

# PIXAR'S 22 RULES OF STORY

(that aren't really Pixar's)

## ANALYZED

By Stephan Vladimir Bugaj

[www.bugaj.com](http://www.bugaj.com)

Twitter: @stephanbugaj

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## **Introduction.**

In 2011 a former Pixar colleague, Emma Coats, Tweeted a series of storytelling aphorisms that were then compiled into a list and circulated as "Pixar's 22 Rules Of Storytelling".

She clearly stated in her compilation blog post that the Tweets were "a mix of things learned from directors & coworkers at Pixar, listening to writers & directors talk about their craft, and via trial and error in the making of my own films."

We all learn from each other at Pixar, and it's the most amazing "film school" you could possibly have. Everybody at the company is constantly striving to learn new things, and push the envelope in their own core areas of expertise.

Sharing ideas is encouraged, and it is in that spirit that the original 22 Tweets were posted.

However, a number of other people have taken the list as a Pixar formula, a set of hard and fast rules that we follow and are "the right way" to approach story.

But that is not the spirit in which they were intended. They were posted in order to get people thinking about each topic, as the beginning of a conversation, not the last word.

After all, a hundred forty characters is far from enough to serve as an "end all and be all" summary of a subject as complex and important as storytelling.

So since Pixar's name is associated with that list, I decided it'd be beneficial to the world's storytellers for another Pixarian to write a series of blog articles to look at the aphorisms one-by-one and analyze them.

In the spirit of inspiration, exploration and discussion in which the advice was intended, I found points of agreement and disagreement, and offer up caveats, expansions, and excisions that I felt made the advice stronger.

This book is a compilation of those blog articles (with a few edits, most notably this intro stopping before going off-topic).

## **Rule 1.**

### **You admire a character for trying more than for their successes.**

In the main, the statement rings true. It's good foundational advice, especially since many storytellers "go too easy on" their characters because they like them. Drama comes from struggle, and empathy and admiration come from seeing someone trying in the face of difficult odds.

A film in which the protagonist never fails at anything is rather devoid of conflict and is unlikely to hold anyone's interest, but the statement is ultimately about the balance between seeing a character fail and seeing them succeed impacting audience appreciation of the character – not about plot dynamics.

Furthermore, most people consider themselves average, even mundane. When they try to do things, they focus on what they get wrong, and how far short of their own goals they've fallen.

Characters who do the same thing will more readily evoke empathy and sympathy from the audience.

A classic, easily understood example is the true underdog story: The everyman trying to do something only special men are supposed to be able to do.

The obvious example is a story like Rudy, but Indiana Jones and John McClaine are beloved, "relatable" action adventure characters in their first films because they are vulnerable, both physically and emotionally.

But there is an assumption in the premise of the statement that can also lead storytellers into trouble if they're not careful: that characters need to be admired.

Sometimes you want a character to be *interesting* more than admired, or even sympathetic – perhaps even going so far as creating a protagonist that's interesting and questionable, unlikable, or even reviled.

And a character that succeeds more than she fails can be *interesting*.

Superhero stories often rely on this to establish that the hero is accustomed to easy success, and so is the world she protects – to underscore how powerful the bad guy really must be to upset this status quo.

Antihero stories, on the other hand, flip the trope to show you someone who is good at being bad, so when they're trying to be good you know they're *giving up something that worked for them in order to change*. (That sacrifice being a crucial, often overlooked element of a great character arc – one that applies to all characters, not just antiheroes.)

Another "clever" use of flipping the trope comes in stories where the fact that the protagonist has no conflict in their life is their main source of conflict. But this is uncommon, and is rarely done well.

So, while the statement is true when your goal is to have your character fit the "admirable, sympathetic character that audiences easily empathize with" – that isn't the only kind of character people will find engaging. Therefore, if a sympathetic character isn't what your story calls for, look at how you can change that success vs. failure balance to serve the character you're creating.

## **Rule 2.**

**Keep in mind what's interesting to you as an audience, not what's fun to do as a writer. They can be very different.**

This may seem like strange advice at first blush. If something is interesting to you as an audience, shouldn't it also be fun to write?

Seriously; I'm not being flip. Storytellers should enjoy writing things that they enjoy reading and viewing.

If that's not enjoyable to you, maybe storyteller is the wrong calling for you. Every story needs to flow from a place of joy, passion, love, or yearning within the storyteller, or it certainly will not be fun to write, or to read.

The premise of the statement really stems from the common notion that writers in particular naturally enjoy writing internal monologue, evocatively meandering descriptions, abstraction, and other things that "shouldn't" be in a screenplay.

This advice was clearly given to Emma by someone who adheres to that common notion that all writers prefer writing things that ought not to be in film blueprints, which isn't true. Many writers completely enjoy writing action, concise description, and external, subtextual dialog.

But what *should be* in a script depends on the target audience of the screenplay – meaning the audience who will read the script, not who will see the finished film.

If you are writing a spec that you're hoping will sell or get you a job, don't do any of those "writerly" things like write novelistic description or rely on internal monologues to carry the story (or, at least, use them very sparingly).

If it's a work-for-hire, do whatever the person who hired you asked for (in Hollywood, that's generally not to fill the script with internal thoughts and meandering descriptions – but the producer or director may ask for exceptions to that rule).

If you're writing a no/lo-budget script you're going to shoot yourself, you may do more of those things – so long as you have a clear idea of how they're going to get on-screen. If you can't visualize it (or speak it aloud), you can't shoot it.

A common example of a "writerly mistake" that elicits this advice is to load "a look" with a lot of subtext. For example:

"He looked at her as if to say: 'how can you think that about me after all these years?'"

A look can only say so much, so you'll need to limit what you try to say with it to things actors can actually convey in a look or action. Which is a lot less than might hope (no affront to actors intended, they can say a lot more with a look than the rest of us). Otherwise, put it into action or dialogue subtext.

If you're excited about the idea of a quiet character who generally "lives in her head", either do the "bad" thing and use voice over, get very creative about expressing that through action and subtext, or write a novel.

As for extensive descriptions and abstract ideas about theme, quite often Directors who are writing for themselves will put those things into at least one draft of the script. Since they're visually designing the film as they write it, they know how they want to visualize even the abstract ideas (perhaps implying it with an effect, camera angle, filter or color treatment).

You can't usually get away with extensive description or abstract thematic notes in a spec, or even a work-for-hire script, but plenty of people do it for themselves. If you're writing for yourself, you can too. (Though generally it gets taken out of drafts that go to actors.)

But always keep in mind:

Film is a visual medium.

Ultimately a screenwriter is trying to convey to the entire cast and crew the basics of how the film will be staged and shot, not just the character dialog and emotions. Anyone who thinks otherwise is in the wrong business.

There's also the aspect of the rule statement which comes from the assumption that because writers find certain aspects of writing more fun, they prefer writing things that are structured for other media than film.

Watching a film, even the funky experimental stuff, is a different experience than reading. And commercial films have a certain three act structure that is expected to underlie the narrative. You need to meet those expectations.

The less filmic the writing, the less filmic the audience experience will be when it's translated to screen. Whether that's a good or bad thing is debated endlessly. Ultimately that's a matter of style, tone, and material versus return-on-investment considerations, and cast and crew capabilities.

Making a "no-budget" experimental film (or something for a government film board)? Do any crazy thing you want. Anything. Those kinds of films are playgrounds and laboratories for wild ideas, and sometimes those experiments even result in something amazing.

Otherwise, if the goal is to write a script that will attract a Hollywood cast and crew, get prodco and studio backing, and find a general film audience – *write a film*.

That means stick to film structure and pacing, and write concisely and visually.

Finally, perhaps what the statement is trying to get at is: don't be self-indulgent. To avoid being self-indulgent, simply think about an audience that isn't you.

You have to enjoy storytelling to a broader audience than the one inside your skull, or film is the wrong medium for you. Film\*making\* is the most collaborative art / entertainment process that exists, and film \*viewing\* is a global shared experience.

That doesn't mean you bring nothing of yourself to screenwriting, of course. All stories come from inside the storyteller.

But when writing screenplays you do need to be cognizant that you're just making a blueprint for a series of

collaborative, shared experiences – not an isolated recounting of your internal thoughts.

As a writer, I love isolated recounting of internal thoughts. A lot. I just don't think a screenplay is (usually) the right place to put them.

Ultimately, I believe that the subtext of rule #2 is all these things:

- Write something that is structured like a film, not some other medium.
- Write for an audience that exists outside your head
- Write visually.
- Do these things because a screenplay is just a blueprint for a film, write a blueprint for a film, not a finished product that is intended primarily to be read.

If you're writing screenplays, the reason is almost certainly because you love films.

So when writing them put yourself into your film audience mindset, and have fun doing those things. Get into it, and enjoy it, and it will make your film writing better.

At least this will make your commercial screenplays in the Hollywood mold better (which, let's be honest with ourselves, includes the majority of "Indie" films as well).



### **Rule 3.**

**Trying for theme is important, but you won't see what the story is actually about til you're at the end of it. Now rewrite.**

I wholeheartedly agree that writers should write all the way to the end and then rewrite. In fact, I'd recommend doing that more than once. As the common aphorism "all writing is rewriting" points out, that's the only way to really find your story.

But as for not seeing what the story is actually about (its theme) until you're at the end of it – I take the opposite tack. I don't think you should even *start* the story until you know what the end is, therefore what it's about.

"What it's about" will likely change during the course of writing a draft, but it's too common to meander and write yourself into corners when trying to get to an *unspecified ending*.

So if you don't know how your story ends when you start writing, be prepared to pay a lot extra to get there.

It's like any journey you start without knowing where you're going: it may be exhilarating and full of possibilities, the detours and pit-stops may be an adventure, and the end result may be fantastic – but it's not efficient, and there's a very real possibility you'll get hopelessly lost and simply give up along the way.

Starting at the end when creating your outline (or treatment, or mental map) will make your life a lot easier. And don't worry that starting with a solid idea of where you're going will stifle your creativity and take all the joy and inspiration out of the journey. It won't.

For one thing, until you've actually written at least one draft everything is still just preliminary, theoretical. While you're writing towards an ending you've already come up with, you may suddenly find that the story is telling you to go elsewhere.

That can happen even when you know where you're going because knowing where you're going is not a barrier to inspiration, rather it makes room for more inspiration

because there's no need to be constantly "figuring it out" at every turn. So when this sort of inspiration strikes, stop and take the time to rework your ending, and the map to get there, before continuing. You can always go back to the old map if needed.

Even after you've done all that, you are likely to reach the (potentially shifting) ending only to discover that in getting there you've got a whole new or clearer idea of what the story is actually about, and therefore about how everything you just wrote should change.

That's why people say all those things like: "writers write" and "all writing is rewriting" and "stories are never finished, they're just abandoned" and "holy @#! writing is difficult - I thought you just typed-in every idea you have as you have them and then people love you and throw money at you".

So, ultimately, what this advice is trying to tell us is don't get bogged down in theoretical analysis of theme in lieu of actually writing the story.

This is an especially damning temptation for screenwriters because screenplays are very structured and formal, and there is a glut of gurus out there who peddle very mechanical, theory-based approaches to storytelling.

Those prescriptive methodologies can be great if you find one that actually works the same way your own mind works, but even so formal exercises about finding your theme (or character, beats, or anything else) will only ever take you so far.

After all the end product is the actual writing, not any of the notes, outlines or worksheets produced along the way.

Belaboring how each scene reflects theme and trying to perfect it is wasting time, especially in the first draft when you've not yet written through the piece at least once and thereby given yourself a firmer idea of what your story is actually all about. Once you've written at least one draft you can start to "perfect" all those beats, through-lines, and setup/payoff moments in rewrites.

Ultimately, storytelling is about feeling, and even once you find your theme and refine your story structure you still need to make your audience feel it.

So whatever methodology you may prefer for finding theme and structure, make sure that for each draft you also set all the formalities aside do a pass where you focus solely on emotion and entertainment.

## **Rule 4.**

**Once upon a time there was \_\_\_\_\_. Every day, \_\_\_\_\_.**  
**One day \_\_\_\_\_.** Because of that, \_\_\_\_\_.  
**Because of that, \_\_\_\_\_. Until finally \_\_\_\_\_.**

This keen little template is called "the story spine". It comes from the world of improv theater, and was created by Kenn Adams, not Pixar.

Pixar does offer improv classes and has a standing improv theater group that performs weekly, so many employees have been exposed to the story spine as a creative exercise.

It's a fun, useful exercise for improv theater. And a great way to "riff on" structural ideas at a very high level since it is a simplified statement of an idea that many other systems and theories also elucidate: that a story is a change from an old status quo to a new one, "old world" to "new world", through action and conflict.

You can find similar but more expansive ideas along the same line in the writings of Syd Field, Robert McKee, Blake Snyder, Chris Vogler, John Truby, Lew Hunter, etc.

Each of their models is partitioned and phrased differently, and some are very formally rigorous while others are more flexible, but they are all saying the same basic thing:

*A story has a setup, change through conflict, and resolution.*

Understanding some model of basic story structure is crucial for all storytellers. Whether it's this exact phrasing or not depends on how well it enables you to actually comprehend the principals.

Filling in the blanks will only get you so far; you need to study and internalize the plot and character dynamics that the model represents.

Unfortunately the strength of the story spine, its simplicity, is also its weakness:

It's too simple for many uses.

It needs more depth to be a guide for narrative drama. With this in mind, another way to rephrase the story spine would be to say that a story has:

- A setup that introduces the characters and the world.
- Action in the normal, status quo world that establishes the baseline of the characters' prior lives.
- An inciting incident that disrupts the status quo and poses the thematic question in the form of a decision the protagonist must make.
- A series of escalating events, triggered by the decision the protagonist makes in each preceding event, that build into a climax.
- A climax, and resolution.

More simply:

- Introduce the protagonist and her world.
- Present the protagonist with a critical, world-changing challenge.
- Litter the path to confronting that critical challenge with increasingly difficult obstacles.
- See how the protagonist overcomes the obstacles and takes on the big challenge.

Notice that I've added explicit mention of the protagonist and conflict (and its escalation).

A crucial flaw in the story spine as a model for all story structure is that its phraseology is all about outcomes. Character isn't explicitly mentioned.

Neither is conflict, escalating or otherwise. Story spine exercises can easily lead to things like this:

Once upon a time there was a piemaker. Every day people came to buy his pies. One day, they stopped coming. Because of that, he lowered his prices. Because of that, people came in droves. Because of that, he couldn't keep up with the work. Because of that he had to hire staff. Because of that, production increased. Until finally, he owned the biggest pie company in the land.

The story is mechanical, flat, and has no tension or escalation. In short, it has no *drama*. I have no idea who the piemaker is as a person. And said piemaker isn't

changed by her "ordeal". It's just not a very interesting piece of narrative at all.

Good stories are dynamic. Characters face challenges, and are changed by them for better or worse. There is conflict that escalates and releases, characters experience lows and highs, victories and defeats. Sudden (but motivated) changes in direction alter the nature of the challenges as well as escalating them. And set-ups may pay off at varying intervals. They are not merely a linear sequence of outcomes.

And the story spine provides no context to remind you about all that.

Adams created the story spine for improv theater, and that is a discipline unto itself with its own goals and rules. Improv is useful for writers, directors and actors in other media as a great way to approach "riffing" on stories; to open your mind to possibilities rather than second-guessing them or obsessing over details.

But improv techniques can actually be a detrimental way to approach understanding and structuring finished narratives, because the goals of improv theater are different than the goals of narrative drama.

Improv theater *prefers* stories that are single-threaded, wander until the climax, and are propelled through agreement or conflict resolution more than disagreement and conflict.

So I don't personally recommend Adams' story spine as a tool for anything other than riffing, or coming up with the most basic concepts for a story framework.

It's a good way to structure a *pitch*, but not deep enough to guide you through the whole script by itself.

When it comes to structuring a narrative for film (or TV, comics or novels) either of my rephrasings of the story spine above – or any one of the structure models offered by the authors I mentioned – are more helpful simplifications to work from.

## **Rule 5.**

**Simplify. Focus. Combine characters. Hop over detours. You'll feel like you're losing valuable stuff but it sets you free.**

Or, more simply:

Rule 5. Simplify.

This is the piece of advice that is hardest for most storytellers to hear, because simplifying always means cutting good stuff as well as bad.

That last sentence is a rephrasing of writers' "kill your darlings" wisdom that dates back to before Faulkner said it (at least to Arthur Quiller-Couch).

But the idea that you have to lose scenes, characters, and ideas that are *actually good* in order to cut away clutter so the audience can clearly see the core ideas in your story goes back long before that.

And sometimes you do indeed have to cut material you know is awesome in order to do what's right for the story.

Great scenes that play well in isolation but don't add new information, blow the pacing, or otherwise just add dead weight have to go.

Characters that are redundant need to be combined. If two characters interact with and reflect the personality of your protagonist in similar ways, they ought to be the same character.

Screen stories in particular need to be concise. Each new scene and every character should give the audience new information and different perspectives. Redundancies rarely work in screenwriting, and filler may fix pacing issues but the audience will notice that not much is really going on in those scenes and lose interest (even if each individual scene is action-packed).

So unless the scene is moving the story forward, it is a candidate for removal. (Note that I said the story, not just the plot. Emotional scenes that "stall" the plot can

be crucial for certain kinds of stories with a certain kind of pacing.)

This can, of course, be taken too far. Few stories need to be one character delivering a monologue in an empty room. That's too simple.

So you need to be careful about simplification. An excessive focus on economical storytelling can cause you to remove conflict, abridge arcs, and remove subplots until you've got a story that lacks depth. Pacing and tone can also suffer greatly from excessive cutting.

A story that is an endless barrage of action and new information without ever slowing down to consider what just happened can leave your audience overwhelmed and confused. Trimming too much meat along with the fat leads to stories that are just as boring as meandering ones. And a story that's not clever at all is just as grating as one that's too clever.

Where the balance lies is tricky. Audience expectation modulates based on what kind of story is being told, and a writer's (or filmmaker's) style.

What simplification comes down to is separating the story essentials from the unnecessary flourishes. And since every story is different, it is up to the writer to determine what the essentials are. Finding that balance is a big part of the job of storyteller. There's no "trick" to it other than trying things until it works.

Even accounting for style and genre, there are still some more objective ways for a writer to self-assess in this area. It requires knowing your theme, character arc, and ending so you can mark as candidates for removal any scene that isn't adding new information about one or more of those elements, and any character that isn't giving you a different perspective on them.

You also need to be clear about tone and pacing. Some stories call for more contemplative moments, or a larger cast of characters, than others. Setting tone through scenery, and establishing conflict in long, low-impact sequences may be exactly what your Merchant-Ivory-inspired historical romance needs, but it is definitely not what your adrenaline-pumped shoot-em-up is calling for.



What too often leads to trouble here is your own confusion about some essential element of your own story, such as the theme or the tone. You can't hop over detours unless you actually know where you're going, and trying to do so can lead you to cut necessary elements when you think you're being efficient.

It is self-defeating and time wasting to attempt simplification until you are very clear on what your theme, arc, conclusion, tone and pacing actually are. A bloated first draft is nothing to be ashamed of if that's what you need in order to find those elements and be in the position to sensibly simplify your story. Once you know, trim it down in rewriting.

Even baroque styles benefit from simplification, because all that florid writing is still wasted if what it's saying is irrelevant to the purpose of the story.

Your challenge as a writer is to make everything in the story somehow relevant to those story elements, even if subtly so. The best scenes and characters fit the established tone and are relevant to theme, plot and arc simultaneously.

Thus, to make rule five more useful I'll add a criteria for what scenes and characters to cut:

*If a scene or character is not providing new information about or an interesting perspective on something relevant to the theme, plot, or character arc of your story, cut it.*

## **Rule 6.**

**What is your character good at, comfortable with? Throw the polar opposite at them. Challenge them. How do they deal?**

There's a problem with the phrasing of this otherwise excellent advice that can lead storytellers into a common trap.

The sound advice in this statement is "take your characters outside their comfort zones", "challenge your characters and see how they respond", and (implied) "the evolution of how your character responds to challenges is their arc".

But "throw the polar opposite at them", if taken literally, leads to merely sticking your character in a contrarian world. That's flat: there's no build and no nuance. And it denies your audience the opportunity to see the character being good at what they're good at.

Since falling back on mechanical, merely contrarian conflict is indeed a trap storytellers too often fall into when grasping for conflict, it makes the phrasing gaffe all the more unfortunate.

For example, if your character is good at playing the violin, the polar opposite is "not playing the violin". But that is only an interesting challenge for so many beats.

It's also important to keep in mind that this concept is most interesting and useful when it's applied to emotional strengths and weaknesses, rather than skill-based ones.

Forcing a character not to use a skill is mechanical, and will only get you so far. It's a useful kind of conflict to have, but not the central one.

Forcing a character out of their emotional comfort zone and challenging her to change her emotional responses – that's the stuff character arcs are made of.

For example, a character that copes with the world through lies and deceit being forced into a situation where she must tell the truth is an interesting conflict, one that leads to a clear character arc (either to greater truthfulness, or self-destruction if it's a tragedy).

You want to start by throwing your character into exactly what they're good at, to show the audience how good she is at it. The liar character needs to be a great liar who gets (the wrong kind of) rewards for it.

Then you put her in the situation where she needs to not fall back into that comfort zone in order to succeed, and that is the dramatic situation that will force her to change.

But later in the story, as she is changing and embracing that change, you may throw her into a situation where her old ways would be an obvious positive solution to the situation in order to show how moving outside her comfort zone is challenging her.

The conflict in such a scene is between going back to her old ways, finding a way to use that aspect of herself as a tool without getting sucked back into negative aspects her old ways, or how can find an equally successful strategy that doesn't resort to her old ways at all.

Presenting the already-arcing character with a situation where the most expeditious and effective solution to their situation would be to fall back on their old ways, after you've already given her compelling reasons to disavow that behavior, is great drama.

The audience will want to see if your character maintains her emerging new self in light of a situation where falling-back into her emotional comfort zone would be practical and useful, but has already been shown to be a morally, emotionally or philosophically terrible idea.

That deceitful character, for instance, may be put in a situation where she *should* lie, even though she's already seen how much damage her deceitful ways have caused her. How she responds to that is, at the right point in the story, even more interesting than how she responded to a situation where not lying at all was the proper response.

To summarize: what you want is a build from showing the comfort zone, to challenging it with situations where the opposite response is necessary, to further challenging the character with situations where the old response is better. The dramatic conclusion of the arc is how the character faces that challenge without reverting to her old self.

## **Rule 7.**

**Come up with your ending before you figure out your middle. Seriously. Endings are hard, get yours working up front.**

As I also mentioned in the analysis of point three, I agree with this completely. In fact, I take it farther: you should come up with your ending even before you figure out your beginning.

Having your ending figured out up-front gives you a goal to write towards. It's a lot easier to figure out how to get to the end if you know where it is. The most efficient way to approach the task of structuring a story is:

- Start with basic dramatic concept, which necessarily has a set-up and a pay-off (i.e. a beginning and an ending).
- Figure out the details of the ending: the resolution to all the conflicts and the answer to all the questions. This means knowing who the protagonist is, emotionally, at the end of the story, how the central conflict has resolved, and what that means in terms of the thematic statement / philosophical stakes.
- Figure out the beginning: the set-up of the conflict and the positing of all the questions. Establish who the protagonist is at the beginning, what the physical (plot), character (emotional), and thematic (philosophical) stakes are, and what the central conflict is that illustrates these elements.
- Plot the middle as an arc between these two points.

Some of you are probably thinking "but that's so rigid, I can't do that, my ideas just come to me". Mine do, too. That's the "Start with a basic concept" phase. (And a million intermediate "I just had a great idea, I'm gonna try it out!" phases.)

But once you have a basic concept you still have to structure the story. Because even if an entire story from beginning to end comes to you in a flash, it's still just a basic concept. There's still work to be done to turn it

into a *finished* story. And thinking through its structure in the manner suggested (once you've written down the flash of insight) is a good way to save a lot of grief later on.

This approach is also a good way to rethink your story before each rewrite iteration.

How has the basic concept changed? Okay, now is the ending still working? If not, how does changing it change the rest of the story? And so on, for the beginning and middle, until you've thought through the broad changes before diving into the details.

If you always take the time to really decide where you're going, you'll always find a way to get there. It may not be the right way the first time you try, and you may get there and find out you need to be somewhere else – but that's what rethinks and rewrites are for.

## Rule 8.

**Finish your story, let go even if it's not perfect. In an ideal world you have both, but move on. Do better next time.**

The advice to not let the perfect be the enemy of the good is tried and true advice because it's one of the most difficult yet crucial things for any artist to do.

You do have to declare "imperfect" work to be finished in order to get things out there *at all*.

Because there is no such thing as perfection (or an ideal world, for that matter), and the idea that something could ever possibly be perfect is a problematic conclusion that can be drawn from the phrase "even though it may not be perfect".

It may seem obvious that perfection is impossible, and that the statement is implicitly taking that position, but I think it's worth splitting hairs over and digging into a bit because the notion of perfection can be so vexing and damaging to so many artists.

"Perfection paralysis" is very real, and can be artistically crippling. So letting go is a crucial emotional *skill* all artists must cultivate.

People in the industry like to paraphrase French poet Paul Valery and say "a movie is never finished, it's abandoned". This is especially true of any commercial art, because commercial deadlines are not exclusively self-imposed.

But it's ultimately true of all art, because perfection is impossible. Seriously, it's impossible, and if you believe otherwise save yourself a lifetime of heartache and disavow that belief immediately.

The advice is actually trying to make that point, but the phrasing of the last clause has a bit of residual "artists' dream" in it. Saying it "may not" be perfect implies that it also may.

But don't think ill of the advice giver: we all let that dream slip into our thoughts and words about our work at times, and it takes a lot of conscious effort to try to

fight against it. So that's what I'm trying to help with in this article.

Don't even try to imagine an ideal world in which your story is perfect, it's a total waste of time (unless you're writing a story about an ideal world in which stories are perfect, in which case go for it).

It's good to be passionate about your work, but not when it prevents you from having a career. Careers can be launched by a single project, but can't be sustained by one.

If you've only ever worked on one project, you're not ready for a career, because you haven't developed the skills needed to sustain one. (A lifelong passion project isn't a career, and all the advice in this series is for people who want *careers* – devoted dreamers don't need or heed any advice at all, so I don't need to give them any.)

One of my writing partnerships recently dissolved in part due to this very issue. The other participant in the project is overly invested in the project, and his goal is perfection. He won't move on, clear his mind, and broaden his skills and experience by focusing on another project for a while. Instead he keeps getting coverage and consultant feedback, finding out that it's not perfect, then repeating the process of digging into an empty mine.

Naturally any feedback one gets varies from person-to-person, and from read-to-read. That's the nature of feedback. Unless someone is paying you to please them it's irrelevant to try to do so, and trying to "please them all" is impossible; especially while refusing to let go of things most readers say aren't working but which please you.

And trying to please everyone, including you, *is the pursuit of perfection.*

This pursuit often comes as a result of a lack of self-confidence. If you don't believe in your own ability, you don't feel confident enough to move on. You don't trust your own instincts about what the right version of the story is, so you rely on others, which leads to endless thrashing trying to please them all. Maybe you don't even know whether or not you even have another story in you to move on to, so you hide behind the search for the elusive "perfect" version of your current story.

But to succeed as a professional storyteller you need to develop the *skills* to know when the changes you're making are merely making the story different, not better, and to know that's when you've run out of ideas and are finished.

Perfection as a goal is always entwined with self-doubt, second-guessing, and thrashing on changes that aren't necessarily making anything better (often because, out of ignorance, the goal is too vague). This situation it makes you vulnerable to being derailed by advice, no mater how well meaning.

A storyteller's job is to know what story they're trying to tell, and tell it to the best of their ability at the time.

Once you've done that, you're finished. Move on.

(If you feel that you didn't do justice to a story idea you really, really love you can always come back to it later. *Much* later. As in however long it takes until you've genuinely got a fresh perspective and new ideas and aren't just thrashing. That could be years. In the meantime, you have to work on other ideas. That's every artist's job.)



## Rule 9.

**When you're stuck, make a list of what WOULDN'T happen next. Lots of times the material to get you unstuck will show up.**

This rule has a great gem of an idea in it: that having ideas, trying them, and then rejecting the ones that don't work is the right way to find the best idea.

But the terse format has led to a statement that taken at face value can potentially get you stuck...

*Because infinity things wouldn't happen next.*

You could spend the rest of your life writing down an *unbounded* list of what wouldn't happen next. The important issue worth delving into is *how to constrain* this exercise in order to make it useful.

For example, if two awkward teenagers have just bumped into each other in the local record store and you start writing:

1. Everyone sits down and eats some pie.
2. Earth consumed by World Serpent.
3. Close-up shot of someone solving differential equations.
4. etc.

It's going to be a while before you say "oh, that thing that wouldn't happen next is actually the right thing for my story". (Unless you're Luis Buñuel.)

But even if you omit gross non-sequiturs from the list, it's still a potentially very long list if it's merely "what wouldn't happen next" in terms of the plot and overall world mechanics.

Better to ask how the *characters* in the scene wouldn't respond to the situation, to ground your ideas about what wouldn't happen in the personalities of the characters involved:

"What's *the last thing this character would do* when faced with this situation?"

It seems like a subtle difference, but it's not.

Your character's personality, needs and wants, goals and obstacles, and the point in their arc are all fundamental considerations when deciding how events will unfold in your story.

The reason for the original advice is to get you thinking about what your character wouldn't do because, especially when you're stuck, the fallback position is to just muscle-through with the obvious responses.

Defaulting to the obvious is one thing that flattens arcs and makes stories too predictable, and the exploration of what wouldn't happen gets you thinking in about non-obvious solutions.

Once you've drawn a box around your character you then need to think outside that box in order to keep things interesting and stay out of ruts.

By thinking about what wouldn't happen and grounding it in character personality, want, and need, you're really exploring for things that actually *could* happen if you take a more nuanced, complex view of your character and the situation.

You don't want to take actions that are totally out of character, but rather you should challenge the preconceptions you've given your characters and put them in situations where they're forced to make uncomfortable decisions. Create novelty through character-motivated conflict, not false conflict by putting the novelty cart before the character horse.

Note that the decision-driving character isn't always the protagonist, not in every scene. Sometimes the villains and other antagonists need to make decisions that force the protagonist to respond. Of course the protagonist's choices, broadly, should get her into and out of conflict – but the obstacles along the way are most interesting when provided by active antagonists.

For example, if the character needing to make the decision about what happens next is an assassin, and the current situation is that she's found the person she's looking for, the most obvious "what wouldn't she do next" scenario is simply "let the target live".

But in order to make this exercise most fruitful, to help you find the pieces that will enable you to develop a better story, you want to be more specific.

In the assassin example, letting the target simply escape is an option, and so is maiming them but not killing them. However, maybe attempting to befriend the target, falling in love with her, switching sides, or even deciding she is an unworthy adversary are more *interesting* "what wouldn't happen next" choices.

And that's what the point of this exercise should be: to explore specific, seemingly unlikely ways that each of the characters involved actually *could* respond to the current scene.

Each individual character involved has an obvious, cliché response to whatever the current situation is that you've put them into. First find that (if you haven't already), and then challenge yourself to think through all the other "impossible" options based on what you know about your characters and the situation they're in.

The most compelling take on the scene is likely going to involve seemingly "wrong" responses to the situation from each character involved, once which still meet enough expectations about each character as to be grounded and believable.

This is not only a way to un-stick yourself when you're stuck, but also a great way to think about creating better scenes when you are still writing forward but have fallen into a rut and are falling back on generic, obvious scenes.

## **Rule 10.**

**Pull apart the stories you like. What you like in them is a part of you; you've got to recognize it before you can use it.**

This is something you should absolutely do as a general exercise in understanding yourself as a storyteller.

But it's not necessarily useful in the middle of trying to actually tell or write any particular story – unless you're stuck and are looking at similar stories specifically to try to find structural and conceptual ideas to get your own story moving again. (A different use of story analysis than is suggested in the advice. Both are equally valid, just for different purposes.)

In terms of understanding yourself as a storyteller and playing to your own strengths, this exercise will make explicit that the things you like in all the stories are a disparate collection of ideas: tonal elements, plot types, specific plot devices, character tropes, pacing, and so on.

You do need to understand all of those elements, so allow yourself to consider them all. Write down each thing you like as soon as you think of it (you can organize them into types later). Capture your most honest, unfiltered perspective.

You'll discover that what you like won't necessarily be the same from story-to-story. You may like one story because of its pastoral setting and slow pace, and another because it's dark and action-packed.

Each story will "speak to you" in a different way. Studying and understanding the when, how, and why of each element you like, in context, will help you learn to deploy the different elements in your own stories.

You're not trying to rip-off other storytellers, you're trying to understand what you like about your favorite stories and then mix those ideas into your own personal storytelling palette.

The exercise will help you understand what you need to do to write what you want to write, in the way you want to write it. It will also help you determine which of the

elements you want to include in your own stories come naturally to you, and which you will have to work at, since you'll observe that some you've already been doing without thinking much about it and others you haven't.

But there is also a deeper digging that you should be doing when performing this analysis: figuring out the core thematic elements that drew you to the story in the first place.

Doing this for several stories will enable you to discover what my friend Barri Evins calls your "Personal Thematic", a central concept that you will naturally gravitate towards in your own storytelling because it's what you already gravitate towards as a story consumer.

Here are some example core thematics and a filmmaker who shares that thematic (according to my analysis):

- Love Conquers All - Nora Ephron
- The Little Guy Can Stand Up To The Powerful and Corrupt - Frank Capra
- The Powerful and Corrupt Always Crush The Little Guy - Alan Pakula
- Things Are Never What They Seem - M. Night Shyamalan
- Only The Strong Survive - John Carpenter
- Be True To Yourself No Matter What Society Thinks - Tim Burton
- Life's A Bitch And Then You Die - Alex Cox

Not every single one of those filmmakers' films is necessarily a strict embodiment of exactly and exclusively that thematic, but elements in each one of their films draw upon this core idea.

This repetition of central ideas is inevitable, because personal thematic equals worldview, which is an interpretation of what it means to live that comes from individual personality and style.

And while one's worldview gets refined and expanded over time, it rarely completely changes, which means the original idea always shows up somewhere in some form.

Embracing your own personal thematic doesn't mean being formulaic or redundant: there are vast numbers of ways to embody any given idea into a specific story. Rather, it

means knowing yourself so you can use your own personality and style to your advantage by developing your *writers' voice*.

Of course your personal thematic does become a refuge when you're lost in or stuck on a story, and can lead to redundancies. But if you make yourself conscious of your thematic, you can also police yourself against this more effectively, because you know what to look for.

Ultimately what this advice is saying is that understanding what you like as a story consumer will enable you to become a better storyteller through focusing on your strengths and strengthening your weaknesses.

## **Rule 11.**

**Putting it on paper lets you start fixing it. If it stays in your head, a perfect idea, you'll never share it with anyone.**

This fantastic advice may seem trivially obvious, but in practice "perfection paralysis" is one of the greatest enemies of all artists. It comes up more than once in this series because it's a difficult problem for many artists to overcome.

It's the root of pithy sayings like "don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good", which is basically what this rule is a half-rephrasing of (since that saying also means don't *overwork* something trying to attain an unattainable goal you've fixated on in your mind, which is also to be avoided).

But this idea of not fixating on perfection also hints at another truth, which is to take the usual advice a step further and tell yourself:

*"Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the bad."*

Because in order to create the good, and then the great, you first have to get the bad version out.

Then you have to start fixing it.

Because, as Hemingway said, "The first draft of anything is shit." Anyone who tells you otherwise is either lying, or has had one of those rare moments of perfect confluence of inspiration and preparedness that leads them to think that sort of thing is replicable. It isn't, so get over it and start loving the rewriting process because "all writing is rewriting" (as about a zillion people have said).

Not letting the perfect be the enemy of the bad is just as important as not letting it be the enemy of the good. You have to fail before you succeed, and it's fear of failure that prevents people from trying.

A number of my friends have attended the venerable art school CalArts. Many have told of a drawing professor (perhaps apocryphal, since nobody seems to remember his name) who would tell students in his (required) class:

"you've all got five thousand bad drawings in you, and in this class you will get every one of them out of you".

Rather than being stuck doing zero or one drawings, scripts, songs or whatever your art is – just let some of your output be bad.

Of course you then need to try to fix it, because revision is the key to all arts.

But sometimes you can't fix it. Sometimes that will mean abandoning a great, seemingly "perfect" idea because it's actually not good idea (or not a good idea *for you*).

Or it may mean coming back to it later, when you have the experience to make it great. But if you move on in the meantime at least you'll be working, and that means you'll be improving.

Where do we get ideas of perfection from, anyway? They come from how we perceive how the outside world perceives us relative to others. In other words: perfection paralysis comes from comparing yourself to others.

I happen to be pals with several A-list screenwriters and several A-list musicians. Their work is inspiring to me. It makes me want to do better. Not to copy them, but to earn and maintain the status of professional peer (not their friend – friendship is not earned, its given).

It's when I compare myself *directly to them* that I can get stuck.

If I find myself thinking that I can't write this script until I am guaranteed I can make it read as if Mr. X wrote it (or record this song until I know it'll sound like Mr. Y produced it, or shoot this film until I know it'll look like Mr. Z shot it), I have to stop and lecture myself that such thinking will lead me to never do anything.

I can't do it the same way they would *because I'm not them*.

I may or may not be just as good as they are at some or all elements of the craft. I might even be more experienced at some aspects of the discipline. But I'm not actually them.

All our ideas of perfection are created by synthesizing the aspects of the people who inspire us that we find



appealing, and often precisely on the things they bring to the discipline that we're not good at, making it all the more difficult to achieve this perfect ideal.

Striving for perfection is self-sabotaging because it's falling into the trap of not letting yourself work until you've already "perfected" exactly the parts of your craft that you find most challenging – something you can't possibly do until you let yourself work!

So let yourself make bad work. Then revise, revise, revise. Even after all that, some of what you let out into the world still won't be your best work.

Not only will your early work be, on average, worse than your later work as you get more experienced, but sometimes later work is also a misstep.

Because everyone is always learning, and you only do that by trying things that might fail. Which is anything at all. Anything you do may fail, even if you're very experienced.

Just look at baseball (it's true, the only essential rule of being a writer is that you must compare things to baseball).

Teams play over 150 games per season. That's a lot of experience even in just one season. The 1906 Chicago Cubs won 77% of their games – the best baseball winning percentage ever. But they lost the World Series, along with 33% of their regular season games. And only fourteen teams have won 70% of the time or better in the last hundred and forty years.

Ted Williams reached base during 48% of his at-bats, for the best on-base record ever. That means Ted Williams, the greatest threat at the plate in baseball history, failed more than half the time (52%).

An average major league player fails to reach base 65% of the time. A 65% *failure* rate is considered a good record for a solid professional career as a hitter.

Every time you step up to the plate in any discipline you risk failure. The professionals are the ones who keep going back to the plate and working it. The greats are the ones who never give up, learn from every mistake, and with a

combination of perseverance, ability, and great luck manage to go beyond.

Of course there are big differences between sports and the arts, but the basic idea is the same: you have to risk failing in order to get up there at all, and when you do fail, keep stepping back up until you get a hit. (But make sure to keep studying, practicing, and refining your craft in the meantime.)

## Rule 12.

**Discount the first thing that comes to mind. And the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th – get the obvious out of the way. Surprise yourself.**

Getting the obvious out of the way and allowing yourself to explore and try out non-obvious choices is absolutely the right thing to do.

But at first glance this advice appears to contradict Rule #11. *Thinking* through these choices and discounting them out-of-hand before trying them is a way to get stuck thrashing around trying to find the thing that surprises yourself rather than *working* your way to it.

I've fallen into this very trap and become totally stuck, more than once. Trying to think up an idea that's maximally new and surprising rather than just going with what seems obvious but works, and then refining it until I find the novel idea, has driven more than one of my projects right into the "for when I have a fresh perspective" drawer.

What you need to do is *try* the first thing that comes to mind, then try some other things and see what works best.

Never completely discount anything offhand. If the idea had no merit to you whatsoever, it wouldn't have come to mind. Get it down and let it settle. Revise it. Play with it. That's how you get it out of the way.

Then try the second, third, fourth, and so on until you find the idea that works best for what you're trying to accomplish. Do this quickly, as an exercise. Write down every idea and try the ones that seem most spontaneous, or clever, or interesting. Chose the ideas you discount by testing them (even if that part's just in your head) and proving to yourself that they're not right.

Sometimes the result of trying all those ideas will be verification that the first idea was right all along. That's not wasted time, that's doing the work to make sure the idea is right. And trying those other ideas may change elements of the idea you *do* go with in ways you wouldn't have thought of if you just ratholed into that one idea.

Another thing to consider when taking this advice is that "new and surprising" can also send you off the rails if you're not careful. Not *everything* needs to be new and surprising.

My pal John August came to Pixar and gave a talk about "Genre and Expectation" in which he correctly pointed out that genre expectations mostly need to be met, and that new and surprising elements of a story need to be carefully chosen and placed in order to be surprising without taking the audience out of the story by failing to meet expectations too often.

Audiences generally want only one or two big surprises. So if you pack your story with nothing but surprisingly novel ideas, it will be intellectually intriguing and perhaps respected for its vision – but it won't necessarily be *emotionally satisfying* and find a wide audience.

There's nothing wrong with experimental, visionary work – in fact it's necessary to do some in order to challenge yourself and the world. I love experimental work, and do a lot of it myself.

But in doing so you need to be cognizant that's the kind of project you're creating, and set your expectations (and budgets) accordingly.

Because on average audiences, frankly, want interesting (not necessarily likable) *characters* more than they want interesting *ideas*.

Of course we all strive to have both great characters and great ideas, but stories with great characters in simple, mostly obvious (i.e. relatable) stories are usually more endearing than stories propelled by novel ideas alone. In other words:

*Character wins over cleverness.*

Letting the goal of surprising yourself at every turn rule your creative life can lead you into deadlock. There is simply no way you'll have a non-obvious idea for every turn in every story (or every riff in every song, or every drawing, etc.)

As I discussed in the rule #11 analysis, it's better to be doing bad work than no work at all.

If you're disciplined about revision and open-minded about giving the novel ideas a go when they do occur, then starting with the first thing that comes to mind is just the first step towards the right thing – whether or not that right thing is novel and surprising or “merely” a personalized take on the more obvious idea.

## **Rule 13.**

### **Give your characters opinions.**

**Passive/malleable might seem likable to you as you write, but it's poison to the audience.**

Definitely do this. But don't just give your characters opinions, give them drives, desires and goals that make them *take action*. The actions of a flawed character cause conflict and consequences. Conflict and its consequences is the root of all drama.

Passive main characters are the kiss of death for many stories, especially "interesting world" plot-driven stories where the storyteller is more enamored of the world than the characters.

In such stories the storyteller shoves the protagonist through the story with the hand of circumstance rather than letting the protagonist's drive propel her.

Weak characters lower the stakes and are less engaging than characters whose drives and decisions are both what gets them into trouble and out of it.

Audiences enjoy stories about characters that are driven. Driven characters are interesting, which is even more important than characters that are likable or sympathetic.

In fact, the desire to make characters sympathetic is often a root cause of weak, malleable characters.

Writers assume that characters that are victims of circumstance, duped by villains, or otherwise shoved into trouble are more sympathetic. Perhaps they are, but sympathy isn't the most important emotion for an audience to feel towards a main character.

It's more important that audiences feel *compelled* by characters than that they like them.

In a great story even a character who is pushed around by the world, and is a victim of circumstance, has some goal or desire that is being thwarted by those external actions. And even the most beaten-down protagonists must take some

action to try to change the situation if you want the audience to believe they deserve to win.

Of course, at first the protagonist will fail to solve their problems since audiences want to see, and drama requires, that characters fail to resolve the central conflict before they ultimately succeed (if they ever do).

Characters with strong viewpoints who make decisive decisions towards their goals (however flawed those goals may be) are whose stories audiences want to hear.

For example, in the biopic "The Iceman" Richie is a repugnant character, very unlikable and only marginally sympathetic. But his compulsion and the consequences it has on his life make for an interesting story. It's an unpleasant story, but one that keeps its audience engaged.

Also, don't confuse the concept of strong opinions and drive with one particular genre, tone or pacing.

Driven protagonists aren't just for action-oriented genre stories. A great romantic comedy like "As Good As It Gets", or even a "slow" (and wonderful) period romantic drama like "Oscar and Lucinda", also has characters with strong opinions and drives. Their goals and desires are "small" and humanistic rather than epic and mythic, but they are what drive the characters to action all the same.

This need for active characters goes beyond just "passive characters are boring". That's true, but more importantly active characters are necessary because their behavior gives the audience a *context* through which to understand the story at all.

Because the only thing that makes any story at all relatable to an audience is the characters. No circumstance or environment is especially compelling to us outside the context of human emotional experience.

Deep space, "The Matrix", or the ocean floor are all intellectually fascinating environments. But in stories we generally populate those places with people whose emotions we care about. And even if we chose to populate them with space aliens, pandas or race cars, we anthropomorphize them in order to enable a human audience to relate to them.

Someone without a strong, comprehensible point of view is confusing to us because we can't ground her responses to the events of the story.

To feel for someone we need to know how they are feeling, and if we don't know their ideas about the world and see the actions they take to put those ideas into action, we don't really have a context for knowing how they feel about the things that are happening to them.

This is not a formula or a trick, it's cognitive science.

Audiences want to see characters experiencing emotions because that's what we're hard-wired to find satisfying. But unless the audience knows a character's worldview, drives and desires they can't contextualize and interpret the character's behavior and know how they *feel* for her.



## **Rule 14.**

**Why must you tell THIS story? What's the belief burning within you that your story feeds off of? That's the heart of it.**

What this is getting at is theme. Though Sam Goldwyn infamously (and perhaps apocryphally) said "If you have a message, call Western Union", it is the theme, or message, that gives a story its underlying, unifying meaning.

What Goldwyn was (probably) complaining about was clumsily overt messaging that comes off as preachy or talking down to the audience. In other words the storyteller's job is to keep the subtext out of the text, and let the characters convey the story's message in a way that seems natural to who those characters are.

The reason why you want to tell a particular story – it's theme or message or heart – unifies all the other elements of the story around a central question.

In it's most general form the central question always is: "is the protagonist's core belief true or false?"

You then populate the story with characters that have different opinions about that question – the dreamer, the cynic, the realist, and all the mixtures thereof. The story drama comes from testing the belief hypothesis repeatedly, in ways that legitimately leave the question open for the audience until the end.

Your choices of characters, what their motivations are, and what their arcs are all come from that central theme.

So while you should solve *problems* with the story based on character motivations and arc directly, because that will give the most natural feeling results for the audience. If you've done your job as storyteller and have populated your story with people and situations that (in different ways) relate to the central question, such solutions necessarily indirectly incorporate your theme.

For example, if you are writing a story where you want to say that "love conquers all", then the central question is "will love prevail over all obstacles?" and your ultimate answer in the resolution is "yes".

Your main character would either be seeking a wrong kind of love and need to find the right kind, or believe seeking love is nonsense and have to be convinced its the greatest thing in the world (basically).

Then the fairy tale romance believer and the jilted "realist" would serve as the angel and devil on the main character's shoulders (though each is actually a bit of both, in a good story). Ultimately, in the resolution, the main character would end up with Mr. or Ms. Right.

It seems simplistic because it is. And it is because it's a *framework*.

A complicated framework is very hard to construct and build upon, and generally ends up with everything that sits on top of it being unstable (i.e. muddled or overly analytical or flat-out confused).

Better to have a very simple, rock solid foundation and layer complexities on top of it where appropriate. Making your foundational elements complicated won't necessarily make you seem like a smarter, better, or more unique artist. Start simple and create richness through how your characters complicate a simple idea because of their flaws and drives.

At UCLA they say "simple story, complex characters", but even if you have a complex, plot-driven story you still want a strong unifying theme that makes every character and every moment relevant to the *why* of the story rather than being "just business" that only matters to the *how* of the story (no matter how clever and entertaining that business may be).

Even long, seemingly unfocused works like James Joyce's "Ulysses" generally do have a central question lurking in there somewhere, beneath all the layers. (In those kinds of works it's usually some variation upon the very ambitious question "what is the meaning of life?", and usually after all the deep soul searching is over the answer is a very unambitious "to be lived as best one can, day by day".)

Every simple to state question has infinite ways to personify perspectives on it in characters, dig deeper into its subtleties, and find story richness in exploring its nuances. That's where story depth comes from.

Having a clear, concise answer to the question "why am I telling this story?" in the form of a thematic statement will enable you to always "dig deep" in the right places and stay on-point, and that will help you keep things interesting and worthwhile for the audience.

## **Rule 15.**

**If you were your character, in this situation, how would you feel? Honesty lends credibility to unbelievable situations.**

This is another one that seems obvious, but even great writers sometimes slip-up and cheat their audiences with dishonest character moments when they forget to *consciously and constantly* keep track of and reassess every scene based on who the characters really are.

And there are, of course, subtleties to consider here which will make the advice even more useful

The phrase "honesty lends credibility to unbelievable situations" is getting at the idea that you can earn a lot of willing suspension of disbelief, and get away with various "internal world logic" errors, so long as the scene is *emotionally honest* for the characters involved.

That is the right idea, but if you abuse this too much the audience will get overwhelmed with unbelievable nonsense and stop caring, even if the characters are compelling and emotionally honest.

I'm referring here to unbelievability internal to the story world, violations of the world logic that you've established. You can get away with a greater degree of "that couldn't happen in the real world" unbelievability by being emotionally compelling.

Emotional engagement causing the audience to accept the unbelievable as believable is, in fact, the reason why all forms of storytelling other than strict realism work at all. Characters' emotional responses to situations enable the audience to understand and care about a fictionalized world and its unrealistic rules.

Relatable character emotion also adds believability to worlds and situations we consider "inherently" believable. After all, stories are artificial constructs created by the storyteller. All you get "for free" as a storyteller is a general cultural context, which is not enough to make anything beyond the most mundane situations believable. Everything else you make believable through how your characters react.

Audiences need to be brought into story worlds and situations with character context not just world context, even if the world is one they know. If it's a "true story", people expect errors and embellishments, and you need to convince them of the veracity of your claims mainly through appeal to emotion (which is why it's so easy to lie about true events – whatever *feels* true becomes true).

There is actually no "free believability". At best there is cultural shorthand for context. You still have to make all the specific details you add to that context ring true, and relatable character emotion is the way to do this.

If the audience feels that the characters in a story are really engaged with and invested in their world, they will start to believe the unbelievable.

But the situation itself must also be honest – it must be a thematic, credible (not necessarily real-world plausible, but believable within the story world) situation that feels like a natural situation in which the emotions being expressed make sense.

There's also the idea of putting yourself in your character's shoes, which is how that first phrase may read upon first glance.

This, of course, seems like perfect advice since when we're always told to imagine ourselves in "someone else's shoes" when trying to understand their feelings and perspectives. However, thinking about character development in this way is misleading because:

*You're trying to do something different from "putting yourself in someone else's shoes" when you're creating a character.*

When you "put yourself in someone else's shoes" you're trying to imagine how you would respond if you were in their situation. It's a thought experiment in mirror empathy, intended to get you to realize that other person's response to the situation they are in is understandable.

In order to have some diversity in your characters, you don't want them all to be you (it's inescapable that some part of your *worldview* will slip into every character, but you don't want them all to be nothing but slices of your personality).

In creating a character you're creating a carefully crafted personality construct, a model of a nonexistent person. It's more profitable to imagine the ways your character would respond to a situation that are different from your own responses along the same axes of personality that their core character is different from yours – even if it doesn't seem empathetic.

For example, if your character is a soldier scouting enemy territory and you're a dog lover, your soldier character will still snap the neck of the guard dog that threatens to give away his presence. If you put yourself in that situation, you might waste time trying to sneak around the dog or knock it unconscious – but that's not the right approach for a professional soldier character.

You actually have to imagine how your character would feel based on the core personality traits and goals you've given that character, not just try to find actions for them you find empathetic (unless, of course, that particular character is one you empathize with).

Ultimately what this rule is about is driving the story forward through character reactions to situations which result in emotionally consistent characters, not giving them responses that are merely convenient actions to take for you to make each individual scene "work" (mechanically).

If your characters' actions lack emotional honesty the audience will stop caring about them, at which point they also stop caring about your plot no matter how "clever" it may be.

## **Rule 16.**

**What are the stakes? Give us reason to root for the character. What happens if they don't succeed? Stack the odds against.**

This particular rule is so essential it probably should be rule #1, because it is the most character-centric statement of the idea: *"what is the story about?"*

What the character will lose if she is unable to overcome all obstacles, internal and external, is the main tension line of the entire story. It's this impending possibility of loss that will make an audience sympathetic to a character, even one who is a bit of a bastard. The stakes are the core of the story, the palpable outcome of failing to resolve the central question.

Stacking the odds against the protagonist makes the audience not only feel more empathy towards her, but it also makes a victory feel earned (or, in the case of a tragedy, a failure feel justified).

A common question producers and other professionals ask about stories is "why this particular character in this particular situation at this particular time?" What they're really asking is "what are the stakes?"

The protagonist's flaw, her wrong choices, the actions of any external opponents, and all the external circumstances should be obstacles that block or divert the protagonist from resolving the central question in their favor. Internal obstacles – character flaws and the bad decisions they lead to – are also crucial.

Yet the protagonist, however flawed, still needs to be deeply invested in her own success so that the audience cares not only about that victory itself, but also about her being able to change in the ways necessary to win.

So the more the protagonist has to lose, the more the audience will get invested in her fate. And the greater the obstacles to success, the more likely she is to lose.

Each step the character takes away from success, and towards the doom scenario, raises the stakes and makes the audience more excited about getting to the resolution. So

does broadening the risk, a common, melodramatic example of which is the protagonist discovering that not only will she die if she fails, but "life as we know it will cease".

Active, intelligent opponents are usually the most compelling obstacles, and they work best when they have opposing stakes. Opponents need to be equally as invested in their own success as the protagonist is, and therefore determined to bring about the protagonist's failure in order to achieve their own goals.

Most importantly, the opponents need to have the advantage. If the advantage is too great, the protagonist needs to acquire allies in order to make a successful outcome (if there is one) believable, but it's far worse for the dramatic tension if the opponents are too weak to pose a credible threat to the protagonist.

This is a particular problem with "hack n' slash" action films where sheer numbers of dumb, aimless, weak opponents tries (usually quite unsuccessfully) to make-up for an intelligent, driven, strong central opponent.

Quantity alone doesn't make the odds greater, opposing strength does. If a single soldier in a Sherman Tank goes up against a thousand Roman legionnaires, the audience won't be terribly concerned about that tanker's fate despite the number of opponents.

But if a single Roman legionnaire goes up against a squad of Sherman Tanks, the odds are very much stacked against the Roman and an audience will be intrigued to find out if he'll somehow prevail (or, given most audience members' exposure to story trends in our culture, *how* he'll prevail).

It's also important that how the character overcomes these seemingly insurmountable odds be motivated by that character's personality, take advantage of her strengths, and be plausible -- not necessarily realistic, but believable and consistent with the story world you've created.

Making the character's victory (or defeat) too sudden, spurious, or simple will undermine all the tension you've worked to create up to that point, wiping it all away in one bad choice. The victory moment must be a struggle, and



a narrow victory is generally more sympathetic than an overwhelming one (of course there are exceptions).

Keeping that tension going until the very moment of the protagonist's victory will enable the audience to stay on board with the character until her plight is ultimately resolved. The moment things start going overwhelmingly in favor of the protagonist there's only a moment left before the audience will just sigh and say "okay, I get it, she's going to prevail".

And if the protagonist will be defeated in the end, the audience will feel the tragedy more acutely if there was a moment of true hope she might prevail rather than just mowing her down with overwhelming opposing forces.

Ultimately the stakes are the heart of both story and character, and without clearly stating what they are the audience will become lost and disaffected.

Even worse, if you don't know what the stakes are you will end up creating a story that is muddled and just kills time until its conclusion.

This is why a lot of writing advice says to start at the end: all the conflict in the story flows backwards from the resolution of the stakes question. Knowing the conclusion of the story and how the protagonist and opponent are each changed in the end will enable you to make sure that every moment in the story is a building block towards resolving the stakes, not "just business".

## Rule 17.

**No work is ever wasted. If it's not working, let go and move on - it'll come back around to be useful later.**

This is great motivational advice. It may seem pithy, but ignore it at your own peril. Being unable to let go has caused many an artist to never progress.

However, there is also a bit of "artists' dream" thinking that has slipped into the *phrasing*, through no fault of the advice giver (we all do it). I'll pick this apart so that you can approach taking this advice with "the spirit of the law, not the letter".

Work is never wasted because in order to find the right ideas for your story you have to *try out* ideas on the page and then refine, excise, and add to them.

As has come up before in this series, the best ideas come from trying whatever ideas feel right at the time and then seeing if they work, not by trying the first thing you think will work and then sticking with it forever.

To paraphrase the famous writing-specific quote so that it applies to all phases of all arts:

*All vision is revision.*

Furthermore practicing your craft, whether it's writing or another art, is experience.

And experience doesn't come from (thinking you are) getting it right every time. Experience comes from learning to identify when something you're doing isn't working, troubleshooting the reasons why, and trying out options to solve the problem.

You absolutely must learn to figure out what isn't working, let it go, and move on. And you need to really let go even though it won't necessarily come back around to be useful later.

Lying to yourself about what letting go means, which many writers and artists are prone to do, isn't very helpful. It can lead to getting lost in thoughts about when and where

that favorite excised idea is going to come back around and be useful. It may never do so.

Holding out hope that all ideas are good ideas if only you find the right place for them is a waste of time. If the idea is the right idea for some other section of the piece, or some future draft, or even some entire other story – you'll think of it then.

If it isn't ever useful again anywhere else, it still wasn't wasted work. It was something you needed to try in order to find what was right and there's no shame or waste in that.

Of course, many artists keep discarded (or "stalled") idea bins. I do. But the trick is to approach how you think about the contents of that bin in the right way. Those are just scraps that might be useful, or inspirational, sometime when you get stuck or are just "riffing".

There should be no self-imposed mandate to use them "someday", and no feeling you wasted your time creating them if they never emerge from the bin. Some things just aren't meant to be.

Keep the ideas flowing, and don't worry about what winds up in the bin. Whether or not it comes back to be useful someday, you're still a better artist for having gone through the process of creating it in the first place.

## **Rule 18.**

### **You have to know yourself: the difference between doing your best & fussing. Story is testing, not refining.**

Knowing yourself is absolutely essential. It's the difference between doing your best and not just fussing, but ultimately getting stuck and giving up.

The difference between doing your best and fussing over small details at the cost of the big picture can be very subtle, and while it ultimately does all come down to knowing yourself there are some general warning signs to look out for.

If you've spent a lot more time than average on a single page, that probably is a sign that you've gotten mired in the details (if you haven't figured out your own average yet, more than an hour at a sitting is a good starter rule of thumb for "too much time on one page").

When this happens, just keep going. If you haven't solved it in the usual amount of time then what you most likely need is time spent *not* thinking about the problem consciously rather than more time ratholing.

It's also a problem if you're rewriting dialog and description over and over to "perfection," or any other sort of "polish" work, when you still haven't finished the overall story changes you've identified as being necessary for the draft at hand.

You can make all those details "perfect" once the character arcs, thematic threads, and plot mechanics are firing on all cylinders.

Even dialog and action just need to be "the right idea" in order to work out those high-level mechanics to the point where the story actually is engaging, emotional and "right".

The nuanced, subtextual writing can come in revisions once the big picture is painted.

If you're "just thinking" for a longer than average time, then you're probably worried about doing something "wrong"

with a story point you're not sure about. You need to just do the wrong thing and fix it later.

When you're stuck, since you've already written something for all the previous parts of the story there's a good chance that something that comes later will inspire the solution to what you're fussing over. But you can't find that thing unless you write past the current problem and get into the rest of the story.

My mantra about this is "be wrong early and often". You can't fix something in revision if there's nothing to revise.

And finally, if you find yourself spending more than a moment on time of day, character names, what people are wearing, location dressing details, models of cars or guns or computers, or anything very specific like that – you're totally stuck, and have to force yourself to reengage with the hard work of making *story* progress that you're avoiding.

None of those kinds of details really matter *at all*, they're just an amusing distraction from the hard stuff. (The rare exception is when it's crucial, and I mean "the story completely falls apart without it" crucial, not "nailing all the details makes me feel smart" pseudo-crucial.)

The second part of this piece of advice deserves to have been a separate rule, since it's an idea unto itself. Even if you know yourself and understand the difference between doing your best and fussing, you can still run into trouble. Because even if you're doing it well, and doing it efficiently, you can still end up doing the wrong thing at the wrong time.

Packing the idea into half a Tweet also led to a phrasing that can really lead inexperienced storytellers into trouble because they don't necessarily understand what a Pixar person means when they say "story". It's using a shorthand with implied meaning that you may not all get, so I'll unpack it for you in order to help you make best use of the advice.

This phrase uses a distinction between "story" meaning story development and "production" meaning implementation in which those involved in the "story" process are creating

all the high-level elements (broad characterizations, themes, arcs, plot points, sequences), and those involved in the "production" process are refining the details (dialog, action, settings, moments and scenes).

"Story" meaning "story development" is the process of conceiving, structuring, sketching (drawn or written), and testing ideas. During that phase of the process, everything is rough and the few details added in are intended only to support the main ideas, and everything is subject to change at any moment through inspiration or analysis.

So therefore what's meant by "story is testing, not refinement" is that when you're working out the basic structures, themes, and characterizations of your piece you have to focus on the big picture and test ideas in rough form to see if they work at all, not get caught-up in the details by refining the details to "perfection".

But once the story starts to lock into place, the process of refinement starts. Dialog, description and action are rewritten and restaged, sets are designed and dressed, and so on.

This "iterative refinement" approach, working from rough to fine, is actually an ideal approach for every phase of every artform. Within film production, for example, all the different artistic disciplines use the sketch first, test and review, decide, then refine approach for creating their own work.

Getting into the refinement details during the story development process bogs you down and often makes you precious about the refined ideas, which gets in the way of testing ideas. In story development you need to not be precious about anything, because you'll be throwing away even great ideas that just don't work for that particular story.

Finding the problems before you dig into the details makes it much easier to make the necessary revisions, not just because you won't be precious about things, but because sticking to the big picture first means there will also be fewer dangling threads to track across each revision.

Once you get into rewriting, then you need to stay focused on only what's most important for your story *even during*

*refinement*. If it's not important to the *story*, it's just taking up space that should be used by something that is.

Overall the crux of this advice is this: figure out the overarching structural and thematic elements of your story first, and test those in a non-precious sketch form until you've found something that seems to work best. Then refine it. And always focus on what's important, the other details are just clutter.

## **Rule 19.**

**Coincidences to get characters into trouble are great; coincidences to get them out of it are cheating.**

There is a gem of excellent advice in this rule: in drama everything works best if protagonist motivation, choice and action drives her into and out of trouble. Period.

All coincidences are suboptimal. Yet they also appear, to a certain degree, in every story.

When they're used to get characters into trouble they're simply more forgivable because the audience gets wrapped-up in the new conflict and consequences. When they are used to get a character out of trouble the result is a deflation of tension and the audience having time to pause and reflect upon how cheated they feel that a tense moment was resolved by fate rather than character choice.

Coincidences to get characters into trouble will be forgiven so long as the audience is emotionally invested in the character, since that's what will get them on board with the new conflict and less concerned with how it arose.

But you can't do this too clumsily, too often, or worst of all in a way that undermines the audience's interest in the character.

Like any illusionist if you show your hand too clearly, the audience will see the trick where otherwise they might just relax and enjoy the show.

Glaringly clumsy coincidences even to get the character *into* trouble are the stuff of parody, such as having a hero say "I wish the cops would get here!" and a second later a ring of cops rushes in and points their guns at the hero rather than the villain. In that scene the writer did use coincidence to put the hero into peril and increase the stakes, but in such an obvious way the audience will see the trick rather than enjoy the magic.

Likewise, if every turn of the tension ratchet is done by accident, the audience will soon tire of it.



People empathize with someone who gets in trouble because, try as they may to do the right thing, their actions keep blowing up in their faces.

Audiences are generally less enthusiastic about someone who is passively dragged into conflict by other characters' actions and accidents of time and place. The very rare exceptions involve clever uses of that trope to comedic or paranoiac effect (and even then, the audience still wants at least some of those "coincidences" to be the result of the bungling protagonist trying to find a way out of the "consequence machine" they've gotten trapped in).

Even if you're using your coincidences sparingly, a poor choice regarding the specifics of a coincidence can undermine what the audience most likes about the character and cause them to disengage. This is especially true if the choice undermines a character personality trait rather than merely a skill.

For example, if you have a character who you've been setting up as a braggart, and then put them in a situation where their bragging should get them into more trouble but instead you push them into trouble through a coincidence -- you've just blown it.

Let's say you have a tough talking petty crook who gets called before a mafia boss. The audience *wants* his bragging about his toughness to get him into some kind of trouble here, such as the boss taking his brag at face value and sending him on a hit.

But if you choose instead to have the boss give a hitman a job and say "take one of my boys" just as your petty crook walks in, and the hitman says "you, come on" -- you just gave the moment a hapless character deserves to a braggart.

By doing so you've undermined an interesting trait that engaged your audience with the character. Not paying off that character set-up probably just lost them for good, even though you only did it once.

Coincidences to get characters out of trouble are cheating *especially* if the coincidence precludes character driven action.

If a character is randomly ambushed by an armed opponent, scrambles to take cover, is chased down, cornered, and then

before your hero can even draw her weapon the assailant is hit by a bus -- that's not satisfying. The hero didn't get to take any action, not even something that led them into the coincidental situation.

But if a character takes an action that leads to a coincidental situation, you're getting back into forgivable territory. This starts to feel more like good luck than total coincidence.

In fact, set-ups and pay-offs are basically just chains of coincidence: earlier in the film you establish something seemingly unrelated to the rest of the plot, and later it happens to be exactly what the protagonist needs.

For example, let's say in a cop thriller you establish that there's a beekeeping convention in the downtown convention center this coming weekend.

Later, coincidentally, the hero finds out that a villain is allergic to bees.

Later still, as the villain is closing in on the hero and seems about ready to win the hero remembers the convention, and in a last ditch effort to escape certain defeat she diverts the action into the convention center. She kicks over the bee boxes, and lets the bees do her work for her.

It's coincidence that there were bees and a bee-allergic villain in the same cop story at the same time to begin with, never mind that the action happened to take place on bee convention weekend. But the audience will (if it's done with enough finesse) potentially consider it clever rather than coincidental because a *character choice* closed the loop.

Set-ups and payoffs are one of a dramatist's greatest tools. Getting away with the coincidences needed to make them work is all about how much care and finesse you use in constructing them.

You really can only ever get away with coincidences when a notable protagonist choice has led her straight into them. Though it's often better to have choice and action lead to *direct* consequence instead, sometimes a clever, well-constructed chain of motivated coincidence works best.

Like with coincidences to get a character into trouble, the ones to get them out are most egregious if they're too obvious, too frequent, or poorly timed and staged such that they undermine character moments.

The most infamous example of this happens when the clumsy coincidence comes during the conclusion of the story, a problem so egregious yet so common it has its own term of art: Deus Ex Machina.

The term translates to "God In The Machine" and basically means "some invisible external actor (ultimately, the writer) solves all the protagonist's problems for them".

Many otherwise interesting stories have been completely ruined by Deus Ex Machina conclusions in which the main character is removed from the central action of the climax by outside actors solving everything for them.

A particularly infamous and frustrating example of this is the computer entity actually named Deus Ex Machina in "The Matrix Revolutions": a literal God in the literal machine swoops in and solves all of Neo's problems for him.

When the coincidence actually resolves the entire story, a nod towards character action motivating it just isn't good enough. Drama is dramatic because protagonists save the day when God can't get the job done (or die trying, in a tragedy), *not* the other way around.

In essence, what this rule is trying to say is that your protagonists' motivations, choices and actions should always be what gets them into and out of trouble, and any coincidences involved need to be motivated by those decisions.

## **Rule 20.**

**Exercise: take the building blocks of a movie you dislike. How'd you rearrange them into what you DO like.**

This is a great exercise that I do all the time, often in a group session with the filmmaking team I've been working with for the last three years, in order to hone overall story analysis and troubleshooting skills.

It's not a rule or piece of advice specific to defining your own working approach, or solving a common creative problem, but it's a fun and informative exercise to do whenever you see a "bad" film.

Picking a part a movie you don't like and trying to fix it makes you realize what you do and don't like about story, what works and doesn't work for you, and how you troubleshoot those things.

It's a great exercise because it gets you thinking about editing, which is something a lot of writers and directors don't think enough about. (Though, frankly, writers shouldn't think about it at all until they've written the first draft that gets all the ideas down so there's something to work with in editing.)

Figuring out what's working and what isn't, and what you think needs to be taken out, rearranged, or added in order to fix problems and enhance the drama is an absolutely essential filmmaking skill.

Another great benefit to this exercise is that by trying to troubleshoot someone else's film you begin to realize how difficult it can be to find solutions, which will teach you patience when it comes to analyzing and fixing your own stories.

But there are many other equally useful story and writing exercises out there that get you thinking about other neglected aspects of the craft. It seems a shame to limit it to this one, so here are some other enjoyable, useful exercises that will help you refine story skills:

- Open the newspaper and write a story about the first article you find. What things about the original

article that grabbed your attention when they were real did you have to modify in order to make the dramatic fiction work?

- Take a movie you *do* like, study a scene between your two favorite characters, and then write an entirely different scene between those two characters. In order to find each character's "voice" how much did you have to pay attention to word choice, cadence, and tone, versus point of view and personality?
- Write down everything you think you know about your favorite character from your favorite movie. Then watch it and see where you learn that information: what's in the set-up, what is explicitly stated in dialog later, and what you've inferred from actions and "reading between the lines" of the dialog.
- Take a movie you *do* like and try to improve it. What things don't you like that you forgive, but given the chance would remove or improve? More importantly, is there anything you *like* that could be cut or reworked in order to make the story better?
- Stop a movie about 15 minutes in and write down all the things you see as negatives about the main character. Do most of them resolve into positives by the end of the film? If not, was it a struggle to enjoy the film -- and if not, why
- Take a movie you *do* like, and re-outline it from another character's point of view. What changed, and what didn't? How much of the new POV character existed in the original, and how much did you have to make up? What did you do with the original protagonist?

The exercise in rule twenty, and the others I suggest above, are some of the best exercises that involve analyzing someone else's work.

There are tons of other story exercises out there as well. Not just analytical ones, but also various preparatory exercises involving exploring your own characters and world in order to get you ready for first and revision drafts.

You can find more exercises in various books and websites.

## **Rule 21.**

**You gotta identify with your situation / characters, can't just write 'cool'. What would make YOU act that way?**

This good advice is a rephrasing of rule fifteen's "If you were your character, in this situation, how would you feel? Honesty lends credibility to unbelievable situations," but with a more explicit suggestion to "put yourself in your character's shoes". So I have similar quibbles with how the phrasing could lead some readers to counterproductive conclusions.

Regarding the idea that all your characters be identifiable and that you answer the questions about their actions based on how you'd act, I refer back to my analysis of rule fifteen: You actually have to imagine how your character would feel based on the core personality traits and goals you've given that character, not just try to find actions for them you find empathetic.

What you most need to do is understand your characters and situations. Not just in a mechanical, "I did a lot of research" sense, but in an emotional sense.

Some characters are your own proper avatars, and you identify with them completely. Others are fantasy extensions of a part of yourself, or something you wish you were. Those sorts of characters are natural to *identify* with.

Still others are cautionary tale, pathetic versions of yourself, or something you fear you could become. Those are easy to *empathize* with.

But if those are the only characters you write, you'll eventually end up in a rut.

Of course you always want to "write what you know" by playing to your "core thematic" -- the kinds of stories you are naturally inclined to tell -- but you want to vary things by setting them in unfamiliar situations populated by characters that aren't necessarily all some modified version of yourself.

With those types of characters it's not so much a matter of identifying or even empathizing with them, but rather with understanding who they are and creating believable scenes based on how that character would act.

Fulfilling that goal includes creating situations that make sense for that character to have gotten into based on their goals and flaws, and ways out that draw upon the character's strengths and needs.

What constitutes an inappropriate situation may also not be obvious. It may seem that a soldier forced to dance ballet is inappropriate, but that may be exactly what that particular soldier needs to do at some point in his character arc. Merely incongruous situations aren't necessarily wrong.

And an action that is emotionally dishonest at one point in a character's arc may be essential at another point. The whole point of character drama is to put a protagonist through some sort of ordeal that changes them (or they "die trying" in a tragedy), which means the situations that feel emotionally honest will change with the character.

For example, a narcissist acting in a self-deprecating manner seems like it'd never be right, But if her arc has her going from narcissistic to "humble yet still self-confident" then her being self-deprecating may very well be crucial during the low point, but if it happens at any other time in the story it will feel wrong.

Audiences identify with situations when they can believe that the characters in the scene would be in that given predicament at that point in time.

It's a matter of constantly tracking not only your plot, but also your character arc as it relates to your thematic question, and making sure they reconcile.

Finally, there is the matter of "don't write cool". This doesn't mean you can never have a character that is a hipster or a hepcat (depending on your time period).

Rather, it is referring to the mistake of writing vapid characters in an attempt to meet a surface expectation of what an exciting character is. In other words, trying to get your audience to say "wow, that guy is cool!" rather than really feeling for the character.

Cool characters are ones who are emotionally dishonest by virtue of being straight stereotypes rather than specific people designed around archetypes.

Mediocre action movies often have this problem in the form of the ultra-capable hero whose only flaw is his regret that he couldn't save all the good guys the last time he was called to duty.

But the romantic comedy stereotype of the super-competent ice queen who just needs the right man to melt her heart is just as much a lazy, "cool" character.

You have to strive to create characters and situations that are both "cool" in the entertainment value sense (as determined by your genre), yet emotionally honest and therefore emotionally *compelling*.



## **Rule 22.**

**What's the essence of your story? Most economical telling of it? If you know that, you can build out from there.**

This absolutely crucial piece of advice may seem like it is just a restating of rule sixteen (which is also related to rule three); or perhaps it seems like a generalization of the schema in rule four.

In some sense it really is a restating of rule sixteen in that the stakes a key to the essence of the story. If you don't know the stakes (which in order to do you must also know your character arcs and theme), you don't have the essence of your story.

And the variations on the story spine presented in my analysis of rule four can be an excellent way to express the essence of your story.

However, the most useful way to think about this rule is about is to ask:

*What's your story pitch?*

Too many writers (myself included for many years) look down on the pitch as merely a crass sales tool, something that producers make us do because they are cruel and heartless titans of industry who just don't understand our artistic souls. But this is the wrong way to think about the pitch (and the wrong way to think about producers).

The (roughly) two minute "teaser pitch" is exactly what this rule is telling you to come up with. That is the most economical telling of the essence of your story.

A good pitch strips-away the inessential details, no matter how great those details may be, and refines the entire story down to its compelling essentials:

- Title and genre
- Who the story is about (the protagonist)
- Where and when the story takes place (the setting)
- Her want and how it isn't met (the core conflict)

- The plot outcome if the protagonist fails (the external stakes)
- Her need and what will happen if it isn't realized (the internal stakes)
- What about her character and philosophy is being tested (the thematic question or philosophical stakes)
- The most crucial turning points in the story (the inciting incident, the midpoint twist/kicker, and the low point)
- The final resolution (of the plot, character arc, and thematic question)

And it does this in about three sentences.

(Note: People very frequently confuse a pitch with a logline, which is just one sentence and is all about conveying the conceptual "hook" in hopes of getting someone interested in hearing the short pitch, and then hopefully the longer pitch. A logline isn't the most economical telling of your story, it's just a statement of the core concept.)

To pitch a story in three sentences a lot of set-up gets left out, and some of those essential elements are conveyed more through subtext or implication than direct statement. For example:

"Blade Runner is a future noir in which Deckard, an ex-cop once known for hunting rogue androids, is dragged out of retirement when a murderous group of military androids shows up in his city intent on forcing their designer to extend their short lifespans.

But what Deckard least expected was to fall in love with an android, Rachel, and as he hunts the rogues Deckard begins to question his own humanity, and theirs.

In his dogged pursuit Deckard drives away Rachel and is nearly killed by the dying rogue leader, Roy -- but a moment of mutual empathy between man and android earns Deckard a second chance at a life and love."

Whether or not you think my pitch is the best possible pitch for Blade Runner, and whether or not you agree with my take on the frequently debated outcome and theme of the

film, let's look at the pitch to see how it tells you the essence of the story:

- The phrases "future noir" and "his city" explain the genre and setting.
- Deckard is stated to be the protagonist.
- The character's want to be left alone, and the conflict of being thrust back into the role of hunter, is summed-up in the phrase "dragged out of retirement".
- The external stakes are implicit in the phrase "murderous group of military androids" and "extend their short lifespans": these killing machine could become gods among men and avenge themselves upon all humanity.
- The internal stakes involve Deckard's humanity and his love affair with Rachel: which Deckard will win out, the hunter or the lover?
- The thematic question is "what does it mean to be human?", and in the pitch it is presented as the phrase "questions his own humanity -- and theirs".
- The turning points are: he's dragged back to hunt down the rogues (inciting incident), he meets Rachel and falls for her (midpoint "twist"), and he loses her and is nearly killed (low point).
- The resolution is that Roy dies and Deckard lives (plot), but now Deckard has found his humanity (character) and the audience understands what it means to be human in the first place -- it's not your origins, it's your character (theme).

When preparing to write (or rewrite) your own story you don't necessarily need to phrase the distillation of the essence of your story as bullet points, a modified story spine, or even as a three sentence pitch (though writing it as a pitch will help you later when you go to sell it, or get people on-board to help make it).

How you choose to explore ideas and write down your summation is entirely up to you.

But you do need to nail-down all of those elements at that level of specificity and be able to clearly state them to yourself as the foundation for creating a definitive draft of your story.

Of course, for a work in progress, all this may get revised with each draft.

As part of each revision you should re-state those things to yourself with the changes clearly spelled-out. This will make creating the rest of the story a lot easier, because you'll know where your story is going, and who the character is that's taking it there.

## Conclusion.

The conclusion to my analysis of "Pixar's 22 Rules of Story" is not a summary but rather one last thought about story drawn from the response to the original list itself.

I was inspired to write the analysis because a number of people latched onto the original tweets as the codification of a hard-and-fast set of "rules" for the "proper" way to craft stories. And the weight of Pixar brand seems to have caused many to take these tidbits as "The Truth" about storytelling.

The intimidating notion that Pixar had laid down the law of craft for storytellers everywhere has overwhelmed the original intention of the Tweets: to share some observations and guidelines in order to get people thinking about various important storytelling concepts.

But story development is a difficult, messy process and the idea that its elements could be fully legislated in twenty-two short sentences is at best wishful thinking.

Each topic in the list was calling out for clarification and deeper consideration than a "sound bite" medium like Twitter affords.

But the success of the Tweets does illustrate one important idea quite clearly: *people are drawn to compelling ideas concisely stated.*

My own more in-depth analyses are moored in the original statements, and make use of additional concise statements to grab the reader's attention and direct them from idea to idea.

That's exactly how you structure any story:

*A series of simple hooks followed by details that enrich and deepen the original idea, enticing your audience to keep taking each next step along the path from premise to conclusion.*

Ultimately, my own analyses are themselves intended to get you thinking about the enumerated aspects of storytelling presented in the series, not as the be-all and end-all of story doctrine.

I've also shared some tips and techniques, lessons and observations. Each one is something that I've learned from my Pixar and non-Pixar mentors and collaborators, and through trial and error.

Some of my ideas and approaches may click with you and integrate perfectly into your storytelling practice, and some won't.

But every one is a personal truth I've arrived at in my storytelling career, ones that I apply every day in crafting my stories. They're not part of some theoretical construct. So hopefully you will at least find each one useful as food for thought.

Please share this series with every one of your storytelling friends. I wrote it so everyone who crafts narratives -- screenwriters, playwrights, novelists, poets, songwriters, directors, actors, etc. -- could get more in-depth with these "Pixar rules" and find something that helps them express themselves more fully through their art.

## **Bonus Chapter.**

### **Bugaj's Five Rules for Writers.**

This bonus chapter is mainly drawn from another blog post I wrote about my "rules" for writing.

Writing, people claim, is the most personal of the arts. Yet it seems everybody has a bunch of rules for you to follow about how to do it their way.

In fact, coming up with a set of rules about how to be a writer seems to be as important a part of convincing people you're a "real" writer as actually writing things. (In fact, a number of people skip the writing career part and settle right into careers writing and promoting sets of rules.)

There are as many sets of rules for writers as there are writers, and screenwriting is particularly amenable to people coming up with rules and formulas for how to do it.

"Sound bite" rules for anything are always insufficient. The more detailed thought and analysis that the quips are intended to provoke is crucial to understanding.

And there are legions books dedicated to in-depth screenwriting rules, templates and formulas. The famous Robert McKee "Story" book, Syd Field's "Screenplay", Blake Snyder's "Save The Cat", Richard Walter & Lew Hunter representing UCLA's approach, David Howard & Paul Gullio bringing you the USC rules, Christopher Vogler channeling Joseph Campbell, William Goldman eschewing pedagogy and focusing on funny anecdotes, Linda Seger and John Truby and many others promoting their consultancies, and so on.

I've read pretty much every piece of writing pedagogy that's in print in the English language, and two things are very clear to me:

1. In general, everyone says the same thing.
2. In particular, everyone pitches you their own personal style.

Unfortunately, nobody but you can figure out which of the particulars work for you. Do you only find inspiration when

writing in red sharpie on butcher's paper? Did an adjective kill your parents when you were a child, and now you've sworn revenge upon them for all time? Must every paragraph you write contain the word "burrito"? Only you can figure those things out about yourself.

But the generalities can be summarized, and people do enjoy concise statements of "greater truths" about things. So I've put down my thoughts about what the simplest, most overarching rules for writers are. And by doing so I will not only potentially save you hundreds of dollars on books and classes and template software (I kid, you're going to buy all that stuff anyway), but I will also establish street cred as a "real" writer – one with rules and everything!

**1. Write what interests you.** If you don't like your idea very much, nobody else will, either. Writing something because it's what's cool or commercial when you're not really into it won't get you a sale, it'll cause you to waste your time writing bad work because you don't care about it enough to make it great.

**2. Don't be boring.** Since I am first and foremost a screenwriter I also call this my "Zero Act Structure Theory," because too many novices interpret structure teachings that focus on certain key moments to mean you can half-ass all the other moments. Wrong. Every moment needs to be interesting, and have a clear (to you) reason for being in the story – not just the "important ones". In other words, if you know something is filler so will the audience.

**3. Be concise.** Writers, professional readers and writing pedagogues love to have opinions about specific ways to do this (Elmore Leonard's rules are all nit picks around this point, for example). But rules about details are matters of style and personality, not just yours, but that of each individual story and character. The main point is to say exactly what needs to be said and no more. Exactly what that is must be determined on a case-by-case basis.

**4. Always take critique, rarely take advice.** Even other "better" writers don't know how to write what you want to say in your personal style, but even the least sophisticated audience member can clue you in to when you're not succeeding. You also need to be smart about your analysis of the critique – as often as not the bit someone



says isn't working is fine, it's a related set-up or pay-off that's missing or botched. And don't be defensive about hearing critique. Even if someone is a complete jerk about how they tell you what they aren't connecting with in your writing, try to learn from the critique anyway. (Then never ask that person to critique your work again – a cruel attitude about giving feedback is never warranted.)

**5. Write, rewrite, then finish.** Write as often as possible. There is a lot of specific advice out there about how to compel oneself to do that: egg timers, solitude, only using pencil, heavy drinking. I feel that writing frequently often comes down to this: either you need to rearrange your schedule and drop some commitments because you using your time and energy elsewhere, or you need to accept that "the first draft of anything is shit" and not waste all your time trying to write perfect first drafts. Finishing comes down to accepting that "the perfect is the enemy of the good", and being able to just stop when you realize you're just making changes and not making anything better.

There you go, those are my "five rules for writers".

All are sufficiently vague that there's no point in anyone taking issue with any of them.

Unfortunately, vague rules are the only types of creative rules that are universal. Everything else comes from self-knowledge and thousands of hours of practice.

And those rules do seem utterly devoid of any suggestions about *how* to do those things.

But that's not quite true. The only two things all writers must do is stated quite clearly: write often and seek out people to critique your work. That's how you do it.

Whatever other rules and methodologies you experiment with, the artistic growth that actually gets you anywhere is coming from those two things.

Finally, notice that this advice also applies to pretty much any creative discipline. In fact, I apply the same basic rules to filmmaking, music production, CGI, writing software, and photography (which for me are interconnected practices, anyway).

## **About the author.**

### **Stephan Vladimir Bugaj.**

I'm a writer/filmmaker who most recently spent two years story co-developing and co-writing the early drafts of an as-yet-unannounced Pixar animated feature, a family friendly action drama. This role was the result of mentoring with various Pixar heads of story and directors starting in 2004.

My twelve years of experience at Pixar Animation Studios in various production roles have also given me extensive expertise in most aspects of feature production, from concept development through production.

On the live action side, I currently have features in development with three European independent producers, and have written and directed several low/no-budget short films.

My specs "Let The Games Begin", a family comedy; "Welcome To Akron", a dramedy; and "Desert Maelstrom", a military horror story have placed in numerous contests, most notably "Welcome To Akron" in the Nichol Fellowship competition, and "Let The Games Begin" at Austin Film Festival.

And the first book of a philosophical sci-fi graphic novel miniseries I wrote for indie publisher Whamix! is currently being inked.

My other passions are technology, photography and photomanipulation, music production, and video art. I've done some for-hire work in these areas, but most of my art and music projects are self-directed. You'll find examples of both on this site.

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