

# Chuck Palahniuk: Consider This

Summary of Palaniuk's "Diagnostic Check" for fiction writing from his book "Consider This"

Problem	Consider
Your narrative voice is boring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read it out loud.</li> <li>• Do you vary sentence length and construction?</li> <li>• Do you balance dialogue with action and gestures?</li> <li>• Do you mix different "textures" of communication?</li> </ul>
You fail to build tension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you established a clock?</li> <li>• Do you limit and revisit elements like settings, characters and objects?</li> <li>• Do you avoid passive verbs like "is" and "has"?</li> <li>• Do you use "tennis-match dialogue" (rapid back-and-forth responses between characters, often found in situation comedies) that instantly settle tension?</li> <li>• Do you make everything a series of three (e.g. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)? Instead use two or four items.</li> <li>• Do you stay within a scene?</li> <li>• Do you fall into frequent flashbacks that jolt your reader out of the fictional moment?</li> <li>• Are you taking things too lightly?</li> <li>• Cut back on your cleverness.</li> </ul>
Your stories meander without coming to a climax	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did you plant a gun? (A plot device introduced early that foreshadows trouble later on.)</li> <li>• What unresolved expectation can you revisit?</li> <li>• What character can you kill in the second act in order to heighten the seriousness?</li> <li>• Can you send your characters on a brief road trip that will wreck their complacency?</li> </ul>
You lose interest in the work before it's complete	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does it explore a deep and unresolved issue of yours?</li> <li>• Are you depicting a horizontal series of plot events that doesn't deepen?</li> <li>• Are you reintroducing objects and morphing them into symbols?</li> </ul>
A scene runs on and on without contributing to the horizontal or the vertical of the story	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Before writing the scene, did you plan its purpose?</li> <li>• Does it establish or introduce something?</li> <li>• does it deepen the risk and tension?</li> <li>• Is it a lull to pace an upcoming reveal, or to suggest time passing?</li> <li>• Or does it reveal something and resolve tension?</li> <li>• Always, always have some inkling of your scene's purpose before you begin to work on it.</li> </ul>
No one reads your work -- agents, editors, or audiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does it really matter?</li> <li>• Is the writing fun?</li> <li>• Does it exhaust and resolve a personal issue?</li> <li>• Does it put you in the company of others who enjoy it? I</li> <li>• Are you growing and experimenting with every draft?</li> <li>• Does your work really need to be validated by others?</li> </ul>

Your fiction fails to engage the reader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you rely too much on big voice and abstract verbs?</li> <li>• Readers are entranced by an object in motion.</li> <li>• Are you clearly depicting an object or person in motion?</li> </ul>
Your beginnings don't hook readers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you begin with a thesis sentence that summarizes, or do you begin by raising a compelling question or possibility?</li> </ul>
You don't have time to write	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daydream in silence in the car instead of listening to music</li> <li>• Keep a pad and pen (or Notes app) with you all the time to jot down ideas to make the most of your writing time</li> </ul>
You don't want to freak out your family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By telling the truth you allow others the same opportunity.</li> <li>• So long as you're clearly writing fiction, you force other people to own the fact they might be the characters. If they take offense, deny you wrote about them.</li> </ul>
You can't find a workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start one.</li> <li>• Enroll in a course.</li> <li>• Find any social structure to hold you accountable to writing.</li> </ul>
Your workshop sucks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They all suck at some point</li> <li>• Ultimately, does the workshop keep you writing?</li> </ul>
Writers in your workshop suggest unhelpful revisions or fail to offer creative insight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A good writer knows what she can use and makes note of the helpful advice.</li> <li>• A professional knows not to push back, but just to smile and thank everyone for their contribution.</li> </ul>
Your audience isn't surprised by your work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are you yourself surprised?</li> <li>• Do you withhold your best idea for the end, or can you use that strong idea near the beginning and trust that the story will naturally build to a stronger climax than you ever could've initially imagined?</li> </ul>
Your work fails to break readers' hearts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are you being too clever?</li> <li>• Have you established emotional heart authority?</li> <li>• Does your work sound too much as if it's being told by a writer instead of an actual person?</li> </ul>
Your main character is a shallow stereotype	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you make her do something awful for a noble reason?</li> </ul>
Your work isn't as good as Amy Hempel's	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No one's is</li> </ul>