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 Why science fiction? Is it a tool or a toy? A destination or a warning sign? Maybe it’s all mere escapism, great entertainment, or some vague and easily dismissed genre covered with black and yellow “CAUTION! NERDY!” tape. Or maybe it’s both. In a genre so broad and imaginative, meaningful things can hide between the pages, too. It’s a genre of possibilities. Many see the genre of science fiction as having a positive influence on society. Exactly how it impacts us, however, is still up for debate. In Robert Sawyer’s article “The Purpose of Science Fiction,” for *Slate*, he suggests that science fiction, due to its flexibility, is able to show society the different possibilities of the future. With this, humanity can steer its course towards or away from hypothetical scenarios shown in sci-fi literature. On the other, not-so-opposite hand, Glenn Harlan Reynolds reminds us in his *Popular Mechanics* article, “Why We Need Big, Bold Science Fiction,” that sci-fi has long been the basis for advances in technology, and has served as a source of inspiration for the world's creators.

To begin, Reynolds boldly states: “**The future isn't what it used to be.” It’s an eye-catching intro, but he goes on to decry current works of sci-fi as escapist and gloomy. This alienates readers who might be fans of dystopias (and there are many, especially with the recent influx of young-adult dystopias in the past few years). This move should not hurt Reynolds, however, since this article is for the *Popular Mechanics* readership. Much of his article is devoted to emphasis on prioritizing space travel over the scientific progress made on, for, and about earth. To justify why sci-fi’s purpose is to inspire progress in space, Reynolds compares our current science fiction situation to that of the Golden Age of sci-fi by quoting Neal Stephenson, a well-known science fiction author with multiple Hugo Awards. The ethos is strong with this evidence, and Stephenson agrees that Golden-Age sci-fi had a more shoot-for-the-moon attitude than current material. Reynolds adds two more paragraphs about his interactions with Stephenson, who he called and spoke with personally. In doing so, Reynolds helps himself to another serving of credibility.**

**TOPIC SENTENCE THAT SHIFTS TO REYNOLDS. “**Alas, he agreed,” says Reynolds, after asking Vinge whether the state of science fiction was truly worrisome. The choice of adding “Alas” in this sentence gives readers a glimpse at Reynolds’ attitude. “Alas” says something like ‘I don’t like having to say that current science fiction is pessimistic, but I am going to call it out on its negativity anyway.’ It paints the author in a positive light, as if he is doing a job that no one else is willing to do.

Then Reynolds steps back for a moment to remind us that the fault of stagnation in technology is not due entirely to science fiction’s shortcomings, but also to “bureaucratic inertia.” In doing this, Reynolds takes some of the burden of responsibility off of sci-fi, which would strike most readers as understanding and logical of him.

Reynolds is generous in his use of quotes. It allows him to include a wide range of perspectives, not just his own. By using the quote, “Earth is too fragile a basket to hold all of our eggs,” from Robert A. Heinlein (another well respected sci-fi author), Reynolds pours some logos and pathos into his argument. Logically, the earth does have a limited ability to sustain humanity. Emotion-wise, the success of humanity is worth our attention. Space travel and colonization, therefore, should be shown in science fiction to encourage such development. To further support these claims, Reynolds also plays the ‘Stephen Hawking agrees with me!’ trump card, and moves on to make a more emotional impact at the end of his article. Using words and phrases like “inspiring,” and “dreaming,” to describe how science fiction can direct our future, Reynolds closes with hopeful, motivating sentiments.

Robert Sawyer begins his article with a nod to Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein—often considered the first work of science fiction—and then notifies his readers that Frankenstein, like many other works of science fiction, was a cautionary tale that was ahead of science itself. Sawyer then dives into some background and defines sci-fi in the words of Isaac Asimov, a prominent science fiction author: “’Science fiction is the branch of literature that deals with the responses of human beings to changes in science and technology.’” To back up this claim, Sawyer mentions three examples of popular works of science fiction and explains how they follow Asimov’s definition.
 To create credibility for the genre itself, Sawyer reminds us that “Science-fiction writers do get to talk about the real meaning of research. We're not beholden to skittish funding bodies and so are free to speculate about the full range of impacts that new technologies might have.” This indicates that sci-fi is honest and has the freedom to raise concerns when necessary, which enforces the idea that sci-fi is an effective warning mechanism for society. Sawyer speaks about science fiction with contagious confidence claiming that “Science fiction is the WikiLeaks of science, getting word to the public about what cutting-edge research really means.”
 Sawyer builds up the credibility of sci-fi authors and of himself with examples of authors who are involved or are educated in scientific fields. When he refers to literature produced by science-savvy authors, he calls it “Our recent works.” Sawyer includes himself in this circle. At first, this seems perplexing until one reaches the end of the article, where, in small italics, it reads: “Robert J. Sawyer has won the Hugo, Nebula, and Aurora Awards for best science fiction novel of the year.” While Sawyer does not explicitly seize his claim to science-fiction authority in his article, his ethos is implied by his writer’s bio. This works in his favor and he does not come across as boastful, but on the other hand Sawyer could have made his own credibility more obvious. Bringing his article to a close, Sawyer solidifies the purpose of science fiction by commending Orwell’s novel,1984, as a reason why society was able to avoid such a dystopian system. He concludes with a call to action: to read some sci-fi and to get involved.

Overall, both authors take meandering approaches to their articles, but Sawyer seems less driven to prove a point. While his article seems less persuasive evidence-wise (Reynolds’ quotes were stronger), it is actually more inspiring than Reynolds’. Reynolds focuses so intently on space travel that anyone whose passion does not hinge upon it will turn away before they understand that Reynolds just wants more inspiring sci-fi. This works against him. That said, the articles both end with effective calls to action, though Reynolds appeals to writers, while Sawyer appeals to the readers. Sawyer carries strong ethos in the sci-fi field because he is an author in the genre. On the other hand, what Reynolds lacks in science fiction authority (he is a law professor), he makes up for with quotes of those who agree with him and *do* possess such credibility. The overall tones of each article are hard to decipher. Sawyer seems matter-of-fact, as if he wants to explain to sci-fi readers why they should keep on (or start) reading. Reynolds oscillates between a sense of disappointment and a sense of hopefulness. Sawyer’s tone is more consistent, and while it is less emotional, Sawyer allows himself to be taken more seriously this way. On the whole, Reynolds’, while maybe a little but whiney, poses a strong argument. But Sawyer, whose topic is also more inclusive for different audiences, seems to more effectively convey a point in sharp focus.

Laura:

I really like that you didn’t pick an obvious global conflict with two obvious takes, but chose something more nuanced for your topic. It would have been easy to pick a hot button issue with pro/con points of view, but you didn’t, and I appreciate that a great deal. I also like the way you understood the nuanced differences of each piece. There are LOTS of sharp observations in here about the two articles you discuss.

That being said: the organization of those observations leaves a lot to be desired. It felt a bit too stream of consciousness, like you sat down and just wrote whatever came to mind about each article. To that end, the paragraphs had no real clear sense of cohesion and I got lost in the myriad points you brought up in each. It would have been much more effective if you had outlined your essay according to the points of commonality between the two pieces that you so wonderfully point out in your final paragraph. That is: a paragraph about how the authors establish credibility, then another about their audiences, and then finally, one about their tone. If you were to rewrite this, I would say that it would be best to reorganize that way.

Thanks!