

# The Sekrit to Writing Fresh

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## Lesson 1. Defining “Fresh” Writing

*Q. What are you looking for right now? What kind of project would excite you?*

Sound familiar? I’m sure you’ve heard this question asked on an editor/agent panel at a conference, and I’m sure you’ve heard some variation on this response:

*A. I want something fresh, something I haven’t seen before. Surprise me!*

The “something fresh” response. It’s best, amirite? And yet when you realize OMG you totally have that bloodsucking dustbunny shifter medieval time travel romance with a literal fairy princess heroine, you pack that puppy up and ship it off to this industry pro asking for something “different” and “fresh” and “surprising.” It’s been through edits, you know it’s clean, and your beta readers can’t stop gushing over your voice and how different this is from the usual stuff crowding the shelves these days.

And six months later, you get a form rejection. Or, better, you get a rejection that says it’s great, but she just doesn’t know how to market it.

Well, what the hell did she expect? She asked for something fresh, you delivered, and she doesn’t know what to do with it.

The problem, grasshoppers, is that she said “fresh” but what she meant was fresh like a new sheen of dew on the morning grass...not an alien species of grass suddenly growing out of your lawn in sprays of acid-spewing orange blades.

So let’s define what “fresh” means:

**Fresh doesn’t mean revolutionary. It means a fresh take on a familiar idea.**

So it’s best to consider what about your story is familiar to the reader. What can the reader relate to? What ideas, what elements of a story can lull the reader into feeling comfortable, even when the alien monk hero walks onto the stage of your Regency novel? This is your bridge into the territory du fresh.

### Reflection

To build up your cache of familiar stuffs and things, come up with a list of story elements that might be able to carry that sense of familiarity for the reader and consider an example of a story that shows one way this might work. Example: Setting can be familiar. Urban fantasy is full of stories with a setting most readers can connect to either from experience or exposure in popular culture, such as Anita Blake’s very middle-America setting.

## Lesson 2. Defining the Not-So-Fresh

Now that we've brainstormed story elements that give us familiar ground to work from, let's go into a little more detail about why this familiar ground is so important.

### Familiar Characters

The most vital thing every writer must know before she puts fingers to keyboard or pen to paper is this: Who is her audience? If she knows her audience, can define their common interest or demographic or culture or religion, she can write a book that will resonate with that group. And if it resonates with that group, chances are good it will resonate outside that group—society is a Venn diagram of people with intersecting lives and priorities. Pin down your audience, and you know exactly what they expect to get when they open your book and start reading. Disappoint that audience, and word of mouth will never reach outside the core group to pull in new readers.

These expectations define the Reader Contract. When a reader opens a mystery, for example, he expects (whether it's a police procedural or a cozy) to see someone die within the first chapter, find red herrings and misdirection as the protagonist searches for the murderer, and know in the end who the killer is and that justice has been or will be served. Deviate from this contract, and you take the chance of alienating your core audience—don't solve the mystery by the end, and the reader will make a literal wallbanger of your story...warranties on that Kindle be damned.

The elements that define the Reader Contract are sacrosanct, and you should absolutely not "freshen" that contract unless you're prepared for readers bearing pitchforks and torches gathering on your lawn. Of course, this isn't an absolute rule. Cross-genre stories successfully blend the genre elements and defy one particular genre's RC all the time. But even here, you must consider what the reader will allow. Can you marry horror and mystery and then not solve the mystery at the end? Sure, but if you do, make sure your ending fulfills a horror Reader Contract...and maybe consider making the story more horror than mystery.

About fifteenish years ago, I was a moderator at an RWA conference, where a panel of editors and agents was discussing why readership in the 18-24 demographic had fallen so much in romance. Everyone had an opinion, but I noticed not a single person in that room fell into that demographic...except for me. Even the panel members were older than this age group. When an older woman—perhaps in her 50s, though at the time she looked ancient to me because hahahahaha stupid youth—stood up and decried the internet as the downfall of this demographic ("My granddaughter spends all her time on the internet and just doesn't read anymore!"), my arse started twitching.

I knew exactly why my peeps didn't read romance anymore because I was starting to lose interest, and I could pinpoint the reasons.

At the time, the historical romance was becoming one-note. All the stories were set in Regency England, Medieval England, or the Scottish Highlands, and Every. Damned. One had the Same. Damned. Plot. Historicals were awesome, but I wanted to read something different. The American settings were disappearing, Europe was a no-no, and OMG don't even start with Australia or \*gasp\* Africa. Even the

British Dude in India was Not Done, and the overdone British Dude in Sheikh Disguise was falling away. Only a handful of authors who'd been writing these kinds of books could continue to get away with them. So where else to look in the late 90s but...<insert dramatic flourish> contemporary romance.

Except when I tried to read these books, the heroines were supposed to be my age, but they didn't *feel* my age. They listened to oldies music, they drove classic cars, their views on sexuality and dating and careers and men were...well, like my mom's views. Or my grandmother's. The words they used were never slang I grokked, and each heroine felt like a throwback to some earlier period...but she was supposed to be like me. And she wasn't.

She soooo wasn't.

It was clear that the authors writing contemporaries no longer knew their younger target audience, their editors weren't calling them on this, and the readers in that group were going, "Meh, if I wanted to read about my mom pretending to be a 23 year-old virgin, no, never mind, I don't want to read that k, thanks, la la la I can't hear you."

Know your audience. And know the age group your characters fit in. Make them believable to readers *in* that age group.

Older heroines (and I cringe at this term because I'm talking about early 30s) are becoming more common nowadays, but 20-somethings are still big and probably will be until the average lifespan of humans reaches into the centenarian age range. Twenty-something is when we were becoming adult, learning to navigate the world, and were still excited about possibilities. Our brains had finally finished forming, we'd finished preparing for adulthood, and we were ready to embark on new adventures.

When we read about 20somethings in literature, it's easy to remember those emotions—the excitement, the fear, the uncertainty, the bravado—and relive those feelings through another character's experiences. Now that 30something doesn't mean universally married with school-aged kids (or kids graduating from high school soon), it's easier to see new adventure and possibility in that age group, too. But 20something remains magical because we were still whacking away at the forest with our machetes—we hadn't yet found the path we knew we'd take.

If you aren't a 20something or 30something and you write a character that age, immerse yourself into the television shows and movies and music and internet corners popular in those age groups and learn the vernacular, the topics they focus on, and even the cadence of their speech. Know your audience, and don't insult the audience that might be that age by writing an outdated version of a character they should feel could be their BFF.

### **Know Your Genre**

Every genre comes with shorthand for the reader. Anyone who's read more than five books in a genre can start to identify that shorthand. These cues for the reader are known as tropes, and they give the

reader a familiar stage and expected plot points or endings. Think of sci fi books or television shows you've read or watched where the trope was Lost in Space. You know, when you encounter this trope, that you're looking at two or more characters who are trying to get back home but have to overcome distance/malfunctioning technology/just being stranded first. In the interim, they will encounter dangers that make getting home that much more important, and the alien landscapes might sometimes tempt them to give up their goal of finding home. These are things the reader expects, so the trope is shorthand to the reader, to let her know what she's likely to see as the story progresses.

Consider a sekret baby trope in romance. What does this trope telegraph to the reader? What can he expect to read in a story with a baby on the cover or in the title and "secret" somewhere in the back cover copy (or title)?

Know the Reader Contract for your genre, but also know the tropes of your genre and what readers will expect to see from a story with those tropes.

Bonus extra read: <http://bookriot.com/2015/02/17/story-tropes-bingo-almost-every-genre/>

### **Know Your Sub-Genre**

What's important in a sub-genre? Usually, this is where you might see some crossover from another genre, so it's helpful to know the familiar ideas, characters, settings, and conflicts inherent to other genres. For example, an urban fantasy might be a cross between noir mystery and fantasy, or it might be a cross between romance and horror. What elements are required for that sub-genre and where do you have wiggle room?

*Note: Throughout this course, I will refer to premises, archetypes, and situations that drive the conflict as tropes. Tropes can also include settings, characters, plot points, etc., but I tend to refer to the conflict drivers as just tropes and other elements more specifically (e.g. setting tropes, character tropes) because the conflict-driving tropes are the ones that make your story a story.*

### **Reflection**

What genre(s) and sub-genre(s) do you write, and what are your favorite tropes: conflict sources, settings, characters, etc.

### Lesson 3. Finding the Fresh Take in Style

Now that we know what “fresh” is and we’ve defined what our familiar foundations might be, let’s start working on ways we can make stories fresh. Over the next two weeks, you will be coming up with new ideas for stories. It’s helpful to start with a new foundation for each exercise, but if you’re in love with one particular familiar element, go nuts with it. Get comfortable with freshening it so that you can replicate these exercises with other familiar foundations later.

To recap, you have to find a familiar point to introduce your reader to your fresh idea. Give the reader a point of reference, whether that’s character, setting, premise, genre structure, etc. Then make sure the familiar point is one that’s strong enough to create a bridge to the fresh idea. This familiar point *must* resonate with the reader as a familiar element. For example, Luke Skywalker is a familiar character — he’s the epic fantasy farm boy who learns he’s special and must go on a quest. He and the very Joseph Campbell-esque fantasy plotline were the bridge that pushed scifi into the mainstream. His story is familiar, but Lucas moved the setting to a technologically advanced world far, far away from our own.

One way you can freshen your story is to twist the typical style of your genre. Paranormal romance and urban fantasy were, once upon a time, rife with the snarky heroine in first person. Then the dark, brooding, not-very-humorous-at-all narrators came along.

#### Reflection

Consider your preferred genre. What is a style that is very typical in your genre? What can you change about your own delivery, while staying true to your authorial voice, to freshen the style?

## Lesson 4. Finding the Fresh Take in Archetypes and Old Tales

There are no new stories, right? We hear that one a lot, and it's true. Certain stories resonate with us because of how they relate to the human experience. Certain characters ring true for us, too, even though they might feel a little cliché, because they are archetypes.

What is an archetype? These are characters that boil down to a very specific, very powerful role (and by powerful, I don't mean they run around kicking butt). These can be the Mentor, who offers guidance to the hero; the Wounded Hero, who sulks with hard glances and hurts because of the things he's seen/done/experienced; the Warrior, who doesn't shrink from a battle; the Mindless Monster, who poses a constant threat and sometimes comes in feral hordes. It might be helpful to come up with a list of archetypes you might use in your stories and keep that list on hand in case you need to mix things up a bit.

Old stories are redone and redone, and among those, we see a lot of fairytales recycled for the modern age. Snow White and the Huntsman takes the familiar fairytale and twists its presentation (the genre – it became an action movie with a coming of age element rather than steeping in the romance-that-isn't-really) while keeping the setting and characters about where they were originally. Take *Romeo and Juliet*, throw in some zombies, and you have *Warm Bodies*. Show Austen's Emma in modern-day Los Angeles, and you get *Clueless*. All these stories work because they are familiar stories...twisted and freshened.

### Reflection

Twist a fairytale or very old story and write up a short premise or a longer description if you feel the urge. E.g. Cinderella with spies! And guns! ←totally works

## Lesson 5. The Fresh Take with Twisty Tropes

Attached to this lesson are tropes related to different genres. You can definitely see crossover in some genres, as these premises and characters hearken back to the human experience, but most genre conventions will call for a specific set of tropes that are popular with readers...for a reason.

What are tropes? Some of you might immediately say “clichés,” but that’s not quite right. Clichés are ideas that are so overused, they invoke eyerolls and groans. Tropes, on the other hand, are ideas that have been used so often and so effectively, they’ve become canon to that genre. They telegraph specific shorthand to any reader who’s consumed more than two books with that particular trope, so the reader knows exactly what to expect from the story.

Stop reading here for a second and respond below. Take a trope you know from your genre (reference the attached documents if you’d like) and reply to this post with the expectations a reader would have from that trope. For example, in a *sekrit baby* trope, the reader can expect a mother to return to a hometown (or similar place from her past) to a hero who thinks there were dirty dealings between them, and now they will reconcile...but the news of the baby will create conflict between them. When you’re done, return and keep reading!

Consider the tropes in your genre. What is it about those tropes that feed the central conceit of your genre? What is it about those tropes that appeal most to readers of your genre? Why are those tropes so successful in delivering the characters of your genre to the approved conclusion according to your genre’s Reader Contract?

Now consider what might happen when you combine these tropes. Take the Sci Fi tropes, for example. What kind of story would result if you used the Time Loop trope in a post-apocalyptic story? Hopefully something better than a Tom Cruise flick. ;) What about a horror story with a Mad Scientist archetype trope and the That’s Not Mommy trope? What if you took The Rebel and put her in a Government Corruption plus Murder by Disease tropes?

There are so many stories that can be created from these tropes, and each one will telegraph certain plot elements to the reader. Adding another trope or archetype (or two!) to the base trope will twist the story with further reader expectations. Your familiar elements are the tropes themselves. The “fresh” twist is how you combine them and the story that results.

### Reflection

Consider the list of tropes for your genre. Pick one. Pick another one or two, either from within your genre or from another genre...or pick an archetype that will twist the conventions of your situational trope. Write a short premise description or a back cover blurb for the book that would result.

## Lesson 6. The Fresh Take with Twisty Settings

Setting is super important to a story. In some genres, such as Urban Fantasy, the setting might actually function as a character all its own. The flavor of the city or town where the characters function might have its own personality, and that personality will flavor the story. What if *Black Hawk Down* weren't based on actual events and instead was set in Siberia? What if *Pride and Prejudice* took place in an alternate dimension where every woman with a fortune must be in want of a husband and men have to decide whether to marry for position or to marry for love...and leave his brothers socially and financially destitute?

What if *Othello* happened on a space station? What if "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" happened on Mars?

Setting affects not just the scenery in a story, but how characters interact with one another, what their focus is, and what conflicts and challenges they might experience. It's an extremely important element to every story and, with some manipulation, can provoke a fresh story.

### Reflection

Find a trope you like or take a fairytale or old story. Change the setting. Post your new story as a response to this lesson and describe how you think this change will affect the characters or conflicts.

## Lesson 7. Delivering Fresh on a Fantasy Platter

It's entirely possible that you chose a fantastical setting with crazy worldbuilding in the last lesson. If you did, this might be a slight retread, but this time, I want you to focus on the familiar aspects of your story premise.

Fantasy is any story element that is an impossibility in our world because of its magical elements. Sci fi might seem impossible, but it is not fantasy because the impossible elements are grounded in scientific advancements. Fantastical elements might seem paranormal, supernatural, preternatural, etc.

And when you add a dash of magic to a story, you change the world. Whether that magical element is recognized by the general populace, and the magic is accepted as a thing that happens, or the element is hidden from the public, how the characters deal with the world will change.

This is different from the setting because fantastical elements require worldbuilding—rules, consequences for magic use, new roles that might be unfamiliar to a contemporary reader, etc.—whereas the setting redefines the space and how the characters survive and interact with one another. There is, of course, overlap, but these are different ideas.

And when your characters are suddenly subjected to a new set of rules based on magic, your story will change completely. We've talked about Shakespeare and Austen in past lessons. What if *Pride and Prejudice* revolved around a family of witches? What if Cordelia in *King Lear* were a changeling? We've talked about fairytales, so consider what would happen if Cinderella's fairy godmother turned her into a shifter.

The possibilities are endless when you add magic, and you can worldbuild a tiny fantastical element into your story (a Fish Out of Water story, but the hero has a wristwatch that allows him to rewind time by four seconds) or create an elaborate world with a lot of rules governing the magic and the magicians.

### Reflection

1. Take a trope from your genre and add a magical element, small or large.
2. Create a new paranormal critter nobody has seen before and put it in a world that is both familiar and full of magical rules dictating that critter's behavior.

## Lesson 8. Micro-Fresh: Freshening the Delivery

We've spent seven lessons looking at how to reach your audience with a fresh idea. But what about freshening the delivery of your idea?

I briefly referenced stylistic changes, and this is always an option for fresh delivery. But there are even smaller ways to do this.

1. Twist clichés. Some of the best New York Times bestselling books utilize this fresh delivery. Clichés serve an important function—they become overused because they are effective. Like tropes, they deliver a punchy shorthand image or message to the reader, but because they're overused, the delivery is tired and no longer fresh. Keep the power of the cliché while making it zing with new life by twisting it. Ex. Her knickers were in a twist. => Her knickers were so twisted, it would take a scalpel, a pulley system, and a gynecologist to get her free.
2. Play with different styles of presentation. For example, Mark Henry's Amanda Feral series includes a heroine whose voice is as cold and funny as she is dead, and he occasionally presents her thoughts in footnotes.
3. POV. Be sure it's always deep. We want to be immersed in the narrator's voice, and that voice should sound fresh to the reader's ear.
4. Deliver setting description that relays the POV character's worldview. If the POV character, for example, is a chef, her world is food and senses, and she should relay colors and smells and textures and flavors as she would do for food. If the POV character is a geologist, she's going to look at the rock someone threw at her living room window, and she's going to name the rock. If she's in shock, she might even think for a few seconds about how interesting the markings are on it rather than the fact someone just threw a damned rock through her window.

### Reflection

Consider the first five pages of your WIP (or the story you just finished). Did you twist any clichés? Did you play with a new style? Is your POV deep? Does your narrative reflect the POV character's worldview? Revise these pages if you see a way to freshen the delivery.

## Conclusion

The next time you hear an industry pro pine for something fresh, remember that readers are going to want a familiar starting point, and editors are going to want a definite shelf in the bookstore to place your story.

With these tools, you can write fresh stories and deliver a fresh style to those editors and agents who keep insisting they want that new, exciting idea. Don't be afraid to experiment, but keep in mind the Reader Contract so you know how far across a line your audience will let you tread.

Good luck, and have fun!

## Group Discussion Prompts

1. Name a movie that bored you silly because it was the same story we've seen a hundred times thankyouverymuch. Name a movie that successfully twisted a familiar story.
2. Have you ever stopped reading a book because it was just too *out there* and you couldn't get into it? You don't have to name the book, but do talk about what made it hard to set aside your disbelief.
3. What conventions in your genre's Reader Contract will turn a book into a wallbanger if not followed?
4. Let's start a list of archetypes! Add your own ideas here, or pull from good sources, and be sure to define what that archetype adds to the the story.
5. What subgenres do you feel are wide open, stylistically and content-wise? In other words, what subgenres do you feel haven't been done to death?
6. Is there a trope in your genre you absolutely cannot abide? What about that trope could be changed to make it more palatable to you?
7. When you look at the world around you, in what ways do you consider it that reflect your worldview? What word choices or descriptors do you think you use that aren't common to others outside of your social/political/career/economic/ethnic circle?

# Romance Tropes

Situational	Character	Sexual
Accidental Pregnancy Accidental Wedding Arranged Marriage Boardroom Romance Blackmail Revenge Marriage of Convenience Baby on the Doorstep Emotional Rebirth Bait and Switch Reunited Lovers The Bet Secret Baby Fake Engagement/Fake Marriage Amnesia Mistaken Identity Redemption Secret Romance Cinderella Stranded Forced Proximity Charity Auction Road Trip Endangered Reputation	Boss/Employee Friends to Lovers Enemies to Lovers Matchmaker Tycoon/Billionaire Reunited Lovers Runaway Bride Bride Sheikh Cowboy Bad Girl/Rich Boy Love Triangle Different Worlds Older Brother's Best Friend/Best Friend's Little Sister/variations Ugly Duckling Troubled Marriage Long Lost Love The One Who Got Away Girl/Boy Next Door Right Under Your Nose Nanny/Governess Caretaker Protector/Woman in Jeopardy Tortured Hero Reformed Player/Rake Athlete/Sports Spinster Spy Highwayman/Outlaw Orphan Fallen Woman/Courtesan	Fling One Night Stand Wrong Bed Intimate Strangers Friends With Benefits

# Speculative Fiction Tropes

Sci Fi	Fantasy	Horror
Robots/Cyborgs	Fish Out of Water	Psycho/Insanity
Interstellar Travel	Quest	Redneck/Freak
Time Travel	Political Intrigue	Haunting
Super Powers	Magic vs Science	Cryptid/Alien
Body Mutations	War	Paranormal Monster
Time Loop	Chosen One	Monstrous Womb
Parallel Universe	Dark Lord	Body Mutation
Alien Invasion	Portal	Animal Mutation
Immortality	Inter-Species Relationships	Vagina Dentata
Post-Apocalypse	Medieval World	Desecrated Sacred Land/Object
Aliens as Gods	Contemporary Off-World	Mad Scientist
Virtual Reality	Ancient World	Cursed Object
Genetic Engineering/Cloning	Paranormal Critters	That's Not Mommy
Mind Control	Non-human Races	Changeling/That's Not Susie
Futuristic/Off-world Utopia	Magical Talisman	Bad Seed
Futuristic/Off-world Dystopia	Intrusion/Invasion	Apocalypse
Cyberpunk	Liminal	Buried Alive
Waking in the Future		Dark World/Underworld
Mind Control		Deadly Prank
Lost Worlds		Ultimate Evil
Mad Scientist		Lost/Trapped
Dying Planet		End of the World
War		Record of Evil (Film/Book/Etc)
		Black Magic
		Cult
		Revenge
		Dark Secret
		Abuse
		Kidnapped
		Ineffective/Corrupt Police
		Childhood Fear Revisited

# YA and Mystery Tropes and Archetypes

Young Adult	Mystery/Suspense	Archetypes
Love Triangle	Mystery writer protagonist	The Innocent
Body Mutation	Detective/Private Investigator	The Mentor
Absent Parents	Forensic Professional	The Orphan
Crush	Lay Investigator (cozies)	The Everyman
Chosen One	Government Corruption	The Tortured Hero
Social Issue	Dark Secret	The Caregiver
Medical Issue	Score to Settle	The Explorer
Bullies	The Psychic	The Rebel
Sibling in Trouble	Mafia	The Lover
Abusive Parent	Murder by Disease/Medical	The Creator
Terminal/Serious Illness	Murder of Convenience	The Jester
Special Powers	Serial Killer	The Magician
Secret Identity	Crime of Passion	The Ruler
Fish Out of Water	Political Intrigue	The Seducer
Coming of Age	Terrorists	The Trickster
Oppressive Authority	Conspiracy	The Maiden
My Boyfriend's a What?		The Crone
Rebellion		The Parent
Independence		The Initiates
The Wrong Crowd		The Loyal Companion
Pariah		The Scapegoat
Popularity Quest		The Outcast
Preacher's/Politician's Child		The Tempter/Temptress
		The Innocent in Distress
		The Intellectual
		The Advocate/Devil's Advocate
		The Seeker
		The Savior
		The Badass