

# Fantasy Writing — Workbook

This workbook turns the Fantasy Writing course into hands-on building of your own world, magic system, structure, and scenes. Each section maps to a course module and pairs exercises, fill-in worksheets, and checklists you can run against your work in progress, plus editable templates for a world bible, a magic-system rulebook, a hero's journey beat sheet, and a scene-and-stakes tracker. Work one section per module, keep a running project file, and use the action plan to take a single story from idea to a fully outlined draft.

## Building a Believable World

Build your setting from geography outward so cultures, economies, and conflicts feel inevitable rather than bolted on.

### Exercise: Geography-First Map Pass

Sketch a rough map of your story's main region by hand. Place mountains, then draw rivers flowing downhill from them to the sea, merging rather than splitting. Mark the rain shadow (lush windward side, dry leeward side). Then place every town and city only where water, food, or trade makes it inevitable. Finally, circle the chokepoints (passes, fords, harbors) where conflict and stories will naturally happen.

- Which settlement was hardest to justify by water, food, or trade, and how did you fix its placement?  
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- Where does your rain shadow create a desert beside fertile land, and who fights over the border?  
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- Which natural chokepoint is most likely to host a key scene in your story?  
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### Exercise: Scarcity-to-Culture Derivation

Pick your story's most important culture. Name the single scarcest resource where they live (water, metal, timber, safe land). Then derive at least three cultural features directly from that scarcity: a value, a ritual or law, and a source of conflict. Resist inventing culture for its own sake; everything should trace back to the constraint.

- What is the scarcest resource, and what value does its scarcity create in this culture?  
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- What ritual, law, or taboo grew up around protecting or sharing that resource?  
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- What internal division (class, region, faith, generation) does the scarcity produce?  
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### Worksheet: Culture Profile Sheet

Fill this in for each major culture so it reads as a society with internal variety, not a single-trait stereotype.  
Culture name and home region

\_\_\_\_\_

Scarcest resource and how it shapes daily life

\_\_\_\_\_

Core values (and where they came from)

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\_\_\_\_\_

At least one internal division: class, region, faith, or generation

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Who grows the food / who holds the power / who is exploited

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A historical scar (war, plague, betrayal) still shaping behavior

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One person in this culture who is unhappy, and why

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### Checklist: World-Building Iceberg Check

- I have invented in depth only what the plot and characters will actually touch
- Distant places and eras are one-line sketches, not full systems
- No scene stops the story to deliver an info-dump of history or politics
- World detail reaches the page through sensory specifics, songs, ruins, or offhand remarks
- Each major culture has at least one internal division and a working economy
- Settlements sit where water, food, and trade make them inevitable

## Designing a Magic System That Holds Up

Design a magic system with clear rules, real limits, and a steep cost, and follow its consequences into society.

### Exercise: Place Your Magic on the Spectrum

Write one paragraph defining where your magic sits between hard (explicit, rule-based like Mistborn Allomancy) and soft (mysterious, undefined like Gandalf). Then apply Sanderson's First Law: list every plot problem magic will help solve, and confirm the reader will understand the relevant rules before that moment. Flag any place magic rescues the hero with a power the reader has not seen.

- Is your magic hard, soft, or a hard system inside a softer cosmos, and why does that fit your story?

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- Which climactic problem does magic solve, and have you taught the reader the rule in advance?

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- Is there anywhere a new, unexplained power saves the day? How will you set it up earlier or cut it?

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### Exercise: Limitation, Weakness, Cost

Apply Sanderson's Second Law. For your magic, write one of each: a limitation (something it simply cannot do), a weakness (a vulnerability or side effect using it creates), and a cost (a price paid every time, physical, emotional, social, moral, or resource-based). Then put your protagonist in their worst moment and check whether magic makes escape too easy. If it does, raise the cost until escaping would cost them something they do not want to lose.

- What can your magic never do, no matter how skilled the user?

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- What does using it cost, and is that price steep enough to make characters hesitate?

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- In the hero's worst moment, does the cost make using magic a hard choice rather than a free button?

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### Worksheet: Magic System Rulebook

Complete this one-page rulebook so your magic stays consistent across the whole manuscript. Source of power (where magic comes from)

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Who can use it and how they learn

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The core rules (kept few and deep, not many and shallow)

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Limitation: what it cannot do

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Weakness: vulnerability or side effect it creates

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Cost: what is paid each time it is used

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How common magic reshapes war, medicine, communication, travel, or law

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Why a clever villain cannot exploit the rules to win instantly

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### Checklist: Magic Stress-Test

- Magic solves plot problems only to the degree the reader understands the rules
- The system has a clear limitation, a weakness, and a real cost
- The cost is steep enough that using magic is a meaningful decision
- New surprises come from fresh uses of existing rules, not constant new powers (Third Law)
- I have followed the magic into society: war, medicine, travel, law, and class
- No clever character could trivially break the world with this system

## Story Structure and Point of View

Structure your plot on the hero's journey and the MICE quotient, build the middle with try-fail cycles, and hold a consistent POV.

### Exercise: Hero's Journey Cliché Swap

Map your rough plot onto Vogler's twelve stages (Ordinary World through Return with the Elixir). For the three or four stages your story actually uses most, name the predictable cliché version (chosen-one prophecy, dying bearded mentor, motiveless dark lord) and deliberately replace it with a specific alternative drawn from your own world and characters. Keep the emotional function; throw out the worn furniture.

- Which stages does your story lean on hardest, and where does it currently sag or skip?

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- Which cliché default were you about to use, and what specific replacement did you choose?

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- Does your protagonist's own flaw drive the Refusal and the Ordeal, or just external obstacles?

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### Exercise: MICE Bracket and Try-Fail Map

Identify your dominant MICE thread (Milieu, Inquiry, Character, or Event) and any secondary threads. Write the order they open, then confirm they close in reverse order, like nested brackets, so nothing dangles. Next, take your story's middle and rewrite three key beats as try-fail cycles using yes-but or no-and so each attempt complicates the situation.

- What is your dominant MICE thread, and does the story start and end on it?

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- Do your threads close in reverse order of opening, or is something left dangling?

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- Where does the hero currently succeed too easily, and how did you turn it into a yes-but?

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## Worksheet: Point-of-View Decision Sheet

Fill this in before drafting so your POV is deliberate and consistent.  
Effect I want most: intimacy / scope / dramatic irony

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POV chosen: first person / third limited / multiple third limited

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Viewpoint characters (keep to roughly one to three for a first book)

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Rule for switching heads (only at a scene or chapter break)

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Key information the POV lets me withhold to build suspense

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A scene I worried about head-hopping, and how I fixed it

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### Checklist: Structure and POV Readiness

- Plot maps onto the hero's journey as a flexible skeleton, not a rigid checklist
- Tired beats (prophecy, dying mentor, motiveless villain) are subverted or replaced
- I know my dominant MICE thread and my threads close in reverse order
- The middle is built from try-fail cycles, not a smooth ramp to victory
- POV is chosen for a clear effect and the viewpoint count is small
- Each scene holds one viewpoint; head changes happen only at breaks

### Pacing Stakes and Avoiding Genre Clichés

Pace scenes with scene-and-sequel, escalate personal stakes with ticking clocks and dilemmas, and handle clichés deliberately.

#### Exercise: Scene-and-Sequel Rebuild

Take one important action scene from your draft or outline. Rebuild it on Swain's scene structure: a clear goal, escalating conflict, and an ending disaster (a setback or a costly win, never a clean victory). Then write the sequel that follows it: reaction (emotional fallout), dilemma (a hard choice among bad options), and decision (which sets up the next scene's goal).

- Does the scene end in disaster that opens new problems, or in a clean win that deflates tension?
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- What hard dilemma does the disaster force on your character in the sequel?
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- What decision ends the sequel, and how does it become the next scene's goal?
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#### Exercise: Shrink the Stakes to Someone Loved

Write down your story's biggest external stake (the kingdom, the world). Then anchor it to one specific person the hero loves, so the world is at risk but the scene is about saving this one person. Add a ticking clock (a hard deadline) and confirm that each act makes the danger greater and the hero's options fewer.

- What is the cold, epic stake, and which beloved person can you anchor it to?
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- What is your ticking clock, and how does it force decisions and compress time?
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- At each major turn, is the hero's position worse than the turn before, or just repeating?
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## Worksheet: Cliché Audit Worksheet

Run your draft against the common fantasy tropes and decide, for each one present, how you will handle it: subvert, deepen, or earn.

Chosen one / prophecy present? Subvert, deepen, earn, or absent

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Orphan with hidden noble lineage? Decision

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Wise mentor who dies to motivate the hero? Decision

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Motiveless dark lord? Decision and the villain's real motive

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Single-trait races? Decision and the internal variety added

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Static medieval world untouched by magic? Decision and the consequences added

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## Checklist: Pacing and Originality Check

- Action scenes end on disasters or costly wins, not clean victories
- Tense scenes are followed by sequels with reaction, dilemma, and decision
- The epic stake is anchored to a specific person the reader cares about
- A ticking clock and tightening dilemmas keep danger escalating
- Every common cliché present has been deliberately subverted, deepened, or earned
- No trope sits on the page unexamined or used straight out of laziness

## Your Action Plan

1. Week 1: Draw a geography-first map and place every settlement where water, food, and trade make it inevitable; mark the chokepoints.
2. Week 2: Build two to three cultures from their scarcest resource outward, giving each internal variety and a working economy in your world bible.
3. Week 3: Place your magic on the hard-to-soft spectrum and write its core rules, applying Sanderson's First Law so the reader understands what magic will solve.
4. Week 4: Add a limitation, a weakness, and a steep cost to your magic, then stress-test it against your hero's worst moment and a clever villain.
5. Week 5: Follow the magic into society (war, medicine, travel, law, class) and complete the magic-system rulebook.
6. Week 6: Map your plot onto the hero's journey, swap every cliché beat for a specific alternative, and identify your dominant MICE thread.
7. Week 7: Confirm your MICE threads close in reverse order, then rebuild the sagging middle into try-fail cycles using yes-but and no-and.
8. Week 8: Choose and lock your point of view, set the viewpoint count, and scan a sample chapter for head-hopping.
9. Week 9: Rebuild three key scenes on scene-and-sequel, ending each on a disaster, and anchor your epic stakes to a beloved person with a ticking clock.
10. Week 10 and ongoing: Run the cliché audit on the full outline, deciding subvert/deepen/earn for each trope, then draft chapters while keeping the world bible, magic rulebook, and beat sheet updated as the story grows.









