

How To Write Suckitudinous Fiction

By Holly Lisle

It's fair to say that writing a good story is damned hard to do. Writing something that engages readers and wins them over to the side of the characters and makes these readers care about the outcome of your tale requires constant effort on the writer's part – brutal questioning of each scene and each line, a tight, sharp focus, and a deep belief in the story that you the writer want to tell.

Being mediocre is normal. It's where you start before you pick your path, hone your skills, and become either truly wonderful or friggin' gawdawful.

But the quest for good fiction is not the only way. There is ... another path. A dark path. And it is a path rich in tradition and esteemed by many. It is the Path of Suckitude.

Not all bad fiction is Suckitudinous. Some of it is simply bad – written by people who are completely tone-deaf to the language, blind to character and motivation, and incompetent with conflict.

Unlike bad fiction, Suckitudinous Fiction takes a dedication to the fine art of sucking that, if pursued with sufficiently rabid fanaticism, can win Pulitzers. (Yes, I think an inordinate number of recent Pulitzer-prize-winning novels suck. Hugely.)

If your grand fantasy is to suck like a Pulitzer winner, you have to be competent with the English language. You have to have a big vocabulary or a good thesaurus. It wouldn't hurt to have a graduate degree from an Ivy League college. But above all of those, you have to follow the Thirteen Sacred

Commandments of Suckitudinous Fiction.

The Thirteen Sacred Commandments of Suckitudinous Fiction

I. Thou shalt anoint no hero.

If you have a real hero, you cannot reek magnificently. It simply cannot be done. Real heroes beget a whole slew of real sins of good writing that will in the end slaughter your hopes of Genius-Level Suckitude. So eliminate heroism from your main character's personality. This takes some serious mental gymnastics – but if you want to pursue writing at the GLS level, you have to know the stunts. Here's your floor routine.

Embrace the philosophy that everything is relative. Everyone's actions are morally equivalent to everyone else's actions. Heroes act out of self-interest, just as criminals do. The guy who risks his life racing into a burning building to save a kid is no better than the arsonist who set the building on fire – they're both imperfect people dealing with the world as best they can. (CONSUMER WARNING: The mental gymnastics required by this approach to your writing can cause irreversible brain damage. If you achieved the most rarified heights of GLS [Genius-Level Suckitude], you are probably lost forever to writing anything worth reading again. Proceed with caution.)

II. Thou shalt decree no villain.

The no-hero requirement begets the no-villain requirement. Villains are as deadly to truly horrible fiction as are heroes, because even spineless wonders of main characters have been known to stop contemplating their navels and leap into startling life when faced off against a sufficiently driven, passionate villain. No – your antagonist may have dark demons and vile habits, but they must be equivalent to your

protagonist's vile habits and dark demons, and you may not, under any circumstances, declare (or allow the reader to decide on his own) that one of these characters is morally superior to the other.

III. Thou shalt express no opinion.

Please don't misunderstand me. You aren't avoiding opinions. You **have** an opinion if you are shooting for GLS greatness, and you must express it at every turn. Your opinion is "No opinion." Everything is relative, remember. If everything is relative, then any opinion is passing judgment, which you can't do because in the universe of moral relativism, everything is this mealy gray sludge of sameness. Nothing is bad – and if nothing is bad, then nothing can be good. So for every moral dilemma that your characters face, you must land firmly in the realm of "It's all the same." You cannot dare to suggest that anything your characters might do would matter, that anything might improve (or worsen) their state, that they might aspire to the sublime or sink into depravity – well, they can sink into depravity, but that's only because being depraved is the same as being good, only more so.

You're embracing entropy here, doing your bit to hurry along the heat death of the universe. No matter how deep into the pits your characters sink, you never need worry about getting them to notice that their lives are shit or that they're worthless excuses for human beings because **it's all the same**.

IV. Thou shalt embrace no theme.

Even if you can manage hero-less, villain-less fiction and avoid expressing any opinion beyond 'no opinion', still you are not yet safe from the realms of mediocrity, or, God forbid, the pernicious upward creep into good fiction. Press forward – sweep themelessness to your bosom. Themes are nothing but trouble for the author of GLS caliber. Themes require having a point to what you're writing – for example,

that good triumphs over evil, or that love matters, or that there is some difference between day and night. And having a point is the antithesis of GLS fiction. The reasoning is simple. Well, no, it isn't. The reasoning is convoluted as hell, and it goes like this. If good and evil are relative, then your opinion on everything is 'no opinion' because at the very ground level, having an opinion is passing judgment, so passing judgment is BAD, and the reason passing judgment is bad is because ... because ... (a sane reason escapes me here, but just pretend along with me for a few more minutes that the basic premise of this whole exercise makes any sense whatsoever) ... passing judgment is bad because it might hurt someone's feelings or something, so THEREFORE writing to a theme that expresses an opinion about the relative merits of something – anything – is just unbelievably crass and tacky.

I'm getting a headache already. You might be too. But soldier on. If you can get the hang of this, potential Pulitzers await.

V. Thou shalt sneer at conflict.

Conflict requires stakes. Stakes require that something be at risk, and that the very same something which is at risk shall offer to the characters a potential to reach a resolution, and shall offer to the reader a reason to give a shit whether the protagonist triumphs or the antagonist fails. But in the Universe of Gray Tapioca, everything is equal, everything is relative, and picking a side would require taking a stand. When you're neck deep in tapioca, no stands are possible or desired – the objective is to **drown**. So your people can whine and bicker and have lots of meaningless sex and meaningless violence and meaningless conversations, but IT MUST BE MEANINGLESS. If the point of your fiction is that life has no point, conflict is right out.

VI. Thou shalt commit no plot.

The plot is the direction of the story – it is the way that one event leads logically into the next, with conflict creating actions that beget consequences. At this point in GLS fiction, plotlessness is almost like gravity. Unavoidable. If you have no theme, no conflict, no opinion, no hero and no villain, you **can't** have a plot. The second you try to create a plot, all those other essentials of good fiction are going to start beating at the door trying to get in.

VII. Thou shalt eschew coherence.

The GLS writer has taken his stand on saying nothing. However, having done this, he can't be satisfied to say nothing with no words, which would at least be admirably to the point, and save a few trees. Oh, no. The GLS writer has lots and lots of words, being in most cases very intelligent, if not too terribly smart, and, having nothing to say and many words with which to say it, the GLS writer needs to resort to pyrotechnics. What are these pyrotechnics, you ask?

Well, deconstructionism is always good. Or you can go to the Gertrude Stein School of Repetition and Word Salad, which offers Jackson-Pollock-Throws-Words-on-a-Page as a technique. Meta-fiction (writing fiction about fiction, usually to demonstrate the futility of fiction itself) is always very neat. Vignettes work well, as does the first-person superwhine. You can throw in tin cans trouping cross-country, talking coyotes, and characters with erectile dysfunctions or the tendency to whack themselves between the eyes with hammers; these are always weird, depressing, and disturbing, which is what you shoot for in the world of GLS fiction, instead of being meaningful or entertaining. Remember that in GLS fiction, what you say is nowhere near as important as how you say it.

VIII. Thou shalt flee from any hint of pace.

Pace requires that things within the story happen, and that they happen for a reason, and that when they happen, other things shall happen in consequence. But the sensation of pace – that is, of the story moving forward – also requires that there **be** a story. You, the would-be GLS writer, DO NOT want a story. Stories are nothing more and nothing less than fictional characters participating in a progression of events designed to cast light on the otherwise disorderly existence of the human species, and as such, stories cannot exist without a moral stance, an opinion, a plot, a theme, and characters who are unlike each other. So avoid any attempt at creating pace as if you were nocturnal and undead and pace was silver.

Those are long and somewhat complex rules. The rest are shorter and easier to follow.

IX. Thou shalt murder suspense.

Suspense demands that the readers care, and that the writer give the readers something about which to care. Suspense demands that the writer invest himself deeply in the plight of his characters, and take an interest in the outcomes they face. To create suspense, the GLS writer would have to want one character to succeed and another to fail, and this is utterly anti-Tapioca. You would have to pass judgment on the relative merits of your characters. Who are ALL THE SAME.

No suspense, dammit. Suspense ... BAD.

X. Thou shalt excise vile passion like a nose wart, lest it shame thee.

Love nothing, for nothing is better than anything else, so

nothing is deserving of love. Hate nothing, for nothing is truly vile or evil – it is, at worst, misunderstood. Excitement is for the ignorant unwashed. You, the future GLS author, are beyond all that. You must not love your characters, your situations, or your significant other. You are, however, permitted to be insufferably pompous about your style.

XI. Thou shalt mock hope as plebian.

Hope implies improvement – things getting better, people triumphing. Hope is a sneaky way of saying that everything ISN'T relative, and we mustn't have that. Nope, can't have that. So your fiction must never contain the slightest shred of hope. Ever. Your characters wallow in their filth and they LIKE it. Got that? Anyone who includes hope in fiction is a backward Neanderthal hick redneck married to his sister whose non-branching ancestral tree makes him incapable of understanding that wallowing in filth and liking it is sophisticated.

XII. Thou shalt equate self-determination with heresy.

Self-determination is hope on steroids. Self-determination states that things could be better than they are, and **believes** the individual can do something to make them get better. In permitting your characters to express self-determination, you would be suggesting that your characters – those malcontent bastards – might in some way **wish** to see their worlds improve, or might even take a hand in improving them, or might have confidence in their own competence or the functioning of their own minds. You, the future GLS author, know that you can keep your fiction nailed to the Truth that everything is shit and that shit is good (or at least as good as ice cream) if you can just keep your dim little rodents away from claiming any control over the outcome of their own lives.

The GLS author in the world of Everything Is Relative has no room for individuals or individual merit. Kill upstart thinkers and doers before they have a chance to breed.

XIII. Thou shalt declare story dead, and do thy bit to kill it deader.

Having perpetrated your GLS un-story, you must then mock any fiction that does not worship at the altar of Everything Is Tapioca. You must get involved in awards committees and give awards exclusively to other GLS authors, all the while scoffing at relevance, plot, suspense, heroism, and villainy as rote tricks used by the untalented. You must turn up your nose at bestsellers and use the word “hack” for anyone who sells better than you do. Most of all, you must get a Creative Arts degree, work your way into a position as a tenured professor, and make sure that everyone who comes through your program either learns to write Suckitudinously, or else fails to graduate.

There you have it – the Sacred Path. Astounding suckitude is within your grasp, if only you cast off all common sense and Embrace the Tapioca! Decry reason, never say anything and be sure to say it in the most words possible, and someday, you too can hold your Pulitzer above your head and thank the little people who made it all possible. Only ...

... if you follow these rules and you DO win one ...

... please please please don't mention me.

NOTE: If this article resonates with you, and you want to meet other writers who share your passion and who are working in a friendly, supportive environment, come hang out with us and make progress on your writing in my free writing community.

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