richard Freeborn of *Oceans of the Mind*. "Come back to it and read it aloud to yourself. I am still surprised at all the inconsistencies and bad transitions I catch when I do that."

Once your story has "aged" a bit, seek someone else's opinion. "Find an educated reader who can provide valuable feedback as to how they feel as the story unfolds," urges Lida Quillen.

"Find a reader who can mention segments that were unbelievable, let you know where the story left them cold and sections where they were pulled into the story."

Finally, make sure you don't make the ultimate fatal mistake, cited by Tony Venables of *Ad Hoc*: "Thinking that people should read what you write simply because you write it. Writers need to understand that they have to earn their audience, to make their audience feel it's worthwhile to read their work. This does not mean pandering to populist ideas or sugar coating what you have to say -- it means not choosing to be boring."

SIDEBAR: Seven Deadly Sins

In addition to the five fatal mistakes cited above, several editors had their own pet peeves to share. Here are seven other problems that can speed your story to the rejection pile:

- Preachiness. "Stories that present an obvious moral, without nuances, subtlety, or complexity, are the first to hit the [reject] pile," says Skylar Burriss of *Ancient Paths*.

Articles

- Cliches. "I did, actually, receive a story that began, 'It was a dark, stormy night!,'" says Tom Rice of *Elbow Creek Magazine*. "It shows that a writer is not particularly careful with the quality of the story."

Outlandish names. This is another peeve of Tom Rice: "Nothing pulls me out of a story more quickly than thinking, 'You know, no parent in their right mind would have named their child that.'" Tommy Zurhellen of *Black Warrior Review* agrees: "Don't be cute. When I see Mercutio or Hezekiah, I drop the story. Write about real people."

- Lack of knowledge. "If your story revolves around hacking into computers, it's best that you at least know your way around your own computer," says Tom Rice. "If you are writing a story about the Old West and you want to include an Indian character, make sure that the tribe he/she was from actually existed within the confines of the territory you are using."
- Autobiographical stories. "Leave the baggage in your own house, don't put it in an envelope to send to an editor," says Andrew Gulli of *The Strand Magazine*. "The great writer is the one who despite having bad parents and despite all the difficulty is able to create something so completely opposite that it is very believable. It is easier said than done."

Cute Titles. "If we get another title like 'Getting Vanessa' or 'Moving Shane' we will sue somebody," says Zurhellen. "Don't be cute. Keep it simple and short."

- Stupid cover letters. "Give us your name, some previous pubs, and sign off," says Zurhellen. "Editors don't want to know what the story is about, or how long you worked on it, or what your mom thinks of it, or what someone semi-famous said about your writing, or who rejected your last story." Don't include your resume or CV, and keep your cover letter to one page. And make it interesting, says Don Muchow of *Would That It Were*. "I do not like authors who are scared, humble, diffident or otherwise unsure of themselves. Send me the kind of biographies you'd tell me at a party, not the kind you'd put on your resume. If you don't think you're interesting, no one else will either."

SIDEBAR: Striking a Balance

By Dave Carey, Editor, *The Leading Edge*

It seems to me that the most common problem shared by new writers is maintaining the delicate balance that makes up a story. Most really good work can be looked at like a set of scales with three pans: The first holds all of the story's action, the next holds the dialogue and character development, and the third contains all of the setting and description. Most of the stories that we end up rejecting for reasons other than plain poor writing suffer from an imbalance in these three elements.

Articles

However, unlike poor writing, there is no really easy solution to the question of balance. To correct poor writing one merely needs to read and write more (notice I say both; one or the other exclusively will not suffice.) Correcting balance, however, requires an intimate knowledge of something much more nebulous -- the expectations of your audience. Stories in which the balance is even slightly out of alignment leave the readers with an almost indescribably bad taste in their mouths; they often don't even consciously recognize why they didn't like it! These are the stories in which there is just too much action -- or not enough. These are the tales that have too much meaningless chatter in their dialogue -- or not enough dialogue at all. These are the almost nightmarishly boring tales in which we hear almost nothing about the environment in which the characters live and it takes three pages to figure out whether the genre is sci-fi or fantasy simply because we aren't told enough.

Balance problems can be corrected, but it usually requires a certain sense that new authors haven't fully developed. The best solution is, believe it or not, simply tinkering with the work until it "feels better than it did before" and continuing to do so until you think you are ready to submit. I suggest drawing up an outline, labeling each paragraph with its particular "arm of the scale," and looking at it. Add, delete, move or change until things feel right. Taking a story by an author you already admire and splitting that into its components to see how they fit it together can be especially helpful.

I do not wish to discourage writers from experimenting with the balance. Many great "surprise ending" stories depend almost entirely on warping the expectations of the audience by tinkering with balance. But it must be recognized that these are experiments and therefore will fail far more often than they will succeed. For a new writer, practicing with getting a normal arrangement right will be challenge enough.

Moira Allen (moira@writing-world.com) is the former managing editor of Inklings and Inkspot, and has been writing and editing for more than 20 years. Allen has published more than 300 articles and columns, and is the author of [Writing.com: Creative Internet Strategies to Advance Your Writing Career](#) (Allworth Press, 1999) and [The Writer's Guide to Queries, Pitches and Proposals](#) (Allworth Press, August 2001). For more information about these books, visit the [Author's Bookshelf](#).