Remember that this is not a list of rules. These are best practices for fiction. If you choose to deviate from this advice, just make sure you do so with awareness of the consequences.

When I edit for clients, I use this list to indicate the strengths ✔ and weaknesses ✗ in order of the elements that I feel are most important. There’s one paragraph style for the check and another for the X, as well as a separate style for notes.

# Primary Elements

The Primary Elements are the ones that drive the story. Edit these first, because changes here can have a cascade effect on the Secondary Elements. There’s no point tweaking the sentence structure if we rewrite whole scenes to develop characters and plug plot holes.

Each element corresponds to one session of the course. Although some information covered in lessons may not be reflected here, everything on the list should be covered in a lesson. If you see an omission, please let me know!

## Character

* The main character is likeable, or if not, is at least someone the reader can empathize with.
* Principal characters are realistic and multidimensional.

You can use the “Notes” style to add notes about each item.

* The main character’s story goal is clear.
* Secondary characters are distinctive and memorable.
* The number of characters is appropriate to the genre.
* Characters have distinctive names that are suitable to the genre and setting.
* Continuity is maintained in characters’ appearance, habits, and vocabulary.
* Emotional states are demonstrated through speech, action, and visceral response rather than labels.
* The main characters have changed by the end of the story.

## Viewpoint

* The decision about using character or narrator viewpoint is appropriate for the story.
* The chosen point of view characters are appropriate.
* The psychic distance is appropriate for the story and genre.
* The chosen grammatical person is suitable to the story and the viewpoint characters.
* If multiple viewpoints are used, the transitions are clear.
* If using deep character viewpoint, the narrative and interior monologue reflects the personality of each character.
* Scenes begin and end with thought, action, or dialog by the viewpoint character whenever possible.

## Plot

* The stakes for the principal characters are stated early and clearly.
* Each scene includes tension and moves the plot forward.
* The plot contains elements of surprise.
* Events are plausible.
* Events flow logically in cause-and-effect relationships.
* The protagonist gets into deeper and deeper trouble.
* Coincidences are used to get characters in trouble—not to get them out of it.
* Subplots arise organically and make sense as they unfold, not only in light of the ending.
* Tangents add to, rather than detract from, the main plot.
* Questions that arise are left tantalizingly open as long as feasible
* Loose threads are tied up before or during the climax.
* Premise or theme is expressed subtly but consistently.
* The ending is satisfying, with all major story questions resolved.

## Structure

* The opening hook could be stronger, to better pull the reader into the story.

In his book *The Irresistible Novel*, Jeff Gerke notes that we need to begin novels with either surprise or peril to engage the readers attention and transport them into the storyworld.

* Prologue, if used, is necessary and engaging.
* The story begins in an appropriate place and time.
* Chapters are of approximately similar lengths.
* Transitions clearly show how much time has elapsed and show how events relate to each other.
* Vestiges of earlier versions have been edited into the current version seamlessly.
* Flashbacks, if used, are kept to a minimum, are necessary to the plot, and are engaging.
* Backstory, including each character’s personal history, is woven into the story briefly using engaging dialogue or, if necessary, interior monologue or narrative.

## Pacing

* Pace is appropriate to the action and genre.
* Tension is appropriate to genre and keeps reader turning pages.
* Excessive step-by-step description of actions is avoided.
* Stage directions have been broken up with dialog and internal monologue.
* In action scenes, the pace races through build-up and then lingers at finale.
* The denouement moves at a pace appropriate to the genre; fast enough to be interesting but not rushed.

## Setting

* The time and place are established early and portrayed clearly.
* The setting is integral to the story and not arbitrary.
* The culture and mood are evoked through description and character reactions, i.e., not by “telling.”
* If the story is set in the past, historical details are accurate.
* If the story is set in the future, scientific details are plausible.

# Secondary elements

## Dialogue

* Each character has a distinct voice, with vocabulary suitable to background and temperament.
* Conversations are natural and realistic.
* The dialogue moves the story along.
* Dialog tags convey meaningful information, such as action beats.
* Punctuation such as em-dashes and ellipses are used correctly.
* Interior monologue is presented consistently.

## Description

* Each scene includes a baseline descriptor to aid the reader, e.g., the drawing room, the baseball field, the space station
* Descriptions are woven in organically and pull the reader into the story.
* Settings and objects are described in proportion to their importance.
* Comparisons and similes are used to engage readers.
* Readers get enough detail to envision each scene taking place.
* Details are relevant and add to the reader experience.
* The amount of description is appropriate to the genre.
* All senses are engaged as appropriate to each scene.

## Voice

* The narrative voice draws the reader into the story.
* The narrative voice is appropriate for the genre and the target audience.
* The author is showing and not telling.
* The author’s voice and approach are fresh, avoiding purple prose and clichés.
* The voice avoids being offensive or stilted.
* If using omniscient viewpoint, the narrator has a distinctive voice, i.e., avoiding “generic narrator voice.”
* The voice is consistent.
* The passive voice is used only when appropriate.
* The author avoids unnecessary repetition.
* Paragraph and sentence lengths are varied to avoid monotony and to enhance pacing.

## Mechanics

* Sentence structures are polished and avoid awkwardness or convolution.
* Punctuation is properly applied.
* Usage is in accordance with convention.
* Grammatical errors have been eliminated.
* Spelling is correct.
* Requirements of the chosen style guide have been met.
* The manuscript is formatted in accordance with industry standards.

## Other notes

Feel free to add elements that are unique to your book. For example, you could add a line under “Setting” to remind you to look up 1920s railroad timetables.

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