

Next week we will announce a puzzle writing contest! Writing puzzles is fun and is also a great way to improve your solving skills. Thinking about how puzzles are written can help you figure out methods to attack other puzzles. As preparation for the contest, this week and next week's columns will discuss the puzzle-writing process.

When writing a puzzle, it's best to start with the answer. From there, you will eventually come up with a title, flavortext, and the bulk of the puzzle. Your puzzle's answer can provide inspiration to get you going. For example, if the answer is a movie title, maybe you want to write a puzzle about movies. Or perhaps a property of your answer (e.g., having double letters or being a palindrome) suggests a mechanism for the puzzle. If you stare at your answer but noth-

ing is coming to mind, another good place to start is to pick a variant on a common puzzle type, like a crossword or a sudoku.

Once you have the idea for the puzzle theme or style, the next step is to decide what the actual mechanism of the puzzle is, i.e. what steps solvers will have to take to solve the puzzle. There shouldn't be too many steps. Steps should be fairly logical and clued by the title or flavortext. If you want to add additional steps, a good strategy is to "do it again", that is, make the second step follow exactly the same mechanism as the first step but applied to the results of the first step. For example, let's say your puzzle involves a Caesar shift. A common way to "do it again" would be to have the final answer look like gibberish until it is Caesar shifted a second time.

An important point to keep in mind is that a puzzle can never be too easy. You think it's easy because you know the answer and how the puzzle works. A puzzle is a battle between you and the solver, but this is a battle you are supposed to lose.

When you've written your puzzle, it's important to check that you don't have any errors or extraneous information. Read the title and flavortext again, and see if it suggests anything misleading; you want to avoid sending solvers chasing after a red herring. After you've checked it over, hand it off to a friend (or, in this case, us) to test solve. Your test solver will be able to catch any mistakes you might have missed, and see if you've successfully made a puzzle that's both solvable and fun.

In next week's column, you'll get a peek into how various members of the Campus League of Puzzlers have gone about writing past puzzles. Stay tuned for these behind-the-scenes tips!