

A wizard walks into a bar... Exercises in Magical Realism

These writing exercises are designed to help you develop the way you present magic in your real world stories. Each exercise focusses on a separate element of magic and how it might impact your characters – both magical and non-magical. Completing them will give you a solid understanding of how your magic works and that's key to making magic real for your readers.

There's no set time limit for completing each exercise. I'd recommend 5 – 10 minutes for each one but play with them for as long as you like. For each exercise I've given you some ideas to start with or an illustration of how I've dealt with that area of magic in my own writing (hopefully without any major spoilers for those of you who haven't yet read the books and want to) but you can have fun with your own characters and settings.

Exercise #1: A wizard walks into a bar...

The object of this exercise is to get to grips with who knows about magic and how your characters react to it. Do they understand it or have they stumbled across it by accident? How do they react to the idea? Everyone is different but here's how my hero Aidan learns about the existence of wizards from his ex-guardian, Gwyn, in *The Demon's Call*:

'Marcus Eldritch isn't a writer, or at least it's not all he is. He's a warlock.'
Gwyn must have seen the blank look on his face because she added, 'A warlock. A sorcerer. A wizard, if you prefer. The name doesn't matter; they're really one and the same.'

'A wizard?' Aidan tried to keep his tone neutral. Gwyn really must have banged her head. 'As in Harry Potter?'

Despite his good intentions the words dripped scepticism.

'No, not as in Harry bloody Potter.'

The look she gave him would have melted the lead from the chapel roof at fifty yards and gone on to scorch the tiles underneath. Aidan winced and did his best to look apologetic. It was a long time since he had seen Gwyn quite so livid and he had forgotten how formidable she could be.

'We're not talking wands and games on broomsticks; we're talking real power, real magic.'

Put your character in a situation where they're explaining the existence of magic to someone. Perhaps it's late at night, they're in a bar and they simply have to tell someone about the crazy thing that's just happened to them. Or maybe they're used to magic and they need to convince someone about its existence. You decide who they're telling and why and then let them explain.

Once you're happy with what you've come up with write the scene again from the other person's perspective. What do they feel about the conversation?

Exercise #2: Me and my magic sofa

Another thing you need to understand in order to portray magic realistically, is where your magic comes from. It might be an innate power that your characters possess or it can come from an external object or source that they come into contact with, just as Aladdin did when he found the magic lamp. For the purpose of this exercise we're going to play with external sources of magic.

Look around you and identify 3 objects. Now, choose one of them and imagine what it would be like if that object endowed its owner with magical powers. What would those powers be and how does the owner find out about them? For example, I might have a magical sofa. But how does it work? Does the person who sits on it have visions? Can it fly? Or time travel? Spend a few minutes jotting down your ideas. Then try the exercise with another of your 3 objects.

Exercise #3: You can't do that!

It's important that you set boundaries for what your magic can and can't do. This allows you to build and maintain dramatic tension. After all, there's nothing more boring than a hero who can solve every problem they come across with a wave of their magic wand. Also, you need to remember the rules you create so that you don't inadvertently break them. Don't think that your readers won't spot this. A broken rule will destroy their belief in your magic – and the credibility of your story – faster than daylight turns a rock troll to stone.

Here's how Gwyn explains one of the limits of psychic energy (aka magic) to Aidan – with the help of a piece of flapjack.

'Psychic energy's much the same as ordinary physical energy.' Gwyn's words were slightly muffled by a mouthful of apricot flapjack. *'Mmm, that's good.'*

She finished chewing and took a long drink of tea. Aidan looked at his own cup reproachfully. He would have preferred another coffee, but Gwyn had been insistent that she wasn't teaching energy moves to someone who was hyper on caffeine so tea it had to be. At least he had held out for ordinary tea and not the perfumed dishwater she drank. He shuddered mentally. If he had to drink it, it had to be good strong builders' tea with milk and sugar. Not as good as coffee, but not too poor a substitute.

'If you throw it at someone, you lose it, so you have to refuel. Admittedly, the small amount I chucked at you won't do me any harm, but it's as good an excuse as any for a piece of flapjack. Are you sure you don't want a bite? It's very good.'

Aidan shook his head, slightly surprised by the speed with which the pastry was disappearing. To look at her you would think she subsisted on lettuce and fresh air, but if Gwyn had a bird-like appetite the bird in question would have to be a vulture.

'I don't think I'd dare deprive you.'

Consider one of the magical objects you came up with in Exercise 2. You know what magical power it has. Now think of 5 things that limit its magical abilities or stop it working entirely. Once again, they can be anything you want. For example, my sofa may fly but it can only carry a maximum of 3 people.

Once you have decided on your 5 restrictions imagine one of your characters has been using the magic and has come to rely on it. How might it impact them when one of your restrictions comes into play and they find the magic no longer works. If my sofa can only carry 3 people I wouldn't be able to transport all my family to safety at once. My friend's magic sofa could carry more people but only if one of them is a virgin (it's made out of unicorn hide). It stopped working for her quite a few years ago so now she has to take a carefully chosen passenger whenever she wants to go somewhere.