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## 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY TOOLS: CHAPTER 2

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### TRANSCENDING GENRE CONVENTIONS

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- What's your favorite kind of fiction? What's your favorite thing about it? Narrow that to a single element or event. Find and heighten that in your own manuscript. Celebrate it. Delight in it.
  - Now take that heightened element or event and reverse it. A novel that does the opposite would do what? Do that.
  - Now take that element or event and eliminate it altogether. Do you really need it?
  - What does your favorite kind of fiction get wrong? How does it cheat, lie, or slide by? What's it missing? Correct that defect in your manuscript.
  - What's an iron rule of your genre? What do fans demand? Break that rule. Deny that expectation. How can you do so more deliberately?
  - Write down three overused words in your type of story. Search your manuscript for those words. Uh-oh.
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### WRITING PERSONALLY

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- Stop. Think. What's on your mind today? What question preoccupies you? What's the most recent lesson you've learned? Find a spot to give those thoughts to a character.

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## WRITING 21ST CENTURY FICTION

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- Your computer has crashed. Your backup has failed. Your printouts have burned. Write out in one paragraph why your novel matters. In which character's mouth do those words belong?
- Use that paragraph in another way: What event in your novel best demonstrates what you've written? That's your moral climax. Revise that scene, strip away excess, until its meaning is diamond-hard.
- When was the last time you cried? What's one physical object, sound, or other sensory detail you remember from that moment? Find a spot where your protagonist cries. Add that detail.
- Why did you cry? Anyone would cry over that, but for you what was especially hurtful? Does your protagonist cry over the same thing? Why not? Make it happen.
- What's your greatest joy? The mystery you can't solve? The flaw you can't fix? The most important thing in your life? Give any (or all) of that to your protagonist.
- What's your favorite song? How does it transport you? (Be specific.) Find a spot to transport your protagonist in the same way.
- What's your favorite food? Beyond its flavor, what does devouring that food represent for you? Find a spot to nourish your protagonist in exactly that way.
- What will you do anything to avoid? What for you is its sharpest edge? Cut your protagonist with it.
- What do you wish you were that you're not? Who in your novel can become your fantasy self? Presto.

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## GENRE TRANSCENDING

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- In twenty minutes, write out a parody of your genre, sub-genre, or story type. Be wicked. Then take a look. What in your parody is uncomfortably close to your own manuscript? Oops.

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- Is your novel more than one kind of thing? A romance wrapped inside a mystery in an historical setting? (Or anything blended?) No problem. Take each story element and outline it, as if that were the entire novel. Work until it could be an entire novel.
- Two genres or story intentions co-exist in your novel? Okay. Each says the same thing in a different way . . . what is it? Work until the parallel feels (to you) ridiculously obvious.
- What's the universal message in your type of story? You believe that, too, but would spin it a little differently. Write down that spin. Where in the story, and how, will you make that clear?
- Suppose you're actually living in your story. Who are you? If you're in the story already, make that character more like the real you in one way. (If you're not in the story already, come on, get in there.)

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## S T O R Y + Q U A L I T Y

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- In your opinion, what's the most artful trick of great novelists? Work that trick in your manuscript. Now it's yours, too.
- What's a moment in your story that sparkles in your mind? Spend an hour with it. Polish. Buff. Shine.
- What's a nasty truth about people that nobody wants to hear? Dramatize that strongly once in your manuscript.
- What in your experience is truly wonderful about human beings? Create a story moment that enacts that.
- Pick a favorite novel by someone else. What about it is enormous fun? Have the same fun in yours.
- What's your novel going to say that fans of your story type definitely won't like? Say it louder.
- Make sure of the following: 1) In the world of your story there's something no one has ever seen before; 2) There's something everyone will recognize.

21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY TOOLS: CHAPTER 3

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EMOTIONAL LANDSCAPE

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- Breathe. Lean back. Now, what feeling are you most afraid to put on the page? Get it down. To whom in the story does that feeling belong? Give it.
- What makes you blissfully happy? See that happiness as an object. What about it is familiar? What about it is wonderfully strange? Surprise your protagonist with that object, a gift.
- What emotion is new in your life? In what scene can your protagonist feel that, too? Get busy.
- In your current scene, what's the strongest emotion? Why is it welcome? Why not? What's good about it? What's utterly wrong?
- Pick a scene. What's the strongest emotion your point-of-view (POV) character feels? Write down three secondary emotions. Delete the primary emotion; keep the secondary ones.
- Find a moment when your protagonist feels nothing in particular. Look around. Pick something. Whatever it is, note two conflicting feelings your protagonist has about it. Add them.
- What does your protagonist do? Interview someone of the same profession. Ask, "What's a feeling you experience in this line of work that doesn't occur in others?" Add it in your manuscript.

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RESTRAINT VS. EXPOSITION

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- Pick a passage of exposition, one in which there's a loud feeling. Delete it. Evoke that emotion through actions alone.
- Pick a small moment, when something tiny happens. Write down every feeling your protagonist has about that. Go deeper. What does it

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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mean or epitomize? How does it sum up life? Weave a passage. Something small becomes big.

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### O B V I O U S V S . N U A N C E D E M O T I O N S

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- Word search for neon emotions: rage, fear, loathing, desire, joy, grief. Delete. Replace those with emotions less expected.
- Is there a moment when your protagonist is numb, feeling nothing? Listen. Wait. When it's safe, what does your protagonist say first? Start there. Don't stop until your protagonist has dumped everything that's inside.
- In the story overall, what's the dominant, overriding emotion that your protagonist feels? If your protagonist were mute, what would she physically do to express what's inside? Add that.

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### C O N F L I C T I N G F E E L I N G S A N D I N T E R N A L C O N F L I C T

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- Pick any moment in your manuscript. What is your POV character feeling? Write down a contrasting or conflicting feeling that's also true at this moment. Add it.
- What does your protagonist most want? What's the opposite of that? Can your protagonist want both things? When?
- Pick a moment when your protagonist wants the opposite of what he normally wants. What does he do to go the other way? Do the same in two more places.
- When does your protagonist reject what he most wants? What's the biggest way in which he can throw it away or quit? (Make sure he can never get it back or return.)

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### D O W N W A R D A R C

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- What's your protagonist's worst habit, weakness, or blind spot? Why is she unable to control it? When does she first try—and fail?

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- When is your protagonist's defect most embarrassing? Who notices, yet says nothing?
- What's the worst thing the defect can cost your protagonist? Make him pay the price.
- How does your protagonist know she has bottomed out? What's the most miserable, degrading sign? What's the first thing she then does differently?

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### S E C R E T S , S U R P R I S E S , M I S T A K E S

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- What has your protagonist never told anyone? What was his worst mistake? When in the story is he most wrecked, broken, and done? Have him now disclose the truth.
- To whom would your protagonist least like to confess? That's her confessor.
- What secret is your protagonist keeping? Who is keeping one from your protagonist? Spill the truth at the worst possible time.
- Pick a character other than your protagonist. What would your protagonist never, ever guess about this character? Spring that surprise.
- Whom is your protagonist afraid to let down? What is the sacred trust between them? What would cause your protagonist to break it? Break it.

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### S H A M E

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- Of what are you most ashamed? Describe that feeling without naming it. Now, when in your story is your protagonist most ashamed? Adapt your passage for your protagonist.
- What's the worst thing your protagonist does? Whom does it hurt? How? Work backwards. Set it up to hurt even more.
- Who forces your protagonist to confront her shame? How? How do we know, without being told, that your protagonist has forgiven herself?

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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### HEALING

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- What's your protagonist's deepest childhood hurt? What detail does she remember best from that incident? Plant that detail at three other times.
- There's something your protagonist can't let go. What's the deeper reason for that? Who knows that reason before your protagonist does?
- What's something that your protagonist doesn't yet know about the most hurtful person in her life? When will she find that out? How?

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### RECONCILE WITH THE PAST

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- Who does your protagonist most need to forgive? What event puts that past wrong in perspective? What symbolizes letting go?

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### THE INNER JOURNEY

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- What's the hardest action your protagonist will have to perform? Make it the one action that your protagonist has sworn never to do.
- What's the most important thing your protagonist needs to know about himself? Give him five good reasons not to care. Tear each one down, step by step.
- What truth does your protagonist cling to the hardest? Reinforce it three times. Then destroy it. It's wrong.
- Who does your protagonist hate the most? Reinforce it three times, or more. When does she discover she's mistaken? How?
- What's your protagonist's greatest hope? Build it three times. How is it naïve? What makes her realize that? Why does she let it go? What replaces that hope?
- What's your protagonist's highest principle? What cemented it? Find three ways and times it serves. How is he wrong? What brings that home? What new principle is learned?
- Where does your protagonist most want to go? What does that destination represent? Make the journey impossible in six ways. Then ar-

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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rive. What's disappointing? What exceeds expectations? What has the journey itself revealed?

- What person matters most to your protagonist? Deepen that commitment three times. Then force a breach. Ruin that relationship. What's lost? What's gained? Repair—or not.

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### T U R N I N G I N T O E V E N T S

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- What are five stages on your protagonist's journey to self-knowledge? Create one event to dramatize each stage.

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### F A M I L Y A N D F R I E N D S

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- Who changes because your protagonist does? Work backwards. Find three ways for that other character to resist that change, or to celebrate the status quo.
- Who changes in a way your protagonist doesn't like or want? Give that other character three actions to show his change underway.

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### S E R I E S C H A R A C T E R S

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- In this book, what enrages your series protagonist? What's the worst thing he'll have to do? What does she fear above all? What personal truth is painful to learn? What principle is at risk? Build in five steps the outrage, loathing, fear, resistance, or commitment. Push. Test. Go to extremes. Go beyond.

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### M E A N I N G

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- What larger truth does your protagonist learn? Earlier in the story, plant three clues.
- What puzzle is solved? List the pieces. Scatter them earlier. Hide them. Disguise them. Hand them to others. What event unlocks the solution? How?
- What's one thing your protagonist hates as the story opens? By the end, have your protagonist love that same thing. (Or vice versa.)

- At the novel's outset, how does your protagonist define her purpose in life? How is it different at the end?
- How have you changed over the past year? What's the biggest way in which a lifelong friend would see that change without being told? Give that to your protagonist.
- What's the biggest insight you've gained while writing this novel? Give that insight to your protagonist.

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## 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY TOOLS: CHAPTER 4

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### S U R P R I S E

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- Pick a scene. What's the outcome? Work backwards. Convince the reader that the outcome will be the opposite of what you've written.
  - Pick a scene. What's the outcome? Now reverse it. Make your scene come out differently. Does that work? Is it more interesting? If so, use it.
  - Pick a moment anywhere in your story. What's your protagonist doing? Try alternatives: What wouldn't your protagonist do right now? What shouldn't she do? What does she secretly want to do? What is she burning to do? Do it.
  - Look at anything that happens in your manuscript, any event. Assume your reader saw this coming. What would blow your reader's mind? Great. Do that instead.
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### E M O T I O N A L

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- Select a strong event in your story. What's the emotional impact on your protagonist? Work backward to make your protagonist fight that feeling. What can your protagonist do to delay, avoid, or counteract it? Add that.

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- Pick a scene. What do you want the reader to feel here? Evoke that emotion through actions alone. Delete all exposition.
- Find a quiet emotional moment. Is it artfully written, delicate, subtle, nuanced, and precise? Congrats. Make it enormous: a tidal wave, an attack, a life-altering earthquake.
- Find an enormous emotional shock. Is it neon, explosive, blistering, painful, and huge? Nice. Underplay it. Instead use irony, throw-away action, or a secondary emotion.
- Pick a point at which your protagonist feels something that everyone feels: love, fear, grief, etc. In this moment, why is your protagonist's experience of this emotion unlike anyone else's? Detail that. Add.

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### REVEALING AND CHANGING

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- Choose any scene. What's your POV character's strongest emotion? Evoke it through actions alone.
- Same scene, using that action: Reverse, rehearse, or otherwise foreshadow the action earlier in the scene, or earlier in the story.
- Same scene: How is your POV character different at the end of the scene than she was at the beginning? How will we know? How will someone else in the scene see it without being told?
- Same scene: What's the biggest thing your POV character does? Is it something small? Make it big, dramatic, or completely outrageous. Is it something big? Make it small, understated, or the opposite of what you first wrote.
- Open your manuscript at random. What's your protagonist's or POV character's secret desire right now? What's inappropriate, a bad idea, or just wrong? Is it more interesting than what you've got? Go there. Do it.
- Open to another random page. What does your protagonist or POV character not want to admit, acknowledge, or face right now? Force it on him.

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- Open to another random page. Don't think. Let your protagonist or POV character do whatever she wants to do right now. It's allowed. Good. Now, what does it mean? What is it that your character is suppressing? Enact it, or have your character wish that she could.
- Pick a point when your protagonist is suffering or stuck. Tape her mouth shut. She has to act it out. What does she do?
- Pick a spot where your protagonist is acting out. Put a scolding angel on his shoulder. What does the angel say he should do instead? Have your protagonist realize the right thing to do, but nevertheless do what's wrong.
- Choose another random spot. Take a quick look; now take a walk. Breathe. Be honest. What are you avoiding? What do you not want to hear? What would your best friend tell you right now, for your own good? Is the same true for your POV character at this moment in the story? Who can say that to him?

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### H I E R A R C H Y   O F   E X T E R N A L I Z A T I O N

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- Find a point where your protagonist has reactive feelings. Turn them into an action.
- Run through every scene in your manuscript. For each one, write down how circumstances change. Good. That's how your story is advancing, step by step. Is that clear in each scene? Make it clear.
- For each scene note the observable action, what readers will expect, and what's discovered that's new. If actions are lacking, add more. If the expected happens, change it. If nothing new is discovered, discover it and add it.

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### T U R N S   A N D   T W I S T S

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- Go anywhere in your manuscript. What would blow the story sideways right now? Go for it.

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- Find a point at which your protagonist strongly wants to do something. Erect a roadblock. Make it impossible to do.
- Find a point at which your protagonist is blocked. There's a secret door that only you can see. Open it. Go through.
- Pick a character. What's something this character wouldn't do? Do it.
- Pick anything that any character does to advance the story. Assign that action to a different character. Does that work? Use it.

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### S E C R E T S

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- What secret is your protagonist keeping from the reader? List all clues. Delete all that are obvious. Create three that mislead. Add.
- What's the secret that someone else is keeping from your protagonist? Delete all clues that are obvious. Create three that mislead. Add.
- What's your protagonist keeping from himself, and who sees that before your protagonist does?
- A secret: What's the latest point in the story you can reveal it? When will it inflict maximum damage, or change things the most? Delay until then.

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### C O M E B A C K A N D R E D E M P T I O N

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- What's your protagonist's biggest mistake? What's the worst consequence? Work backwards to build your protagonist's commitment never to make this mistake.
- When your protagonist screws up, who is most let down? Work backwards to make that character's high regard of your protagonist important to both of them.
- When he screws up, what principle does your protagonist violate? Make that principle a foundation of his moral code.
- What's the biggest thing your protagonist must do to make up for her mistake? Work backwards to make this something that your protagonist finds impossible to do.

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- Plant the redemptive action earlier. Have others do it, or fail to do it. Make it matter to someone. Build up its symbolic value.

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### E N D I N G S

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- What's the big thing your protagonist must do at the end? Make it the one thing your protagonist has sworn never to do.
- What's the place your protagonist must enter at the end? Earlier, make it a place of fear.
- What sacrifice cannot be avoided? Whatever will be sacrificed, make it something your protagonist would never let go.
- What does it mean, in this story, to die? Have your protagonist suffer that death.
- What's the worst thing that could happen to your protagonist? Do it. Go there. Take something away, permanently. Deliver the fear. Enact defeat. Wreck everything. Then find the way back.
- At the end, what's an outcome sweeter than anyone could have imagined? Add it.

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## ◀ 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY TOOLS: CHAPTER 5 ▶

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### P R O T A G O N I S T S

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- Is your protagonist an Everyman or Everywoman? What's his or her outstanding quality? Show it within their first five pages. Terrific. Now show it within one page.
- Is your protagonist a hero or heroine, someone with a job that entails danger, big decisions, and high responsibility? Find one way (even a small one) in which he is perfectly human. Got it? Good. Show it on the page right away.

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- Is your protagonist dark, haunted, outcast, suffering, or non-human? In what way does this character most want to become more normal, human, or happy? Show that longing right away.
- Whatever you came up with in the three exercises above, find three new places to reinforce that in the remainder of your manuscript.

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## LIVING TOGETHER

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- What's a foundational attribute of your protagonist? Create an odd tic or habit that implies the opposite. Add six times. *Voilà*: a quirk.
- What can your protagonist do that no one else can? What's one unexpected benefit? What's the biggest cost? When does it not work? Add.
- Give your protagonist a paranormal gift or superpower. If that's unrealistic, scale it to make it possible but eerie, unusual, and hard to explain. Now use it.
- Give your protagonist a handicap. What's the best thing about it? Show that. Get it in the way, or make it inconvenient, three times.
- What's something hard to explain about your protagonist? Deepen the mystery. Make the puzzle more puzzling. Bury the answer deeper. Delay the explanation.
- What does your protagonist know about himself that's true? What does he not see that's even more true? Hit 'em with it.
- Quick: Write down something completely out of character for your protagonist to do. Don't know why she would do that? Better still. Do it. Work out the reason later. (But do work it out.)
- What does your protagonist know about people that no one else does? Create three moments when she spots that in others.
- In your current scene, who's against your protagonist? What's that character hiding? Let your protagonist intuit, guess, or see the truth.

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- What does your protagonist love best about the one she loves the most? What's something unflattering about that person that your protagonist sees through? Show and add.
- Pick someone your protagonist knows and interacts with. Where (or who) will that person be in ten years? Give that perspective to your protagonist.
- What does your protagonist believe beyond all else? Create a story event that forces him to accept the opposite.
- Find a small hurt someone suffers. What's the big principle or hidden injustice it represents? Stir your protagonist to anger over it.
- What happens in your story that makes your protagonist the most angry? Anticipate that anger three times in the story before the big event.
- During a big dramatic event, what's one small thing your point-of-view character realizes will never change—or never be the same again?
- Find a small passing moment in your manuscript. What big meaning does your protagonist see in it? Add that.
- Find a moment for your protagonist to rise above it all. Let her rise. Show it.
- What's the most selfless thing your protagonist does? What positive effect does it have, or what change does it provoke, in someone unexpected? Add that.
- Why does your protagonist's life matter? At the moment when that's most true, allow your protagonist to humbly grasp his importance to someone else or to the great scheme of things.
- What is your antagonist's most selfless motive? What motivates him for the good? Add that.
- Create a selfless action for your antagonist. Add it.

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### THE GOOD IN THE BAD

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- What's the worst thing your antagonist must do? Make it against her principles. Make it unthinkable. Then make it imperative.

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- What's your antagonist's goal, objective, yearning, hope, or dream? What six practical steps are needed to achieve that? What are the biggest blocks? Add all.
- Find three new times and ways to bring your protagonist and antagonist face to face. (If your protagonist doesn't meet this character until late in the game, then that's not your day-to-day, working antagonist.)
- What does your antagonist believe in? Who else shares those values? Why is your antagonist actually right? When does your protagonist see that, too?
- What does your antagonist most want to bring about? How is that something that everyone wants? Explain and add.
- What do you like best about your antagonist? Demonstrate that in the biggest way possible.
- What is your antagonist missing? What hasn't she seen, figured out, or yet found? Give that insight. Grant that discovery.
- In what way (big or small) is your antagonist like you? Show that one time.

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## SECONDARY CHARACTERS

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- Pick a secondary character allied to your protagonist. What's the biggest way in which she is different? Show it.
- Same character: When does she most understand and best love your protagonist? Show it. When does she least understand and hate your protagonist? Demonstrate it.
- Same character: What contradiction does this character embody? What's the biggest way in which we can see that?
- Same character: What's the most important piece of shared history this character has with your protagonist? What can your protagonist count on? What's the article of trust between them? Shatter it. Then repair it.
- Same character: What does this character see about your protagonist that your protagonist denies? Force a showdown over it.

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- Same character: How can this character betray your protagonist? Do it.
- Same character: What self-sacrifice can this character make for your protagonist? Make it.
- Before a new character arrives on stage, give your protagonist an expectation or fear with regard to that character. Make the reality three times better or worse.

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### W A R M A N D A L I V E

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- Find a spot where your protagonist is in a black mood. Objectify it. How is this blackness different than any other? What does it look like? Why does it feel good to feel bad? Will it blow over? When? Create a passage in which your protagonist studies her own misery.
- Find your character in a sunny state. Qualify this bliss. Why can't this ebullience be trusted? What's the cloud on the horizon? What shouldn't be forgotten? Create a passage in which you cast doubt upon good times.
- Where's your protagonist right now? Look around. Let him notice something that no one else does: something about the place, the people, or the atmosphere itself. Get it down.
- Give your protagonist passionate feelings about something trivial: e.g., cappuccino, bowling, argyle socks. Write his rant. Add it.
- In your current scene, what's a setting detail that delights or disgusts your POV character? Why? Add it.
- In your current scene, what does your protagonist feel about someone or something else that's rude, inconvenient, or just out there? Go on, protagonist: Blurt it out. Whoops.
- In your current scene, what's the hidden high principle that your protagonist sees at work? Express it. Make the action show it more.
- In the last inner monologue you wrote, insert one insight, question, or worry that hasn't hit you (or your protagonist) before now.

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- You are your protagonist's best friend. Big or small, what's safe for your protagonist to share with you right now? Add it immediately.
- From your protagonist's point of view, list: 1) the best thing about the problem at hand 2) the secret enemy 3) the best place to think things over 4) the problem with authority 5) who needs help more than anyone else. Add those things.
- Pick a spot in the middle; ask your protagonist: 1) What score would you award yourself right now? 2) What are your chances of success? 3) What don't you have that's needed to win? Add it.
- What's the biggest thing your protagonist needs to know about herself? Give her three good reasons not to care . . . then tear those down.
- If your protagonist is content with himself, give him fifteen minutes of self-assessment. How would others see him? What needs improvement?
- If your protagonist is unhappy with himself, give him one good thing to appreciate. Find the moment for "maybe I'm not so bad after all."
- What's the worst thing that happens to your protagonist? Work backwards. Make it something he has spent a lifetime avoiding.
- What's the emotion or experience you're most afraid to put your protagonist through? Go there. Do it. Now.

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### WHAT MAKES CHARACTERS UNIVERSAL?

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- List the ways in which your protagonist is like anyone. Go down the list. How many specific ways can you make your protagonist different?
- Write your protagonist's biography. Go over it. Make his childhood in some way weird. What's one odd habit she had in adolescence? What's a peculiar aspect of adulthood?
- Give your protagonist a signature fashion look, an uncanny gift for a certain game, a knack for an offbeat sport, vast knowledge of something special . . . anything remarkable.

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- What's something about your protagonist that most people wouldn't know? What's one outward clue to it that—until you understand—is decidedly odd? Add it.
- What's your protagonist's big unresolved issue? Find a new way for it to twist your protagonist.
- What situation would test your protagonist the most? How would it hit her biggest weakness? What are you waiting for?
- In what way are you a little crazy? What do you see more clearly than others? What was your best moment? Can you give any of that to your protagonist? You can? Do it.

## 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY TOOLS: CHAPTER 6

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### INHERENT CONFLICT

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- In your story, what's the problem that's tough to solve? Make it impossible to solve.
- Which characters in your story are set against each other? Work until their conflicts cannot possibly be settled.
- Divide your cast into opposing camps, one being pro-protagonist. What grievances or injustices run so deep that they have no choice but to remain at war?
- In the world of your story, what ideas are in opposition? Build them until they represent two (or more) irreconcilable philosophies.

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### GUT EMOTIONAL APPEAL

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- What's the worst turn of events for your protagonist? What's the personal cost of this disaster? Make that element primary to her happiness.
- What's the most dramatic reversal in your story? Find three new ways to deepen this calamity.

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- Who can betray your protagonist? What's the worst way in which that can be done?
- Your protagonist's worst mistake is—? For whom is that error unforgiveable? Destroy that relationship, but then heal it with forgiveness.
- What love is forbidden? Make it more impossible. Then make it happen.
- Kill a beloved character. Increase that character's innocence, warmth, spirit, generosity, or wisdom.
- What death, disaster, or misfortune has boxed in your protagonist for life? What concrete reasons keep your protagonist from escaping that grip? Strengthen those. Add to them.
- Who in the story has been cast under a spell? What locks that spell in place, never to be broken? Break it.
- Who can't forget a past wrong? Why not? Move that character to the center of the story.
- Something is wrong in your story world. It's a whirlpool. Who else can be sucked into its vortex, and how?

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## P L A U S I B L E

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- What's your story's most unlikely, improbable event? Write out six reasons why this usually doesn't happen in the real world. Answer those reasons with six explanations why, in this case, it does occur. Add.
- If you're writing a thriller, the unlikely event cited above is the looming threat or disaster. Increase your list to twenty.
- Quick, what's something that can happen to anybody? Don't think. Write it down. How can that happen to your protagonist in the course of the story?
- What's your protagonist's most heroic act? What's one way in which it's something anyone could do? Echo or incorporate that.

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- If your story involves magic, the paranormal, a leap of science, slaying monsters, a criminal act, conspiracy, quest, war, or survival . . . what's the small, real-world, garden-variety equivalent? Find two ways to add that mundane, analogous element.
- If your story realistically captures life the way it is, ask, *What utterly outrageous thing does my protagonist secretly long to do?* Do it.

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### O R I G I N A L

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- What's one convention of your genre or story type that you have honored in your manuscript? Reverse it. Is that interesting? Keep it.
- What's your protagonist's profession? What's one stereotype of people who do that kind of work? Reverse it.
- What's the main outward and objective problem facing your protagonist? (That is, if your protagonist weren't around, what's the problem someone else would nevertheless have to deal with?) When this problem occurs, it usually looks like what—? Escalate, warp, or twist it in a way that no one expects.
- Where is your story set? Give the place itself a personality trait that is the opposite of what we're used to.

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### M O R E I N T H E M I D D L E

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- What's your protagonist trying to do? What else can go wrong? Add it. Repeat. Again.
- What's your protagonist trying to do? What's the worst thing that can go wrong? Poor protagonist! Too bad. Make it happen.
- How many things can your protagonist try to solve the problem? Make a list. Make it longer. Let your protagonist try each solution. Make each one fail.
- What does your protagonist want to become? What's getting in the way? Add more blocks. Fold them in.

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- What's the last, most desperate thing your protagonist can try or do? Push her into it.
- Drop a bombshell on your protagonist. Scatter the wreckage. List the consequences. Incorporate it all.
- Where's the story going? Close that road. Force a detour.
- When does your protagonist want to explode? How? Light the fuse and stand back. Kaboom!
- Create an impossible choice. Work backwards to deviously box in your protagonist. No cheating. No escape. Whatever he decides, big consequences. Make them bigger.
- Imagine a more fearless writer than you creates an event for your story. What is it? Use it.

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## STRONG SCENES

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- Pick a blah scene in your manuscript. What changes here? Exactly when does that change occur? What would an impartial observer see or hear to make the change impossible to miss? Add or strengthen that. (That is the outer turning point.)
- Ten minutes before the change, how would your protagonist describe the essence of himself? Write it out. Ten minutes after the turning point . . . how does your protagonist see himself now? Write it out. (The change is the scene's inner turning point.)
- Follow the above two prompts for every middle scene.
- What's the outer turning point in your current scene? Make its trigger more dramatic—or less obvious.
- Pick a weak scene. What are three setting details that only your point-of-view character would notice? How does this place feel, or make your character feel? Create a passage of subjective opinion regarding the place itself. Delete all other description.

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- Imagine the scene is a person. What mood is it in? How does that mood change following the turning point? Add.
- How does your POV character change in your current scene? Work backwards. Make that change unlikely, a surprise, or impossible.
- In this scene, what does your POV character hope to get? Will he get it or not? What are three things that will misdirect the reader from the actual outcome? Delete as much else as possible.
- The prompt above creates a reversal. Strengthen that turnabout. Make one outcome utterly certain. Make the actual outcome the exact opposite.
- Find a dialogue passage. Strip it down. Take out all attributives (“he said,” “she said”). Take out all incidental action. Take out all exposition. Reduce each thing said to ten words or less until the dialogue fires quickly back and forth, rat-a-tat.
- Take a passage of exposition in this scene and turn it into dialogue.
- Pick a blah middle scene. Summarize what happens in a paragraph. Reduce that to one line. Can you substitute that for the scene?
- Pick a scene where nothing overtly happens or changes. Rewrite it using only actions: no dialogue, no exposition. What do we see? Make us see more. Now add the results.
- Pick a scene of high action. Rewrite it using only exposition; that is, internal thoughts and feelings. How many different emotions does your character feel? In the actual scene cut the action in half. Add the most unusual feelings.
- In your current scene, what’s the best zinger line? Structure the scene to make that the last line.
- In your current scene, cut 100 words. You have five minutes. Fail? Cut 200 words.

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## M I C R O - T E N S I O N

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- Pick a passage of dialogue. Strip it down. Increase hostility between the speakers. It can be friendly ribbing, worried questioning, polite

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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disagreement, snide derision, veiled threats, open hostility, or any other degree of friction.

- Repeat the prompt above 100 times.
- Pick a passage of action—anything from high violence to a stroll in the park. Freeze the action in a sequence of three to five still snapshots. Select a detail from each frame. For each snapshot record your POV character's precise feelings. Discard obvious emotions. Choose emotions that contrast or conflict. Rewrite the passage.
- Repeat the prompt above 50 times.
- Pick a passage of exposition. List all of your POV character's emotions. List all ideas. Discard what's obvious. Find emotions that conflict. Find ideas at war. Grab what creates unease, uncertainty, fresh worry, new questions, a deeper puzzle, or agonizing dilemma. Rewrite the passage.
- Repeat the prompt above 100 times. (If you are a romance writer, repeat 200 times.)
- Pick a moment when your protagonist is still, simply waiting or doing nothing. Look around. List three setting details that only this character would notice. Detail her emotions. Find those that conflict or surprise her. What's this moment's personal meaning? Write a passage combining snapshot clarity and roiling inner intensity.
- Print out your manuscript. Randomize the pages. Examine each one in isolation. Does it crackle? Are the characters on tiptoe? What question arises that the reader can't answer? What's going badly or wrong for your POV character? How does this page tell the whole story? Revise until the tension level is unbearable.
- Repeat the prompt above for every page. Yes, seriously.

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### P L O T L A Y E R S

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- What's a stage-of-life problem your protagonist would be facing at this time, even if the events of the story weren't happening? Add it.

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- Deepen that problem. List most people's normal, dependable solutions. Decide why in this case each one won't work. Turn each failure into a scene.
- Create echoes: Who else can have this problem, or the opposite problem? Create a parallel event from this layer in another layer. When can an event in this layer overlap (occur at the same time as) a main storyline event?
- What's a third not-easy-to-solve problem your protagonist could face, the kind of thing that could trouble anyone? Deepen it. Take away solutions. Add.
- Pick a secondary character. If this character had a volume of his own, what would it be about? What would his main problem or conflict be? Complicate it in four ways. Add.
- Weave the layers and storylines: What secondary character can play a role in the main plot and another layer? What location can host multiple events? Find as many such connections as you can.

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## PAST AND PRESENT STORYLINES

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- Separate the past and present scenes into two different documents, as if each were a novel standing alone. Is each scene in each document strong? Does each story rise, deepen, and complicate? If not, cut and revise. Weave the documents together again only after you have storylines that work on their own.

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## MULTI-POV NOVELS

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- In a multi-POV novel, collect scenes from each POV into separate documents. Is each scene strong? Is there a complete story told from each POV?

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**E N D I N G S**

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- What would cause your protagonist to fail? What would signal that defeat? What, in this story, does it mean to lose? Go there.
- What miracle does your protagonist pray for? Make it impossible. Then make it happen.
- Everything comes out okay . . . except for—? What cost has been too great? What decision will always feel wrong? What failure along the way darkens the final success?
- How do things come out better than imagined? What's an unexpected gift or unforeseen joy at the end?

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**T H E F O U R T H L E V E L**

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- The “onion layer” effect: What's the big secret you're keeping from the reader? Invent two other secrets to reveal earlier.
- Pick a character about whom you want your readers to have doubts. Keep them guessing. Pick four points in your story to swing your readers' thinking. Make those events stronger, each time digging the readers' doubts deeper.
- What's the ultimate point of your novel: the message, meaning, or whatever you want readers to see? Challenge your own wisdom. List all the arguments against it. Include those in your story. Assign each objection to a character.
- For each character who represents an outlook that opposes yours, find one way in which each will demonstrate the validity of her belief.

21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY TOOLS: CHAPTER 7

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PARALLELS, REVERSALS, AND SYMBOLS

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- Pick anything that happens in your story. Create another event that's like it, or mirrors it. Add it.
- Find a dramatic event in your story. Create a smaller version of it for another spot in the story.
- Look at one of your protagonist's plot layers. Inflict an analogous problem on another character. Add it.
- What's something done by your antagonist or a secondary character? Find a place for your protagonist to do the very same thing.
- Or reverse the tool above: Have your antagonist or a secondary character mirror something done by your protagonist.
- How does your protagonist look at the main problem? How does it look different to her best friend? Add.
- Who sees things the same way that your protagonist does? What might happen to reverse that character's view? Make it happen.
- Send a gift to your protagonist. Make it huge, a windfall. What problem does it solve? What is its hidden cost? Add.
- Who or what is highly valuable to your protagonist? Take that away.
- What is your protagonist utterly, irrevocably right about? Pull the rug. Make her utterly wrong. List the implications. Enact each one.
- Elevate your protagonist's status. What privileges are awarded? What's dangerous about that?
- What's a moment when everything could change? Pause. Explore. What does it feel like to be weightless?
- Where is your protagonist heading right now? Shut down that road. Force a detour. What changes the most? How does your protagonist change as well?

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- Do your protagonist's fortunes rise or fall? Pick a character whose fortunes will do the reverse. Develop and add.
- Choose a high moment in your story. Look around. Pick an object, one that's particular to this place, this moment, or these people. Now work backwards and forwards. Find at least three other spots in the story to plant this object.
- Find a corner, crossroads, or dark object in your story. Invest it with eeriness, unknown portent, or dread. Go there three times.
- Select a significant setting in your story. Find two other story events that also can happen there. Shift their settings.
- Pick a scene, maybe the one you're working on right now. Identify an emotion or idea, insight, or mystery that arises. Find a way to represent that physically. Broken phone? Squeaking windshield wipers? A ring too tight to remove?
- Write out your cast list. To each character assign an allegorical role: mother, destroyer, wanderer, sacrificial lamb, and so on. Now find one way for each character to more obviously enact their role. Add.

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## WORLD OF THE STORY

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- List twenty things your protagonist notices in her story world that no one else does. Plant each somewhere in the manuscript.
- What's the most wonderful thing about the world of your story? Find two new spots to enjoy that.
- What's one unchanging feature of this story world? Observe it three times (protagonist POV or others). What's the mystery about it? Why is it holy?
- Take a minute. List three things about people that bug or intrigue you. How does your protagonist feel about each? Add.
- Take a minute. List three weird or wonderful things about your town. What are the equivalents in your protagonist's town? Add.

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- Take a minute. List three bizarre or ironic things about society. Give them to your protagonist to notice.
- Take a minute. List five unbearable things about life. What could be fixed? What can only be endured? Give your protagonist those ideas.
- What's the opening mood in your story? Visualize it as an object. Describe it. What's most familiar about it? What's the most unexpected? Give that object to your protagonist to handle early in the manuscript. Bring it out again in your final chapter. How has it changed?
- For your story world, create a unique version of: sport, food, perfume or cologne, vehicle, vice, sin, festival, holiday tradition, flower or plant, remedy, coming-of-age rite, generation gap, courtship custom, death ritual. Add.

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## S U R P R I S E

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- Pick a character. Drop a bomb. Destroy or transform his world. Nothing is as imagined. Everything is different. Work backward to make this character's foundations rock solid. Work forward to scatter the wreckage.
- Pick an ally of your protagonist. What's the worst betrayal this character could do? Do it. Work backwards. Make it something impossible to foresee.
- Pick an enemy. What's the most improbable way in which this enemy could help? Do it. Work backwards. Make it something impossible to imagine.
- You are God. Look lovingly down at your protagonist. What does she need? Give it. What does she need to learn? Teach the lesson. What do you feel like doing to your protagonist just because, hey, you're God? Do it.
- What's one thing your protagonist dearly hopes for? What would make that impossible? Do it. What does your protagonist get instead? Quietly plant that earlier.

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- You're at the mercy of a puckish Story God. Pray. What do you ask the Story God not to do to your story? The Story God doesn't listen. What happens?
- Once you've unleashed a disaster upon your story, think through every implication. List every untidy consequence. What must be done to clean up the mess? That's your punch list. Work through it.

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### A S E N S E O F S E L F

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- Look at your beginning. How does your protagonist understand himself? What defines him? What code or rules guide him? What assumptions are givens? What's home base? Who's on his side? In whose love is he secure? Who knows him as well as he knows himself? List all.
- Use the above list like this: At the end of your novel, how has the answer changed to any of the questions above? Shake those foundations along the way. What's needed to rebuild them? Add all.
- What's your protagonist's snapshot take on money, prayer, pop music, abstract art, minivans, modern dance, fourth-down passes, bespoke suits, raw food, blended whiskey, or anything else that demands an opinion?
- At the end of your novel, how has the answer changed to any of the questions above? What happens to change that opinion? Add it.

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### T H E B I G P I C T U R E

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- List the classes or social strata in your story world. Pick a character to represent each, its characteristics and values. Build and add.
- What's one unexpected or contradictory thing about each class? Embody each of those things in a character, too.
- Find three new times/ways for the classes to meet or clash.
- How does your protagonist feel about his place in his world? Find three spots to measure that, and how it's changing.

- What's the predominant philosophy in your protagonist's world? Imagine breakaway factions, hair-splitting denominations, opposing parties, or a revolutionary movement. Assign a character to one of those dissenting views. Show it one time in action.
- Give your protagonist a unique term for the story's era. What are three things about this era that your protagonist sees that others don't? What's the best thing about it? What's the worst? In what way is this era stuck? (Unstick it by the end!)
- How does your protagonist feel about the passage of time? Find three spots to measure that, its effect, and its changing feel.
- Is your protagonist in charge of his own destiny? If yes, show him that he's not. If no, show him that he is.
- What's your protagonist's conception of God? If she's humble, reward her. If she's not, punish her.
- What's the cosmic question that your novel is addressing? Without stating it, how do the events of the story make it clear? Go further. Make that question, for the reader, inescapable.

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## 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY TOOLS: CHAPTER 8

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### OUTLINES VS. INTUITION

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- Are you an outline writer? Take an afternoon off. Take a walk. Bring a notebook and pen. Ask, "If a gutsier novelist than me were writing my book, what would happen in the story that isn't happening now?" Ah.
- Are you an outline writer? Take your protagonist out for coffee. Ask, "Something's bothering you . . . is there something you'd like to tell me?" Listen.

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- Are you an outline writer? Take a slow walk through the world of your story. No rush. Notice one thing that you didn't see before. Find a way to use it.
- Are you an outline writer? Plan a side story to offer as a freebie prior to publication, such as a detour with a secondary character or a dropped plot thread. Now, does this really have to be an extra? Can it go into the manuscript?
- Are you an intuitionist? Burn your manuscript. Erase your hard drive and your back-ups too. Phew. Feel better? Now, in fifteen minutes write down what you really want to say.
- Are you an intuitionist? You have superhero vision. What do you see that no one else does?
- Are you an intuitionist? You have godlike perspective. So tell us . . . what do people get wrong? How are they supposed to act, but don't? What's the point of life? What's the meaning of creation itself? Work through every scene in your novel until each answers one of those questions.
- Are you an intuitionist? You run a crisis hotline. The phone is ringing. It's your main character. She's in distress. She needs to know what to do. You're trained not to say "wait" or "do nothing." That doesn't work. What do you tell her to do?

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### RESEARCH VS. OBSERVATION

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- Are you a researcher? Go to a public place. (Not the library!) People watch. Pick up one weird detail. What's something odd, ironic, or interesting about people in general? Make a note. Use that in your story.
- Are you a researcher? Think about your family. What kind of people are they? Who's best? Who's worst? Who's the coolest? Who's the nastiest? How? Use that.
- Are you a researcher? Read the newspaper. What's the big issue nowadays? What's the equivalent issue in your story? Strengthen it.

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- Are you a researcher? What's something ironic about life? Give that ironic observation to one of your characters. Better still, show it happening.
- Are you an observer? What's your protagonist's occupation or identity? Interview someone who's got that job or profile. Ask, "What do outsiders not know? What's something you feel that others don't? What's a specialist term, tool, or measurement you use that others don't?" Use that stuff.
- Are you an observer? Invent something for your story world that doesn't exist there. Make it something big, notable, colorful, creepy, mysterious, famous, singular, or a source of shame or pride or wonder. Put it in your story.
- Are you an observer? Pick a secondary character. Give that character an extraordinary ability or notorious past. Find a way for that to cause something to happen.
- Are you an observer? What could happen in your story but doesn't because it would be a stretch? So . . . stretch. Work out how it would happen. What would have to be different? Make it different. Make it happen.

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### DEADLINES VS. SPEC

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- Are you on a deadline? When you reach the halfway mark in your first draft, pause. Ask, "What's the step I'm afraid to take for this story? What would pump it up to giant size?" Go there. There's still time.
- Are you on a deadline? Take two minutes, no more, to quiz your protagonist: Who really bugs you? What would you like to say or do to that person? Give permission. Go for it.
- Are you on a deadline? Pull aside a secondary character. Ask, "Are you frustrated? What would you like to do in this novel that you're not able to?" Give 'em the chance. Do it.
- Are you on a deadline? Guess what? Your story's weak. It's not saying what you want it to say. What's the biggest thing you can do in one af-

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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ternoon to guarantee that your story will sing out? Guess what? The Story God's feeling good. You've got that afternoon. Use it.

- Are you a spec writer? Write the one-day version of your novel. Yep. Whole novel. One day. What happens on the page? That's your core story.
- Can you do that? Write the one-hour version of your novel. That's your one- or two-page synopsis.
- Are you a spec writer? When you finish your next draft, turn into the bitch editor from hell. Send yourself a revision letter. Make it hurt. Make it on target. Hit every weakness, every cheat. Give yourself sixty days to revise.
- Are you a spec writer? You're hiding from something in your story. What is it? Face it. Use it.
- Whether you like deadlines or not, what's the biggest thing you're afraid to do in your current novel? Try it. It could be the most important thing you're missing.

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### C O O L V S . W A R M

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- Are you a cool stylist? What scene are you working on right now? Who's your point-of-view character? Open a fresh document. For fifteen minutes let your POV character spew what she's feeling. Is any of that useful in the scene?
- Are you a warm writer? What scene are you working on right now? Who's the POV character? Pause. Ask that character, "Hey, how would you like to act out here? Go on. Go crazy." Given permission, how does that character go gonzo?
- Are you a cool stylist? What's your main character not saying right now? Have another character say it instead.
- Are you a warm writer? What's your main character feeling in your latest interior passage? Make your main character suddenly reticent. Convey the feeling solely through action.

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**B A B Y V S . B U S I N E S S**

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- Is your book your baby? Look at your current scene. Cut 200 words. Fail? Cut 500.
- Is your book your baby? Look at your main character. He's a jerk. Make him shape up in one big way. Right now. No excuses.
- Is your book your baby? You've gone too far. You haven't gone far enough. Which is it? Guess what? It's the opposite of what you think. You have work to do. You know that's true. Make a list of the top five weaknesses. Get to it.
- Are you all business? What's your favorite moment in your current manuscript? Disaster! Your editor says cut it. Don't argue. Don't justify. Revise until your editor has to cave.
- Are you all business? Make your protagonist do something that will piss off your readers. Too bad, readers, live with it.
- Are you all business? What's your novel saying that people won't want to hear? Buy yourself billboard space next to a busy highway. Splash that message. Make motorists mad. Now make that message as hard to miss in your manuscript.

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**E N T E R T A I N M E N T V S . T R U T H**

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- Are you an entertainer? Your story has in it one huge, hoary cliché. You know that's true. Find it. Kill it.
- Are you an entertainer? There's a character in your story who is a big, fat stereotype. Don't deny it. Fix it.
- Are you an entertainer? There's one way in which you're going too easy on your protagonist. You're not fooling anyone. Go on. Make things tougher. Make them horrible.
- Are you a truth teller? What's a truism that's too common to allow into your novel? Go ahead and say it, or let a character say it.

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- Are you a truth teller? What's a feeling too saccharine to abide? Satisfy your sweet tooth. Use it. Don't worry about calories. The rest of your story is rigorous exercise.
- Are you a truth teller? What's a gimmick too cheap and cheesy to use? You're right. It's a gimmick. But what's a variation that could work for you? Ah.

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### PLEASING VS. GROWTH

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- Do you write a series? Change a series character. Violate a series rule. Do something that will mean things can never be the same. Feels good, doesn't it?
- Bored with your story? What story development would make you happy? What are you waiting for?
- You won the lottery! Congrats. You can ditch your manuscript and write what you want. What is that? Well? Write it.
- Burning out? Phone your agent. E-mail your editor. Take a break. Take away pressure. When you return, take a fresh look. Why were you stuck? Try a different approach. There's probably less wrong than you fear.

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## 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY TOOLS: CHAPTER 9

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### F E A R

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- What is your protagonist's deepest fear? What is its origin? Triple the magnitude of that event.
- What is your protagonist's deepest fear? Rehearse it or brush up against it twice. Then bring it about.
- What is your protagonist afraid to confess or admit to himself? Bring him up against it, big time. Make it impossible to avoid.

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## WRITING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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- Earlier in life, what was your protagonist's worst mistake? Make it even worse. Now find a way to bring that event into the present. If it's a secret, bring it to light. Who is hurt? Make it hurt more.
- What's your own deepest shame? What do you most regret? What have you ruined? What have you lost that you will never get back? What are you powerless to change? Give any of that to your protagonist.

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## FIREWORKS

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- Pick a scene at random. What does your protagonist really want to say? What's the most blunt, rude, or raw way in which she can say it? Make her use those words. Let the wreckage fall.
- What's an event that passes with little notice? Invent a dire consequence. Make it one that no one sees coming. Who or what can be wrecked? What is the worst outcome of that disaster? Get those in.
- Choose a character with little to do. Create for her a gift to give. Make it a gift that will transform the recipient. Give that gift at the time of greatest need.

Set off fireworks between two characters. What's the biggest skyrocket you can explode for the finale? Go ahead . . . *kaboom!*

- Select an entrance or exit. Dress it up, make it dance onto (or off) the stage. Work with its effect on your point-of-view character. What will he (or we) never forget?
- Choose a scene involving violence or sex. Create an action that we don't expect. What deep wound is opened? What unexpected joy arises? What is the irrevocable truth now known?
- Turn to any page in your manuscript. Pick a sentence that's just quietly doing its job. Pump it full of speed. Make it hallucinate. Include a word from poetry. Find in it something sublime, if not divine. Make it explode.

T H E E L E M E N T S O F A W E

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- Look at your first chapter. Put in something positive. Don't worry. We'll survive.
- What's one way in which your protagonist is hopeful? How quickly can you get that in?
- What is the strongest emotion you want your reader to feel? What event will provoke that emotion the most? This is your story's signature moment. Find three ways to heighten the effect you're shooting for.
- **ADD:** an intriguing fact, a tough puzzle, a character who is not what he first seems to be.
- **ADD:** a different take, an alternate outcome, an opposing belief, an extra mystery.
- **ADD:** a character from a different social strata, a symbol of these times, a harbinger of the future, a sign from God.
- If your story sprawls, plant something small, personal, and domestic at the beginning. Bring it back at the end.
- If your story is tight, what is its cosmic meaning? Choose a character (other than your protagonist) who sees that.
- Your protagonist changes: Is it a change we all need to make? Make it more so.
- What does your story explain? Work backwards. Make the mystery deeper, the solution harder to see.
- Think about the last year: What do you see differently than you did one year ago? Get that in your story.
- List your life lessons. Now . . . well, you know what to do.