

Skill Builder Packet



FAST ORBIT
P R E S S

What's in this packet?

- 1. Showing vs. Telling**
- 2. Head-Hopping**
- 3. Active vs. Passive Voice**
- 4. Worldbuilding without info-dumps**
- 5. Writing Believable Dialogue**
- 6. Dynamic vs. Static Characters**
- 7. Mastering Story Structure**
- 8. What a cohesive chapter looks like**
- 9. Sci-Fi Word Counts**
- 10. How to write a first draft in 6 months or less**
- 11. Writing isn't just typing**
- 12. Scene-Level Craft**
- 13. Character Motivation**
- 14. Stakes & Tension**
- 15. Endings**
- 16. What to Fix Later**
- 17. Introducing New Sci-Fi Concepts**



1



SHOWING vs. TELLING

What This Means

- Telling: You explain something directly.
- Showing: You let the reader figure it out through actions, details, or dialogue.

The Easiest Way to Remember

- Tell = facts
- Show = evidence

An Example

- Telling: The room was dangerous.
- Showing: The warning light flashed red. The door sealed behind her.

Show Actions: What a character does tells us how they feel.

- Telling: He was scared.
- Showing: His hands wouldn't stop shaking.

Show Senses: Use what the character sees, hears, or feels.

- Telling: The air was toxic.
- Showing: The mask beeped after one breath.

Show Through Dialogue: People reveal themselves by how they talk.

- Telling: She was angry.
- Showing: "Say that again," she said.

Show One Clear Detail: You only need one strong detail.

- Telling: The city was under strict control.
- Showing: Cameras followed him down the block.

When Telling Is Okay

Telling is useful when you need to:

- Move quickly
- Explain something once
- Connect scenes

A Quick Fix for Your Draft

Circle words like: angry, scared, happy, dangerous, important

Then ask: What could the character do instead?

2



HEAD-HOPPING

What Is Head-Hopping?

Head-hopping happens when the story jumps between different characters' thoughts inside the same scene without warning. It confuses readers and breaks immersion.

Head-hopping example:

Alex watched the shuttle descend, heart racing. Maya hoped he wouldn't notice her shaking hands. Alex knew the mission would fail.

Two minds in one scene!

Why It's a Problem

- Readers don't know whose experience to follow
- Emotional tension gets diluted
- The scene feels unstable

The Fix: Pick One Head Per Scene

Choose one character to be the camera. The reader should only know:

- What that character sees
- What that character thinks

The Same Scene (Fixed)

Single point of view:

Alex watched the shuttle descend, his heart racing. Maya's hands shook beside him. She wouldn't meet his eyes.

How to Tell If You're Head-Hopping

You might be head-hopping if:

- You know what multiple characters are thinking
- Emotions are explained instead of shown
- The scene feels hard to follow

2



HEAD-HOPPING

How to Show Other Characters Without Entering Their Heads

Use:

- Body language
- Dialogue
- Actions

Instead of: She was terrified.

Try: She kept backing toward the door.

When Switching POV Is Okay

You can change point of view:

- Between scenes
- Between chapters
- With a clear break

Quick Revision Check

Highlight all thoughts and emotions in a scene. Ask: Do all of these belong to the same character?

3



ACTIVE vs. PASSIVE VOICE

The One-Sentence Difference

- Active voice: the subject does the action
- Passive voice: the subject receives the action

A Simple Example

- Passive: The door was sealed.
- Active: The system sealed the door.

Why Active Voice Is Usually Better

Active voice:

- Feels immediate
- Creates momentum
- Makes cause-and-effect clear

How to Spot Passive Voice

You may be using passive voice if:

- The sentence uses was or were
- The person doing the action is missing

Passive: The signal was lost. Ask: By whom?

Turning Passive Into Active

Find the action. Name the doer.

- Passive: The message was erased.
- Active: The AI erased the message.

When Passive Voice Is Okay

Passive voice can work when:

- The doer doesn't matter
- The doer is unknown
- You want to hide responsibility

Example: Mistakes were made.

3



ACTIVE vs. PASSIVE VOICE

A Common Sci-Fi Trap

- Passive: The system was activated.
- Active: The system activated at midnight. OR She activated the system.

Quick Draft Check

Circle sentences with:

- was
- were
- had been

Ask: Who is doing this?

4



WORLDBUILDING WITHOUT INFO-DUMPS

What Is an Info-Dump?

An info-dump is when the story stops so the writer can explain the world.

It often looks like:

- Long explanations of history or politics
- Paragraphs explaining how technology works
- Characters explaining things they already know

Why Info-Dumps Don't Work

Info-dumps:

- Slow the story
- Overwhelm readers
- Make the world feel less real

The Core Rule

If the world matters, it should affect what's happening right now.

A Simple Example

Info-dump:

The city used a tiered oxygen system created after the climate collapse, which controlled where people could live.

Story-first:

Her badge flashed yellow. The elevator stopped at Level Three and locked her out.

4



WORLDBUILDING WITHOUT INFO-DUMPS

3 Easy Ways to Worldbuild Without Explaining

- **Show the Rule in Action:** The gate wouldn't open for her ID.
- **Use Objects:** He counted the last three drops before sealing the bottle.
- **Let Characters React:** Conversations stopped when the drone passed overhead.

When Explanation Is Okay

Short explanation works when:

- The reader is already grounded
- You're clarifying something important
- The story keeps moving

Quick Revision Check

Highlight paragraphs that explain the world. Ask: Can this be shown through a choice, obstacle, or consequence?

5



WRITING BELIEVABLE DIALOGUE

What Bad Dialogue Sounds Like

Bad dialogue often feels:

- Stiff
- Over-explained
- Too perfect
- Like speeches instead of conversation

What Good Dialogue Does

Good dialogue:

- Sounds natural
- Reveals character
- Moves the scene forward

A Simple Example

Stale:

- “I am very angry about the mission,” Alex said angrily.

Improved:

- “You promised this would work.”
- “I didn’t promise anything.”

5 Simple Rules for Better Dialogue

- **Keep It Short:** Only reveal what is necessary.
- **Don’t Over-Explain:** “As you know...” is a red flag.
- **Let Actions Help:** “Don’t touch that.” He touched it anyway.
- **Use “Said” as your main dialogue tag:** Readers barely notice muttered, sighed, etc.
- **Avoid Emotion Adverbs:** Let the words do the work. Pick a stronger verb.

6



DYNAMIC vs. STATIC CHARACTERS

Two Types of Characters Every Story Needs

The Basic Difference

- Dynamic characters change over the story.
- Static characters stay mostly the same.
- Both are important.

Dynamic Characters

Dynamic characters:

- Learn something
- Change a belief
- Make a different choice by the end

Example:

A pilot who believes survival matters more than people, and learns they're wrong.

Static Characters

Static characters:

- Hold their ground
- Represent a belief or system
- Force others to change

Example:

A knight that always follows the rules, no matter the cost.

A Simple Comparison

- Dynamic: Starts one way → ends another
- Static: Starts one way → ends the same, but changes others

6



DYNAMIC vs. STATIC CHARACTERS

How Each One Works in Sci-Fi

Dynamic characters often:

- Question the system
- Adapt to new worlds
- Change because of the future they live in

Static characters often:

- Represent authority
- Enforce rules
- Embody the world's values

Common Mistakes

- Mistake #1: Thinking every character must change
- Mistake #2: Thinking static means boring. Static characters create pressure.

A Quick Writing Check

Ask yourself:

- Who changes by the end?
- Who stays the same and causes that change?
- If everyone changes, the story can feel unfocused. If no one changes, the story can feel flat.

When to Use Each

Use dynamic characters for stories about:

- Growth
- Survival
- Moral choice

Use static characters for stories about:

- Systems
- Power
- Consequences

7



MASTERING STORY STRUCTURE

What Story Structure Really Is

Story structure is the order things happen. A story works when:

- Something changes
- Because something happens
- And it forces a decision

The Simplest Structure

1. The World: Show normal life
2. The Problem: Something goes wrong
3. The Choice: The character must act
4. The Consequence: Things get worse or change
5. The Outcome: The story ends differently

A Simple Sci-Fi Example

1. Oxygen is rationed
2. Her supply is cut early
3. Steal or suffocate
4. She's hunted
5. She survives, but can't go back

What Each Part Should Do

- Beginning: Set expectations and introduce the problem
- Middle: Complicate everything and raise the cost
- End: Force a final decision and show the result

7



MASTERING STORY STRUCTURE

A Common Mistake

Things happen, but nothing changes. If the story feels flat, ask: What is different at the end?

How Structure Helps You

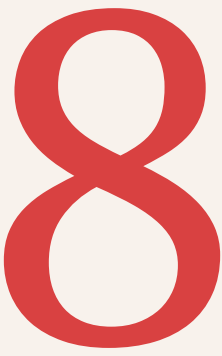
Structure:

- Keeps the story moving
- Prevents wandering plots
- Makes endings feel earned

A Quick Draft Check

Ask:

- What just changed?
- Why does it matter?
- What choice does this force?
- If there's no answer, the scene may not be doing enough.



WHAT A COHESIVE CHAPTER LOOKS LIKE

What a Chapter Is

A chapter is one focused unit of story. It doesn't need explosions or twists. It needs:

- A clear purpose
- Forward movement
- A reason to keep reading

The Core Idea

A chapter should begin with a question and end with a change.

The Five Parts of a Strong Chapter

- **Clear Focus:** We know whose perspective we're in, where we are, and what the character wants.
- **Forward Motion:** Something happens such as new information, a mistake, a confrontation, or a discovery.
- **Rising Tension:** The situation complicates or costs something, even in quiet chapters.
- **A Turn or Shift:** A plan changes, trust breaks, a door closes, or a threat appears.
- **A Clean Exit:** The chapter ends with a decision, consequence, or question.

A Simple Sci-Fi Example

- **Start:** She sneaks into the restricted sector
- **Middle:** She finds proof the system is lying
- **End:** The alarm goes off, and her name appears on the screen

8



WHAT A COHESIVE CHAPTER LOOKS LIKE

Common Chapter Problems

- Nothing changes
- Too many ideas at once
- The chapter only explains
- No tension or decision

A Quick Chapter Check

Ask:

- What did the character want?
- What went wrong or changed?
- Why does the next chapter need to exist?

Bottom Line: A good chapter has one job, does it clearly, and pushes the story forward.

9



SCI-FI WORD COUNTS

Typical Sci-Fi Book Lengths

- These are ranges, not rules.

Children's (8–12):

20,000–50,000 words | Chapters: 1,000–2,000

Young Adult:

60,000–90,000 words | Chapters: 2,000–3,000

New Adult:

70,000–100,000 words | Chapters: 2,000–4,000

Adult:

80,000–120,000 words | Chapters: 3,000–5,000

Typical Chapter Lengths

Most chapters fall between 2,000–4,000 words. Short chapters increase urgency. Longer chapters allow immersion. Both are valid and needed.

What Matters More Than Length

A chapter should:

- Focus on a cohesive goal
- Create tension or change
- End with a decision or consequence

A Simple Planning Trick

If your goal is 80,000 words over 25–30 chapters, aim for 2,500–3,200 words per chapter.

Bottom Line: There is no perfect length, only a readable range.

10



A FIRST DRAFT IN 6 MONTHS OR LESS

The Goal: Finish a complete first draft.

The Fast Orbit Method

- Write 750 words
- 4 days a week
- ~3,000 words per week
- About one chapter per week

What That Looks Like Over Time

- 12,000 words per month
- ~90,000 words in ~30 weeks
- A full sci-fi novel in under six months.

Why This Works

This plan:

- Builds consistency without burnout
- Makes progress visible
- Leaves rest days for thinking
- Works with life and job commitments

Adjust the Numbers

750 words is a starting point. Some writers do better with:

- 500 words a day
- 1,000 words twice a week
- Longer weekend sessions
- The best word count is the one you can repeat.

What Matters Most

- Show up regularly
- Don't edit while drafting
- Let the draft be messy
- A finished draft beats a perfect first chapter.

11



WRITING ISN'T JUST TYPING

Why Time Away Makes Your Writing Stronger

The Big Idea

Writing doesn't only happen at the keyboard. Some of the most important work happens when you:

- Walk
- Think
- Rest
- Let scenes sit

What “Non-Typing” Writing Looks Like

Writing also includes:

- Letting a scene replay in your head
- Thinking through a character's choice
- Noticing ideas while walking or commuting
- Sitting with a problem instead of forcing it

Why Stepping Away Helps

Days off help because they:

- Create mental space
- Reveal what isn't working
- Strengthen emotional clarity
- Prevent burnout

Walks Are Work

Movement helps ideas loosen. A short walk can:

- Unlock stuck scenes
- Clarify dialogue
- Spark new connections

11



WRITING ISN'T JUST TYPING

Let Scenes Sit

You don't have to solve everything immediately. Letting a scene rest:

- Makes weak spots obvious
- Helps you hear false dialogue
- Clarifies what actually matters

Rest Is Part of the Process

Constant pressure kills creativity. Rest:

- Refills attention
- Improves focus
- Keeps writing sustainable

A Healthy Writing Rhythm

Strong writing habits include:

- Writing days
- Thinking days
- Rest days

Bottom Line: Writing is creation, reflection, and rest. Trust the process.

12



SCENE-LEVEL CRAFT

How to Make Each Scene Do Real Work

What a Scene Is

A scene is one moment of story where something specific happens.

The Core Rule

Every scene needs three things:

1. A goal
2. An obstacle
3. A change

1) The Goal

At the start of the scene, the character wants one clear thing. It can be:

- Information
- Safety
- Escape
- Control
- An answer

2) The Obstacle

Something gets in the way. This can be:

- Another character
- A rule or system
- Time pressure
- Fear or doubt

3) The Change

By the end of the scene, something is different. Examples:

- The goal is achieved, but at a cost
- The plan fails
- New information appears
- The stakes rise

12



SCENE-LEVEL CRAFT

A Simple Sci-Fi Example

- Goal: She wants access to the restricted archive.
- Obstacle: Guards deny her clearance.
- Change: She sneaks in through the back and it triggers an alert.

What Scenes Are Not

Scenes are not:

- Explanations
- Travel summaries
- Worldbuilding dumps
- Characters thinking in circles

Quiet Scenes Still Need Structure

Even calm scenes need:

- A want
- Resistance
- A shift

A Quick Scene Check

Before moving on, ask:

- What did the character want here?
- What stood in their way?
- What changed by the end?

How Scenes Build a Story

Scenes stack like this:

- Scene change → chapter movement
- Chapter movement → story momentum

13



CHARACTER MOTIVATION

What Character Motivation Is

Character motivation is the reason a character takes action. If we understand why a character acts, the story makes sense, even when we don't agree.

The Core Idea

Characters act to:

- Get something
- Avoid something
- Protect something

Two Levels of Motivation

1) External Motivation (What They Want)

A visible goal that drives the plot. Examples:

- Escape a collapsing city
- Save someone
- Get access to restricted information

2) Internal Motivation (Why It Matters)

The emotional reason underneath. Examples:

- Fear of being powerless
- Guilt over a past failure
- Need for control or belonging

A Simple Example

- External want: She wants to leave the station.
- Internal why: She refuses to die trapped like her parents did.

13



CHARACTER MOTIVATION

Motivation Creates Choice

When motivation is clear:

- Decisions feel earned
- Conflict feels natural
- Characters stop acting randomly

How Motivation Shapes Sci-Fi

In sci-fi, motivation often comes from:

- Survival under systems
- Scarcity of resources
- Control vs. freedom
- Fear of losing humanity

A Quick Motivation Check

For any major decision, ask:

- What does the character want here?
- What are they afraid of losing?
- What happens if they don't act?

Motivation Can Change

Motivation doesn't have to stay the same. Stories often track:

- A shift in priorities
- A new fear
- A deeper truth

13



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14



STAKES & TENSION

What Stakes Are

Stakes are what the character stands to lose. If the character fails, something bad happens. No stakes = no reason to care.

What Tension Is

Tension is the pressure of waiting to see what happens. It comes from:

- Uncertainty
- Risk
- Limited options

The Core Rule

The more something matters, the tighter the story feels.

A Simple Example

- Low stakes: She needed access to the archive.
- Higher stakes: If she accessed the archive, the system would flag her ID.

Types of Stakes (You Only Need One at a Time)

- Personal: injury, death, guilt, loss
- Relational: betrayal, separation, trust
- Systemic: punishment, surveillance, exile
- Moral: becoming someone they hate

How to Increase Tension Without Bigger Action

- Take Away Options: Each choice should cost something.
- Add Time Pressure: Deadlines force decisions.
- Make the Cost Personal: If the character doesn't care, readers won't either.
- Delay the Outcome: Don't resolve things too quickly.

A Quick Stakes Check

In any scene, ask:

- What happens if this fails?
- Who pays the price?
- Is the cost clear on the page?

15



ENDINGS

What an Ending Does

An ending shows what changed. It doesn't explain everything. It shows the result of the choices the character made.

The Core Rule

The ending answers the question the story asked through consequences.

What a Strong Ending Includes

1) A Final Choice

The character must choose:

- Action or inaction
- Sacrifice or safety
- Change or staying the same

2) A Consequence

Show what that choice costs. Even happy endings lose something:

- Safety
- Innocence
- Belief
- Certainty

3) A Clear Shift

By the last page:

- The world is different
- The character is different
- Or both

15



ENDINGS

A Simple Sci-Fi Example

- Choice: She releases the truth.
- Consequence: The city collapses into unrest.
- Shift: She's free, but her city is no longer the same.

Types of Endings

- Closed: the main problem is resolved
- Open: the future is uncertain, but changed
- Bittersweet: success with loss
- Tragic: the system wins

Common Ending Problems

- Everything is explained
- The conflict disappears too easily
- The ending doesn't reflect the theme
- Nothing feels different

A Simple Ending Test

Ask:

- What did the character believe at the start?
- What do they believe now?
- What did it cost them to get here?

16



WHAT TO FIX LATER

So You Can Keep Drafting

The Big Problem

Most first drafts don't fail because of bad writing, rather they fail because writers try to fix everything too soon. Drafting and editing are different jobs.

The Core Rule

If fixing it won't help you reach the end, fix it later.

What to Ignore in a First Draft

These do not need to be perfect right now:

- Clunky sentences
- Repetitive wording
- Weak dialogue
- Chapter length
- Small continuity errors

What to Flag and Move On

Some problems are real, just not urgent. Flag them and keep writing:

- "This motivation feels thin"
- "Research needed"
- "Fix pacing here"
- "This scene may need to be cut"

What Not to Fix Yet

Avoid these during drafting:

- Line edits
- Word-choice perfection
- Rewriting early chapters
- Polishing scenes you haven't finished

16



WHAT TO FIX LATER

A Simple System That Works

When you hit a problem:

1. Write a quick note in brackets: (Example: [clarify why she agrees])
2. Keep drafting
3. Trust future-you to fix it later

When to Start Fixing Things

Start revising when:

- The draft is complete
- You know how it ends
- You can see the whole story
- Review Fast Orbit's editorial guide

Bottom Line: A messy finished draft beats a perfect unfinished one. Every time.

17



INTRODUCING NEW SCI-FI CONCEPTS

Sci-fi introduces new:

- Technology
- Systems
- Rules
- Terms

The Core Rule

Introduce one new idea at a time. If everything is new, nothing sticks.

1. One New Concept Per Moment

- Give the reader space to absorb. Too much at once: The neural grid, carbon credits, orbital visas, and memory locks activated simultaneously.
- Clearer: The neural grid came online. Her vision flickered.

2. Context Before Explanation

- Show how the concept affects someone before you explain it.
- Explanation-first: Memory locks prevented citizens from accessing restricted thoughts.
- Context-first: She reached for the memory and hit a wall.
- Now the explanation makes sense to the action.

3. Repeat Through Use

- Readers learn by seeing concepts used, not explained once. Instead of one big explanation:
- Show it across multiple scenes
- Let characters interact with it
- Let it cause problems
- Repetition builds understanding.

17



INTRODUCING NEW SCI-FI CONCEPTS

A Simple Sci-Fi Example

- First appearance: Her badge flashed red.
- Second appearance: The badge flashed red again. People stepped back.
- Third appearance: She hid the badge in her sleeve.

Common Mistakes

- Naming everything at once
- Explaining before the reader cares
- Assuming one explanation is enough

A Quick Clarity Check

When introducing something new, ask:

- Is this the only or one of few new idea(s) in this moment?
- Does the reader see its effect first?
- Will they see it again later?

Bottom Line: One idea at a time. Show first. Repeat through use. That's how sci-fi stays readable.

Now Go Write!



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