

Fiction Rules Archeology

Introduction

Why this — Why now

Corrupted rules don't just constrain technique - they **constrain understanding**. They keep writers in a perpetual amateur state where they're always asking "Am I allowed to do this?" instead of "Does this serve my story?"

Fiction writing is complex problem-solving. Every story presents unique challenges. Rules like "never head-hop" or "always start with action" are procedures being taught where principles need understanding.

Most "break the rules" advice just says "rules are meant to be broken!" - which is useless rebellion without understanding.

When someone tells you a 'rule', be skeptical and dig into that rule before you accept it as gospel.

Principles require understanding.

Rules just require counting.

The worst damage these corrupted rules do is they make writers fear their own judgment. They create dependency on external validation rather than internal craft knowledge.

Some rules are often just sediment. Layers of misunderstanding built up over decades until the original principle is unrecognizable. It's time to excavate down to the actual craft principles underneath. Get your picks and shovels.

The Pattern Behind the Corruption

Looking at these mutations shows consistent mechanisms:

- 1. Decontextualization:** Good advice for specific contexts becomes universal law. Strunk's advice for academic clarity becomes fiction dogma.
- 2. Binary Thinking:** Nuanced principles become either/or rules. "Use active voice generally" becomes "Never use passive voice."
- 3. Authority Worship:** A famous writer's personal preference becomes commandment. King 'doesn't like adverbs much, therefore adverbs are evil'.
- 4. Pedagogical Laziness:** Teaching principles requires explanation. Teaching rules requires only prohibition. Rules are easier.
- 5. Status Signaling:** Knowing the "rules" lets people feel superior. Counting "was" instances is easier than understanding narrative distance.
- 6. Telephone Game:** Each retelling simplifies. Chekhov's nuanced advice about sensory detail becomes "show don't

tell" becomes "never summarize." When a well conceptualized and limited rule gets repeated enough times, the original message is truncated.