

ESSENTIAL RULES FOR A GOOD STORY – BY LAUREN RIVERS / ERIC KERN

1. Every character receiving ‘star billing’ must be indispensable.

Definition: Any character who is to have a significant role or influence on the story must be made essential. Their role affects the details of the story, and without them, however minor, the story is not the same. This does not apply to the butler, the NPC level character, the supporting character there to serve only one function ‘ie, lock in the chevrons or beam you up’. However, anyone that would be credited in the opening of a movie, mentioned on your book’s back jacket, or is in your opening sequence on your tv show MUST be essential. Their indispensability may not be immediately apparent such as a cameo intended to pay off in a later work or a fan reference such as a notable guest character. Additionally, there are multiple ways in which a character can be made to be essential.

Corollary: If at all possible, each of these characters given star billing must be unique as a fingerprint. For example, if you have two doctors, they cannot be interchangeable. Doctor A cannot be able to seamlessly slide into Doctor B’s job. Doctor A must be either of a different speciality, a different personality, or something along those lines. Stories should be possible with both doctors without making one redundant.

Example: Battlestar Galactica (2004), any Joss Whedon series, any book by David Mack. The absence of any one character will alter the balance of the story, as well as force a new plot. Characters are important but still die (see the mortality shield below), and each one does not interfere with the others. Characters should be minimal Venn diagrams and not overlap.

Eden of the East
Smallville
Babylon 5
Chobits

Failed Examples: Stargate Atlantis introduces Aiden Ford, played by Rainbow Sun Francks. The character is not given a backstory before his appearance on the series, and is more or less a complete blank slate. Other than being a soldier who is ‘the best of the best’ there is little to distinguish this character. He is completely loyal and fits in well. Due to this poor planning, he is demoted to recurring and removed from the series after early season 2. He is never seen again.

Veronica Mars introduces Mallory Dent, played by Sidney Tamiia Poitier. The character is a teacher introduced to help Veronica when she needs a teacher as an ally, but other than that she serves no function. The character is present in only four of seven episodes in which she is credited. Though rumored to be budget issues, I suspect she was also removed because of all

the cast members she was the most expendable to the plot. She is never seen again.

Life's Dream by Goldfur is filled with characters that have no overall effect on the story. If any one sub character or minor family member is removed, their storyline such as it is could be assigned to another character without compromising the storyline. In addition, the leads do not make themselves essential, Pandora is largely unnecessary in the second half of the book other than her biological function as mother. Karl is a generic white man carpenter, a function that requires no growth whatsoever to make a living in his new home other than minor familiarity with their different tools. His pieces are so signature that anyone knows they are one of his, yet he is unable to realize the events going on around him until they are too late to do anything about it, or the problem solves itself.

Stargate as a franchise is known for being incapable of having two people with the same job on the series. In any episode that features Doctor Carson Beckett, Doctor Jennifer Keller (the series regular who gets paid regardless) is not present or her role is marginalized. As soon as Daniel Jackson is forced to leave due to contract issues in season 6 of stargate, Jonas Quinn (Corin Nemec) is brought in to replace him. Like Jackson, he is a white man with experience in ancient languages and archaeology (exactly like Daniel Jackson), and is promptly removed and ignored after Daniel returns.

2. Lead character must face problems they cannot easily solve nor avoid.

Definition: The lead character CANNOT excuse themselves from their own story. Classic mythic structure even allows that the main character initially refuses the call to duty. (ie, Luke Skywalker in Star Wars is hesitant to join the rebellion, even though he knows the Empire is evil. He does not go because he owes his uncle labor.) Any lead character must not only be required to be a mandatory participant in their own story, but at no point can they be allowed to walk away.

For example, see the following.

(The Negotiator – 1998)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Negotiator

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJ1pS1W0XXg>

(Serenity – 2005)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serenity_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serenity_(film))

<http://youtu.be/JY3u7bB7dZk>

In the provided examples, even though the protagonist does not wish to be involved in the events in which they are embroiled, walking away is not an

option. In both cases, they are aligned against forces more powerful than they, with more resources, men, and influence, in some cases not even being aware of all the forces arrayed against them. The only way forward is through.

If the character can simply walk away, logic suggests they will.

(Hell No: The Sensible Horror Film)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olEbwhWDYwM>

Characters follow Newton's first law of motion, stated here.

First law: When viewed in an [inertial reference frame](#), an object either is at rest or moves at a constant [velocity](#), unless acted upon by an external [force](#).

Stated simply, if a character does not have a reason to get up and go to market, they will not. If there is an easier way to go about it, they will take it. Without forced motion, there is no story. Though they may begin without any noted motivation, by the end of the first act (20% of the story total), they must have a reason to move forward that is not within their control.

3. Rules must be consistent.

Definition: When you establish your universe and lay down the ground rules, please stick to them. Enough inconsistency will destroy the suspension of disbelief, taking the audience out of the story. While two of my examples are for children's stories where the rules are more lax, the logic still stands.

For example, in *Equestria Girls* (2013), Spike is able to open the door with no problem. Later on in the conflict against Sunset Shimmer, he is unable to open it despite it being the exact same door.

Iron Man's armor in the *Avengers* is able to handle a direct strike from The Hammer of Thor. Yet in *Iron Man 3*, despite 40 upgrades, the suit falls apart several times, fails to assemble properly, and runs out of power despite even the original arc reactor in Iron Man's chest in the first film being stated to power a heart for several lifetimes, and this was the prototypical version. (It was later pointed out to me that this was at least partly due to it being designed to operate as independent pieces and assemble on site, though perhaps indicating clarification needed.)

Kryptonite is repeatedly erratic in its effect and use. *Smallville* often incapacitates Clark Kent with small amounts but when surrounded by it he is sometimes able to tough through the pain to save another character.

While the effects are defined by the color of the kryptonite, the effect determined by amount or potency is unclear.

Harry Potter as a series is immensely illogical. Forgoing the 'it's magic and it's for kids' argument for a moment, let's analyze a few key events from the series. In Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, Harry and his friends break the rules and are punished accordingly, though ironically one such punishment is the same as the infraction they committed. For hanging out late at night with Hagrid, they are punished by staying out late at night with Hagrid in a forest they warn the rest of the students to avoid at risk of death, in which they split up.

At the end of the film, Harry and the others are rewarded though an unclear point system that teachers are free to assign, yet despite the obvious prejudices they have against some of the rival houses and no regulation for how many points may be added or removed, Dumbledore assigns 160 total points to Gryffindor for saving the day, even though they broke several rules in doing so, and Slytherin is robbed of their rightful place of House Cup winners. It is the end of the semester, and even though all of the points have been counted, it teaches kids that the ends justify the means. Or that you have to have the right leverage to get what you want. Harry did save the day, but he still should've been punished for what he did, and they did not deserve the house cup.

Uses of several items are erratically regarded, such as Floo Powder, Portkeys, and the platform to Hogwarts being in the most crowded train station in London, yet despite the magic world being secret, the wizards are regularly shown flying in plain sight, and two muggles are even clearly noticing Harry and Ron's failed attempt to get onto the platform. How any of these things work is never explained.

Though it seems enticing to kids, the idea of magic wands that choose their user is ultimately illogical. As seen in the first film, if every customer tried every wand until they found the right one, there'd be a huge mess every five seconds. Seems a poor way to run a business, if you are making custom orders for a customer that may not come in for 20 years, such as the wand that Harry accepts.

Finally, the fact that Slytherin is universally evil, or so it is strongly implied that all dark wizards came from Slytherin. Not only is this borderline 'racist' or the magic school equivalent, but this also points to extremely poor standards on behalf of the magic world. Book 7 even features a scene where Dumbledore hears Voldemort a.k.a. Tom Riddle say he likes torturing animals and controlling others will. Like Obi Wan, he ignores the advice of wiser peers and teaches this child absolute power, and wonders why things went wrong. I suppose this means the deaths of

hundreds and years of darkness are on Dumbledore's head. Fortunately he found Harry to correct it and basically negate his legacy.

4. Characters must behave according to their established patterns and histories.

Definition: People do things for a reason. Characters are no different. The backstory you give them **MUST** match with their actions. There is no reason for a promiscuous sex addict to join the monastery, or for a Jedi to suddenly switch sides without a good reason and enough time. For examples, I provide General Zod, Anakin Skywalker, and Sunset Shimmer.

General Zod is a killer. We know he is a megalomaniac and a ruthless dictator. Yet in *Man of Steel* he politely gives us 24 hours to turn over Superman. Once the time has expired, he activates a terraforming device to make Earth into Krypton. Since they declare this will kill us all anyway, why did Zod wait in the first place? It is out of character since his own actions declare he does not care about human life, even though we already knew this from 80 years of Superman lore.

Anakin Skywalker starts out as an innocent child, in fact, a bit too innocent. When he becomes a teen, he proves Yoda right by becoming the greatest evil the universe has ever known because of a coincidence and an oddly convenient offer. When he begins Episode II, he is good. He goes home to find his mother has been kidnapped over 30 days prior, or whatever a month is on Tatooine. He arrives just seconds before she dies. This convenient timing sends him on a homicidal rage, causing the annihilation of the village of sand people. He makes a large issue over killing children, but these are by the same token the people known for killing humans and other acts of violence regularly. Later, in episode three, he states he wishes to keep his loved ones from dying. Despite there being no way he could know this, that is exactly what Palpatine offers to convince him to turn to the dark side. In three seconds he is converted to killing children again.

Sunset Shimmer of Equestria girls, makes the fastest enemy to friend conversion in MLP history. Nightmare Moon took a millennia, Discord most of a season, and Sunset Shimmer mere seconds after clearly intending to do harm to the heroes.

Make certain the story provides enough time for such transitions to appear natural rather than convenient.

5. Antagonists should be a genuine threat to the hero's goals.

Definition: An **antagonist** is a character, group of characters, or [institution](#) that represents the opposition against which the [protagonist](#) or protagonists must contend. In other words, an antagonist is a person or a group of people who oppose the main character(s).

Basically, it amounts to the bad guy. However, antagonist suits better since an antagonist is not necessarily evil, they simply want the opposite of what the main characters want. These two forces operate on Newton's Third Law of motion, which states when one body exerts a force on a second body, the second body simultaneously exerts a force equal in magnitude and opposite in direction to that of the first body. In other words, for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Emphasis on equal.

The greatest villains are those that can match or exceed the hero in every way, providing the characters with their strongest challenge yet.

Faith Vs. Buffy
Xena Vs. Callisto
Sherlock Holmes Vs. Moriarty
Superman Vs. Doomsday
Fantastic Four Vs. Doctor Doom
Professor X Vs. Magneto
Locutus of Borg Vs. The Enterprise Crew

Suffice it to say that the antagonist cannot be easily trounced, dismissed, or otherwise beaten. They are not the person on the other side of the world who cannot reach you through the computer. They are the neighbor next door that parks in front of your driveway. You cannot avoid them, and must deal with them. If there is no possibility of failure, victory means nothing.

I point to *More Terrible Than Chains* by Bernard Doove, which features a slave who falls into good fortune by random chance and skills a slave should not possess, and at no point do they make any effort to recover their property within the plot of the story. While it is indicated the slavers will be back, the fact that you do not see this in the story means it may as well never have been brought up in the first place. Similar is his other book *Life's Dream*, where the antagonist is trounced once by harsh language, once by legal mumbo jumbo, and then dies.

A true antagonist must make the protagonist fear for their survival, and at the very least make certain that winning is not a forgone conclusion.

(See 'Everything wrong with Harry Potter' on youtube for corroboration.)

6. Significant time jumps MUST be acknowledged.

Definition: If a person's entire developmental period, such as their training or childhood is skipped over after their introduction, it must be acknowledged. For example, if when a character is introduced, they cannot use their powers well, but the next time they are introduced they have mastered them precisely, this must be explained. In movies, this is often done by '3 years later' or some similar acknowledgement. Time jumps without clear indications of how long, can result in audience confusion. See Rule 11 for further explanation.

7. Anything outside of conventional science MUST be explained.

Definition: Most people are familiar with the fact that heat makes metal expand, that gravity pulls you downward, and that there is no air in space. Fair enough. We also know that sometimes rules are stretched for the sake of brevity and clarity. For example, a criminal flashes a bag of cash to a girl to impress her. A real criminal would never do this, however, in television and movies this quickly establishes that he has money, a lot of it. Same with hot wiring a car by touching two wires together. Realistic, hardly. This nevertheless gets the point across, and serves the second purpose of not teaching people how to hotwire cars, such as MacGyver skipping steps and many kids science shows saying 'don't try this at home'.

Things such as 'the force' in Star Wars, magic in Harry Potter, and the capabilities of superheroes must be explained insofar as the universe requires. For example, we want to know exactly what the force can do with most people, who has it, and why. We want to know what Spiderman's powers are, though how he uses them are up to the writer.

8. Avoid the 'hero shield'.

Definition: The hero shield is a syndrome that occurs when the hero is seemingly immune to any form of injury. Most noticeable in television and movies, it is usually presented in the case where the cast regulars are invulnerable to any serious harm, yet the guest stars, extras, and so on are fair game.

While this is logical to a degree based on their importance to the story, you must make certain to avoid giving the impression that the main characters cannot be harmed. If there is no risk, there is much less of a chance your audience will be concerned for their well-being.

I recall a trailer for an X-Files episode where it said, "A side of Scully you've never seen, could get her killed..." Statements like this hold no weight when you know the cast consists of her and Mulder, and the series

is dependent on their chemistry. It is further emphasized by the fact that since Scully is regularly in danger, this reminds us she cannot die.

This is again when I turn to Battlestar Galactica (2004) and any Joss Whedon series, as both are stronger universes for keeping their regulars on even footing in terms of survivability.

Corollary: Do not kill a character with the intention of bringing them back when resurrection is not in their list of skills. Stargate Atlantis kills Doctor Carson Beckett, but he is brought back as a clone two seasons later for no reason. The event cheapens his death and makes it irrelevant.

A second example is Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance (PS3), Liu Kang is killed in the opening movie, but he is immediately brought back as a zombie in the next game. A note about the franchise in general is that it seems afraid to kill any characters despite the name Mortal Kombat and the fact that it is known for fatalities.

9. Antagonists MUST be competent.

Definition: A chain is only as strong as the weakest link, and in so doing is your antagonist. Whoever opposes the hero must be skilled in their profession, as well as take any opening the hero provides for their defeat. Failure to present your villain in this fashion makes them look foolish and your hero appears weak. For example, in the 1987 episode of TMNT “Corporate Raiders from Dimension X” the turtles are finally captured by shredder. Bebop asks ‘Should we kill them?’ and Shredder replies no, with no explanation. They are imprisoned in a broom closet with no guards and their weapons still attached. Even for a kids show that’s unforgivably BAD.

As shown in the following example, if the villain does not provide a good reason for everything they do, it will be noticed.

(Honest Trailer – Star Trek Into Darkness)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6B22Uy7SBe4>
(Everything Wrong With Star Trek into Darkness)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=REOjxvQPQnQ>

If the antagonist is the type to kill people, they cannot hesitate to do so. (See ‘hero shield’) The time they waste waiting to give the hero time to be rescued cannot seem in any way unnatural. Star Trek and Stargate are known for this. Whenever the hero is in danger, the killer holds his fire just long enough for them to be beamed away, then waits until they are gone to react.

10. Conversions MUST be of the appropriate amount of time for the characters histories and personality.

Definition: People are the products of their pasts. They do not change on a dime, nor should your characters. If a character is a slave, they are not likely to master technology quickly, if at all.

A person that has spent their life in the military will have a different mindset than an ivory tower intellectual. If you ask yourself if this military man would suddenly just become a pacifist, and you think you will have a hard time believing it, your audience will too.

Sunset Shimmer after spending years angry at Celestia, should not become a friend so quickly, nor would she even for that matter know about the elements of harmony, having been gone from Equestria since before Twilight made any significant impact.

Anakin Skywalker should not have instantly turned to the dark side when asked, without at the bare minimum a protest or hesitation. The fact that he does clearly indicates Padme never meant anything to him, only his own self interest.

11. Do not change rules out of convenience. Think things through first.

Definition: This refers to two things seen often in movies and television. The first is when it takes a character an entire movie to master their powers, but by the sequel, it takes three seconds and no instructions. Not plausible. For example, Neo finally learns how to move like the agents at the end of the first. By the Matrix Revolutions, he can now fly and enemies even as strong as the Agents (declared in the previous film to be the guards to every door and that everyone that EVER faced them has died) are nothing more than an inconvenience. Anyone remember how he could face hundreds of agent smiths? Even for The One, that's pushing it.

The second example is that it took Tony Stark an hour to build the Iron Man suit and a full movie to master its abilities. Rhodey is able to accomplish the later in seconds despite clearly never having used one before. If it takes Tony a full movie, it needs to take Rhodey more than five minutes.

Secondly, in The Amazing Spiderman, Peter Parker falsifies his identity (and is not asked for ID), yet the man who has said ID is escorted out by police. He enters the building and is able to slip away from the group in a multimillion dollar lab undetected, and duplicates a complex security code he saw once from fifty feet away without an error. No security guards or cameras intercept him as he works his way into a room full of spiders that

conveniently bite him. Not possible, by any stretch of the imagination. No competent company would allow any of that to happen.