



## “Has This Been Done Before?”

Inspiration suddenly strikes from the blue and ideas begin to swirl. The first question authors typically ask themselves is: “Has this been done before?” It’s a good, logical question. A good self-check. The answer, however, shouldn’t necessarily be “Yes” or “No.” It should be “Who cares?”

Ideas are just that. Ideas. No one owns them. They’re a part of our shared collective consciousness. It’s what you *do* with them that’s the important and distinguishing step you need to take next when creating your story, film, game, or other *Magnum Opus*.

After all, if someone said that all the love songs possible have been written and all the inventions that have been patented to date were all that we need, what would we do with all the post “I love you”-songs (after “The Song of Solomon,” a love poem from the Holy Bible) and the patents filed starting on January 2, 1900 (after Charles Holland Duell urged President McKinley to close the U.S. Patent Office in 1899, because “everything that could be invented has been invented”)?

Exactly. You keep writing and inventing!

## What is a Literary Formula or Trope?

In writing, as with all forms of artistic expression, formulas and tropes are common conventions used often enough to be recognized as belonging to a specific genre. It takes common literary themes (love, war, betrayal, isolation, rich versus poor, etc.) and elevates them to a specific, focused level.

Wikipedia.org [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trope\\_\(literature\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trope_(literature)):

A literary trope is the use of figurative language, via word, phrase or an image, for artistic effect such as using a figure of speech. The word trope has also come to be used for describing commonly recurring literary and rhetorical devices, motifs or clichés in creative works.

The selected trope is what makes speculative fiction different from, say, traditional romance and mystery/suspense fiction. The formula used is a combination of elements and devices to tell the story.

To make your writing stand out from the crowd, however, you may have to bend or even break these conventions and formulas. Explore and use them in ways that no one has tried to before.

You can also dive into a stale, time-worn cliché and see what you can do with it. Seriously! How else do you think the *Marvel* and *DC Cinematic Universes* are making so much money these days?

## *Just a Sampling of Speculative Fiction Tropes and Formulas*

The lists of setting and character tropes, clichés, and genre formulas found in speculative fiction are long. Too long, in fact, to be listed in full here. Check the “Resources” section on the last page for more examples. You can

### **Fantasy**

- **A damsel in distress** or **saving a companion**
- **Chosen one** or **the secret heir**
- **Good versus evil** (dark versus light; dreams versus nightmares)
- **Magic** (creatures, spells / enchantments, weapons, objects)
- **Masquerade** (world or places hidden from the “outside world”)
- **Medieval settings** (alternative historical places or events)
- **Quests** (for something to possess or something within)
- **Races and species** (humans and non-humans; single species)

### **Horror and Dark Fantasy**

- **Abandoned** (places, houses, people – “can’t connect!”)
- **Ancient horror** (ancient gods and demons and the afterlife)
- **Drugs and “jump scares”**
- **Ghosts** (vengeful spirits, poltergeists, shadow people)
- **Mad** (scientists, apes and other creatures, invisible man)
- **Monsters** (giant \_\_; werewolves, vampires, mummies)
- **Mental menace** (psychological, moral, spiritual)
- **Murder** (sex, serial killers, gore, splatter, slasher, “the last girl”)
- **Witches, villains, and evil magic**
- **Zombies**

### **Science Fiction**

- **Aliens** (ancient, current, first contact) **and alien invasions**
- **Any aspect of hard science or soft science**
- **Artificial intelligence and robots**
- **Bodily transformation and immortality**
- **Extrapolated futures** (and reimagined “golden ages”)
- **Faster-than-light / hyperspace / wormhole travel and communications**
- **Insert “McGuffin” and “technobabble” here ...**
- **Parallel worlds and dimensions**
- **Time travel, alternative histories, post-apocalyptic worlds**
- **Social science**
- **Space colonization**
- **Space opera**
- **Superheroes**

### **Science Fantasy**

The genre of Science Fantasy blurs and combines many of the tropes listed on the left.

This genre typically focuses on worlds and settings that violate the scientific laws of the real world, but explains those violations in a logical and science-like manner.

And let’s not start with high fantasy, modern fantasy, urban fantasy ...

*What are some of your favorite tropes?*

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## A Few of My Favorite Speculative Fiction Tropes in Literary or Other Form

### Fantasy

- Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*
- Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* series (including *The Eye of the World*)
- Terry Goodkind *Wizard's First Rule*
- Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (ancient gods, monsters)
- Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*
- C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*
- George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series (including *A Game of Thrones*)
- Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonflight*
- Terry Pratchett's *The Colour of Magic* (and all of the Discworld novels)
- J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* series (species, magic, quest)

### Horror

- Anything with **Nazis** in it (human social horror)
- Humbaba, guardian from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (a "mechanical" monster that left tracks?)
- Stephen King's *The Shining* (axe murders)
- Edgar Allen Poe's *The Raven* (psychological horror)
- *Poltergeist* (Indian burial ground)
- *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (what's NOT in this movie)
- Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (monster, life/death, technology abuse)
- *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (you guessed it - murders)
- *Night of the Living Dead* (zombies)

### Science Fiction

- Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series (interstellar travel, space colonization, social science)
- Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.* play (robot) [Note: "robota" (forced labor) used in Čapek's 1920 play; term coined by his brother, Josef) and "robotics" used in Isaac Asimov's "*Liar!*" (1941) "*Three Laws of Robotics*" (1942)]
- Jack L. Chalker's *Well World* series and others (bodily transformation)
- Frank Herbert's *Dune* series (interstellar travel, space opera)
- H.P. Lovecraft's *Cthulhu Mythos* (god-like aliens, interdimensional monsters)
- Frederick Pohl's *Gateway* and Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* (ancient aliens)
- E.E. "Doc" Smith's *Lensman* series (often called the first space opera)
- The *Stargate* franchise (ancient and current aliens)
- Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (bodily transformation)
- H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (time travel) and *The War of the Worlds* (alien invasion)
- Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (immortality)

### Masquerade

- Robert A. Heinlein's *Methuselah's Children* (term coined in 1958)
- John Crowley's *Little, Big*
- Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere* (and other stories)
- Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series
- J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series

## How Do I Break the Formula and Subvert the Trope?

It's actually easier than it seems.

Tropes are important and shouldn't be ignored. They're what make genre fiction, well, genre fiction. Overused tropes are clichés and you want your writing to be fresh for your readers.

What do you do?

Breaking the trope or formula starts with understanding and embracing it. This means reading and researching the topic, learning what others have done with it, then jumping in and seeing what you can do to "Zap!" your idea into life – this is not too dissimilar than putting the electric paddles on Frankenstein's monster and flipping the switch.

Practice is the first step in creating something new from the numerous speculative fiction worlds and characters that have come before. Oh, and don't forget to use real history, science, biographies, and the list goes on!

## Writing Exercise #1

Using one of the example speculative fiction trope types or examples listed on the previous pages, or you may substitute your own, how would you change the trope to give it a fresh feeling?

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Write the first sentence or two of a short story that focuses on your modified trope.

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## Writing Exercise #2

Being “subversive” sometimes means “borrowing from the best.” You’ve started a fantasy story, but then realize you borrowed *too much* from a *Harry Potter* series character, say, Dobby, the house-elf. What changes might you make to transform your character into something unique and new?

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## Writing Exercise #3

You have used a stereotypical character in your science fiction story. For example, an indecisive starship captain who thinks through everything too thoroughly before acting. Analysis paralysis has no place on the bridge of a starship, right? What might your character do that would be totally unexpected of their stereotype to change the reader’s first impression?

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## Resources

- **The ABCs of Horror Tropes**  
Ethan Lewis, 04-27-2013  
<https://www.denofgeek.com/tv/the-abcs-of-horror-tropes/>
- **Fantasy Clichés: Why You Shouldn't Fear the Fantasy Trope**  
<https://www.theazrianportal.com/blog/fantasy-cliches>
- **14 Popular Fantasy Tropes — And How to Make Them Feel New Again**  
<https://blog.reedsy.com/fantasy-tropes/>
- **The Grand List of Fantasy Clichés | Silver Blade Magazine**  
Kathy Pulver and J. S. Burke  
<https://www2.silverblade.net/cliches/>
- **The Grand List of Overused Science Fiction Clichés | Silver Blade Magazine**  
John VanSickle  
<http://www.geocities.ws/evilsnack/cliche.html>
- **101 Fantasy Tropes for Writers**  
<https://writerswrite.co.za/101-fantasy-tropes-for-writers/>
- **101 Sci-Fi Tropes for Writers**  
<https://writerswrite.co.za/101-sci-fi-tropes-for-writers/>
- **Speculative Fiction Tropes**  
The Arcana Wiki – Distilling the Real World for Gaming  
<https://arcana.wikidot.com/speculative-fiction-tropes>
- **Ten tropes you'll find in science fiction - over and over again**  
Alasdair Wilkins, 09-02-2010  
<https://io9.gizmodo.com/ten-tropes-youll-find-in-science-fiction-over-and-ove-5628989>
- **TV Tropes**  
The All Devouring Pop-Culture Wiki  
<https://tvtropes.org>

## Wikipedia Lists

- **Fantasy Tropes**  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fantasy\\_tropes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fantasy_tropes)
- **Horror Tropes**  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horror\\_fiction](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horror_fiction)
- **Masquerade Trope**  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masquerade\\_\(trope\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masquerade_(trope))
- **Outline of Science Fiction**  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Outline\\_of\\_science\\_fiction#Genres\\_of\\_science\\_fiction](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Outline_of_science_fiction#Genres_of_science_fiction)
- **Science Fantasy**  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Science\\_fantasy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Science_fantasy)
- **Science Fiction Tropes/Themes**  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_science\\_fiction\\_themes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_science_fiction_themes)