



Notes from the Bunker

Adventure Writing, Part 1

by Rich Redman

Welcome to your bunker. I'm Rich Redman, one of the designers of the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*. I may not be an expert, but I'm experienced and opinionated. Here in the bunker, we can explore some corners of the **d20 Modern** rules and create rules variants, and I can offer suggestions for your campaign based on my experience writing and running games.

This past year, I saw a message board thread in which posters complained about how difficult it is to write non-FX adventures for modern games using the d20 System. Since writing adventures seems to come pretty easily to me (at least until playtesting starts and my players gleefully leap into plot holes I never noticed), I thought I would share some of my tips and tricks. So this month we'll talk about the general rules of writing, and next month we'll talk specifically about adventure writing.

Writing Tips

No matter what I do to pay the bills, I think of myself as a professional writer. The tips below have proven invaluable to me in my writing career, and they may help you as well. You can take them with a grain of salt if you're not a pro and not trying to be one.

A Writer Writes, Always

I first heard this expression in the movie *Throw Mama from the Train*, and experience has taught me that it's true. Writing is a difficult task, and like any other difficult task, it gets easier if you train for it and practice regularly. Try using the following tips to hone your writing skills.

- Write for some period of time every day. You can write for as little as 20 minutes when you start, but try to work your way up to several hours or more at a time. No matter how much or how little time you can spend at it, be sure to write something every day.
- Start with some short warm-up projects. Write letters, message board posts, e-mail, or journal entries.
- If you're stumped, don't stop writing. Just switch to another project and keep going.
- Carry a notebook with you. Jot down ideas, clever phrases, and bits of overheard conversations. (Do not eavesdrop -- eavesdropping is wrong, but you can't write dialogue if you don't listen to what others say and how they say it.) That way, even if you can't get to your computer or typewriter, you've written something.
- Schedule time to write. Let those who live with you know that they must leave you alone during this time -- even if you seem to be just staring off into space. To avoid earning the ire of your loved ones, don't schedule more time than you can actually use for your writing sessions (see the first bullet point, above). If writing at home is difficult, go to a public library or a coffee shop instead.

KISS

KISS generally stands for Keep It Simple Smiling or Keep It Simple Stupid. In this case, Keep It Simple Short might be a better translation. The point is that you shouldn't start out to write something complex, especially if you're new to writing. Write something short and simple first.

Finish

In keeping with the KISS principle, finish what you write. When you have a beginning, a middle, and an end, then stop writing. You can edit what you've already written if you wish, but don't write more.

Good Enough Is Great

If you set out to write the next great international best seller, you probably won't ever finish your project. Write to the best of your ability and be happy that you finished what you started.

Silence the Voices

The biggest single source of writer's block is, in my opinion, the writer's own internal editor. Each of us has a little critic in our heads who constantly denigrates what we write. Eventually we get so afraid that we might write something bad, silly, or stupid that we write nothing at all -- a clear violation of at least two of the above tips.

The best cure for writer's block that I ever found was in *The Comic Toolbox* by John Vorhaus (Silman-James Press, 1994). In the second chapter, the author talks about killing "your ferocious editor" by using "the rule of nines." Basically, the rule is that nine out of every ten jokes you write will be awful. Here's how to use the Rule of Nines.

1. Pick a topic.
2. Make a list of ten words or names related to that topic. Don't worry about whether your choices are good, bad, funny, clever, stupid, or anything else -- finishing the list is the important part.

That last bit isn't as easy as it sounds -- at least, not at first. Eventually, though, you get so used to the task that you can finish it without worrying about making it perfect.

You can apply this rule to any writing situation, not just comedy writing. When you're stumped for a name, a location, a plot, a monster, or anything else, make a list. Just write down the first five or ten possibilities that come into your head, and you'll be surprised how much genuinely clever material you generate. Back in 2002, when I was laid off, Stephen Radney-McFarland of the RPGA Network approached me to write an adventure for Winter Fantasy. While he was getting the contracts ready, I made a list of adventure ideas. They filled so many pages that I still haven't worked through all of them. Not all of them were good, and I don't know how to turn some of them from idea into adventure. But one idea did become the adventure that I wrote for the Network, and now when I'm stuck for an idea, I can still go back to that list.

Write Now, Edit later

Editing is not writing. Editing is an essential part of the publication process (and these columns would be horrible

if not for the stellar assistance of my long-suffering editor, Penny Williams), but it's not writing. Always do your writing first. Edit at the end of the day, after you have accomplished your writing goals. When you edit, make changes on the spot. Don't wait until tomorrow and try to decipher your notes, and don't waste your precious writing time for a new day making changes to something you already wrote.

I personally find it extremely helpful to schedule my work in such a way that I can switch to another project for a week or two before my due date. A few days before I have to turn the first project over, I go back to it and read it again. This tactic helps me catch incomplete thoughts, poor word choice, repetitive word use, and other mistakes before my editor ever has to deal with them.

Thought Webs and Brain Spiders

When I start a writing project, I jot down the specifics of my assignment in the middle of a sheet of legal-sized paper. Then I start writing down whatever comes into my head when I read the specifications. I circle those ideas and draw lines linking them back to my assignment. If one of those ideas sparks another idea, I write that down, circle it, and draw a line back to the source of the spark. Usually the ideas start slow, then come in a flood, then trickle down to nothing. This process is called "thought webbing," and I may spend an hour or two a day for several days doing nothing else.

The purpose of thought webbing is to record all your thoughts relating to the subject at hand. Once you have them down on paper, focus on the ones that give you enough material to complete your assignment. This step is probably the toughest. After you gain some experience as a writer, you'll begin to understand which ideas can generate enough words to meet your specifications and which ones can't. But even if your first try comes up short on the word count, you still have your thought web to give you more ideas that will generate more words.

Outlines

Some people hate outlines; some people love them. Some professional writers would never start a project without one, and others never use them. Personally, I love them, and I always go right from thought web to specific, detailed outline. You'll have to learn from experience which combination of processes works best for you.

Ideas

You are an idea person. You have tons of good ideas -- seriously, you do. So do I. But even the most professional, experienced writer gets stumped sometimes. Here are some tips I use to overcome my personal writer's block. **Silence the Voices:** When the words won't flow, I go back to making lists -- even if they're not related to my current project. I just want to limber up my mind and open the flow of ideas.

- **Write Something Else:** Sometimes the words won't come because another project is inspiring all my creative processes at that particular moment. Rather than lose that inspiration, I just work on the other project instead.
- **Simplify:** I make sure that whatever I'm writing has a beginning, a middle, and an end. I make sure I have the necessary characters, items, and locations, then trim out all the extras that are cluttering up the flow of my document.
- **Review:** I read my original thought web and my outline and look for places where I might have wandered

off course. Sometimes in the heat of inspiration, I head in a direction that I didn't intend, and correcting that situation can get me writing again.

- **Look for Inspiration:** Certain books and movies never fail to inspire me as a writer. Others tend to spark new ideas for me to try. When I'm discouraged or stumped, I go back to my library.
- **Use Your Resources:** Around my writing desk are about a dozen books that I consider extremely useful, including a dictionary of phrases, a flip dictionary, and a book of names. Another helpful volume is *20 Master Plots* by Ronald B. Tobias (Writer's Digest Books, 1993). This book provides outlines and examples of plots that are used over and over again in fiction, such as quest, adventure, pursuit, and rescue. You can also find a lot of other books similar to this one, each of which offers a number of master plots.

Participate

Keep reading -- novels, short stories, poetry, newspapers, and magazines -- it doesn't matter, as long as you read. Watch television and films. Join discussion groups and learn how to think critically about writing. I never, ever advocate plagiarizing, but we can all be inspired by writers who came before us. After all, if it weren't for Homer's *Odyssey*, would we have *O, Brother, Where Art Thou?* I'll touch more on this topic next month when we talk about non-FX modern adventures and how to find plot ideas.

Parting Shots

I suspect that two of the biggest problems people have writing adventures are finding the time to write and producing something "good." You need to schedule time to write, and you need to actually write during that time if only to build up your "writing muscle." You also need to stop listening to the voices in your head that criticize you. Just aim to write something that's good enough and don't try to be perfect. Next month we'll get more specific, but these tips should give you a good start.

About the Author

Before [Rich Redman](#) came to the RPG R&D department at Wizards of the Coast, Inc., he had been an Army officer, a door-to-door salesman, the manager of a computer store, a fundraiser for a veterans' assistance group, and the manager of Wizards of the Coast, Inc.'s Customer Service department. Rich is a prolific game designer who has worked on the **Dungeons & Dragons** game, the **d20 Modern Roleplaying Game**, the **Marvel Super Heroes Adventure Game**, and **Dark*Matter**. When he's not working as vice president of [The Game Mechanics](#), a d20 design studio, Rich works fulltime, does freelance game design, cooks, and practices yoga, tai chi, and silat.