

Craft Your Treatment

A Story Principles Guide



Introduction:

The purpose of this how-to guide is to help you feel more confident about the story you're telling, and to set yourself up to move through the writing as smoothly as possible. Some writers spend an enormous amount of time researching, sketching out characters, plotting their stories in detail. Others just like to let it rip. We're going to take a fairly casual approach, but you should do what makes you comfortable.

Our approach is to put in enough work to give your future self, the one actually writing the story, all they need to excel, but not so much it drains your battery.

You don't want to feel bullied into filling out forms, or like you're merely connecting dots. But you also don't want to get lost. Think of your treatment like the start of a road trip. You may have a few attractions you want to visit, but you have options on how to get to each point.

The key is coherence. Our goal is to make sure your story is one you're passionate about, connected to, and will enjoy telling. You're more likely to invest fully in your story when you know that your work will be rewarded, that you will write something you're proud to share, and that you feel has a real shot of being published or produced.

Keep in mind that you don't have to answer every question in minute detail. Stories evolve. You iterate through drafts, over time. You discover things as you go. Here is what your treatment will include:

- The Title
- The Basic Story
- The Setting
- The Characters
- The Plot
- The Theme
- Wildcard Idea File

As you write your story you might want to keep this document open and adjust it as you go. In "Wildcard Idea File" you can just riff on ideas as they come to you then



cut-and-paste them into the relevant section later. For example, as you're writing you may get hit with a strange burst of ideas for titles. Or a totally new take on a character. Save every idea no matter how bad it might seem at the time. What we thinks is atrocious one day may seem like genius on another. Your greatest, most inspired ideas are often the ones that come closest to being over-the-top terrible ideas. So, save everything and as you define your work, it will get easier to know which ideas are best.

The Title:

Your title is the first thing people hear when introduced to your story. And people form opinions quickly. Make a strong first impression. Here are some things to consider as you search for your title.

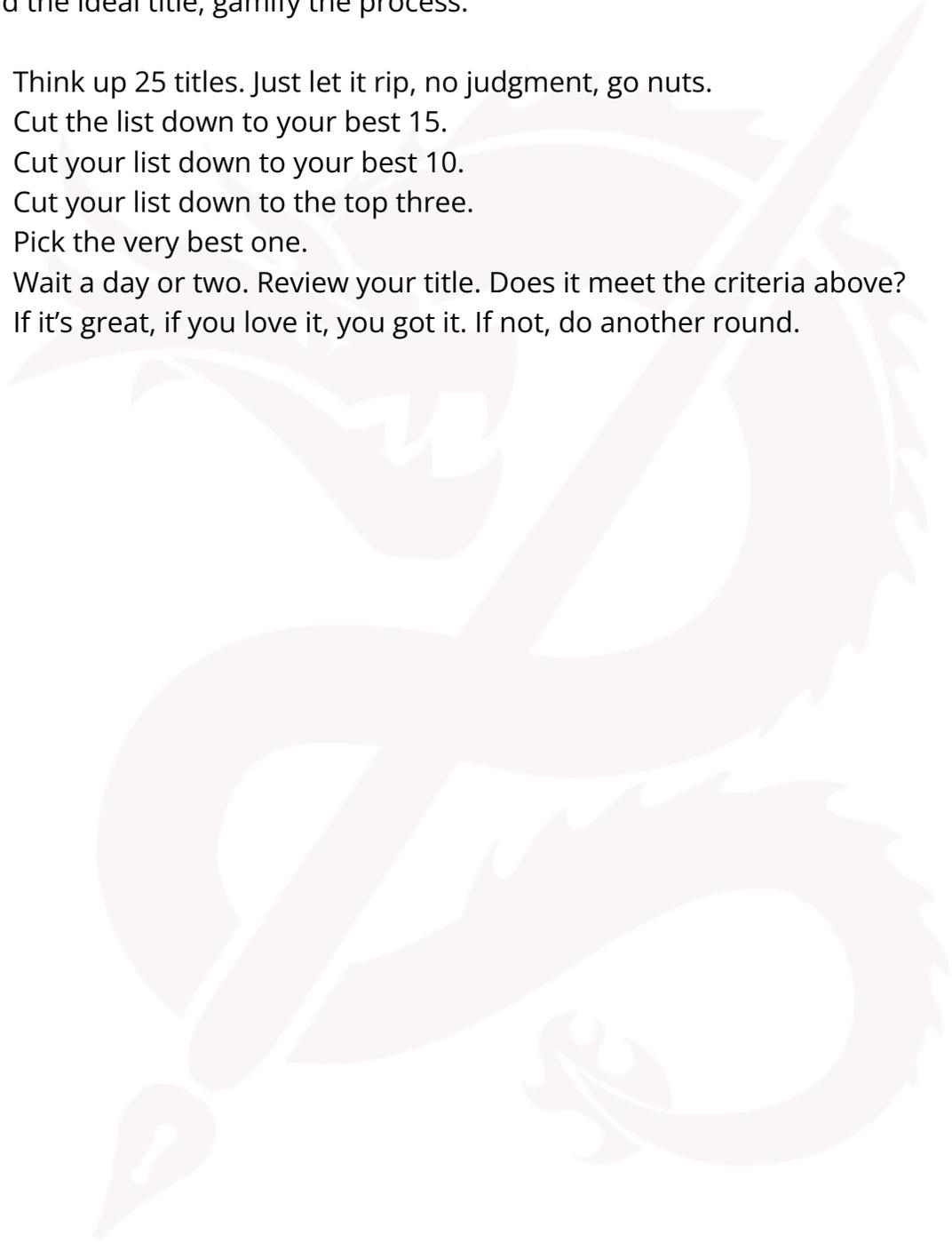
- It labels the bottle. It suggests the type of story your reader is about to experience. And it literally feels like your story. Think of titles like *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, *The Remains of the Day*, or *Star Wars*.
- You feel good when you tell it to someone. It has cool factor.
- It feels like you. When the people who know you best hear it, they recognize your personality in it.
- It's unique. We tend to forget the ordinary. Our minds are excellent at filtering out unimportant information. A title that we've never heard before is simpler to remember. Stanley Kubrick was passionate about this. People rarely forget titles like *Dr. Strangelove*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *Full Metal Jacket*. Notice the harsh K sounds are aligned with his difficult subject matter. His titles were unique and impactful like his films.



Workbook:

To find the ideal title, gamify the process.

- Think up 25 titles. Just let it rip, no judgment, go nuts.
- Cut the list down to your best 15.
- Cut your list down to your best 10.
- Cut your list down to the top three.
- Pick the very best one.
- Wait a day or two. Review your title. Does it meet the criteria above?
- If it's great, if you love it, you got it. If not, do another round.





You want to feel confidence and wonder -- confidence that you can do this and wonder about how. Think of your basic story structure like a train track that can take many routes to one of four stations. To explore this further turn to chapter 2 in your textbook, *Ask dramatic questions*.





The Setting:

There are two elements we focus on in setting:

- The world of your story – where it takes place.
- The type of story – how it's set in your reader's mind.

Your goal is to build a world that is so specific, so intricately detailed that your characters could not come from, or exist in, any other place without being meaningfully altered. *The Lord of the Rings* hero Frodo Baggins comes from the green rolling hills and tightknit community of Hobbits of the Shire. If he came from anywhere else, he would be changed.

The world of your story could have many sub-worlds. A story set in a city might take place in a house with different rooms. All of these can be worlds of their own. Think of the first time you had dinner at a new home and wandered down a hall to the bathroom. The dining room, hall, and bathroom are each unique worlds.

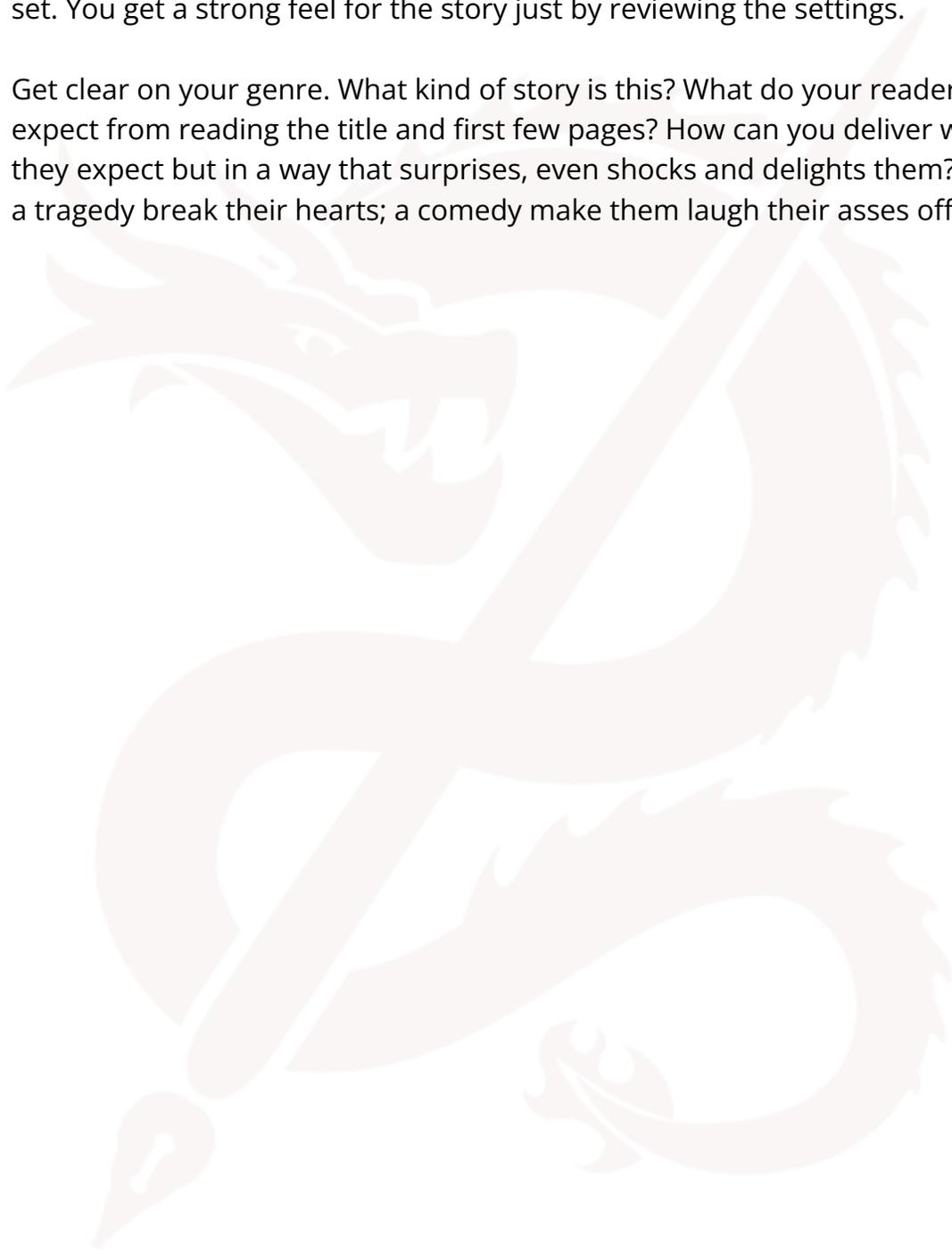
Get clear on the type of story you're telling -- the genre. It could be one genre, for example a Western or romance, or hybrid genre, like a romance set in the old West.

Workbook:

- Turn to chapter 20 in your textbook, *Link Inextricably to Your Setting*. Carefully work through the list of items featured there and put real effort into the ones most relevant to your story. Overwork this. Even if things don't get directly into your story, their existence will add depth and permeate the world you build.
- For every scene, make sure the setting maxes out all five senses. We want to know what they feel, look, smell, sound, and even taste like. Bring them fully to life.



- As you work keep a list of your settings. In great novels like *Crime and Punishment*, the apartments, restaurants, streets, and alleys feel like a unified set. You get a strong feel for the story just by reviewing the settings.
- Get clear on your genre. What kind of story is this? What do your readers expect from reading the title and first few pages? How can you deliver what they expect but in a way that surprises, even shocks and delights them? If it's a tragedy break their hearts; a comedy make them laugh their asses off.





The Characters:

This is the big one. There really is no limit to just how deep you might go to develop your characters. Here though, again, our goal is to help you keep it simple and make the most intelligent decisions. Developing characters can be a daunting task because it's difficult to define what actually is a "well developed" or "multi-dimensional" or "psychologically complex" character. For example, it's hard to prove that a character with contradictions – suffers paralyzing anxiety but stands up to a bank robber-is "believable."

You can explore that as you go, and as you learn more about your characters. For now, we'll start with practically valuable, actionable strategies to help you fully invest in your characters to make them clear and compelling, to give them the gravitas necessary to carry your story.

Workbook:

- Start with Cast Design. You're creating a set of characters who will carry your story from start to finish.
- They should each be unique but feel like a boxed set. Think of any story you love and you'll notice no two characters are identical. They may be similar but there are key differences. Consider *Macbeth*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Star Wars*, *Family Guy*, *Parks & Rec*, or any story you love. No two characters are identical, and they all bring something unique to the story.
- Focus the most energy on your hero. The other characters exist in relation to your hero. One character brings out their soft side, one their dark side, one is a mentor, another an enemy, one is an object of lust, one brings out their better angels.
- Consider how your hero transforms from start to finish. As you build and analyze your cast, explore how each character relates to or facilitates this transformation.



- Dignify and love every character you write. They are each the main character of their own story. The only difference is we see more of main characters and less of minor ones. In the Coen Brothers' film *Fargo* Steve Buscemi berates a parking attendant. Though we only see this guy for a moment, we get a strong sense of his personality and ethics.
- It may be helpful to break out a pen and paper: put your hero's name in the center then draw hub-and-spoke lines out to each other character. Imagine each one standing behind your hero. It should feel like you're looking at group of unique individuals who come from the same world.
- Lastly, as you develop each character, keep the nine essential principles of character in mind:
 - Make your hero active and decisive.
 - Provoke dilemma.
 - Layer conflict.
 - Peel the onion.
 - Writer characters to the top of their intelligence.
 - Mask everyone.
 - Earn transformations.
 - Motivate fierce antagonists.
 - Confront evil.
- One of the great joys of storytelling is how it lets you expand your conception of yourself. Every character is a facet of you. They only exist because you brought them into existence. They come from you. They are, in a very real sense, part of you. The miracle of Shakespeare is not that he is Hamlet, Macbeth, Iago, Prospero, Caliban, The Witches ... he is *all* of them. Who are you? Imagine someone dropped a grenade into your soul and blew it to pieces, each one becoming its own character.



The Plot:

The degree of detail you go into when developing the outline of your plot is entirely up to you. Below we'll lay out one way to think through your story. To maximize its value, you'll need to have completed the course, **Master Plot Construction** and/or read the first section of the textbook, *Part One: The Essential Principles of Plot*.

There's a lot to consider and it might be overwhelming at first, but it will make the writing easier for you. Just relax, stay patient, and carefully focus on each bullet point, and you'll find it's simple.

Workbook:

To structure the broad strokes of your story:

- You set up the hammer...
- Then drop the hammer...
- That asks the Central Dramatic Question, which is simply...
- Will the hero acquire their object of desire?

This completes the beginning of your story. Obviously, your story won't be resolved in act one, and you might need a second hammer along the way, but if you know how it ends, it'll help you write with purpose and conviction.

You might view the entire process of writing your story as a search for the ending that feels true. And you might structure the story to trick your reader into thinking it will end in a way that it ultimately doesn't. We cover this in chapter 3 of your textbook, *Explore All Endings*.

Playwright Arthur Miller described knowing your ending prior to writing like attaching a hook on the end of a rope to throw it across a chasm. Without it your story falls apart. Other writers like August Wilson felt the whole point of writing is to figure it out as you go. Here we're taking a middle path. We want to know the general direction we're heading but not the precise destination. This gives confidence but leaves room for organic discovery.

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You now move into the middle part of your story, or “act two.”

- Your hero takes actions and makes decisions...
- In an effort to acquire their object of desire...
- By operating at the top of their intelligence.
- These actions are fueled by cause and effect.
- A causes B, which causes C, which causes D...
- And the risks the hero takes escalate until...

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Here we cross into act three, when...

- They make a decision to take one final action...
- They feel certain will lead them to acquire or fail to acquire their object of desire once and for all, BUT THEN....
- Something intense happens, that makes it as hard as humanly possible for them to go forward with this action. Here they might turn back in defeat or confirm their initial decision, and after this final action is played out...
- The CDQ is definitively answered when your hero...
 - acquires object of desire (positive)
 - acquires object of desire but pays high price (positive with downside)
 - fails to acquire object of desire (negative)
 - fails to acquire object of desire but gains valuable thing (negative with upside)

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Now your story is essentially over. You have asked a Central Dramatic Question and answered it. This is the simplest way to define Classic Dramatic Structure. You built a train track, then kept your story on track from start to finish. Every single moment of the story either is on track because it relates to the CDQ or off track and must be cut.



But there's still some work left to do. After your CDQ is answered, in the final moments you...

- Tell us where things stand, most importantly how your hero *feels*, and you make clear how they have transformed from the person we met in the beginning, then...
- Tie up all loose ends and...
- Finish with one last powerful, iconic image.

Here are some key things to consider as you build your plot.

Take your time. Relax and have fun. Carefully work out one plot point at a time. Enjoy the creative process. Be playful and experimental here, not judgmental.

Don't add characters, change locations, or jump time periods unless it is necessary and relates directly to the hero's attempt to acquire their object of desire.

Don't overthink act breaks. Generally, the first act ends when you drop the hammer and the second act ends when your hero takes a final action to resolve the CDQ. Don't drive yourself nuts trying to precisely define these moments. Simply follow your story through to its logical progression and you'll be fine.

The Bruce Lee quote, "Obey the principles without being bound by them" cannot be repeated often enough. Every story is unique and has its own needs. If the truth of your story requires you to violate a principle, violate the principle.

Trust that the hard work you put so far will pay huge dividends throughout the process. Think of two homebuilders. One takes a month drafting their blueprint. One just starts laying brick. After a month the fast starter will seem to have a huge lead. But they'll soon realize they forgot something critical and need to tear down their work. Meanwhile, the one who did the blueprint will ultimately pass them and finish much faster.

Lastly, remember, the more stories you tell, the simpler all this will become as you make these decisions organically as you work.



The Theme:

After you shape your plot, take some time to consider what it's about. You can approach this in one of three ways. You have an idea that you:

- Need to express;
- Need to explore;
- Don't know but trust others will find.

Some writers, like the socialist Clifford Odets, always had a strong point to make. His stories were constructed to prove a point, almost like a legal argument. Another playwright, Neil Simon, said that he only learned what his plays were about when he read the reviews. As you know from the lesson *Take a Stand* in **Master Theme**, it is probably easier to have an idea of what you're trying to say prior to writing, but it's up to you.

Workbook:

To keep this simple, complete the following sentences:

- The subject of my story is:
- The theme, my take on this subject, is:

Make certain the word you use to define your subject is in your statement of theme. For example, my subject is war, my theme is that *war* is evil. Make sure you can state your theme succinctly. Your objective here is to not avoid two pitfalls. One is that you make your point so strongly it feels like you're shouting at people. The other is that your story feels like a mess.

The most reliable way to analyze the meaning of a story is to simply analyze what happened. Schlomo cheated on his wife then wound up divorced, broke, and alone. And her heart never mended. Therefore, we conclude that adultery is wrong.

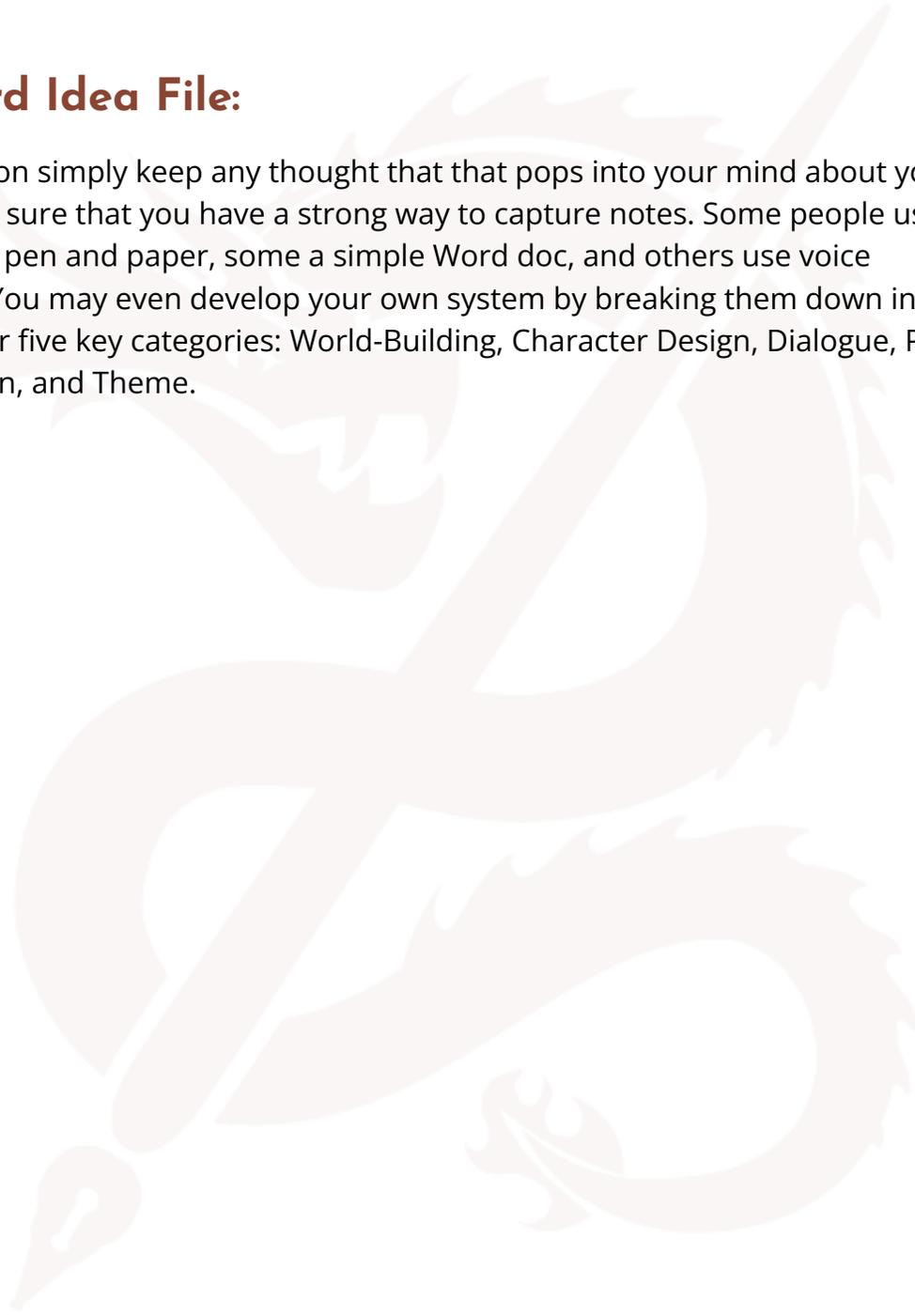
Consider keeping a list of every moment that you might reference the idea. It could be visually or through dialogue. These references may add nuance and texture, and might even argue against where you ultimately land. Leave your reader feeling that



the events of your story are worth thinking about long after they've experience the story. You want your story to resonate.

Wildcard Idea File:

In this section simply keep any thought that that pops into your mind about your story. Make sure that you have a strong way to capture notes. Some people use apps, some pen and paper, some a simple Word doc, and others use voice recorders. You may even develop your own system by breaking them down in terms of our five key categories: World-Building, Character Design, Dialogue, Plot Construction, and Theme.





Conclusion:

Everything we do here in Blackbelt Writing Academy is meant to inspire you and make the process of writing more interesting, insightful, and fun. You, as a writer, are always in conversation with yourself. View this method as a conversation starter about what you think, feel, believe, how you work, etc. No two writers work exactly alike. Track how you feel as you use this guide. For some writers, it will feel too restrictive or too verbose. Other writers may prefer to put even more work into their treatment than we do here.

The bottom line is that you should always do what you want, how you want, for any reason you want. Take what you find valuable from our guides and ignore what doesn't work for you.

Above all, you should enjoy the process of writing and find it rewarding.