



GETTING YOUR HEAD AROUND EXPOSITION IN SCI-FI & FANTASY

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We've all heard it before, in novels, comics, films, or television: a character turns to someone else and innocently asks something along the lines of, "So tell me, how does the matter transporter work again?" This prompts a humorless response from the other person in the room, describing the rules and inner workings of this piece of sci-fi technology solely for the benefit of the audience. In a fantasy tale, substitute elven magic for this futuristic technology—even the best authors fall into the trap of turning characters into dry summarizers for the reader. This may seem inevitable for stories that have to develop a world different than our own, but it isn't. All it takes to avoid the clichés of bad exposition¹ is a bit of creativity.

One of the easier-to-avoid clichés of sci-fi writing is the risible device of "as you know." This refers to when a character gives the important details of how the setting works to a character who already knows all of this information. An egregious example is in the film *Avatar*, where Giovanni Ribisi's character tells a doctor who has lived on the alien planet for years that the miners are only there because "this little gray rock sells for \$20 million a kilo!" While the character's tone is slightly snide and sarcastic, that doesn't change the line's clunky quality. When writing genre fiction, it can be tempting to have a character tell another character information that they obviously know, with an "I've told you this a thousand times before" thrown into the dialogue.

When writing, ask yourself: if the most convenient-for-the-story method of setting up the world is with quick soundbites from characters, then why not have them delivered to a character who is in the dark like the audience? This character does not necessarily have to be the protagonist, but at the same time, a bit of character development keeps them from solely being The Person Who Has Things Described to Them. In a sci-fi story I'm writing, set in a future Los Angeles, I include a scene where two main characters escort schoolkids on a field trip to see how the authoritarian government of their city is run. Rather than just being the designated chapter of dull exposition, this

¹ Exposition refers to writing or speech in a fictional text intended to introduce important plot-related elements to the audience.

gives me the wonderful opportunity for a bit of black comedy: contrasting the innocent kids with the efforts of a propaganda arm in a totalitarian regime. What's key is that the story did not stop being fun and engaging for reader and writer just because I was writing a chapter heavy on exposition—instead, I was able to keep the humorous tone present from the rest of the book in the character's dialogue.

The character in the dark who has details of an alien world explained to them is not automatically a bad cliché. To the contrary, these interactions have been the engine that's driven the sci-fi series *Doctor Who* since the 1960s. The show's famous Doctor/companion formula relies on one character asking questions about how an alien world operates and the other giving the answers. This dynamic usually has the Doctor as the educator and the companion as the student, but not always—in episodes where the alien Doctor is visiting Earth, he will be out of his element and need to ask the companion about the way certain things operate. The dialogue between the two is witty enough that what seems like clever banter at first is actually laying down valuable plot information. And that is one of the true tricks of expository writing. Don't let it become a boring task you sigh and plow through in your story, but instead imbue it with whatever personal style and flair you'd use for any other dialogue exchange in your work. Ideally, then, the reader won't even know at first that they're being lectured to.

Another option for organic exposition is to slowly introduce parts of the world through first-person narration. A great example is Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. The book is a frightening parable in which a government of Christian fundamentalists has led a coup and destroyed the most basic rights of women. Much like George Orwell's *1984*, the story sets up a future world that's simultaneously familiar and horrifying by showing events of the protagonist's daily life. The heroine, Offred, forced to be a servile Handmaid, has an inner monologue that's both rebellious and fearful of the consequences of speaking up—her unsaid insults tell us a lot about how this totalitarian society runs. The first-person format also allows the writer to create a long stretch of exposition more fluidly than in third-person, as there is an assumed intimacy between the reader and narrating character. Well into *The Handmaid's Tale*, an effective passage details the loss of freedoms after a terrorist attack:

Newspapers were censored and some were closed down, for security reasons they said. The road-blocks began to appear, and Identipasses. Everyone approved of that, since it was obvious you couldn't be too careful. They said that new elections would be held, but it would take some time to prepare them.²

Here, Offred's recounting of a world falling into repression feels so personal and compelling, it doesn't even register to the reader as exposition.

Science fiction is a genre that encompasses a massive spectrum, from fun adventure romps like *Doctor Who* to bleak possible futures like *The Handmaid's Tale*. But no matter the tone of the story,

² Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986).

establishing the details of the plot and world in a fluid way is important. No reader wants to endure a massive swarm of exposition at the very beginning of a book—the writer must trust their audience’s ability to piece together little details as the story goes on. If creative and fascinating worlds are the heart of sci-fi writing, then good exposition is the blood that makes everything possible.

If you’d like to learn more about writing a well-crafted sci-fi tale, see these resources:

Avery, Jenna. [“Sci-fi Circuit: The Magic of World-Building.”](#) Script, April 12, 2013.

Brand, Sarah. [“The Four Ps of Exposition.”](#) Alpha: The Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror Workshop for Young Writers, August 2, 2012.