

In “The Eject Button” checklist, we talked about the most common mistakes. Now let’s take a closer look at the attributes that can make you a Slush Survivor. Each of these qualities can give your story that special something to help you shine brighter and attract your editor’s attention:

1. Voice

Perhaps the most difficult yet critical element of writing is narrative voice. As my fellow editor Nikki Baird puts it, “Voice is the personality that is conveyed through the narrative.” This can refer to how your characters express their personality, and it can also mean the narrative voice itself. It’s about word choice, sentence structure, and why your narrative “camera” chooses to focus on what it does.

The nub of the matter is that a story with personality creates an impression—the same story told in a bland voice doesn’t. Work on your voice, and you’ll go far.

2. Clarity, Revisited

We talked about clarity in the “Eject Button” checklist. Now let’s go a little deeper. What if you *want* to puzzle your reader? In mysteries, for instance, it’s pretty much essential. Or if you have an unreliable narrator, or a surreal setting, or an enigmatic character. There are lots of reasons to confuse on purpose.

“On purpose” is the key. Your best strategy is to be as impenetrable as your story requires—and then be extra-clear about *everything else*. Trust your editor to know the difference between mystery that serves the story and that which is unnecessary.

3. Originality

Not every story breaks new ground. Some terrific stories can be retellings of timeless classics. But a story *feels* cliché if it doesn’t have a unique way of presenting its ideas, new or old. If you’re going over well-trod ground, do more than just repeat what has been done before.

It doesn’t mean you can’t write a story about zombies, vampires, first contact, scary aliens, and so on. To make a familiar element feel fresh, the best place to start is to focus on what *you* enjoy about it. Whether you have a new take on an old favorite or a premise that we’ve never seen, you can make your story feel lively and original if we can share in your excitement about this kind of tale.

4. Strong Characters

When we care about characters, we care about a story. The best way to make us care about a character is to reveal their emotions and perspective. Reinforce their perspective as often as you can. If your character is looking out at the ocean, don’t just describe the waves—help us understand how they make her feel, what they make her remember, and why she’s more interested in the waves than any other feature of the world around her.

When we empathize with a character—whether we actually like them or not—they feel alive to us. And that’s when we care what happens to them.



5. Setting

The short story is an art form that thrives on elegant writing. Long, chunky blocks of description that might be welcome in a novel are often tiresome in a short story. If you're worldbuilding, describing setting, or giving backstory, don't get bogged down—give the reader what they absolutely need, and trust their imagination to do the rest.

In the interest of economy, seek out setting details that tell you a lot. For example, you show a character winding his pocket watch. That instantly tells us a great deal about your setting—and suggests some things about your character, too. Editors and readers are searching for that kind of detail to help them get into the story. Look for choice details to drop early on, and let the setting reveal itself naturally from there.

6. Heart

When the editors of *Electric Spec* get together and talk about why we want to publish certain stories in an issue, there's a phrase we use a lot: "This story has heart." It doesn't mean the story has a positive tone or a happy ending. It means we got a sense that behind the story, there's a writer willing to let themselves be unusually honest, vulnerable, and invested in what they wrote.

I can't tell you how to do that. It's not technique—it's what technique exists to serve. Just know that we can sense it when an author is showing us more than skill or ambition or professional experience. My best advice is that each story you write, try to push yourself into territory you haven't dared to explore before, even just a little. The bravery and heart it takes to do that will shine through in your writing.

7. The Difficult Trick

This is my favorite Slush Survivor feat—when an author does something I normally dislike, yet does it *so well* that I cannot help but applaud. This can be as simple as writing in a genre I don't prefer (and we all have our preferences, no matter how objective we try to be) or as unusual as finding a clever way to make a done-to-death cliché sparkle with new life.

Which is to say... listen to advice, whether it's from me, or the many brilliant RMFW teachers you'll work with at this conference, or anyone else. But don't let it stop you. If you've got the confidence, the skill, the flair, or the inspiration, you *can* be the exception. And I, for one, will be thrilled to have been proven wrong.

