

Dear _____,

Thank you for the opportunity to read _____. People love stories where the magical mix with the real, because it lets them imagine if they enter the right door, meet the right person, or turn around a street corner on a moonless night, they might happen upon something wonderful. The world your novel takes place in makes these marvels possible. The truly great concept behind your work is that Sanderson isn't locked away in some wizarding school, detached from the common people that readers will relate to, but is instead shoulder to backpack with them in high school. This choice makes your world more accessible. Having each wizard born with special gifts is also interesting. You mix comic book style powers with the general concept of magic, which, as many of us at Ooligan Press are avowed geeks, we love.

There are some aspects of the novel we feel could use some more development. You offer up so many tidbits about this amazing world, but we want more! We have broken our feedback into sections for your convenience.

Plot and Structure

Points of View

Alternating between Sanderson and Avery's points of view works well for this novel, as you allow Sanderson to explore the magical while Avery is our non-magical eyes, looking in on a world we cannot be a part of but are hopelessly infatuated with. Sanderson generates the fantastical content that we find fascinating, while we empathize with Avery. We are Avery, both afraid of the monsters under the bed, while simultaneously lingering in haunted places hoping to spot the bogeyman.

Beginning with Avery's viewpoint, however, seems an odd choice. This story is really Sanderson's; after all, he is the titular conjurer! He is also our, as well as Avery's, entryway into the magical side of the world. It is fitting, then, that he should also be our entry into the book. It also sets up an unfulfilled expectation in the reader to begin the chapter with a knowledgeable discussion of the role of wizards, to only later find out the character whose head we are in has no interaction with wizards at that point in the narrative.

Related to this, Avery's first chapter should be about her. I'll discuss this more in the section about setting, but the first chapter of a character's point of view (POV) should introduce us to the character. Currently, Avery's chapter is about wizards, not about her.

If you began with Sanderson, you could detail a lot of your setting in a more believable way. Maybe instead of Sanderson's first chapter being about making fake licences, you could have it be about Sanderson first showing up at Mr. Periwinkle's shop. That way you could describe Mr.

Periwinkle. You could describe some wizard history, because you'd be describing Sanderson. You could introduce how magic works by having Mr. Periwinkle tell Sanderson what his lessons will be like, or what he'll learn. Maybe Mr. Periwinkle needs to test Sanderson to find out what he has already learned. You'd have the opportunity to delve into how Sanderson feels about being in another new town, another new school. We'd have so much to hook our attention right away, and by exploring Sanderson's background we'd immediately sympathize with him.

Alternatively, you could begin with Avery at school when she first sees or hears about Sanderson. Instead of narrating what she knows about him, you could reveal it in dialogue with Avery's classmates. This would be a much more active way to deliver exposition. Is she suspicious right away? Does she think he's weird? Does she try and talk to him? Does she think he's cute? This would also give you the opportunity to reveal what Avery is like when Sanderson is not in her life, and maintain the mystery of who this new student is until the next chapter, when Sanderson is at the magic shop, studying with Periwinkle.

Another example of when the POV is a little awkward, is when we see Sanderson in the pit from Avery's POV, not his own. By not showing from Sanderson's perspective getting trapped in the pit, you miss out on an opportunity for excitement and tension. We think Avery has to be the one to find Sanderson in the pit, because she runs to get help. But maybe we could end Sanderson's chapter with him getting trapped and then overlap time a little so Avery finds him, in order to rescue him?

Revealing Information

The major conflict of ——— is Zea's quest for revenge against the wizard council. Interweaved with this are some of our favorite aspects of the novel: the unique wizard powers, the Dragon Wars, Zea himself, the Wizard's Regulation Council. Unfortunately, they all pop in near the end. This cheats the reader of a lot of excitement. We don't fear Zea, because we don't have any time to know him. We don't get the exciting tension of wondering if the Council is really good or bad, because we don't have hints about the unique powers earlier. Imagine Sanderson overhearing that wizards in the area have gone missing before. We immediately become worried about his well-being. Imagine Sanderson finding a book on Zea and Mr. Periwinkle forbidding him to read it. Our interest is immediately piqued. The Dragon Wars must have had serious consequences. Perhaps people's distrust of wizards stems from those wars? Maybe references linger in everyday speech about how horrible that time was? You mention on page 143 that they teach about the Dragon Wars in history class; maybe have a scene at the beginning of the story with Sanderson and Avery in history class learning about the Dragon Wars. We get to learn about the background early, and if Sanderson isn't outed as a wizard yet, it provides a wonderful opportunity to show his discomfort with the topic as he tries to conceal it.

What we crave as readers is a wild ride. Think of a rollercoaster. There's not just one ramp to go down, but dips and twists and turns. Parcel out the information throughout the novel, in both small and large chunks. People also love to feel smart, and because of this they love the opportunity to figure things out. Give the reader enough information early on to start those mind wheels turning. If the reader is trying to figure out the nature of a mystery, and you give little bread-crumb clues to lead on but never reveal, the reader will keep turning page after page.

Disseminating information throughout the novel will also give the characters a clear goal. We will also discuss this more in the section about characterization, but the characters currently feel a little directionless, as if their only concern is to lead a quiet life. This is fine as a motivation, but as a fantastical story we need to know, or at least guess at, what great end event the hero(s) are heading toward.

One plot twist we didn't understand was the reappearance of Tad's dad. Is it in the book only to officially out Tad as a wizard? It might be more effective to remove Tad's dad entirely and have Sanderson get captured. This might prompt Periwinkle to force Tad to assist in finding Sanderson. This would still out Tad and preserve the conflict with his wife that distresses Avery. While Sanderson is being held by Zea, this would give some time to explore Zea's character more. Alternatively, you could have Tad's dad return much earlier in the book, maybe right near the beginning. He could then be a device to hint at the other captured wizards, Zea's existence, and the Council's restriction spell every wizard suffers. You could have him found wandering in the woods, so you don't directly reveal Zea's traps at that point, and still have him die before anything critical is found out.

Conclusion

What is the resolution of ———? At the end of the novel, we don't have a good grasp on what Zea is really after. Sanderson doesn't defeat Zea; Zea escapes for his own reasons. While Sanderson is afraid through most of the novel that he'll be expelled from school or get in trouble with the Council, he doesn't seem to be actually threatened with either of these events at any point. They defeat Eric, but he is not the main villain; it is only a subplot that is resolved. What is the payoff you want to leave the reader with at the end of the story? Currently, ——— reads more like a setup for the next book than a novel in its own right. Whether or not you plan to have a series, each book needs to be its own journey, or the reader will wonder why he or she is reading it at all. Having Sanderson rescued by Periwinkle, Tad, and Avery would be one way to solve this. Having Sanderson actually threatened with expulsion or consequences from the Council, and then being redeemed by his actions against Zea, would be another way to solve this.

Timeline

The period of time the story covers is a little vague. Are we talking about a few days? A week? For example, on page twelve, you write that Avery “ended up not talking to her dad that night, or the following day.” Then she goes to school. This is unclear as to whether she went to school the next day, or spent an entire day not talking to her dad and then went to school. Just a few touchstones about what day it is, or how many days it’s been since Periwinkle went missing, would help the reader feel grounded.

Setting

Wizards in the World

As we mentioned before, one of the most distinguishing and compelling aspects of your novel is the setting of your novel. There are a plethora of stories about kids running off to other worlds or going to special magic schools, but not so many that look at the consequences of being a wizard in the normal world. The Dresden books do, but they are focused on an adult world. We think there’s definitely a niche your novel could fill in the young adult market.

That being said, we want more details about the wizarding world. The overall setup works; having wizards disliked, but necessary, adds interesting conflict. Some particulars are vague, though, and this confuses the reader. Arguably the most confusing element of your world is why wizards are disliked and why, if they are so disliked, they are tolerated at all. As we mentioned earlier, the Dragon Wars could be a believable source for why wizards are so disliked, but this isn’t specified in the novel. Or is it just that people don’t like those who are different? Either would be fine, just let the reader know.

Once that is established, you can answer the question of why they are needed at all. On page two, you list services the wizard provides, and all of them seem minor, hucksterish offerings. Why go to a wizard to unblock your pipes when you can just call a plumber? On page four, you mention people avoid the shop at all costs and that most emergencies don’t require magic. On page 38, you say that every magic shop Sanderson had ever been in had needed something magical done every day. Which one is true? Magic isn’t needed usually, or it is? On page 40, people come in for dry skin and leaky garden sprinklers. Why not use moisturizer? Again, why not use a plumber? You mention a cancer treatment here. It’s believable that someone desperate for a cure for cancer would go to an otherwise abhorrent source, but, on the other hand, if wizards can help with otherwise terminal illnesses, how are they not considered heroes?

The number of wizards in the world seems vague, as well. In the first paragraph, you specify there aren’t many practicing wizards in the world. Yet, Sanderson bounces between more than a handful of mentors before winding up with Mr. Periwinkle. Ferncroft seems like a small town, yet they have Sanderson, Mr. Periwinkle, Tad, and Eric. This seems like a lot of wizards in one small town if there aren’t a lot in the world. On page 169, Tad is shocked the town has been

without a wizard, saying, “there’s infrastructure in place to ensure that there’s always a wizard nearby.” Again, this seems incongruous with the statement that there’s not a lot of practicing wizards.

The Wizard’s Regulation Council

It makes sense that there would need to be a governing body for wizards. We like how they are subject to the non-magical government—too many series have the non-magical governments completely duped by wizards or supernatural forces. We never thought it believable that non-magical humans would be completely unaware of magical forces, or that the government would not find some way to control the magical side of their population.

The exact relationship of the Council to the mundane government is, however, unclear. How powerful of an institution is the Council? What exactly are their responsibilities? Who do they report to in the mundane government? The mayor? The military? Are they a national organization? International? How does someone get appointed to the Council? You don’t have to explain everything about how the council works, but we should have enough information that we aren’t guessing how they fit in the world. If we’re busy thinking about the function and role of the Council, then we aren’t paying attention to the actual story.

On that note, what is their purpose in the story? As we noted before, while Sanderson is afraid of them, they don’t ever actually threaten him. They seem completely ineffective in working against Zea. What do they provide to the story that another character couldn’t? One solution would be to cut the Council out of the story. Maybe they are too far away to feel that magic was used in the earthquake, and Mr. Periwinkle doesn’t get the chance to contact them right away. Mr. Periwinkle, Tad, Eric, Sanderson, and Avery could then be the ones to take down Zea. And Mr. Periwinkle could administer the test to Eric without the Council. Alternatively, you could give them more of an active role. Make them suspicious of Sanderson acting on Mr. Periwinkle’s behalf. Give specific consequences to Sanderson getting in trouble with the council. How bad could the consequences get? Sanderson’s moved a lot already—are there wizard apprentices who make too much trouble? What happens to a wizard if they never obey the rules? Is there wizard juvie? Wizard jail? Death?

Related to this, why wasn’t Erasmus Zea dealt with by the Council? If the Council’s entire mandate is to control the power of wizards and keep them in line, why do they just let an ex-Councilmember, known to be dissatisfied with the current system, run free?

Presentation of the Council

We weren’t really a fan of the name the Wizard’s Regulation Council. We would suggest either going with something more flavorful and fanciful, like the Grey Council (not that in particular,

already used), or exaggerating their connection to the government. Think of the types of names used in governmental regulatory boards. Maybe something that gets an acronym? National Wizard's Regulation Committee? NWRC?

Also, if you want the Council to be a source of intimidation for Sanderson, we would recommend changing their headgear. Spangled top hats do not convey authority. As mentioned below, you often have a lighthearted tone in the manuscript. We think this may be one of the times the lightheartedness is out of place.

How Does Magic Work?

When Sanderson realizes he is a conjurer, a wizard naturally gifted with summoning and creating objects, We wanted to say, "Oh my gosh! He's one of the legendary, powerful conjurers!" But we didn't, because we don't really know how magic functions in your world. There's natural magic: are there other kinds? What sort of spells do wizards with the government's charm use? Is it about energy work? Do they need material components? Do they need to say magic words? Does it vary according to type of spell? This could be fixed easily, if you have a scene where Periwinkle instructs Sanderson in magic. Have him go over the basic types of magic with Sanderson, so we can learn along with him. Also, give us clues that magic wasn't always this way. Maybe Sanderson's fantasy books have mages who are conjurers and charmers and telepaths, based upon how magic used to be. If the Dragon Wars are taught in history, there still be some echo in contemporary culture of how magic used to function. Myths, legends; the magic table would also be a great mechanic for this. Sanderson could discover a book discussing the natural gifts wizards are born with, and he could read about conjurers. Maybe charmers, too, and that's how he realizes Eric must be a wizard.

The other questions we have about magic regard Tad's pendant, the anti-wizard protections, Zea's plot, and the Council's restriction spell. Why are spells that mask wizard's abilities and spells to protect against wizards so common, but Zea's and the Council's spells so singular? While not identical spells, they all seem to be of the same type. Is it a matter of the skill involved in getting the details right?

Ferncroft

We understand that Ferncroft is a small town, and Wallingford seems to be a city, but we do not get a sense of where they fit in with the rest of the world. Is this an alternate version of our own reality? If so, where does Ferncroft fit in with the rest of the world? You don't necessarily need to specify that it is in New York, or whichever state, but is it on the east coast? West coast? Referencing other landmarks would also help us know the nature of the world you are creating. For example, instead of referencing the government every time, you could instead mention the president (if set in the US), or the White House, etc.

Alternatively, this could be set in a completely other world, in which case we need more details about the type of world this is. Is Wallingford the nation's capital in this world? How big is this country?

Some more concrete details about what Fercroft looks like would also be appreciated. Where is the veterinary clinic at? It's across the river from Main Street, but is it in a business district? A residential neighborhood? Are the businesses around it in quaint old buildings, or are they new, clean-cut, gentrified constructions? On page 11, you give us a description of Avery's house being a turreted clapboard on the edge of town, but we don't get a sense of what the neighborhood is like. On page 3, you describe Howl street: "Doorsteps protruded into the narrow lane, making it barely wide enough for a single car to drive down. There weren't even sidewalks. Brightly painted stone buildings appeared to grow out of the cobbles. Quaint iron signs depicting various professions swung from chains over doors." This seems to indicate this street is unusual, but why? Is it an older part of town? If wizards are so hated, why are there any business nearby the magic shop? These are just some examples of places that could use more physical detail.

Characterization

Writing Teenagers

Sanderson's struggle as a wizard encapsulates the struggle of every kid who feels like an outsider. Avery fights against an archetypal bully. These themes are very relatable to any teenager. Still, even with great and magical happenings, it's important to have the kids still be kids.

Teenagers are full of hormones. We can all remember our puberty era growth spurts, and being able to clean out the kitchen of all food in a single night. Teenagers are trying to figure out who to listen to, whose advice is right, what path they should take. Dating is on everyone's mind. We still need to see the kids behaving like kids their age in order for their characters to be believable. For example, we are perfectly happy with Sanderson and Avery not being a romantic couple, but it seems strange that no one in the group has a crush or a love interest at all. Sanderson may be a bit too level headed. Especially with his background, which we go into more later, he seems like he should be more reactionary, more resentful, and occasionally make impulsive, bad decisions.

Life Outside the Plot

Your characters each bring an interesting perspective and angle to how they interact with the plot, but it's important to remember that they have lives outside of the current conflict with Eric and Zea. We don't really know what any of the characters are like normally, except for brief glimpses. Sanderson likes reading fantasy novels and hates math. Does he spend all his spare

time reading? Is he a book worm? If so, this should be clarified. Or does he have other interests? Does he like sports? What does Avery like to do in her spare time? On page 114, you mention Periwinkle has books on fixing cars and self-confidence. This is great. There should be more moments like this, for all the characters, interspersed throughout the book so they seem more human and complete.

Middle Reader vs YA

If you are aiming at a middle reader audience, then the age of the characters works. If you are aiming at a young adult audience, you might need to age the characters up a little, and put them in high school rather than eighth grade. Maybe Sophomores; you'd probably get more high schoolers to read the book if the characters are a little older.

Agency and Urgency

Avery is the only character that has any sort of agency; she succeeds in toppling Eric from his bully throne. Aside from that, the main characters have no real effect on the story. Everything happens *to* them, rather than resulting from their own actions. Having the first major point of conflict being environmental is fine, but after that, each point of conflict should arise from the characters trying to respond to the first crisis and either making it worse, or unveiling new layers of conflict. This is tied to the lack of resolution the story currently has. If the characters aren't accomplishing anything, how can the story have any sort of conclusion? There is also a marked lack of urgency. As mentioned before, Sanderson isn't under any explicit threat to be expelled or punished by the Wizard's Regulation Council. Despite Sanderson's worry that someone will realize Periwinkle is missing (still kinda fuzzy on why Sanderson would get in trouble for that), no one seems to be really asking questions about it, except for Marcel, and he doesn't seem like a genuine threat. This could be fixed by making Zea more of a threat early on, and having the heroes have successes against him. Here is an example of a structure that would work:

Conflict 1: Sanderson is almost trapped, but Periwinkle is trapped instead. Sanderson's governmental spells are half removed.

Conflict 2: Sanderson succeeds in freeing Periwinkle, whose magic is almost, but not completely, drained, due to Sanderson's intervention. This attracts the attention of Zea who

Conflict 3: Captures Sanderson. Avery, Tad, Periwinkle, and Eric must go rescue Sanderson.

Resolution: Sanderson uses his returning powers to conjure to keep Zea at bay until Tad is able to locate him through telepathy. Tad and Eric confuse Zea, Sanderson conjures objects, big fight. Maybe Periwinkle tries to talk to Zea. Do they know each other? Does Periwinkle know what Zea is after? Maybe Avery uses some of the anti-wizard magic her mom always buys to help fight against Zea. End result, Sanderson is rescued. Zea is revealed. They all escape, and Zea's

plan to capture wizards is thwarted, because everyone knows what's going on now, and Zea has to run away to pursue his villainous plans some other way. Periwinkle contacts the Council for help.

This is just an example, but you can see how the characters actions are propelling the story along, rather than the story is propelling the characters along.

Sanderson

Sanderson's backstory, being disowned by his parents and never having a stable home life, is certainly evocative. We feel like he should be more troubled by his past, however. He would probably have PTSD or troubles connecting with anyone emotionally, because he would believe they'd just leave him again. We would classify this as a missed opportunity. If you can successfully portray him as someone who is psychologically damaged from a broken home life, you can reach out to many kids who've gone through similar experiences and give them a hero to relate to. Maybe researching into what effects that sort of early life has on children will give you ideas on how to portray Sanderson?

Avery

Avery's entire point in the novel seems to be so Sanderson has a friend. She should have her own motivation. You're close in her determination to bring down Eric, but as she doesn't have any special enmity toward him and doesn't think about standing up to Eric until after she meets Sanderson, this loses power as her motivation. We also didn't see why she likes Sanderson as a friend. Even before her dad convinces her to give everyone a chance, she seems really fixated on Sanderson. Is she naturally inquisitive? A gossip? Does she need to know details about every new student? Even if she decides to give Sanderson a chance because it's the right thing to do, why does she stay his friend? Does she think he's funny? Kind? She should also struggle more with staying his friend when Lara threatens to ditch her. That's a hard decision to make, giving up your best friend for someone you barely know.

As Avery is half the narration of the novel, she should always be equally as important to the plot as Sanderson. This means that she has to have some sort of role in the climax. Perhaps she's wearing Tad's necklace again, and this helps protect her from negative magics?

Lara

There's not much to distinguish Lara from Avery. She's mostly a hanger on.

Tad

We really like Tad and his ability. Drowning out his mind-reading with loud music is a nice touch.

Mr. Periwinkle

We would like his character to be fleshed out more. Avery characterizes him as mean, but he seems gruffly protective of Sanderson at the end. Having more interactions with Sanderson and Periwinkle at the beginning of the book would be nice.

Marcel

Why is Marcel in the book? We feel like you are trying to give Sanderson a family reunion, but it doesn't seem fully developed. Do you need this subplot in this book? Maybe it would fit better in a later novel? That way you could spend more time developing Sanderson's struggle to trust in his new friends.

Eric

We liked Eric. He is the believable byproduct of someone born with a charm ability. We weren't sure why his charm ability works so well on adults, but not so well on kids his own age. We like that his family doesn't disown him, like Sanderson's does. Sanderson would probably resent this more than indicated in the story, however. Eric's a manipulative brat, and his family still loves him enough to keep him, even though he's a wizard? We would be pissed if we were in Sanderson's shoes. Also, Eric seems a little too willing to help out in the Zea battle at the end.

Niall

Does Niall exist solely so Sanderson can have ingredients and so Eric has someone to pick on? We feel like Niall could have a more active role in the story.

Avery's Mother

If Avery's mother is so terrified of magic, would she really buy any spells, even spells to keep wizards away? Would she trust any type of magic? Why is she so terrified?

Tone

In general, The novel has a very lighthearted tone. We feel like this is a little discordant with some of the serious issues you deal with, such as abandonment by family, intolerance, and government oppression. The tone sometimes gets in the way of the excitement and danger of certain scenes. You certainly don't have to make the story dark or depressing, but eliminating

some of the silly moments would help. For example, on page 16, during the earthquake a math book falls by Sanderson, “taunting him with their impossible evil.” This seems out of place. Again, on page 17, you write, “First, math—his least favorite subject—tried to kill him, then Mr. Periwinkle came to school.” This sort of levity seems forced. It doesn’t seem believable that Sanderson would actually think that in that moment. These are just a couple examples of mismatched tone that runs through the manuscript.

Thank you for taking the time to read our notes on your manuscript. We really enjoyed ———. We hope you find these suggestions useful and inspiring. We see a lot of potential for this book: in its possible popularity, in its ability to give hope to children who feel like outcasts or who are abandoned by their family, and in its ability to encourage children to stand up for themselves and to believe in their own potential. Best of luck in your writing!

Thanks again for this wonderful opportunity,

Brandon Sanford