

The Rule Book for Writing a Story

These rules were originally tweeted by **Emma Coats**, Pixar's Story Artist.

- Rule 1 You admire a character for trying more than for their successes.
- Rule 2 You gotta keep in mind what's interesting to you as an audience, not what's fun to do as a writer. They can be very different.
- Rule 3 Trying for theme is important, but you won't see what the story is actually about til you're at the end of it. Now rewrite.
- Rule 4 Once upon a time there was _____. Every day, _____. One day _____. Because of that, _____. Because of that, _____. Until finally _____.
- Rule 5 Simplify. Focus. Combine characters. Hop over detours. You'll feel like you're losing valuable stuff but it sets you free.
- Rule 6 What is your character good at, comfortable with? Throw the polar opposite at them. Challenge them. How do they deal?
- Rule 7 Come up with your ending before you figure out your middle. Seriously. Endings are hard, get yours working up front.
- Rule 8 Finish your story, let go even if it's not perfect. In an ideal world you have both, but move on. Do better next time.
- Rule 9 When you're stuck, make a list of what WOULDN'T happen next. Lots of times the material to get you unstuck will show up.
- Rule 10 Pull apart the stories you like. What you like in them is a part of you; you've got to recognize it before you can use it.
- Rule 11 Putting it on paper lets you start fixing it. If it stays in your head, a perfect idea, you'll never share it with anyone.
- Rule 12 Discount the 1st thing that comes to mind. And the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th – get the obvious out of the way. Surprise yourself.
- Rule 13 Give your characters opinions. Passive/malleable might seem likable to you as you write, but it's poison to the audience.
- Rule 14 Why must you tell THIS story? What's the belief burning within you that your story feeds off of? That's the heart of it.
- Rule 15 If you were your character, in this situation, how would you feel? Honesty lends credibility to unbelievable situations.
- Rule 16 What are the stakes? Give us reason to root for the character. What happens if they don't succeed? Stack the odds against.
- Rule 17 No work is ever wasted. If it's not working, let go and move on – it'll come back around to be useful later.
- Rule 18 You have to know yourself: the difference between doing your best & fussing. Story is testing, not refining.
- Rule 19 Coincidences to get characters into trouble are great; coincidences to get them out of it are cheating.
- Rule 20 Exercise: take the building blocks of a movie you dislike. How d'you rearrange them into what you DO like?
- Rule 21 You gotta identify with your situation/characters, can't just write 'cool'. What would make YOU act that way?
- Rule 22 What's the essence of your story? Most economical telling of it? If you know that, you can build out from there.