

Magic Rules!

Part 2: Limitations of Magic—At What Cost?

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Fiction is about conflict and fantasy is no different. Magic cannot be an all-powerful force, or there would be no conflict, and thereby, no story. Or, to put this another way: if anything and everything is a possibility, than nothing would be interesting in your fantasy world.

I'm not talking about rules, at least not yet. That's the subject of the third article in this series. Setting limitations allows the author to focus on story elements: tension, conflict, plot, etc., whereas, rules are part of a world building system.

While magic can be used to get the heroine or hero out of a sticky situation, it's not the only or always appropriate way out. The protagonist has intelligence, strength, and other

non-magical abilities to be called into use to save his or herself. Use those first. Only use magic as an out when there's no other way.

Limitations

On the other side of the mirror, we have the antagonist, who might appear to have no limits to his or her magical power, but if that were true, our heroine or hero would lose in the end. The editor or agent reading your manuscript would be disappointed, and the author would not be offered a publishing contract.

Anyone who uses magic in a fantasy world has to deal with natural limitations of that magical system. Magic is a wonderful force in a fantasy story, but it's also a dangerous force. This adds inherent conflict to the plot: not only is the antagonist trying to stop the heroine or hero, but those who love and support the protagonist might also not want her or him to use this dangerous power.

Magic can have limitations in other ways. Maybe it only works as desired 60% of the time. Maybe the outcome is predictable half of the time. Maybe the side effects change over time.

When You Take Away the Magic

Another aspect a fantasy author must remember is that if you take away the magic, the protagonist and antagonist are people, with their own limitations and flaws, their own strengths and salvations. Accent these and let magic play a secondary part in your plot.

A character's current situation might also limit the use or outcome of his or her magical power. What happens when the hero has a cold or the antagonist didn't get a good night's sleep? How might this affect the ability to use magic effectively?

Adding Conflict with Magic Mistakes

Fantasy characters make mistakes including mistakes with magic. This adds additional conflict and tension and shows the character dealing with an outcome not intended or expected. Maybe the character has to deal with guilt as a result of a mistake in using his or her magical power.

Fantasy characters are more than their magic. They feel, they think. They feel, they think. They have dreams and fears. Your characters need to be well rounded people, with aspects of goodness and a pinch of the dark side. Focus on them as characters first, as magic users second.

Anyone who uses magic in a fantasy world must keep in mind the limitations, which make the story believable, and allow the author to develop tension and to create conflict. Remember: no conflict – no story.

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