

On Spec Submission checklist

Thinking about submitting to On Spec? What are we looking for?

We're looking for stories that engage the reader on an emotional level, and that tells a meaningful story set in a unique world where the speculative nature of the story is as important as any other aspect of craft.

Alas, we see a lot of stories that do not develop the potential in the work. I'd like to share a story checklist for our slush readers and editors that will help you get the story you want, and how to tell it is ready and not a first draft.

Speculative Aspects of Your Story

1. What is the science fiction, fantasy, or horror element? Is it necessary for the plot (set on a space station, in an alternative world, or somewhere more horrific?) Check to see if the story was picked up and set in a conventional world, would the story remain unchanged without the speculative aspects? What is it about the world in your story needs to have and is important and isn't part of the world familiar to your reader?
2. On Spec editors have been a part of the speculative writing community for decades. Is the aspect of your story you want to work with like any existing speculative fiction work? We can work with a familiar idea. We can't work with a familiar idea done in a familiar fashion.
3. When does this speculative aspect of the story appear? If it isn't on page one, how close to the beginning can you foreshadow it?
4. How can you make the speculative aspect of the story crucial?

Plot Issues

1. "There are no rules" doesn't mean no rules exist. Learn your craft. It's exceedingly necessary.
2. How are you telling the story? A very common plot we read is something exciting happens at the start of the stories and then characters spend the rest of the story talking about its resolution. Dialogue is a very useful tool, but it takes an exceptional story for the dialogue to do all the work. Look for stories told in small chunks of exposition (where you tell the reader what has happened or what is happening) description, and dialogue. Keep the backstory out as much as possible, and never start with backstory.
3. What is keeping the protagonist from what they want? Internal and external conflict is a fundamental building block of story. It takes an exceptional story to work if the character has all the skills and knowledge they're going to need to finish the story and without needing to change in some way to overcome the central conflict. What do they need to change about themselves? We'll be talking more on that in Character.

4. What is at stake for the character on a personal level? External stakes matter whether the characters are trying to save the moon or a wedding on it but what can be built up in the story to force the character to continue down the story's path even when another character would quit because it became too difficult to continue?

Character Issues

1. Visual media has a lot more leeway when it comes to characters who are not empathetic, and there are a lot of brilliant examples of unempathetic characters in fiction that have been remembered through the ages. But in a short story it is very difficult to pull off and unlikeable character effectively. "There are no rules" exists for stories like this. If the story works despite having an unempathetic main character, it's a *tour de force*. If it doesn't work, it's an unlikeable story about an unlikeable character doing unlikable things. Most readers won't like this. There's no satisfaction. Whoever told writers that shooting the moon was easy was probably trying to sell them something.
2. Overpowered characters, even if they are likeable, are equally difficult to get behind. We read many stories where characters have practically no chance of failure if it ever was an option. Failure should always be a possible outcome. In some parts of the story, it should be the most likely outcome but for the growth of the character that occurred. **The character's weakness should be central to the conflict** because stories where characters get better at a thing they can already do well doesn't have the same growth potential.
3. The greatest advice I ever read about characterization is from the literary agent, Donald Maass. He said that heroic characters should be something ordinary, everyman characters should be something heroic, and wounded protagonists should be at least want to get better. It sets up the expectation for the reader that there is something more about that character than its stock nature that the reader should pay attention to.
4. Your character's Point Of View (POV) should be felt from the first paragraph. What happens in stories isn't as important as how what happens impacts the character.

Next time, we'll discuss conflict, tension and pacing in speculative work. Then we'll tackle world building, point-of-view, and tips to bring out the awesome in your fiction.