



# Worlds That Win - The Scholastic Speculative Fiction Playbook

Step-by-step craft, real award-level analysis, and workshop assignments for grades 9 to 12.

## In this guide

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Each part teaches the skill, shows how winning writers make their choices, and ends with workshop assignments. Coaching notes and model responses are at the back.

## 07.1 What Makes Speculative Fiction Award-Worthy

Learn what jurors reward in Scholastic speculative fiction: a sharp premise tied to a human question, a voice that carries the world, and an ending that lands after the last word.

### Why This Matters

Speculative Fiction at the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards is a wide door: science fiction, fantasy, horror, dystopian, alternate history, worldbuilding and mythology all fit. The category takes full stories of 500 to 3,000 words (an excerpt belongs elsewhere, and a novel-length work goes in the Novel category). Because the door is so wide, jurors see a great many stories that share the same furniture: a chosen one, a rebel against a cruel government, a robot learning to feel. What stands out is not the genre but the writer.

Scholastic publishes no scoring rubric. What it does state is that jurors weigh **originality, technical skill, and the emergence of a personal voice or vision**. In this guide, everything else about what jurors tend to reward is the coach's inference from reading published winners, and we will label it that way. Students lose points in this category for a predictable reason: they spend their words on the invention (the map, the rules, the history) and run out of words for the human being the invention was supposed to reveal. A strong speculative story is a story first, and the strange element is the lens that makes an ordinary human question impossible to ignore.

### An honest note about the evidence

Our research found only one clearly science-fiction winning text that is publicly readable in full: 'Home,' which received a Scholastic Ray Bradbury Award for Science Fiction & Fantasy in 2021, as listed by the Alliance's own newsroom. That is a special award, not a Gold Medal, so we never call it one. We also studied uncanny, horror and fantasy-tinged winners from the flash fiction and short story categories. One sample is thin, so the lessons here are coach's inference from reading winners, not a Scholastic statement. Treat them as craft tools, not guarantees.

### Core Ideas

Think of a speculative story as a machine with three parts. The **premise** is the single strange thing that is different about this world. The **pressure** is what that difference does to a specific person who wants something. The **point** is what the reader understands about being human when the story is over. Award-level work keeps all three tied together. Weaker work often has a brilliant premise with no pressure, or lots of pressure with a premise that could be deleted without changing anything.

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## The Premise Test

State your premise in one sentence: 'In this world, \_\_\_\_\_ is different, so \_\_\_\_\_.'

Remove the strange element in your mind. If the story still works unchanged, the element is decoration.

Ask what the element makes impossible to avoid. A good premise corners a character.

A small, sharp premise beats a vast one. You have at most 3,000 words, so one change, fully explored, outperforms ten changes touched lightly.

## The Four Jobs of the Strange Element

- ◆ **It reveals.** The strange element shows a truth that realistic fiction could not show as cleanly (a probe's loneliness shows what a home means).
- ◆ **It tests.** It puts a character in a situation where every choice costs something.
- ◆ **It estranges.** It lets the reader see an everyday thing, like grief, memory or obedience, as if for the first time.
- ◆ **It stays disciplined.** It follows its own rules once you set them. Jurors notice when a magic system or technology bends to rescue the plot.

Notice that none of these jobs is 'to impress.' Wonder is a by-product of a premise that is working, not a goal you aim at directly. A grade 9 writer is expected to control one clear idea, one point of view and a clean ending. A grade 11 or 12 writer is expected to show deliberate choices: a reason for the point of view, a reason for the tense, a structure that carries meaning and a sense that every detail is chosen.

## Originality Is Not Strangeness

Originality here means a **fresh angle on a question**, not a new monster.

Your personal voice is the way your narrator notices things; protect it from sounding like a movie trailer.

Your vision is what you believe about the question underneath. Write toward that belief, not toward a twist.

Everything in your final work must be your own idea and creation. If you used any outside help for brainstorming or research, the program asks you to disclose it, and a work that is itself generated is ineligible.

## Case Studies

These case studies paraphrase real winners. We name the title, tier, year and source in words and never reproduce passages. Where a piece is only speculative-adjacent, we say so.

### CASE STUDY: 'HOME' (SCHOLASTIC RAY BRADBURY AWARD FOR SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY, 2021)

Source: the Alliance's newsroom page, which lists the piece and its award. Length is about 2,900 words, a full-length short story. An artificial probe narrates its long search for a perfect planet.

#### SOLUTION

**Development.** The story opens on a reflective thought about stars, not on an explosion or a chase. That choice grounds the premise in a feeling (loneliness) before any technology appears. The middle covers thousands of years by summary, with a few dramatized beats: the memory of departure, lifeless worlds, the discovery of a termination program, and the landing among ruins.

**Organization and the late turn.** The structure is chronological until the reveal that the perfect planet is Earth. Because the reader works out Earth's fate before the narrator does, the search turns into a homecoming, and the early loneliness is recast as grief. A twist that reinterprets the emotion, rather than just the plot, is the strongest kind.

**Syntax and diction.** Long layered sentences alternate with short blunt ones. The vocabulary blends technical terms with lyrical language about silence and light, which fits a machine that has had a very long time to think.

**Effect.** The ending is bittersweet and open: the probe trades its own consciousness to restore life, and its last thought is a question about dreaming. The premise carries a human cost, which is the point of the whole piece.

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**CASE STUDY: 'SKYE' (GOLD KEY, FLASH FICTION, 2019, FROM A SCHOOL'S PUBLISHED AWARDS BLOG)**

Speculative-adjacent. About 490 words. Second person, present tense, nine numbered attempts at the same meeting in a field with a winged young woman.

**SOLUTION**

**Development.** The structure is the story. Each numbered attempt replays the encounter, and each one changes the narrator's stance a little, moving from dread to acceptance. The change is progressive, not cosmetic, and that is the difference between a gimmick and a form.

**Syntax and diction.** Short declarative sentences and parallel openings create a steady, almost ritual rhythm; longer sentences appear only when emotion strains. The vocabulary is plain and controlled.

**Devices.** Repetition, extended metaphor (fear and grief as physical weight), personification of sky and clouds, and a circular design. The angelic traits are never explained, and the story is stronger for it.

**Effect.** The fantasy element is a way to stage grief, so the reader feels acceptance rather than being told about it. Lesson: a strange element can stay unexplained if the emotional logic is exact.

**CASE STUDY: 'OTHER GODS' (NATIONAL SILVER MEDAL, FLASH FICTION, 2019, FROM A SCHOOL'S PUBLISHED AWARDS BLOG)**

Uncanny, about 900 to 1,000 words. A blind widow's last ordinary morning, then a neighbor finds her. An uncanny encounter is never confirmed.

**SOLUTION**

**Development.** The opening announces that this is the day of her death, then moves into routine. Dread is built before anything frightening happens, because the reader knows where the day ends.

**Organization.** Three sections: routine, conversation with an embedded memory, discovery. The point of view shifts to the neighbor at the end, giving an outside view of a death we have only known from inside.

**Diction and devices.** Quiet, elegiac word choices; sensory detail that leans on sound, warmth, air and touch since the character cannot see; mirrored gestures between the opening and the close; and a deliberate ambiguity about whether the uncanny visit was real.

**Effect.** The supernatural never gets explained, so it stays with the reader. Lesson: restraint can be more frightening than display.

**CASE STUDY: 'STOLEN HEARTS' (NATIONAL GOLD MEDAL, FLASH FICTION, 2017, FROM A SCHOOL'S PUBLISHED AWARDS BLOG)**

Epistolary horror, about 850 words, ninth grade author. A dying narrator writes a letter-confession in which a romance becomes a murder.

**SOLUTION**

**Development.** The first lines give the reader an addressee, a deadline, a story to be told and an object with a hidden secret. Four hooks arrive in a form that usually offers one.

**Organization.** Frame letter, flashback, the killing, return to the present. The writer summarizes the middle of the relationship and dramatizes only the meeting and the killing, which is how 850 words feel complete.

**Diction.** Two registers collide: romantic language and clinical language. The narrator hears no difference, and that gap is the horror.

**Effect.** The ending hands the reader a box and stops, so the final image happens in the reader's mind. Lesson: choose a form (a letter) that does a job for you, and withhold the last image.

## Step-by-Step

- 1 Start with a question, not a creature** Write the human question first: What do we owe those who left? What does obedience cost? Then ask what invented condition would make that question urgent.
- 2 Write your one-sentence premise** Use the formula: In this world, X is different, so Y. If Y is a plot event, push until it becomes a pressure on a person.
- 3 Choose a narrator who must care** Pick the person for whom the premise is least abstract. A technician, a child, a machine, a ghost, a traitor. Their limited view will deliver your world for you.
- 4 Pick your two or three dramatized moments** Summarize everything else. Choose the scenes where the premise corners the character.

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- 5 Draft toward an image, not a lesson** Know what the final image or act will be before you write the middle.
- 6 Cut the first page of explanation** Most drafts start a page too early. Begin where the pressure begins and let context arrive later.
- 7 Revise for voice and clean copy** Read aloud. Replace default phrases with your narrator's own. Proofread, since polish signals care. Remove your name and any identifying details from the manuscript before entering.

#### BEFORE AND AFTER: OPENING A STORY

**WEAK** (coach sample): In the year 2187, after the Great Collapse destroyed the old governments, humanity lived in domed cities controlled by the Council. Mara, a sixteen-year-old girl, was different from everyone else.

#### SOLUTION

**STRONG** (coach sample): Every dome had one door, and Mara's job was to forget it was there. She was sixteen and on her fourth month as a Door Clerk, which meant she logged who left and wrote down nothing about why.

**What changed.** The weak version delivers a date, a history and a label ('different') before any person acts. The strong version puts the world inside a job, a verb and a limit, so the dome, the Council and the secrecy are implied. The reader now wants to know why the clerk writes down nothing.

#### BEFORE AND AFTER: LETTING THE STRANGE ELEMENT COST SOMETHING

**WEAK** (coach sample): Her memory-trading machine could swap memories between people. She used it to give her grandmother a happy day, and everyone was glad.

#### SOLUTION

**STRONG** (coach sample): The machine took one memory for every one it gave. She gave her grandmother the afternoon at the lake. She paid with the sound of her grandmother's voice calling her name.

**What changed.** In the weak version the invention is a free gift, so nothing is at stake. In the strong version it has a price that is specific, personal and tied to the relationship. The cost creates tension, and it also hints at the story's point: love and loss traded evenly.

## Tier Check

Scholastic publishes no rubric or tier percentages. This table is the coach's inference from published winners, including the small speculative sample, and should be read as tendencies only.

| Gold Medal level                                                                            | Silver Medal / Gold Key level                                                            | Honorable Mention / unrecognized                                                                   |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A single, sharp premise tied to an emotional question; the story could not exist without it | Clear premise and strong control; the emotional question is present but sometimes stated | Premise is a familiar set-up (chosen one, rebel, awakening robot) with the emotion explained to us |
| A voice or structure that does a job (letter frame, machine narrator, numbered loops)       | Strong voice or form, sometimes with a weaker ending                                     | Standard narration, with equal space given to every moment                                         |
| Ending withholds or redirects and lands after the last word                                 | Ending is satisfying but a little explained                                              | Ending moralizes or repeats the premise                                                            |
| Clean copy, deliberate diction, consistent rules                                            | Few slips; some default phrases                                                          | Typos, borrowed phrases and loose rules                                                            |

### Common traps

1) Opening with a history lecture or date stamp. 2) A premise so large it can only be summarized. 3) Describing a character as 'different' or 'special' instead of showing what they do. 4) Ending with a stated moral or a dream/wake-up reveal that erases the story.

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### Coach's Playbook

[ ] My premise fits in one sentence. [ ] One person is cornered by it. [ ] Two or three scenes are fully dramatized. [ ] I know the final image. [ ] The strange element has a rule and a price. [ ] The word count is between 500 and 3,000 and the story is complete. [ ] My name appears nowhere in the manuscript. [ ] Every word is mine.

### Do This Tonight

Set a timer for 15 minutes. Write five human questions that bother you (loss, loyalty, truth, memory, belonging). Under each, write one invented condition that would make the question impossible to avoid. Circle the pair that makes you want to know what happens next.

## Practice

### WORKSHOP What Makes Speculative Fiction Award-Worthy

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Write the sentence 'In this world, \_\_\_\_\_ is different, so \_\_\_\_\_.' ten times about ten different premises. Circle the one with a person in the second blank.
2. Take a cliché premise (chosen one, rebel against a dome) and rewrite it so the narrator is the least heroic person involved. Write the first 150 words.
3. Write a 120-word opening that begins inside a job, a chore or a rule of your invented world, with no history lesson.
4. Choose a strange element and assign it a price that falls on a relationship. Write the price in one sentence and a 100-word scene showing it being paid.
5. Read 'Home' (Ray Bradbury Award 2021) on the Alliance newsroom page. Write 150 words in your own words on how the narrator's limits deliver the worldbuilding.
6. Write a 300-word scene in which the speculative element is never explained but the emotional logic is exact, in the spirit of nine loops of the same meeting.
7. Draft a 400-word flash story in a letter, log or report form where the form hides a secret. Withhold the final image.
8. Pick one of your old drafts and delete its first page. Write one paragraph describing what the story now starts with.
9. Write two different final images for the same story. Say which one explains and which one withholds, and choose.
10. Proofread a page of your draft aloud and mark every default phrase you would not hear in your narrator's mouth. Replace five.

### 07.2 Worldbuilding That Serves the Story

Build a world the way winners do: let voice, constraint and objects deliver it, keep the rules costly and consistent, and cut every explanation the story does not need.

### Why This Matters

Worldbuilding is where speculative writers fall in love and where they lose contests. You can spend a week on a magic system, a map and four invented languages, and the jurors will see none of it unless it appears in a scene. Scholastic's Speculative Fiction category lists worldbuilding among its forms, but it still limits you to 3,000 words and asks for a complete story, so the world has to be efficient. The test is simple: does each piece of the world put pressure on a person on the page?

Scholastic publishes no rubric, but it does tell us jurors weigh originality, technical skill and a personal voice or vision. Coach's inference from reading winners: a world feels original when it is seen through a particular pair of eyes, and technically skilled when the reader learns its rules without noticing a lesson. Most lost points come from exposition: paragraphs of history, characters who explain things they both already know, and made-up names stacked up until the reader stops caring.

### Core Ideas

Use the **iceberg principle**. You may know ninety percent of your world, but the story shows only the tip, chosen so that the rest is implied. Readers trust a world when a few details are specific and consistent. They stop trusting it when every detail is explained, because over-explaining looks like insecurity.

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## The Three Delivery Systems

**Voice:** the narrator's habits of speech and attention reveal the world (what they notice, what they take for granted).

**Constraint:** what the narrator can know, sense or access limits what the reader learns, and the limit becomes suspense.

**Object and action:** tools, jobs, rituals and rules shown in use, not described at rest.

In the one clearly science-fiction piece we could study, the 2021 Ray Bradbury Award winner 'Home,' a probe narrates its own mission. Everything the reader learns about humanity comes through the probe's archive and sensors. That is a worldbuilding method, not just a style: the constraint of the point of view is the delivery system. Because we have only this one clear sample, treat it as an example of a technique that is widely useful, not as a rule for the category.

## Rules, Costs and Consistency

- ◆ **One big change.** Alter one thing about reality, then follow it honestly. If memory can be traded, ask who trades, who is cheated and who is lonely.
- ◆ **A rule must be breakable only at a cost.** If your hero can escape by inventing a new power, jurors feel cheated. Set limits early in the story and let the ending use them.
- ◆ **Texture beats scale.** Name the bread, the tool, the slang, the smell. Three precise details do more than a page of geography.
- ◆ **Names and terms.** Invent a word only when English cannot do the job, and never invent more than a handful. Make each easy to say and anchor it in context on its first use.
- ◆ **Everyday life first.** How do people eat, work, grieve and joke in your world? Start there and the grand history will follow.

## The Exposition Filter

Does the character need to say or think this at this moment? If not, cut it or move it.

Could the reader infer this from an action or an object? Then show the object.

Would two people who know this really explain it to each other? If not, delete the dialogue.

Does this detail change a choice? If not, it is decoration, and decoration can wait for a longer work.

| Technique          | Weak use                                   | Strong use                                                          |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Opening</b>     | Date, history and a map before anyone acts | A person in the middle of a job, rule or ritual                     |
| <b>Dialogue</b>    | As you know, Bob explanation               | Conflict where each speaker wants something and the world leaks out |
| <b>Terminology</b> | Five invented nouns in a paragraph         | One new word, explained by what happens when it is used             |
| <b>Backstory</b>   | A flashback to the Great War               | A single object or scar the character carries                       |
| <b>Rules</b>       | Magic that solves any problem              | Magic with a price, used for the ending                             |

## Case Studies

The world in a short story is a delivery problem. These real winners show three delivery systems at work. Tier, year and source are given as the research record lists them; all analysis is paraphrase.

### CASE STUDY: 'HOME' (SCHOLASTIC RAY BRADBURY AWARD FOR SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY, 2021)

Source: the Alliance's newsroom page lists the award. Approximately 2,900 words. An artificial probe searches for a perfect planet. This is a special award, not a Gold Medal, and the sample is the only clearly science-fiction text we could read.

#### SOLUTION

**World through constraint.** The post-catastrophe backstory is not announced. It comes out gradually through the probe's investigation: a reflection on stars, records, a termination program, and the ruins and vault at landing. The reader assembles the world as the narrator does.

**Summary versus scene.** The mission spans millennia, so summary does most of the work, which suits a machine reviewing a long past. A handful of dramatized beats (departure memory, lifeless systems, the discovery, the landing) carry the emotion.

**Diction.** Technical terms mix with lyrical language of silence and light. The blend tells us what kind of mind is speaking.

**Effect.** The final reveal that the perfect planet is Earth works because the delivery system hid it in plain sight. Lesson: choose a narrator whose limits create the reveal.

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**CASE STUDY: 'HERO TO THREE' (NATIONAL SILVER MEDAL, FLASH FICTION, 2017, FROM A SCHOOL'S PUBLISHED AWARDS BLOG)**

Not speculative, but a model for world-in-miniature. About 800 words. A displaced community hides in Kazakhstan, and a sick six-year-old weighs his mother's silence against his brother's invented story, then finds letters.

**SOLUTION**

**World through texture.** The opening moves from a wide, almost chronicle-like view of a hidden community to one child. A historical setting supplies stakes at very low word cost, and domestic words (bread, shawls, hiding) ground the larger violence.

**Objects as archive.** A shoebox of letters stands for the whole past. The father's formal name in documents is set against the myth told by candlelight, so two competing versions of history live in one family.

**Syntax.** Long clause-heavy sentences carry context early; short parallel sentences later feel like revelations. The research notes some loose syntax, a reminder that even a Silver Medal piece has flaws.

**Lesson for speculative writers.** A believable invented world should feel as specific as this historical one: a few exact objects, a reasoning child, and no lecture.

**CASE STUDY: 'SKYE' (GOLD KEY, FLASH FICTION, 2019, FROM A SCHOOL'S PUBLISHED AWARDS BLOG)**

Speculative-adjacent. About 490 words. Second person, present tense, nine numbered attempts at the same encounter with a winged young woman.

**SOLUTION**

**Worldbuilding by omission.** The story never explains angels, wings or how they work. It trusts the reader to accept the strange fact because the emotion is precise.

**Structure as world.** The numbered attempts are the rules of this small universe: you can try again, and each try changes you. The form teaches the reader how to read the world.

**Imagery.** A tight palette of green field, golden hair, open sky and cloud anchors the setting in a few repeated images.

**Lesson.** In under 500 words, one repeated image and one structural rule can build a complete world.

**CASE STUDY: 'STOLEN HEARTS' (NATIONAL GOLD MEDAL, FLASH FICTION, 2017, FROM A SCHOOL'S PUBLISHED AWARDS BLOG)**

Epistolary horror, about 850 words. A dying narrator addresses a letter to a named recipient and refers to an unopened box.

**SOLUTION**

**World through form.** The letter format builds context automatically: an addressee, a deadline, a family inheritance of secrets. No narrator needs to explain who is who, because a letter's rituals do it.

**Withholding.** The box is never opened on the page. The reader fills in its contents, which is an economical way to build dread.

**Lesson.** A form that already contains a social world (a letter, a log, a manual, a news bulletin) can do worldbuilding for you.

## Step-by-Step

- 1 Write a private world sheet** One page: the one big change, three rules, three costs, and five everyday details (food, work, greeting, fear, joke). Keep it out of the story.
- 2 Choose the delivery system** Voice, constraint, or objects in use. If you choose constraint, decide what your narrator cannot know.
- 3 Select five details for the page** Pick the five that change a choice. Everything else stays in the iceberg.
- 4 Dramatize one rule being used** Show a character using or breaking the rule and paying. Do this in the first third of the story.
- 5 Delay the big explanation** Hold the meaning of the world until the reader has a question about it.
- 6 Trim invented words** Highlight every invented term. Keep no more than a handful and make each earn its place.
- 7 Test with a cold reader** Hand the draft to someone who has not heard your world. Ask what they think the rules are. If they guess wrong, adjust the details, not the lecture.

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**BEFORE AND AFTER: EXPOSITION IN DIALOGUE**

**WEAK** (coach sample):

'As you know, Jun, ever since the Silence ten years ago, no one has been allowed to speak after dark because sound attracts the Listeners,' said Mother.

'Yes, I know,' said Jun.

**SOLUTION**

**STRONG** (coach sample):

Mother tied the cloth over the lantern and pressed a finger to her lips. Jun did not ask why. At night, even the kettle waited for morning.

**What changed.** The weak version has two characters recite what both know, and it names the threat. The strong version shows the rule through three actions and one odd image, and it leaves the Listeners for later. The rule is clear, the mood is tense and no one explains.

**BEFORE AND AFTER: BACKSTORY**

**WEAK** (coach sample): The city had been flooded for fifty years since the ice melted, and the survivors built floating homes and traded in boats.

**SOLUTION**

**STRONG** (coach sample): Nia's grandmother kept a doorknob in her pocket, the only piece of the old house that was not under the water. Every dawn the old woman rowed to where the door used to be and counted the bubbles.

**What changed.** The weak line is a summary of history. The strong lines use one object, one ritual and one detail to carry the same history, and they show grief. Notice the strong version also hints at a character who wants something.

## Tier Check

Scholastic publishes no rubric or tier percentages. This table is coach's inference from published winners and the small speculative sample.

| Gold Medal level                                                                   | Silver Medal / Gold Key level                                        | Honorable Mention / unrecognized                                                   |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>World arrives through voice, constraint or objects; the reader assembles it</b> | World is clear and consistent but sometimes explained in a paragraph | World is introduced in an opening lecture or by characters reciting what they know |
| <b>Rules have costs and the ending uses them</b>                                   | Rules are consistent, with costs sometimes stated                    | Rules bend to solve the plot                                                       |
| <b>A few exact details; invented terms are rare and earned</b>                     | Good detail, with some excess naming                                 | Invented names pile up; details are generic                                        |
| <b>Form or voice does worldbuilding work</b>                                       | Form is good but not tied to the world                               | Standard narration that stops to explain                                           |

### Common traps

1) The prologue lecture. 2) Characters explaining the obvious to each other. 3) A glossary of invented words in the first page. 4) Rules that change when the plot needs rescue.

### Coach's Playbook

[ ] I can state the one big change in one sentence. [ ] The reader learns the world through a person's choices. [ ] No more than a handful of invented terms. [ ] A rule is used, costs something and returns at the end. [ ] The first page has no history lesson. [ ] My story is complete in 500 to 3,000 words.

### Do This Tonight

Spend 15 minutes writing a one-page world sheet for your current idea. Then circle only five details. Write a 100-word opening that uses all five without a single sentence of explanation.

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## Practice

### WORKSHOP Worldbuilding That Serves the Story

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Write a one-page private world sheet for a story idea: one big change, three rules, three costs, five everyday details.
2. Using only the five details, write a 150-word opening scene with no explanation.
3. Take a paragraph of your own backstory and rewrite it as one object and one ritual, in about 80 words.
4. Rewrite this line as action: 'Everyone feared the night patrols.' Do it in three sentences without using the word fear.
5. List every invented word in your latest draft. Cut it to three or fewer and explain how you will teach each in context.
6. Write a dialogue of 120 words in which two characters who know the rules argue about something else, and the rules leak out.
7. Pick a narrator whose limits hide a fact the reader will discover later. Write a 200-word passage that plants the fact without stating it.
8. Read the research notes or newsroom listing for 'Home' (Ray Bradbury Award, 2021) and write a paragraph on how point of view works as worldbuilding.
9. Invent a rule with a cost and write the scene where a character breaks it. Then write one sentence about how the ending will use the same rule.
10. Give your world sheet to a friend and ask for a three-line summary of the rules. Revise one detail to correct any wrong guess.

### 07.3 Character, Stakes, and Plot in Invented Worlds

Make readers care in a short space: give your character a concrete want, make the stakes personal, and build a plot out of choices that cost something.

## Why This Matters

A reader can forgive a thin world. A reader rarely forgives a thin person. In a story of 500 to 3,000 words, jurors meet your character in the first paragraph and decide quickly whether to care. Scholastic names originality, technical skill and the emergence of a personal voice or vision as what it weighs. A character with a distinct way of seeing is how that voice and vision arrive on the page.

Students lose points here in three ways. The character is a type (the orphan, the soldier, the genius) with no particular want. The stakes are huge but abstract (the fate of the kingdom) and so feel like nothing. Or the plot is a sequence of things that happen to the character instead of things the character chooses. Coach's inference from reading winners: award-level fiction in any genre keeps the stakes small enough to feel and the choice sharp enough to hurt.

## Core Ideas

### Want, Obstacle, Cost

**Want:** something concrete the character can reach for (a key, a name, a forgiveness, a way home).

**Obstacle:** the specific way your invented world blocks that want.

**Cost:** what the character must give up, risk or become to get it.

If you cannot name all three in one sentence each, the plot is not ready.

Stakes are not the size of the explosion. They are how much the character stands to lose, weighted by how much the reader cares. A dying probe that gives up its own consciousness is a bigger stake than a galaxy at risk, because the loss is intimate. In a short word budget, personal stakes with a world-sized echo outperform world-sized stakes with a personal shrug.

## Plot in a Short Space

- ◆ **One problem, one pressure rise.** Short fiction rarely supports more than one central problem and two or three turns.
- ◆ **Choose scene versus summary on purpose.** The strongest flash pieces dramatize two or three moments and summarize the rest.
- ◆ **Turns come from choices.** Each turn should come from something the character does or refuses to do.
- ◆ **Start late, end early.** Open close to the first pressure; stop soon after the decisive act.
- ◆ **The ending should cost.** A character who solves a problem with no price rarely moves a reader.

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| Plot move             | Passive version                     | Active version                                            |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Inciting event</b> | Something happens to her            | She makes a choice that sets the problem moving           |
| <b>Midpoint</b>       | A new enemy arrives                 | The character learns the price of the want                |
| <b>Climax</b>         | A rescue by luck or an unused power | A choice that uses what the story set up                  |
| <b>Ending</b>         | Everyone is safe                    | One thing is lost, one is kept, and the reader feels both |

### Make Strangers Feel Real

Give the character a **habit** (a way of speaking, counting or avoiding) that is not required by the plot.

Give them a **contradiction** (brave but secretive, loyal but resentful).

Give them an **object** they carry that stands for what they have lost.

Let them be **wrong** about something the reader can see.

## Case Studies

These case studies look at how real winners handle character and stakes. We cite title, tier, year and source as the research record lists them, and we paraphrase everything.

### CASE STUDY: 'HOME' (SCHOLASTIC RAY BRADBURY AWARD FOR SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY, 2021)

Source: the Alliance's newsroom page. About 2,900 words. An artificial probe narrates its search for a perfect planet and learns it is Earth. A special award, not a Gold Medal. It is the only clear science-fiction sample we found.

#### SOLUTION

**Character.** The narrator is a machine, yet it has an interior life: loneliness, hope, memory and a final wish about dreaming. The writer gives it a want (to find a home), then an obstacle (a long, empty universe), then a cost (its own consciousness).

**Stakes and development.** The stakes begin as loneliness and become grief once the reader knows what happened to Earth before the probe does. The final choice, to restore life at the price of itself, is the story's decisive act and not an accident.

**Organization.** A mostly chronological structure with long memory digressions builds to the reveal. Summary covers millennia; the dramatized beats mark the turns.

**Effect.** The premise has a human cost, and the final question lets the narrator keep an inner life to the end. Lesson: give your non-human or distant character a want that any reader can feel.

### CASE STUDY: 'CARNIVAL GAMES' (NATIONAL SILVER MEDAL AND GOLD KEY, SHORT STORY, 2017, FROM A SCHOOL'S PUBLISHED AWARDS BLOG)

Not speculative. About 1,700 words. A grieving narrator recounts a friend's decline after his sister's death. The piece handles a school shooting, so treat it with care when you study it.

#### SOLUTION

**Character through objects.** A stuffed panda and a Beatles poster that belonged to the sister carry emotion so the narrator does not have to explain it. The research reads the difference between this piece and lower tiers as being these motif objects plus the frame.

**Organization.** A frame story returns again and again to one carnival day, mimicking how grief revisits one moment.

**Syntax.** Long emotional run-on sentences contrast with clipped dialogue. Sweet sensory detail (lights, sugar, funnel cake) is paired with dread the reader already feels.

**Lesson.** Whatever your genre, give your character two or three objects that stand for what they have lost, and return to them.

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### CASE STUDY: 'HERO TO THREE' (NATIONAL SILVER MEDAL, FLASH FICTION, 2017, FROM A SCHOOL'S PUBLISHED AWARDS BLOG)

About 800 words. A sick six-year-old weighs his mother's silence against his brother's invented heroic story, then finds letters.

#### SOLUTION

**Character.** The boy's reasoning is the plot. He has competing accounts and must decide which to believe. Repeated negative phrasing marks his stages of disillusionment.

**Stakes.** The question is what makes a hero, carried by objects and a child's logic, not stated as theme. History supplies stakes at almost no cost in words.

**Ending.** A short, resolute sentence shows his tears and his decision, so the character changes by choice.

**Lesson.** A small decision made by a specific mind can carry the weight that an explosion cannot.

### CASE STUDY: 'STOLEN HEARTS' (NATIONAL GOLD MEDAL, FLASH FICTION, 2017, FROM A SCHOOL'S PUBLISHED AWARDS BLOG)

Epistolary horror, about 850 words, written by a ninth grader. A dying narrator confesses by letter.

#### SOLUTION

**Character as the subject.** The narrator's mind, not the murder, is the real subject. Two registers collide: romantic idealizing and clinical violence, and the narrator hears no difference.

**Stakes and plot.** The plot is compressed. The first meeting and the killing are dramatized; the middle of the relationship is summarized. The writer spends words on the two moments that matter.

**Unreliable narration.** Self-justification increases dread, and the reader is complicit as the addressee.

**Lesson.** In a short story, the budget of scene and summary is a plot decision. Spend scenes where the choice is made.

## Step-by-Step

- 1 Write the want-obstacle-cost sentence** 'Mara wants \_\_\_, but \_\_\_ blocks her, and getting it will cost \_\_\_.' Make each blank concrete.
- 2 Choose the moment of choice** Find the instant where the character must pick between two things they love or two things they fear. Build the story toward it.
- 3 Give them a habit and an object** One quirk of speech or action, one thing they carry. Use both at least twice.
- 4 List three turns** Each turn should come from a choice and raise the price of the want.
- 5 Spend your scene budget** Mark two or three moments to dramatize fully. Summarize everything else in a sentence or two.
- 6 Draft the end first in rough** Know the act or image the story closes on. Check that it costs something.
- 7 Revise for passive verbs** Underline every sentence where the character is acted upon. Turn at least half into choices or refusals.

### BEFORE AND AFTER: A FLAT CHARACTER

**WEAK** (coach sample): Kael was a brave soldier who always did what was right. When the alarm sounded, he grabbed his weapon and ran toward the danger.

#### SOLUTION

**STRONG** (coach sample): Kael counted stairs when he was afraid, so the tower took him a long time. Forty-one, forty-two. The alarm kept screaming, and his boots kept the beat.

**What changed.** The weak version labels the character as brave and does nothing unusual. The strong version shows a private habit, a fear and a choice to go anyway, through a concrete action. We learn courage by seeing it cost something.

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**BEFORE AND AFTER: ABSTRACT STAKES**

**WEAK** (coach sample): If the portal closed, all the realms would be lost forever, and only Lena could stop it.

**SOLUTION**

**STRONG** (coach sample): The portal was the only way her brother could come home, and it was closing a hand-width each minute. Lena had one key and a decision: use it to save him, or save the three strangers waiting on this side.

**What changed.** The weak version has big stakes with no person and no choice. The strong version ties the stakes to a relationship and sets two goods against each other. The world-sized echo (the portal) stays, but the heart of the scene is a human decision.

## Tier Check

Scholastic publishes no rubric and no tier percentages. This table is coach's inference from published winners.

| Gold Medal level                                                                               | Silver Medal / Gold Key level                                         | Honorable Mention / unrecognized                     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| A particular mind with a want, a habit and a contradiction; the story is shaped by its choices | A vivid character with a clear arc; some choices still driven by plot | A type (the chosen one, the rebel) defined by labels |
| Stakes are personal, with a world-sized echo; the ending costs                                 | Stakes are clear but sometimes large and abstract                     | Stakes are stated rather than felt                   |
| Two or three fully dramatized moments, with the rest summarized                                | Good scenes, though some middles are given too much space             | Equal space to every event; a chase without a choice |
| Objects or gestures carry feeling                                                              | Feeling is often shown, sometimes explained                           | Feelings named in narration                          |

### Common traps

1) The chosen one with no flaw. 2) Stakes of 'everything,' which feel like nothing. 3) A hero rescued by luck, a new power or a stranger. 4) A fast chase in which no one chooses anything.

### Coach's Playbook

[ ] Want, obstacle and cost fit in one sentence. [ ] The character has a habit, a contradiction and an object. [ ] Every turn comes from a choice. [ ] Two or three scenes are fully dramatized. [ ] The ending costs. [ ] A grade 11-12 writer should be able to explain why each scene is on the page.

### Do This Tonight

For 15 minutes, take the main character of your draft and write three lines: a habit they have, a thing they will not say aloud, and the object they carry. Then rewrite your opening so at least one of the three appears in the first five sentences.

## Practice

### WORKSHOP Character, Stakes, and Plot in Invented Worlds

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Write three want-obstacle-cost sentences for three different speculative premises. Circle the one where the cost hurts most.
2. Invent a non-human narrator (machine, ghost, god, animal) and write 150 words in which it reveals one human-like want without saying the word want.
3. Write a character sketch of 100 words that includes a habit, a contradiction and an object.
4. Rewrite the sentence 'The fate of the kingdom depends on her' so the stakes land on one person she loves. Use 60 words.
5. Choose a moment of choice between two goods. Write it as a 250-word scene with no more than one line of narrator explanation.
6. Mark the scene-versus-summary budget of your own draft: highlight scenes in one color and summary in another. Propose one change.

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7. Take a passive paragraph from your draft and revise it so every key event is a choice or refusal.
8. Write a 400-word scene in which a character makes a costly choice in an invented world and the world's rules make the cost specific.
9. Choose an object for your protagonist that is connected to a loss. Write 100 words in which it appears twice with different meanings.
10. Write the last two sentences of your story so that the ending costs something. Then write a second version that rescues everyone, and explain which is stronger.

07.4

Theme, Endings, and Avoiding Genre Cliches

Find a theme that stays a question, end on an act or image that lands after the last word, and replace genre defaults with choices only you would make.

Why This Matters

Theme and endings are where a speculative story either becomes memorable or collapses into a familiar shape. Scholastic says jurors weigh originality, technical skill and the emergence of a personal voice or vision, and an ending is where your vision is most exposed. A cliché is not a forbidden object; a cliché is a choice made by default. Jurors read many stories, and the ones that get remembered are those where each choice, including the last one, looks deliberate.

Students lose points in this category in three predictable ways: the theme is announced in a closing paragraph, the twist erases the story ('it was all a simulation'), or the whole plot follows a shape the juror has met dozens of times. This section helps you find a theme through the story's images, end on something that lands after the last word, and swap defaults for decisions. Because the evidence base for speculative fiction is thin (one clearly science-fiction text, plus uncanny and horror-adjacent winners), the patterns here are coach's inference from reading winners in several fiction categories.

Core Ideas

Theme Is a Question, Not a Slogan

A slogan is 'technology is dangerous.' A question is 'what do we owe the people we built to remember us?'

Find your theme by asking what your main image keeps returning to.

Let two ideas compete inside the story (loyalty versus truth) without declaring a winner.

The reader should be able to state a theme and still disagree with the story about it.

Speculative fiction has an advantage here: it can stage an abstract question as a physical situation. Grief becomes a field where the same meeting is attempted nine times. Obedience becomes a clerk who writes nothing down. Choose the situation that makes your question hard to avoid, then resist the urge to answer it for the reader.

Endings That Land

- ◆ **End on an act or an image.** A box to open, a curtain that moves, a choice made. The lesson stays quiet.
- ◆ **Withhold the last beat.** Let the reader finish the picture. The imagination often does more than another paragraph.
- ◆ **Echo the opening.** A mirrored gesture or frame gives a sense of closure without explanation.
- ◆ **Let the ending cost.** A bittersweet ending that gives up something feels honest.
- ◆ **Avoid the reset.** 'It was all a dream,' 'it was a simulation,' and 'she woke up' erase the story's stakes unless the dream or simulation was the premise from line one.

| Cliche                               | Why it fails                                      | A fresher choice                                        |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| Chosen one with a prophecy           | The outcome is promised, so choices do not matter | A character who is wrongly believed to be chosen        |
| Evil government overthrown by a teen | The politics are cartoon-sized                    | A person who benefits from the system and sees its cost |
| Robot learns to feel                 | The question is answered in the premise           | A machine that has always felt and must hide it         |
| Twist: it was a simulation           | Erases stakes                                     | Let the unreal world cost something real                |
| Dark lord, final battle              | Stakes are abstract; choices are fights           | A bargain, a refusal or a confession                    |

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| Cliche                              | Why it fails          | A fresher choice                   |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------|
| Names with apostrophes and capitals | Decoration, not voice | Plain names with one strange habit |

## Cliche Triage

**Keep it** if the reader will meet it freshly because your voice or form changes how it feels.

**Twist it** if you can flip a convention (the villain is the narrator's kindest relative).

**Cut it** if it is only there because the genre usually has it.

A familiar element is acceptable when the second reading shows it was chosen for a reason.

## Case Studies

Each case study below is about endings and theme. Tiers, years and sources come from the research record; all analysis is paraphrase and no passage is reproduced.

### CASE STUDY: 'HOME' (SCHOLASTIC RAY BRADBURY AWARD FOR SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY, 2021)

Source: the Alliance's newsroom page. About 2,900 words. A special award, not a Gold Medal. It is the single clear science-fiction text in our research, so what follows is a close reading of one example.

#### SOLUTION

**Theme through reversal.** The search for a perfect planet turns out to be a return to Earth after catastrophe. The idea of home shifts from a place to find into a place to restore, and loneliness becomes grief.

**Ending.** Bittersweet and open: the probe chooses to restore life at the cost of its own consciousness, and its last thought is whether it will dream. The sacrifice is specific, and the story ends on a question rather than a summary.

**Devices.** Dramatic irony (the reader learns Earth's fate first), repetition of the search, rhetorical questions and a dreaming motif that closes the piece.

**Avoiding cliché.** A machine narrator is a familiar figure, yet the piece avoids the cliché of a robot learning to feel by granting the narrator an inner life from the start. Lesson: reshape a familiar element by changing what the story asks of it.

### CASE STUDY: 'OTHER GODS' (NATIONAL SILVER MEDAL, FLASH FICTION, 2019, FROM A SCHOOL'S PUBLISHED AWARDS BLOG)

Uncanny, about 900 to 1,000 words. A blind widow's last morning, then a neighbor discovers her. An uncanny encounter is not confirmed.

#### SOLUTION

**Ending.** The last image is the body and the faint movement of the curtains, leaving a sense of presence. The writer does not explain whether the visit was real or a memory she invented.

**Theme.** The dual meaning of seeing for a blind character, and the mirrored gestures of the opening and close, carry the theme of presence and absence without a sentence of explanation.

**Avoiding cliché.** The ghost story is quiet. There are no jump scares, no rule-bound ghost. The supernatural stays unconfirmed, so it stays with the reader.

**Lesson.** A lower-tier version likely explains the encounter or ends on a moral. Ambiguity works when it is built from exact sensory detail.

### CASE STUDY: 'SKYE' (GOLD KEY, FLASH FICTION, 2019, FROM A SCHOOL'S PUBLISHED AWARDS BLOG)

Speculative-adjacent. About 490 words. Second person, present tense, nine attempts at the same encounter.

#### SOLUTION

**Ending.** The final attempt reverses the earlier dread: the narrator lies beside her and finds comfort in a cloud that seems to take her shape. One change in the last loop performs acceptance.

**Theme.** The numbered form performs obsession and then release without naming grief. The theme lives in the structure.

**Avoiding cliché.** An angelic figure could be saccharine, but the story keeps the language plain and the progression earned. Lesson: each repeated element must turn, not merely recur.

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### CASE STUDY: 'STOLEN HEARTS' (NATIONAL GOLD MEDAL, FLASH FICTION, 2017, FROM A SCHOOL'S PUBLISHED AWARDS BLOG)

Epistolary horror, about 850 words, ninth grade author. A dying narrator writes a confession and refers to an unopened box.

#### SOLUTION

**Ending.** The final move is an instruction to open the box. The last image is withheld and the reader supplies it. The ending happens after the last word.

**Theme.** Possession, complicity and a mind that cannot hear the clash of its own registers. The reader is the heir to the confession, and so is implicated.

**Avoiding cliché.** Horror often shows the monster. This story sets a sweet and a clinical register against each other and lets the narrator be the horror. Lesson: shift the source of the genre's effect from spectacle to voice.

## Step-by-Step

- 1 **Name the question** Write your theme as a question, then list three images from your draft that circle it.
- 2 **List your genre defaults** Write every convention your story uses: type of hero, villain, setting, name style, twist. Mark each Keep, Twist or Cut.
- 3 **Draft two endings** One that resolves and explains, one that ends on an act or image. Compare.
- 4 **Test for the reset** Ask whether the last page cancels any earlier stakes. If it does, rebuild the twist so it adds meaning instead.
- 5 **Cut the moral** Delete the last paragraph and see whether the story still ends. Often it ends a sentence earlier.
- 6 **Read the ending aloud** Does the final sentence make a sound that feels done? Adjust rhythm, then trim adjectives.
- 7 **Check the rules** Make sure the manuscript is a complete story between 500 and 3,000 words, with no name or identifying detail, and that it is entirely your work. You can revise until your regional deadline.

### BEFORE AND AFTER: A STATED THEME

**WEAK** (coach sample): Zed looked at the ruined city and finally understood that humans must protect the planet or lose everything they love.

#### SOLUTION

**STRONG** (coach sample): Zed set the seed in the cracked pot, packed the dirt with his thumbs, and told the dead sensor to start counting.

**What changed.** The weak ending states the moral and replaces the story with a statement. The strong ending shows a small act of faith, uses an image of growth and gives the machine a task. The theme remains available but unspoken.

### BEFORE AND AFTER: A CLICHE TWIST

**WEAK** (coach sample): Mina fought through the maze until she saw the exit, then woke in her bed. It had been a simulation all along.

#### SOLUTION

**STRONG** (coach sample): Mina knew the maze was a simulation; the exit was the part she was afraid of. Outside, her body had been waiting eleven years, and no one remembered her name.

**What changed.** The weak twist cancels the stakes at the end. The strong version places the knowledge at the start, so the question becomes what she will lose by leaving. The unreal world still matters because it holds her only relationships.

## Tier Check

Scholastic publishes no rubric and no tier percentages. This table is coach's inference from published winners, including the small speculative sample.

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| Gold Medal level                                                              | Silver Medal / Gold Key level                       | Honorable Mention / unrecognized                            |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Theme is a question carried by images; the reader can disagree with the story | Theme is clear and well supported, sometimes stated | Theme is announced or absent                                |
| Ending withholds or redirects and costs something                             | Ending is satisfying but a little explained         | Ending moralizes, resets or rescues everyone                |
| Familiar genre elements are chosen, twisted or cut with purpose               | Some defaults remain but are handled with voice     | Cliches by default: chosen one, evil regime, it was a dream |
| Form is tied to the ending's effect                                           | Form is good, with a weaker landing                 | Form is decoration                                          |

Common traps

1) A final paragraph that explains the point. 2) The wake-up or simulation twist. 3) Villains and heroes defined by genre rather than by want. 4) An ending that avoids cost to keep everyone happy.

Coach's Playbook

[ ] My theme is a question. [ ] I marked each default Keep, Twist or Cut. [ ] I wrote two endings and chose one. [ ] The last paragraph does not explain. [ ] The twist adds meaning. [ ] The work is complete, original and mine, and my name is nowhere in the manuscript. [ ] Entries opened Oct 1, 2026 and regional deadlines vary, so I have checked mine.

Do This Tonight

Take your draft's last paragraph and cut it. Read the story ending at the sentence before. Then write one new final sentence, 15 words or fewer, that is an act or an image. Compare the two and keep the stronger.

Practice

WORKSHOP Theme, Endings, and Avoiding Genre Cliches

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Write your story's theme as a question, not a statement. Then list three images in your draft that circle it.
2. List ten genre conventions your idea uses. Mark each Keep, Twist or Cut and write one sentence for each Twist.
3. Rewrite a cliché opening (a chosen one, a prophecy) so that the person is wrongly believed to be special. Use 150 words.
4. Write two endings for a draft in 100 words each: one explains, one withholds. Decide which to keep and why.
5. Take a twist from a story you know and rewrite it so it adds meaning rather than erasing stakes. Summarize in five sentences.
6. Read the research notes on 'Other Gods' (National Silver Medal, 2019). Write a paragraph on how the ending uses ambiguity without confusion.
7. Compose a final image of 40 words or less that is an act, not a feeling, for a story about loss.
8. Write a paragraph about why a familiar element (a robot narrator, a ghost, a dragon) could be fresh in your hands.
9. Annotate your draft: mark any line where the narrator states the theme. Cut or convert each to an image.
10. Do a final revision pass using the Coach's Playbook and write three sentences about what changed.

07.5 Bonus Lab: The Annotated Speculative Fiction Draft Clinic

Study a complete original speculative story, then revise your own through six passes. See how one strange rule, a real cost, and a human question turn an idea into a story.

Why This Matters

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Speculative Fiction at the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards covers science fiction, fantasy, horror, dystopian work, alternate history, worldbuilding, and mythology, at 500 to 3,000 words. It must be a full story, not an excerpt. The published criteria are originality, technical skill, and the emergence of a personal voice or vision; Scholastic gives no further rubric, so what follows is coaching. Students often lose points by building a clever world and forgetting the person inside it. This lab walks through one original story of about 420 words so you can see a strange premise tied to a human cost.

Jurors in this category tend to reward a premise that is strange once, not strange everywhere. One altered rule, followed honestly to its consequences, usually reads as more original than a catalog of invented kingdoms. Grade 9-12 writers are expected to show control: a rule that stays consistent, a protagonist whose choices matter, and language that belongs to the story. Read each part, then the annotation, then ask what you would change.

#### COACH'S SAMPLE (ORIGINAL, NOT A SCHOLASTIC WINNER): PART 1, ESTABLISHING THE RULE

Title: Ration

In Marlow Station, everyone is born with a single day of memory to spend. You choose when. Most people spend theirs at weddings. Ines spent hers at six years old, by accident, on a wet afternoon her father taught her to whistle.

She has been trying to earn it back for eleven years. Tonight she stands at the Exchange window with the only thing she owns that anyone wants: the memory of her mother's face.

#### SOLUTION

Development: the speculative element is one clean rule stated in a calm voice. The premise has a who (Ines), a want (to recover a spent day), and an obstacle (a system with a price).

Organization: world rule first, character second, stakes third, all inside two short paragraphs. Worldbuilding is delivered through what a person does, not a lecture.

Syntax and diction: the first paragraph lists in declarative sentences, as if from a manual. The second shifts into Ines's near-present urgency. Words like Exchange and spend borrow money language, which hints at a society that trades in feeling.

#### COACH'S SAMPLE (ORIGINAL, NOT A SCHOLASTIC WINNER): PART 2, THE COST APPEARS

The clerk is a boy not much older than she is, with ink on his cuff. "One trade," he says. "The memory leaves you. Your mother's face will be a word, not a picture."

"I know the terms."

"Everyone says they do." He slides the form across. "Last chance. Whistling is a small thing."

It is not small. It is the last time her father's voice sounded like his own. She signs.

#### SOLUTION

Development: here is the pivot. The strange element now costs something real, and the reader feels the cost before the trade happens. The clerk voices the obvious objection, so the reader's doubt is placed in the scene.

Organization: a three-beat exchange (terms, warning, signature) slows time at the moment of decision.

Diction and devices: 'a word, not a picture' is the central image of loss. The line 'It is not small' is a short sentence after longer ones, turning the scene on a hinge.

#### COACH'S SAMPLE (ORIGINAL, NOT A SCHOLASTIC WINNER): PART 3, THE ENDING

The afternoon comes back whole: wet pavement, the wrong note, his laugh. For an hour she is six and certain of everything.

Walking home she tries to picture her mother and finds only the word. The word is beautiful. She says it aloud, the way you would say the name of a country you will never visit.

Then, softly, she begins to whistle.

#### SOLUTION

Development: the trade is honored at full price. Ines gets what she asked for and loses what she paid, and the story refuses to call either one a victory. That ambiguity is where voice lives.

Organization: the final image circles back to the whistle from Part 1, closing the frame.

Syntax and diction: the simile of the country is a controlled flourish placed once. The last short line gives the ending physical sound, an action instead of a moral.

Notice what the whole sample does in about 420 words: it states one rule, tests it with one decision, and pays the price in one ending image. Your story can be up to 3,000 words, so you have room for complications, a second character with a competing want, and a middle where the rule is stressed. But the skeleton is the same. Rule, want, cost, choice, echo. If you can name those five beats in your draft, you have a structure; if one is missing, that is your revision target.

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## Revision Pass Plan

- 1 Pass 1: Rule and cost** State your story's one strange rule in a sentence. Then write what it costs your protagonist. If the cost is missing, add it.
- 2 Pass 2: Human question** Name the real-world question underneath the premise (loss, fairness, control). Make sure a scene asks it directly through a choice.
- 3 Pass 3: Exposition cut** Highlight every sentence explaining the world. Convert half into action, objects, or dialogue.
- 4 Pass 4: Opening** Begin inside a situation that shows the rule at work. Cut any opening that describes the world from a distance.
- 5 Pass 5: Language** Trade generic genre words (shadow, ancient, void) for specific, odd, concrete ones. Keep invented terms to a few you can justify.
- 6 Pass 6: Ending and proof** Land on an image or act. Confirm the 500 to 3,000 word range, a complete story arc, and that no identifying information appears.

### Speculative Fiction Lab Checklist

One clear rule or change to reality, stated early and consistently.  
 A character who wants something that rule makes expensive.  
 A human question beneath the invention.  
 World details delivered through action, not briefing.  
 An ending that honors the cost instead of cancelling it.  
 Language that avoids genre cliches and invents only what it needs.  
 Entirely your own idea and creation.

### Common traps

Opening with a map or a history lesson. Giving the hero powers with no price. Naming every place with a made-up word. Ending on a twist that undoes everything.

### Do This Tonight

Write your premise as 'In a world where \_\_\_, a person who wants \_\_\_ must give up \_\_\_.' Spend fifteen minutes on the blank after 'give up'.

## Practice

### WORKSHOP Bonus Lab: The Annotated Speculative Fiction Draft Clinic

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Write your own premise in the form: In a world where \_\_\_, a person who wants \_\_\_ must give up \_\_\_.
2. List three ways the rule of 'Ration' could be abused. Which would make the best second story, and why?
3. Rewrite Part 1 starting in the middle of the Exchange scene. What do you gain and what do you lose?
4. Draft a 200-word opening for a story set in a world with one new rule. Put the rule inside an action, not an explanation.
5. Find a place in your draft where the world is explained. Convert that passage into dialogue or an object.
6. Write the clerk's reply if Ines refuses the trade. How does the story change?
7. Replace three genre cliches in your draft with specific, concrete images.
8. Write two alternative last lines for your story: one hopeful, one bleak. Which is more truthful to the cost?

### Notes Coaching Notes and Model Responses

What a strong response to each assignment looks like, and why. Compare after you draft, not before.

#### 07.1 What Makes Speculative Fiction Award-Worthy

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**WORKSHOP · WHAT MAKES SPECULATIVE FICTION AWARD-WORTHY**

1. Look at the second blank in each. If it names an event ('so there is a war'), rewrite it to name a person under pressure ('so a clerk cannot admit her brother left'). Premises with people in the second blank tend to generate scenes, not summaries.
2. Success means the narrator's smallness is the engine, not a hidden greatness. Check that your first sentence places them in a concrete moment, and that you have not announced the setting's name or date in the opening lines.
3. A strong model: 'The lamp-oil came in on Thursdays, and Tobin's job was to taste it first.' Look for a verb, a limit and a hint of danger. If your first sentence contains a year or a proper noun for the world, cut it and let it arrive later.
4. A good price is specific and sad or odd, not merely 'it hurts.' Model: 'Every wish took a day of her shadow's color, so by spring she cast gray.' Check that the cost touches someone the narrator loves.
5. Strong notes mention that the probe knows the world only through its records and sensors, so the reader learns the history as the narrator does. You should paraphrase, not quote, and avoid claiming it won a Gold Medal; it was a Ray Bradbury Award.
6. You are aiming for restraint: one image the narrator cannot explain, and one reaction she cannot hide. If you caught yourself explaining the origin of the strange thing, move that explanation out and see whether the scene gets stronger.
7. The form should do a job. In a letter, the addressee gives stakes; in a log, repetition gives dread. Reread the last line: if the reader knows exactly what happens next, cut half a sentence and see whether the withholding feels earned.
8. Most writers find that the new opening is the second or third paragraph. The test: does the new first line put a person under pressure? If not, keep cutting until it does.
9. The explaining version usually states what the character has learned. The withholding version names an act or object. Choose the one that leaves the reader with a question rather than a verdict.
10. Default phrases include 'little did she know,' 'a chill ran down,' and 'everything changed.' Replace each with a detail only this narrator would notice. Clean copy matters: typos undercut an otherwise strong voice.

**07.2 Worldbuilding That Serves the Story****WORKSHOP · WORLDBUILDING THAT SERVES THE STORY**

1. A good sheet is specific and dull to others, and that is fine. Check that each rule has a cost and that each cost lands on a person. Model rule: 'Names can be sold; the seller forgets who they were named for.'
2. If any sentence explains, cut or turn it into an action. A strong opening uses at least three of the five details in motion, such as tools, food or a gesture, and leaves the big change implied.
3. Model: 'Her father's compass still pointed to a north that no longer existed. She rubbed its glass every night like a lamp.' One object plus one repeated action can replace an entire page of history.
4. Model: 'The shutters closed at dusk. Dad turned his boots to face the door. Even the dog slept with its nose to the crack.' Fear is shown by habits, not named.
5. Each surviving term should be taught by what happens when it is used. If you cannot teach it in one line of context, use plain English instead.
6. Success is two characters wanting different things, with rules appearing as obstacles. If either character explains something they both know, rewrite that line as a gesture or interruption.
7. Good plants are small and physical, such as a locked drawer, a sound the narrator ignores, or a word they avoid. The reader should be able to reread and see it. Avoid winking at the reader.
8. Your paragraph should note that the reader learns history as the narrator reads its records, so what is withheld and what is delivered are controlled by the voice. Avoid calling it a Gold Medal and avoid quoting.
9. The breaking scene should cost something quickly and visibly. In the ending sentence, plan for the same rule to return in a new way, so the world feels consistent rather than convenient.
10. Wrong guesses are valuable. If your friend misunderstands, find the single detail that misled them and change it. Do not respond by adding a paragraph of explanation.

**07.3 Character, Stakes, and Plot in Invented Worlds****WORKSHOP · CHARACTER, STAKES, AND PLOT IN INVENTED WORLDS**

1. Look for the cost that falls on a relationship or identity, not merely on safety. Model: 'He wants his sister back, a sealed gate blocks him, and the price is her memory of him.' If the cost is only death, search for a quieter one.
2. A good answer shows want through behavior: the probe-like narrator lingers, repeats, sends one more signal. If you wrote I want or I long for, replace it with an action the narrator keeps doing.
3. Model: 'Ira whistled when lying, never when afraid. She hated heights and lived in a lighthouse. Her father's brass key never left her wrist.' The contradiction is the most useful part; check that it can produce a scene.
4. Model: 'If the dam failed, the valley would drown, but Lena only thought of the cottage where her mother still hung the washing.' The big stake survives as an echo, and the small one is felt.
5. Strong scenes make both options attractive. If one choice is obviously right, rewrite the setup so that the other protects something the character loves. Cut any narrator line that tells us what the choice means.
6. Strong drafts have two or three heavily dramatized scenes. If you have six equal scenes, choose the two with real choices and compress the others to a sentence each.
7. Underline weak constructions such as 'was taken,' 'found herself,' and 'it happened.' Replace with a decision: she chose, refused, lied, left. Keep one passive moment where being acted upon is the point.

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8. The cost should depend on a rule your world set up earlier. Check that someone could tell the cost came from the world and not from authorial cruelty.
9. The object's meaning should shift between the first and second appearance, such as from comfort to evidence. Do not explain the shift in narration.
10. The rescue version is usually the weaker one because it releases tension. Your cost version may still end on an image rather than a statement; if so, you are close to an ending that lands after the last word.

#### 07.4 Theme, Endings, and Avoiding Genre Cliches

##### WORKSHOP · THEME, ENDINGS, AND AVOIDING GENRE CLICHES

1. A good question cannot be answered yes or no and does not contain the story's answer. Model: 'What do we owe the version of someone who forgot us?' Your three images should be concrete objects or actions, not abstract nouns.
2. Honest lists often reveal that most conventions are defaults. Twists should flip the effect, not just swap a detail. A fresh twist model: the prophecy exists, but everyone knows it was invented to calm a crowd.
3. The wrongly chosen can create tension between expectation and truth. Check that the character acts, and that the reader learns the belief is mistaken through an event rather than a narrator comment.
4. Usually the withholding version is shorter and ends on a concrete detail. If you prefer the explaining version, ask what the reader gains. A strong choice is the ending that leaves the reader holding a question.
5. A twist that adds meaning reframes earlier emotion, as a late reveal can turn loneliness into grief. Make sure your five sentences say what the old stakes become, not just what the new fact is.
6. Your paragraph should note that the visit is never confirmed, that sensory detail makes the ambiguity feel exact, and that mirrored gestures give closure without explanation. Paraphrase, do not quote.
7. Model: 'She folded his coat over the chair and left the porch light on.' An act that implies feeling is stronger than 'she felt empty.' Cut any adverb in your sentence.
8. Fresh means a different need or limit, not a different skin. Model: 'a dragon who has forgotten how to fly and is ashamed to ask.' Check that the freshness changes what happens.
9. Narrated themes often sit in the last paragraph and in sentences beginning with 'she realized.' Convert each to an object the character handles or a thing they do.
10. Good reflections name specific changes: a cut paragraph, a sharper last line, a replaced default. If nothing changed, reread aloud and look for one cliché and one stated feeling.

#### 07.5 Bonus Lab: The Annotated Speculative Fiction Draft Clinic

##### WORKSHOP · BONUS LAB: THE ANNOTATED SPECULATIVE FICTION DRAFT CLINIC

1. A strong premise names the rule, the desire, and the price. Test it by asking whether a reader could picture the first scene. If the blank after 'give up' feels easy, the cost is probably too small.
2. Possible abuses include forced sales, thieves who steal days, or officials who tax them. The best second story is the one that carries the strongest human question, not the flashiest plot.
3. Starting mid-scene is faster and more tense but loses the quiet rule-setting. The compromise is to let the rule appear in a line of dialogue at the window.
4. Show the rule through a person using it, like someone checking a pocket watch that counts spent days. A reader will infer the rule if the behavior is specific enough. Keep it to one rule.
5. Dialogue works when characters disagree about the rule. An object works when it is a small physical proof of it. Either way, the narrator stops lecturing.
6. If Ines refuses, the clerk might sigh with relief or sound disappointed. Either choice reveals what the system wants, so decide what you want the reader to suspect about the Exchange.
7. Swap 'dark shadows' for something located, like 'the stairwell light that buzzed but never lit.' Specific images feel like they belong to one writer, which is what personal voice means.
8. A hopeful ending says the cost was worth it; a bleak one says it was not. The truthful one usually admits both. Whichever you choose, end on an image or sound, not a statement of the lesson.

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