

CLARITY



One of your final revisions will be when you go through your novel with a fine-toothed comb and think about the nuances of the reader experience. You're going to ensure that the message is as clear as can be without any extra words or confusing passages.

You've built your house, now it's time to make sure there aren't so many pillows on the sofa that your guests can't even sit down.

What does that mean? For most writers, adding more is not the issue at hand. Most writers need to take away, reduce the wordiness, give their reader some room to breathe.

Chewing GUM lose its flavor?

So many people tell me that they want to be a writer, but they're no good at grammar. Don't worry about grammar, usage and mechanics (GUM) in the first round. Is good grammar important? Of course--the clarity of your message depends on it.

However, grammar can always be cleaned up later. If you feel like it's not your strong suit, you can always hire a professional copy editor.

Poorly written prose gets left behind, forgotten, abandoned--even if its message is decent.

SECRET SAUCE: Poorly written prose gets put down, even if its message is decent.

Language is the medium through which story is delivered, like paint for painters. It's foundational. A good novel is *good* because it uses its medium well; its sentences are well-crafted.

Know any world renowned finger painters? No?

Then don't think you can get away with sloppy writing in your final draft. As we've discussed (maybe one or two times in this book) writing is a process. It's important to know *when* to focus on *what*.

Use language to your advantage, and work with a quality coaching program to help fill in your knowledge gaps.

Moving your novel from B- to A +

If you're going to go for an A game in any area as a beginning writer, I would put all of my eggs in the basket of style. One of the phrases writers hear me use often when offering feedback is, "If you want to take this novel from B- to A+, you could..." What I mean by that is that heaps of novels are published whose prose is decent, passable, acceptable--and *forgettable*.

We've talked about a lot of the greats in this book: Homer, Dostoevsky, Conrad, Hemingway, Shakespeare.

News flash: They're all dead. But we're still talking about them, enjoying their work. Why?

Because they told the most original story ever? Nope.

Because they told a relatable story *well*.

Do you want your novel to be in the 50 cent bin at someone's yard sale, or a revered possession on the shelf?

We all have an important message, a story to tell, and if you stuck with me this far, it's because you believe in telling that story in the best way of which you are capable.

So let's take a look at a few style points you can consider to augment your book.

Less is More

Remember the section on economy?

Oftentimes, using fewer words makes a better book. This concept is counterintuitive to many beginning writers who revise by adding more, more, more. (I was no exception in the beginning.) When it comes to writing, there is more power in subtraction than addition.

Cut the Melodrama

Remember what I said about equal and opposite reaction?

Well, you are going to use literary devices, but always stay away from the melodrama.

What might this look like?

Well, don't try to be poetic when something simple will do.

Here's an example:

She looked at him and tears made their descent down her cheeks.

Why not just say "a tear ran?"

One hallmark of a beginning writer is that they often reach for a complicated word when a simple one will do.

Balancing simplicity and specificity is how to move yourself on your way from B- to A+.

When it comes to literary devices, sure, try them out, see if they ring true for your work. Just like when you were learning to talk, you'll make mistakes, but you've got to try something out first and work through the process of improving and becoming fluent.

While we've got the ax out...

While we've got the ax out and we're thinking of things to chop, let's think about this. You're going to go through your novel and revise it several times. (Sorry. Pantser Peril.) On the first go-through you'll be cutting scenes, and on subsequent revisions you'll cut sentences, and later still you'll go through and cut words.

How do you know what to cut? Let's take a look at the root of the problem and think about some reasons why writers might include too much detail to begin with.

Why is it tempting to include too much detail?

A lot of writers, especially beginning writers, fall into this trap of gratuitous detail. There was a time, in literary history when lavish detail was important, and that time was in the 19th century.

What was happening in the 19th century?

Well, there was no television, there were no movies, and there were no computers. For entertainment people sat in front of the fireplace and read aloud to each other. Because visualization took place in the imagination, including many details could be important as a means of scene-setting and providing additional entertainment.

Folks in the 19th Century had a lot of long hours to sit around and read. Today, we have very fast lives; a lot to do, a lot to fit in. We don't like gratuitous detail. Literature has moved on, and we don't need to know every single aspect of that Victorian mansion—I'm sure it's beautiful, but

really: three adjectives for the curtains? Move on, please.

Another interesting effect of the advent of photography, television and the internet is a much more connected world. I say “Victorian Mansion,” you’ve got a picture in your mind. It might not be anything like the mansion in my mind, but you’ve got a starting point, a point of reference.

It’s hard to imagine a world without photographs, but I think we can all understand that in a time before photography, the writer would have to fill in a lot of blanks for the reader.

We no longer live in that world.

Even if you’re creating your own universe, you still don’t need to overdo it. Want proof?

Alien Planet. You’ve got a picture in your head, right? Because you’ve watched television and movies, read comic books, whatever. We’ve even got a point of reference for what we collectively imagine.

Fill in some of the blanks for your reader, but not all.

Only include details that have the sole purpose of moving the plot forward. (I feel like I’m having deja vu all over again.)

But what about grammar?

Look, look, I know. We worry more about that about which we have less confidence. It’s ok if you’re still stuck on grammar. So, if you *must* think about grammar, think of the words you (almost) never need.

What am I talking about here? Adverbs and present participles.

Say what?

Ok, let’s review. An adverb is a word that modifies a verb...

Unscrunch your face, please.

Here’s what you need to know: *most* (not all, people, but *most*) adverbs end in -ly. Quickly, hastily, hurriedly, quaintly, quietly, loudly...you get the idea.

CUT. THEM. OUT.

You may use three *total* in your whole novel. The number shall be three and is not to exceed three.

And while I am on my adverb soapbox, there is one adverb that is very unnecessary, mostly because it is very overused, and in general, very superfluous.

Have you guessed it?

Yup, it's "very."

You may not use "very" ever.

But what about?

No.

But if I...?

No.

Very is very sloppy.

Nix it.

Ok, ok, ok. Stop pouting. Let me tell you what you can use: strong verbs.

He walked quickly. NO

He dashed. YES.

He said loudly. NO

He shouted. YES

But where do I get all of these strong verbs?

(My, you are a persistent pouter, aren't you?)

Simple: read.

Oh, and the other thing you can do?

Read.

Read quality writing. Read books that make you look up words!

Having a rich vocabulary means that you can write with precision; you will always choose the most accurate word (which sounds a lot like economy to me.)

(To be fair, I did tell you about a hundred pages ago that writing is a vortex.)

While we are talking about fancy schmancy vocabularies, let me take a moment to address pontification.

If you utilize your expansive neoterics for the intendment of affecting sagacity, you will, for sooth, only represent grandiloquence, and your reader shall, well, do exactly what you just did.

Skip the sentence. Roll your eyes?

Yeah. Nobody likes a showoff.

Use the right word for the situation. Use the best, most specific word--which sometimes just may be, the simplest word.

And before I step off my soap box (the view is quite nice from up here) let's have a little chat about the thesaurus.

Are you gratuitously thesaurusing? STOP IT. NOW. I mean it.

There's this idea, in writing, that you have to sound English-y, pontificating, official, in order to get your idea across. In reality, the opposite is true.

Specific words and labels help us to understand the world around us. (You need only to think of the difference between *flower* and *tulip* to know this is true.) That said, wordiness often detracts from meaning.

Many writers reach to the thesaurus to give their writing an air of authority, or to make it sound the way they think writing should sound.

Ooo, look you've got mail--*again*.

You're quite popular, you know.

To: StubbornReader@storytellingforpantsers.com

From: *The* Stephen King

Re: Your Thesaurus

Any word you have to hunt for in a thesaurus is the wrong word. There are no exceptions to this rule.

Sincerely,
Stephen King

I call it gratuitous thesaurusing— using a thesaurus to sound official while not really enhancing or improving the meaning.

Writing is meant to communicate— whether it's a memo or a story, your point needs to come across. Writing that becomes a murky water of five-syllable words for the sake of five-syllable words is not fulfilling that purpose.

So, yes, use *tulip* instead of *flower*, if you mean *tulip*. But don't use *tulip* when *flower* would have done as well. Don't try to fluff your point to enhance your message, because it actually detracts.

Label something specifically when needed—whether it's object or action. Otherwise, try to explain your ideas in the simplest, most direct way possible. The best way to improve your writing and to get this concept down is practice, practice, practice, and (you know what I'm going to say, right?) read, read, read.

Pesky little present participle

What is a present participle? Well, who cares, really? Are you going to become a grammarian?

Probably not. Ok, well, I will tell you, because if you're like me, you're just curious about the world. But as I've said before, it doesn't matter if you know what any individual item in this whole universe is called if you don't know how to use it.

So, let's talk about the present continuous tense, thusly named because it describes an action that is continuing to take place in the present. I am writing. You are reading. (Did you know books are time machines?)

It's a super handy tense a lot of the time--but not so much in books.

Why? Because there are very, err, scratch that...because there are *few* cases when one is actually still doing the doing.

He was walking across the field and he was thinking about what he would find when he got to the other side of the stadium, to that spot behind the bleachers, where he and Jenny used to make out after practice. He was thinking and he was walking and he wasn't even chewing his gum, because he was feeling distracted.

Do you see how distracting those verbs are? Let's just get him across the field and over to Jenny, for Pete's sake!

(Who is Pete, and how did he get in my book?)

Jack walked across the field. What would he find on the other side of the stadium? What would he see, or worse *hear*, in that spot behind the bleachers where he and Jenny used to make out after practice. His gum sat unchewed in his mouth as he turned the corner and saw...

See how much cleaner that is? What did I do? Eliminated -ing.

(Well, and some other stuff, too but right now we're talking about pesky present participles.)

These little tiny tweaks can have a *big* impact on the effectiveness of your story. That's why we dedicate time every week to diving deep into these kind of details in manuscripts over in the Writing Gym. The tweaks and deletions seem so minor and nitpicky--until you read the difference.

The first book would be a chore to read, the second sounds interesting.

Same Jack. Same Jenny. Same field.

Different *words*.

We must master our medium if we are to be true artists.

Why do you have a love triangle with verb tenses?

Jack knew he loved Jenny the moment he saw her. She has beautiful, long blonde hair that she always tied up in a bun. But it isn't just her hair. It was her smile, her laugh, the way she is kind to everyone she met. The day their trays bumped in the lunch line, Jack knew she was the one.

AGH! If that didn't hurt to read, please, try again.

Look, I know it's tempting. The present tense is so cool and suave, so *now*. He just gets things done, baby. But the past tense--so reliable, always there for you, rugged, solid, a rock.

Did you just get a leading role on a soap opera? Snap out of it! You *have* to choose. Your novel cannot waffle back and forth between verb tenses, no matter *what* you do in your love life.

You *have* to choose.

You cannot date the present tense and the past tense at the same time in your book.

Stop leading these poor tenses on, trailing them about.

Defecate or remove yourself from the human waste apparatus.

Over-excitement

Wow, this is so exciting! I can't believe it! This book is the best thing ever!

Are you tired yet?

Exclamation points are meant to be exciting! Another hallmark of a beginning writer is a manuscript littered with exclamation points!

Now, look, my fellow writer, if you met me, you know I'm more Tigger than Eeyore. I wear my passion for life on my sleeve (must be the Italian connection, Non lo so*¹.)but, I still don't use exclamation points in my writing.

But, can I...?

Yes. Now before you get too uppity, you may have one--one exclamation mark for your *entire* book. That's a maximum. You get bonus points if you don't use any at all.

You get what you pay for

Writers come to me all of the time with the question "How can I find a cheap editor?"

I tell them it's very simple. Don't.

Here's the bottom line: you *must* have an editor look at your book and give you feedback. You'll want both content feedback and grammatical feedback.

No, don't tell me your beta readers did that for you. We already talked about that.

If you're serious about publishing, you need a high-quality, comprehensive, *professional* edit of your book before you submit it anywhere.

Get the best you can pay for. We'll talk more about editing later-- all you need to know now is: Don't Skip. Don't Skimp.

Who you dissing?

Let's suppose you just decided your book would get published on the power of your story. Let's suppose you overlook every clarity rule I've given you because grammar's such a pain and you're not one of those English-y types so, who cares? Let's say after making this foolish assumption you ship ye ole manuscript off to an agent without considering elements of clarity.

What will happen?

Tick Tock. Tick Tock. (I'll give you a moment to consider your answer.)

Yes, rejection. And probably an upset stomach for the agent.

¹ I don't know

Now, look, maybe you were that student who wrote your paper on the school bus the morning it was due and thought the teacher wouldn't notice. (I bet your teacher outsmarted you.)

Let's take a moment to think about agents. Why do you think they become agents?

To spy and shoot guns?

Wrong kind of agent. I mean a *literary* agent.

Right.

Because they love spending hours poring over slushy manuscripts looking for gold? Probably not. (Though I am sure most enjoy finding that one gold nugget.)

It was because they love words, literature, they love to *read*. Somewhere inside of them, that impulse (along with others, I'm sure) is at the heart of what they do.

Let's go back to the NHL analogy. If I play on a pick-up team all winter, become the best player in town, have the most goals ever on record, am I ready for NHL tryouts? No. I may be pretty good, but the people who are going to judge me are *experts*. They can spot a fake in a second. They can critique the way I hold my stick without even realizing it. Why? It's their passion, it's their job, and it's their area of expertise.

What are you an expert in?

How does it feel when someone treats your interest like a hobby, a cute pass time? Does that make you feel good?

I'm going to imagine you said no.

If you are sending sloppy manuscripts to agents, are you treating those agents like the professionals they are? Are you showing them the respect they deserve for the positions they've earned?

No.

And they know it.

Just like your teacher did, all those years ago.

Let's just have another truthing moment, ok? It's all right if you don't want to put in the work. You don't have to. But, please don't expect the agents to coo, and the readers to come flocking.

Could you be the one amazing poorly written one hit wonder of the decade? Maybe. Why take the chance?

Style, grammar, using words effectively--these are the tools of the trade. Writers who put in the practice reap the rewards. If you're not confident in your abilities, get the support you need to take you to the next level.