How to fix a story that isn't working: 7 steps

by Chazda Albright -

http://greatstorybook.com/how-to-fix-a-story-7-steps/

This is about how to fix a story in 7 steps and ultimately, how to learn from your writing mistakes.

We all experience it sometimes:
1. getting a grand idea for a story,
2. plotting it out,
3. writing the first draft and then SPLAT – we realize it’s just no good.

Maybe your editor pointed out a fatal flaw, maybe it was a teacher or a good friend who would never lead you astray. There has never once been a writer who only spins gold. So what do you do about this? How do you fix a broken story so that it works – and is that even possible?

Just to get down to the quick: yes, you can fix a story. But how? That’s what I want to discuss here. As you might imagine, it’s a lot easier to list the steps than to do them.

1. First realize it’s broken.

You already know this, but it’s nevertheless the step we resist most. You loved the words as you wrote them down. It’s hard to acknowledge when the finished draft isn’t so great. The key here is in listening when someone says it doesn’t work.

If the reason is structural, you need to fill that up with purposeful action. If it’s weak character, you need to establish a stronger character profile. These are the Big Two reasons. After that, it’s generally about more specific things like weak dialogue, or boring details of the landscape or a character’s hair color.

If the reason is Market Trends – the idea that the story idea won’t do well on the market, you might want to take this with a grain of salt. In some cases, this is sound advice, but in others, it’s kind of stupid.

Example: a writer friend of mine had a fun story idea involving a djinni. Her editor said there was no market for djinni stories. I think in this particular example it might be that the editor doesn’t like djinni stories. Ultimately, what you want to write about is up to you. If an editor doesn’t want it because they don’t find it economically feasible, you can always self-publish your book instead.

2. Assess what is working and what isn’t.

It’s really important to distinguish what works within the story and what doesn’t. Make two separate lists:
• What’s Working and
• What Doesn’t Work,

to help you keep the details straight. One list will become more important: the list with flaws.

3. Look at the list of What Doesn’t Work and determine WHY.

Why doesn’t it work? Is it because of structural inconsistencies or is it because of something more essential – like demographic?

The Why something doesn’t work will inform the How you fix it.

Example: Sometimes an aspect of a story doesn’t work because it doesn’t jive with the intended readership’s age. If that’s the case, you have a basic decision: to rewrite for the intended age or rewrite for the other, more appropriate age. It’s up to you.

4. Look at the list of What’s Working & choose a path.

Why do these things work? After you’ve batted yourself over the head figuring out why things weren’t working, you need to check-out what is working.

Find out why. This will help you determine if your story:

1. can be rewritten or
2. if it needs to be disassembled – with different parts getting reused and recycled into different writing projects.

Those are your two options.

5. Sleep on it.

Don’t make a rash decision about how you want to handle it. Give yourself a day or two to mull it over. You might want to start rewriting it immediately. If so – go ahead.

If the storm catches you, just go with it. But if you feel frustrated or stuck, this is a good time to step back a bit and let the reasons why sink in.

6. Don’t sleep too long.

Don’t let the question of what to do about the story rest for too long. It becomes harder to get back into it if you spend that time not writing anything at all. Remember, there are only two options: rewrite or recycle.

If you let it sit too long, this can start to look a lot like procrastinating.
That said, there’s absolutely nothing wrong with switching focus to a completely different story for a while. It might be just what your brain needs, in fact – creative distraction so that when the new story is drafted, you can go back to the fixer-upper.

**7. Don’t just trash everything.**

This is for some people the most difficult thing to do, to actually keep the material you’ve written, even when it isn’t great. There’s always something you can learn.

Learn from your writing mistakes and keep what’s working – if there’s nothing to be done about the story, at least reuse what is working.

Example: several years ago, I wrote a short mystery story. It was awful. But one of the things I especially liked about it was a character who wrote children’s books under a pseudonym, Brin Fizbie. That’s the reason I write using that name. Everything else was pretty much trash, but I do suspect that one day I’ll write a story that uses certain other details of the story. There was some good stuff in there.

**Keep creating, no matter what.**