Sharpen Your Style

Learn to Take Your Prose to the Next Level

StoryEmbers.org

Introduction

According to the proverb, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver."

But do we treat the words in our stories with the same care?

Words are important to God. Not only was the language in the Old and New Testaments exquisitely chosen, but He describes Himself (in the person of Christ) as the Word at the beginning of John's epistle. Of all the ways He could have communicated to us, He used the medium of words on paper. If the written word mattered to God, it should matter to us as well.

Here at Story Embers, we're passionate about helping writers develop an eloquent, practical, and personal style. We've compiled several of our favorite articles on the subject into this e-book to aid you in selecting the right words for your story.

We hope it equips you to craft prose as fitly written as the proverb.

-Josiah DeGraaf
Story Embers Editor-in-Chief

Table of Contents

Chapter One – The Difference Between Grammar, Mechanics, and Style	Page 3
Chapter Two – Five Stylistic Mistakes Most Authors Overlook	Page 7
Chapter Three – How to Enliven Your Story's Descriptions	Page 12
Chapter Four – Seven Rules for Grabbing Readers with Powerful Dialogue	Page 15
Chapter Five – How to Use Details in Action Sequences	Page 19
Chapter Six – Five Quick Stylistic Edits to Make Before Sharing Your Work	Page 22
Chapter Seven – Three Lies about Stylistic Editing	Page 26

Chapter One – Why Word Crafters Should Learn the Difference Between Grammar, Mechanics, and Style

By Rachel Rogers, Guest Author

Writers tend to instinctively sense that grammar, mechanics, and style are important. But what are they, really? How are they distinct from each other? Do they overlap? And do they actually matter, or are they just terms that writing experts throw around to sound fancy?

To answer that last question, I'll ask another: How do you feel about the screws that attach your kitchen cabinets to the wall? What about the hinges that secure the doors to the cabinets? You probably don't give the hardware much thought, but what if it wasn't there? If the cabinets were glued together, you'd constantly have the awful feeling hanging over you (literally) that everything might fall on your head when you open a cupboard to grab a snack.

Writing is like building a cabinet. The project involves many different pieces, a blueprint, and options for beautifying and customizing the cabinet once it's assembled. Grammar, mechanics, and style are the tools and materials for constructing your verbal cabinet. And, fortunately, there are even guidelines for when and how to utilize those tools as you write.

Preparing and Assembling the Pieces: Mechanics

A knowledge of mechanics tells you how to cut and assemble the pieces so you end up with a cabinet and not a hodgepodge of nonsense. It's the art of writing well at the sentence level. This can be as general as writing clearly and concisely or structuring a sentence overall. More specifically, mechanics addresses how to combine parts of speech, modifiers, phrases, clauses, transitions, etc.

Mechanics differs from grammar because it deals with the big picture of language structure rather than the detailed rules of its use. For example, word order falls under the realm of mechanics. In English, we position adjectives *before* the noun they describe ("a red house") instead of *after* ("a house red") as with Spanish and French. Furthermore, people often view misplaced modifiers as a grammar faux pas, but they are more accurately classified as flawed mechanics. One of the most famous misplaced modifiers is credited to Groucho Marx, an American radio and television

comedian who said, "One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got into my pajamas I'll never know." The first sentence contains the right information, but the meaning is obscured by the word order, which could be adjusted thus: "One morning I shot an elephant *while* wearing my pajamas."

When you consider mechanics at this micro level, it also begins to overlap with grammar, the set of rules that governs fastening all the pieces together.

Connecting the Pieces Properly: Grammar

Grammar is the hardware that holds the cabinet together so it functions as intended and people comprehend how to use it. The goal of having a grammatical system is to communicate with *clarity* and *consistency*. It provides a standard procedure for handling the parts of speech (articles, verb tense, subject-verb agreement, prepositions, etc.).

Grammar also encompasses punctuation, which is typically considered a separate subset due to the flexibility it offers. Some rules, such as comma placement, are unbreakable, but punctuation also depends heavily on the intended meaning of the sentence. It acts as body language and nonverbal cues, indicating timing, tone, and inflection. Through a generous number of em dashes, Jane Austen wove sidetracks and fractions of thought into a single, long sentence. Eleanor H. Porter used ellipses to show when a character's dialogue trailed off, followed by an exclamation point or question mark to convey the mood. Though unique punctuation usage has the potential to offend modern grammatical sensibilities, it illustrates how even grammar can be personalized within reason. In this way, grammar (especially punctuation) overlaps with style.

Finishing with Finesse: Style

The style of a cabinet is how it *looks* (color, stain/paint, type of handles, traditional/modern, etc.). Similarly, the style of writing is how it *sounds*. Does a Dickens novel sound familiar and rambling? Do Hemingway's stories sound matter-of-fact? Do Austen's novels sound flowery and utterly *proper*, yet still down-to-earth and relatable? All these impressions readers can form are facilitated by writing style.

Style accounts for the gray areas that grammar and mechanics don't cover, like when passive voice is permissible and when second person is a bad idea because of your audience and purpose. It is based on a number of factors, such as the individual author, the audience, and/or editorial policies at a publication (which are designed to encourage a coherent style publication-wide).

As with many other facets of writing, when developing your style, you need to recognize that with great freedom comes great responsibility. Style is *not* deciding that learning the rules is unimportant, nor is it arbitrarily ignoring the rules. Keyword: "arbitrarily."

Consider E. E. Cummings, who did not capitalize his name in print, and based on a cursory reading of his poetry, he appears to have been allergic to conventional English. Note that he graduated from Harvard and *then* proceeded to become famous for being an extreme nonconformist where English conventions are concerned.

Following the Blueprint: Applying It All to *Your* Writing

Even when you know the definition of mechanics, grammar, and style, mastering how to use them can be overwhelming. Sometimes writers internalize the importance of precise grammar and fret about whether their punctuation is correct as they're typing a first draft. Or maybe they realize they haven't been writing for their target readership as well as they should, and they become hyper-focused on the connotations of this or that word before they finish a sentence.

This is where the concept of Higher Order Concerns (HOCs) and Lower Order Concerns (LOCs) becomes invaluable. Basically, it's the same concept that tells you it would be senseless to attach the hinges to your cabinet before you trim the wood to size. So how do you distinguish between HOCs and LOCs? Here's a general breakdown:

Higher Order Concerns include issues with plot and scene structure, content quality, theme, characters, and style choice. Style as an HOC involves pinpointing your audience and purpose, which will guide you throughout the writing process.

Lower Order Concerns comprise grammar, mechanics, and style refinement. This entails polishing sentences and correcting punctuation and spelling. Style as an LOC involves tweaking punctuation, word choice, etc. to suit the previously determined audience and purpose of the story.

LOCs are no less essential than HOCs—they should simply be addressed *after* HOCs. Like attaching hinges before cutting your wood pieces, checking for errors at the sentence level (such as punctuation or verb agreement, which are LOCs) is impractical when large chunks of your story still need drastically altered to communicate the theme (an HOC) more clearly.

With this in mind, the writing process becomes much more methodical and manageable. Writing the first draft is always the top priority, because a story on paper is worth two in the brain. Then you can move on to repairing major problems—HOCs like plot holes, lack of focus, undeveloped theme, and weak characters. After this first round of revisions, you should have a fleshed-out, coherent story to work with, one that you are reasonably confident won't need any more large-scale changes. This is when you can begin fine-tuning LOCs like grammar, punctuation, word choice, and tone.

Word Crafting: Why It Matters

The Bible says that Jesus was a carpenter (Mark 6:1–3) like his father Joseph (Matthew 13:54–55). I imagine He probably learned wood crafting from Joseph as a boy and helped to support His family with that skill.

What if He had built a chair that collapsed when its new owner sat on it because He didn't want to bother with fitting the pieces together snugly? Cutting the wood perfectly was the main thing, right? He could have built it with the wonderful intention of kneeling before the new owner to wash his feet and minister to him, but by then the chair would already have been broken, the damage done, and the opportunity lost.

Our word crafting is the same way. Of course, we always have second chances to make a good impression and share the faith, or even a smile. But isn't it better to build a good message the first time around? In his letter to the Colossians, Paul admonishes us, "Whatever you do *in word or deed*...do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men" (Colossians 3:17, 23, emphasis added). The literal translation of the phrase "do your work heartily" is "do your work *from the soul*."

What does it mean to write from the soul? Metaphorically, it means constructing a solid cabinet that readers are able to open, one that won't crash onto their heads because we neglected to tighten a loose sentence or sharpen a vague thought. Above all, it means remembering that every time we pull out our tools and start word crafting, we do it all for our Lord, the carpenter.

Chapter Two – Five Stylistic Mistakes Most Writers Overlook

By Mariposa Aristeo, Public Relations Director

Writers tend to treat the fine points of writing like chemicals in a science lab. Some jumble style and grammar in an intellectual test tube, uncertain which combination will produce the desired effect. Others avoid the subject because they're worried it might encumber their creativity and make their writing monotonous. Everyone else either doesn't care or assumes that grammar/style is too complicated to understand.

But grammar/style isn't science. You can't experiment with it and try to break the laws of literature. Nor is grammar/style an unintelligible mass of atoms and nuclear power. *Anyone* can learn it with a little study. You don't even need to buy goggles and become a mad scientist—being a mad writer (which I'm sure you are, or else you're a fraud) will suffice.

Today I hope to be the professor who will help you identify five common errors that may be preventing your book from bubbling.

1. Character Filters

Character filter is a fancy term for words that tell rather than show. Some of the most frequent offenders are *felt*, *saw*, *heard*, and *noticed*. They filter the life out of a scene and distance readers from the story.

Telling: *The editor touched the mug the author had left on the counter. It felt warm in her hands.*

Showing: *The editor touched the mug the author had left on the counter. Steam floated up and warmed her fingertips.*

Telling: *She sniffed the cup; it smelled like chocolate.*

Showing: *She sniffed the cup, breathing in the aroma of cocoa.*

Sometimes, as in the above examples, character filters need significant rewording to correct the issue. Fortunately, they can often be easily removed.

Telling: *She heard the author tap on the door and she hurriedly set the cup down.*

Showing: *The author tapped on the door and the editor hurriedly set the cup down.*

Telling: *The editor stashed the mug in a cupboard and saw the author raise an eyebrow.*

Showing: *The editor stashed the mug in a cupboard. The author raised an eyebrow.*

You see how much more vivid those sentences become? Ironically, the best way to make readers feel as if they are actually hearing, smelling, and tasting is to eliminate the words *hear*, *smell*, and *taste*. Those words force readers to feel *through* a character instead of feeling the sensation themselves. It's like listening to a friend describe a delicious chocolate cake versus witnessing him eating the cake. You wouldn't be eating the cake either way, but isn't it easier to imagine how the dessert tastes by seeing, smelling, and touching it yourself rather than hearing about the experience secondhand?

2. Drama Commas & Periods. For. Emphasis.

You're probably wondering what a drama comma is. If you're thinking it's a term for grammar Nazi screenwriters, you're wrong. It's a comma an author arbitrarily adds to create a dramatic pause:

The editor saw the typo, and fainted.

That comma didn't *need* to go in the sentence. *The Christian Writer's Manual of Style* advises writers to employ drama commas sparingly. Writers frequently overuse them, so I recommend allowing no more than three per book; otherwise, your dramatic pauses will become annoying. Instead, insert an ellipsis or em dash for a dramatic pause.

Another mistake closely related to the drama comma is using periods for emphasis. Bloggers are notorious for this quirk and the habit has inadvertently infiltrated novels, particularly in dialogue. For instance:

"Don't. Use. That. Comma," the editor ordered.

"I will. ALWAYS. Use that. Comma," the author retorted, crossing her arms.

Not only does this defy industry standards, it's entirely unrealistic. Because. Who. Ever. Even. Talks. Like. That?

3. Misplaced Motivation-Reaction Units

Suppose you saw a woman at the edge of a cliff screaming for no apparent reason. Then, a few seconds later, the cliff crumbled and she fell off. Wouldn't you be confused? Why was she screaming *before* she fell? That's an example of putting the motivation and the reaction in the wrong order. Like this:

The editor gasped and dropped the book, spotting a misspelling on the first page.

The reaction (the editor gasping and dropping the book) shouldn't come before the motivation (noticing the misspelled word). I may know why she's gasping, and she may know why she's gasping, but readers can only read the words I typed and not my mind.

It should be rendered: *The editor spotted a misspelling on the first page and gasped, dropping the book.*

Now readers understand why the editor is gasping. You may occasionally reverse the motivation and the reaction to build suspense, but be conservative with this technique for the sake of clarity and readers' sanity.

4. Qualifiers & Hedging Words

Words such as *really*, *super*, and *very* are qualifiers, but the only thing they qualify for is poor writing. They weigh down your text and overemphasize what you're describing. Compare the following statements:

That editor absolutely hates the sight of qualifiers.
That editor detests the sight of qualifiers.

He pounded the backspace key, deleting the qualifiers very rapidly.
He pounded the backspace key, deleting the qualifiers rapidly.

Qualifiers are really annoying.
Qualifiers are annoying.

Generally, qualifiers should only appear in dialogue and thoughts, because they fill people's everyday speech, and abolishing them can make a conversation feel stilted. However, even in dialogue they should be used in moderation.

The opposite of qualifiers are hedging words. Instead of overemphasizing, they underemphasize. Some warning signs include *almost*, *seem*, and *started to*. They tiptoe around everything definite and leave readers wondering if the character is doing the action or not. S*tarted* and *began* are only relevant when the character doesn't finish what she set out to accomplish. So don't write "The author began to scowl at the editor" unless her scowl gets interrupted.

However, *almost* and *seem* are usually unnecessary. When you're writing, ask yourself whether the subject can truly seem to be or almost be doing a certain action. No one can "almost laugh" or "seem to smile." Either they smile or they do not; there is no seem. Sometimes *seem* is essential, especially when a detail can't be verified: "the ruckus seemed to be coming from the library" or "the book seemed to be made of gold."

5. Expletive Construction

Expletive construction is when *there* or *it* serves as the subject of a sentence. These words have no meaning, depth, or flavor—they're just there. *Merriam Webster* defines *expletive* as "a syllable, word, or phrase inserted to fill a vacancy (as in a sentence or a metrical line) without adding to the sense; especially: a word (such as it in 'make it clear which you prefer') that occupies the position of the subject or object of a verb in normal English word order and anticipates a subsequent word or phrase that supplies the needed meaningful content." For example:

Weak: *There was once a nameless editor who appeared in an article about writing mistakes.*

Strong: *A nameless editor appeared in an article about writing mistakes.*

Weak: *He fanned his face, glancing at the lava below. It was getting harder to climb with the goop rising so quickly.*

Strong: *He fanned his face, glancing at the lava below. The goop bubbled and rose faster than he could climb.*

Weak: *"Expletive construction," he stuttered; there were too many syllables for him to speak clearly.*

Strong: *"Expletive construction," he stuttered, all the syllables tangling his tongue.*

There was and *it was* color sentences gray. Clever rewording and rearranging will eliminate expletive construction and revive your story. One way to reduce this problem is by specifically naming the item and noting an action, like when I replaced "it was" in sentence two with "the goop bubbled."

Mixing the Chemicals Together

You remember when the Rebel Alliance blew up the Death Star? Well, that's nothing compared to the explosions that happen daily on Amazon whenever a typo-ridden, self-published book is uploaded. Disregarding the conventions of style and grammar is dangerous. Trust me, style/grammar won't clutter up your laboratory or hinder your literary experiments. Rather, if you dissect it properly, it'll turn your bookish invention into a success and show the world that you're taking your profession seriously.

Chapter Three – Enliven Your Story's Descriptions by Infusing Them with Character

By Gabrielle Pollack, Staff Writer

A unique setting isn't about how you describe it, but about how a character perceives it.

Everything in a story revolves around characters, including setting. Descriptions are not foreign elements that must be incorporated solely because characters need a place to plant their feet. Showing the setting through the eyes of a character gives it purpose, direction, and meaning. You'll further immerse readers in a character's POV and make the surroundings distinct—no person will describe the same location in the same way. Descriptions can reveal insights about a character that readers have yet to understand, sowing your prose with subtext. A character's priorities, backstory, and feelings enrich descriptions.

Priorities

Since setting relies heavily on characters, we need one of our own to experiment with. Pretend our protagonist is named Mary. A pack of wolves is chasing her, and she's tearing through the forest in an effort to escape. She comes across a clearing. A stream winds through the grass and a tiny robin perches on a nearby tree branch. What do you think she's going to do?

I'll tell you what she's *not* going to do. She won't stand there and admire the robin's merry tune or how his feathers remind her of a crimson sunset. She won't wonder at the playful stream or how the sun bounces off the water.

In all probability, she won't realize the robin exists, and the stream is only a blur in her peripheral vision. She's more concerned with the wolves behind her than any beauty around her.

This is because a character's priorities determine what she observes, both hiding and highlighting the world around her. In Mary's situation, she may not notice the robin or the stream. However, she might spot a large tree with low branches she could grab to climb out of the wolves' reach.

A character's priorities can narrow down the details you need to include. You don't have to document every aspect of the setting, only those pertinent to your character and readers.

Mood

Emotions make a story memorable and can enhance a setting too. Like priorities, feelings affect a character's outlook.

Mary is still wandering through the forest, but this time she isn't being hunted by ravenous wolves. Instead, she's returning from the castle after being fired from her job as a maid. She trudges through the same stretch of woods and does indeed see our friend the robin. She still wouldn't describe his tune as merry, however.

Her negative emotion alters the scene entirely. The robin's chirping mocks her. The stream she pauses by isn't dancing but murmuring sheepish apologies and condolences.

Coloring the setting with her frustration brings it to life. However, you don't want to go overboard with emotional descriptions. Swapping a word or two is usually effective. The sun's rays could be limp, the robin's flight halting, and the grass bowed.

Backstory

People are not simply the sum of their priorities and emotions, right? Past experiences and trauma influences their view of the world too.

Let's throw Mary into a completely different situation. She is neither being pursued by wolves nor leaving her workplace for the last time. Now she's peacefully strolling through the woods.

When she sees the robin, her mood shifts. Robins were her mother's favorite bird. She's since passed. The robin stirs sadness and nostalgia in Mary. It's a symbol that carries many memories, even though those memories were never before attached to that little clearing with the stream and the robin.

Small details, actions, sounds, and the like can trigger memories that impact how characters interpret their surroundings. This reveals the depths of your character, because the way she describes or feels about a place changes when it reminds her of the past.

Your Character's Personality Is at the Core of Descriptions

Different combinations of backstories, emotions, and priorities will produce a diverse group of characters who won't pay attention to the same details others do. This enables you to use their unique perspectives to create character-infused descriptions that blend well with the story and entertain your audience. However, this won't happen if you don't know your characters. Don't be afraid to dive into their personalities. Get so closely acquainted that you can't help viewing the world through their eyes.

Chapter Four – Seven Rules for Grabbing Readers with Powerful Dialogue

By Brandon Miller, Staff Writer

If your story features more than one character, it probably contains dialogue. Unfortunately, dialogue can be challenging to write, because it needs to sound natural or it will fall flat. As if that isn't bad news enough, cultivating an ear for dialogue is not an overnight process. You have to learn to listen to people, get to know the characters inside your head, and understand how the tension in a scene affects communication.

However, today I want to talk about how dialogue looks on paper, not how it sounds in your mind's ear, and show you techniques you *can* master quickly that will help you fine-tune the conversations in your current manuscript.

1. Give Each Speaker His Own Paragraph

This rule is basic and you may already know it, but it's nonetheless important. When the speaker changes, you should start a new paragraph to clarify who said what and add white space to the page, which is easier on the eyes than a solid block of text. Like so:

"Mary, how big is your lamb?" Joseph asked.

"Small," Mary answered. "You could almost say...little."

"Hm. Mary has a little lamb," Joseph said. "Interesting."

This guideline also extends beyond dialogue, because all thoughts and actions within the same paragraph are assumed to be from or about the speaker. For example:

Humpty Dumpty couldn't believe his bad luck. Once, just once, he'd told himself he would be safe sitting on the edge of a wall. Now...oh, what a mess. "Hello!" he called. "Hello! Anyone? HELP!"

A tall man walking down the path turned aside and waved to him. "Well, hello there. You're in a pickle, ain't ya?"

"Yes sir. Could you please help me get put back together?"

"Aye, aye... Perhaps the king's men could help. And their horses too." The man looked over Humpty's damaged form on the ground and nodded. "Yes, the horses."

"Begging your pardon, but how would the horses help?"

"I don't know, man. Also, you're a talking egg."

Notice that Humpty's thoughts and dialogue are grouped together in the first paragraph. In the second, the tall man's actions and dialogue are blended as well. Never mix a character's individual actions/thoughts with another character's, because this will subconsciously (or consciously) confuse readers.

2. Know When to Use a Beat vs. a Tag

Probably the most crucial detail about dialogue mechanics is the distinction between beats and tags, and when you should choose one over the other.

A dialogue tag is simply a speech attribution. In the sentence, "'I don't think this is a good idea,' Jack said," the tag does nothing except state that Jack voiced the words.

A beat (sometimes called an action tag), not only identifies the speaker but also describes a physical motion: "Why ever not?" Jill laughed. "We're just going up the hill!" In this example, "Jill laughed" is a beat. It doesn't actually assign the words to Jill, but since it's juxtaposed to her dialogue, the attribution is implied.

The first practical difference between beats and tags is punctuation. Tags are part of the same sentence as the dialogue. Unless the dialogue is a question or exclamation, it ends in a comma, and the tag is included in the sentence. A beat, however, is an independent sentence and treated as such.

The second notable difference is that a beat serves a dual purpose and helps paint a picture of the scene. Face-to-face communication involves expressions, intonations, mannerisms, and other gestures. Substituting beats instead of tags captures more aspects of the conversation.

Does that mean you should always use beats? Not necessarily. Tags have the superpower of invisibility. We see them so often that we gloss over them, noting whose name is mentioned before moving on. This can be advantageous, especially in tense situations where interrupting every few

lines with actions would be annoying. Also, if you constantly insert beats, your characters may shift around so much that readers will get distracted from the dialogue.

In short, use tags to avoid disrupting the dialogue's rhythm, and beats to flesh out the emotions and setting with character reactions.

3. Keep Dialogue Brief

In real life, people don't usually spout long speeches in everyday interactions. Nobody has the forethought to present a well-reasoned and thorough speech in one breath. Plus, they'd likely get interrupted.

Yet many characters don't seem to struggle with this and are excessively wordy. Unfortunately, long monologues are unrealistic. If a segment of dialogue has more than three lines, you should probably spend time evaluating and trimming it.

This is *especially* true in emotionally charged scenes. When a friend is dying, when a warrior is rushing into battle, or when a scared five-year-old is about to confront the monster under his bed, these are not appropriate moments for drawn-out words of inspiration. Emotional people might talk a lot, but not in an organized manner. The more tense the scene is, the terser the dialogue should be.

4. Break Grammar to Create Realism

Dialogue doesn't believe in grammar. Your character can pepper his speech with fragments, run-ons, and improper word usage if it's true to his personality. In fact, if all your dialogue is grammatically correct, that's probably a problem. Nobody talks like that. Don't defy grammar just to be rebellious, but when you're writing between quotation marks, remember that authenticity trumps sentence structure.

5. Read Dialogue Aloud

Dialogue is supposed to be spoken in the story, so the best method for testing it is to read it in real life. Is it realistic or clumsy? Do you run out of breath with long sentence after long sentence? Does it seem too polished? Editing on paper is nice, but if you don't read your dialogue aloud, you won't be able to gauge whether it sounds right.

6. Display Character Emotions Outside of Dialogue

Characters have modes of expressing their feelings besides vocalizing them. People tend to become quiet while in the throes of deep emotions. When they do speak, they may not be 100 percent vulnerable and honest.

If you rely on dialogue to convey characters' strong emotions, your story will disappoint. Allow their emotions to also influence their actions and body language. And don't be afraid to use silence. Underwriting is almost always better than overwriting.

7. Don't Put Words in a Character's Mouth

Dialogue should never have an agenda. It will sound stilted if you try to jam information into it. Characters can have motivations for engaging in conversation. They can be bursting to say something. You, dear author, cannot.

How many times has an emotionally scarred love interest, who vowed never to reveal her dark secrets, bared her soul because that's how the author scripted it? How many times has someone divulged secret information to the hero, not because they have a big mouth, but because the author needed the plot to move forward?

Let dialogue go where it will. You can always edit it later, but for now it needs to live.

Applying the Rules to Your Story

If all this advice seems overwhelming, don't worry. I typically refine dialogue in my second draft. When I'm roughing my way through the first draft, I don't worry about dialogue mechanics, only on making sure the words belong to the characters. If I'm focusing on stylistic issues, I can't accomplish that. So, don't get fussy until you finish your first draft, and then you can swing through it with these tips in mind.

Strong dialogue isn't about any one of these tips, or even a combination of them. Strong dialogue is character based, and tuning your ear to the imaginary people in your head requires practice. While you're working on that, you can use this list to improve your dialogue today.

Chapter Five – How to Use Details in Action Sequences

By Gabrielle Pollack, Staff Writer

"Be specific," they say. "It will help your story," they say.

This is good advice, but it's not always true. "Be specific" does not mean "be specific with every word you write."

The wrong kind of details won't help, especially in action sequences. Painting a vivid image is all about balance. Readers will be overwhelmed by too many details, and the image will drown under the weight. If no details exist, readers can't picture anything at all. But, when we purposefully add details and delete unnecessary ones, the words disappear, and readers lose themselves in the worlds we create. To achieve such epic results, we must know how much description to include and exclude during action sequences.

Eliminating Details

Suppose I'm diving into my first action scene. Showing every facet of the fight will drag the pace. Yet, I want readers to understand my character's movements. So I write something like this:

Oliver grabbed the arrow with his right hand. He notched it, fingers tripping over themselves.

The wolves drew near. Their sharp teeth gleamed in the sunlight, ready to latch onto human flesh and bone. Their fur waved as they bolted forward. Their beady eyes zeroed in on him.

Oliver drew back the string with his fingers. He bit his lip, narrowing his eyes to focus on the space between the first wolf's eyes. One heartbeat. Two.

Release.

Readers won't dig this section because I inserted irrelevant details. I referenced body parts at least eight times, which is jolting, because mentioning a small segment of something draws attention to it. Overemphasizing individual body parts distracts from the larger conflict. It's like watching a battle through a camera zoomed in on a villain's fingers or toes.

I also created floating body parts. Singling out a hand or thumb can give the illusion that the appendage is moving independently, and readers may forget about the rest of the character. In my draft, it sounds like Oliver's fingers are literally tripping over his other digits without being attached to his hand. I don't want readers to picture that. He needs his fingers.

Decluttering the Conflict

In the end, an action scene hinges on conflict. Readers won't care which hand Oliver nocks an arrow with. They're anxious to find out if that arrow flies true and whether he survives the wolf attack. They're focused on the bigger picture.

As a general rule, don't concentrate on body parts during an action scene. Details aren't as important in danger-filled moments. Cutting out the nuances will condense your sentences and provide a clearer image. Overexplaining means you don't trust readers to figure out what's happening. The purpose of description isn't to make readers see exactly as you do, but to help them connect the dots with their imaginations.

Here's my piece with fewer details:

Oliver grabbed the arrow. He struggled to notch it. The wolves drew near, their fangs sharp and ready to latch onto human flesh.

He drew his bow, focusing on the fur between the first wolf's eyes. One heartbeat. Two.

Release.

It's not as fancy as the previous version, but it does the trick. In action scenes, less is more. Now readers won't stumble over my words to try to discover Oliver's fate.

Using Details

A time and a place exists for specificity. Sometimes a subtle motion must be highlighted, like a finger tightening on a trigger. But before you rake in the details, ask a few questions.

First, is the involved body part obvious? In my paragraph, I pointed out that Oliver drew an arrow with his right hand. But I don't need to mention that because readers will assume he's using his hand, not his teeth or toes.

Second, is the detail meaningful? If Oliver is left-handed and draws the arrow with his right, that's significant. Perhaps his other hand is wounded and he's about to miss because he's clumsy with his right. But if he's simply right-handed, readers don't need to know. It doesn't intensify the conflict.

However, an action scene may contain moments that call for a slower pace. Perhaps a wolf has pinned Oliver and he's helpless. Describing his surroundings and his thoughts can underline the horror of the situation.

You can't pick any old detail though. If Oliver is worried about his impending doom, he likely won't notice how the wind scatters the fall leaves across the forest floor. He'll probably be focused on the wolf's teeth, the claws piercing his tunic, and the weight pressing him to the ground.

The Key to Vivid Pictures

Remember, to create vivid pictures, balance is crucial. Both underwriting and overwriting produces the same result: readers won't be able to visualize the scene. Be selective with details or risk bogging things down. Make sure every detail has a purpose, whether spotlighting an important action or drawing out a tense moment. Being intentional with details can bring your story to life in a reader's mind.

Chapter Six – Five Quick Stylistic Edits to Make Before Sharing Your Work

By Brandon Miller, Staff Writer

You've finished the first draft of your novel. What's next? At some point you'll need to show your manuscript to a beta reader or two. Seeking an outside opinion is an invaluable and inescapable step in your writing process. Before you send your novel off for critical eyes and minds to parse through though, I'd recommend passing over it with a red pen.

By putting your best foot forward, you'll feel more confident. But you'll also be correcting some of your story's superficial problems before someone else critiques it, which means your beta readers will concentrate on the deeper issues. What you gain from a critique depends upon what you invest.

That said, you don't want to spend the rest of your life chiseling your manuscript into its absolute best shape before sharing it. So, here are five flaws you can quickly fix before your book hits the critique circuit. (Also, keep an eye out for typos as you go.)

1. Too Many One-Sentence Paragraphs

Problem: First drafts often look like this:

Character does an action. Then something unexpected happens.

Something unexpected.

What does it mean?

What can it mean?

Isolating a major plot point or character thought is a legitimate way to add emphasis, and it brings a novel's pacing to life. The trouble is that many authors (like me) overuse this technique in their first drafts, which dulls its effect until it becomes annoying.

Solution: When you see a solitary sentence, try the following three experiments to determine if the separation is necessary:

1. Connect the sentence to the end of the previous paragraph and reread it. Does it work as one paragraph?
2. Read the page aloud. Do you naturally add a pause for the isolated sentence? Does it sound right?
3. Name the emotion you hope to create. If you can't pinpoint it, the sentence probably doesn't deserve its own line.

2. Sentences that Are the Same Length

Problem: This is pretty self-explanatory. If all your sentences are identical in length, they become tedious and even difficult to read.

Solution: Add variety. When I was still a happy little homeschooled pup, I took a writing course that I did not like (IEW, anyone?), but it taught me some good strategies and even made me laugh once or twice. The instructor (who reminded me of Steve Irwin) said we needed to use VSSs in our assignments. VSS stood for a "Very Short Sentence" containing two or three words. VSSs change up the pacing of your story and help your brain reset and refocus.

NOTE: The best way to catch this and the next error is to read your manuscript aloud.

3. Sentences that Start with the Same Word

Problem: Character names and personal pronouns are commonly repeated sentence starters. "Wesley… Wesley… Then, Wesley…" is monotonous to read.

Solution: Personally, I find that these sentences don't usually need tweaked—just separated from each other. I'm bad at description. When I open four sentences in a row with my hero's name, I probably haven't paused long enough to describe his thoughts, the setting, or other characters. Splitting up matching sentence beginnings will not only resolve the immediate issue, it will also enable you to spread description throughout your scene instead of throwing in a chunk at once.

4. Recurring Character Actions

Problem: Character actions can be challenging because a body has a limited assortment of movements. Sometimes an author latches onto a particular mannerism and uses it in excess. My

characters roll their eyes (on almost every page), and I have a friend whose characters are universally fascinated with blinking. Defaulting to a certain action is normal, but as you revise, you need to minimize the repetition.

Solution: Ask yourself these questions every time your character does the thing:

1. What emotion is the character experiencing? Is his response realistic?
2. Does the action fit the situation? Walk through the scene, voice the dialogue aloud, and analyze the character's thoughts before answering this.
3. Could another action communicate the same idea? You can find some great cheat sheets online that map common gestures to common emotions. Many gestures are nervous habits, some of which I don't have and thus don't think about. The cheat sheets help me give the character a personality different from mine.

5. Scanty Description

Problem: Description is hard. Characters and plot twists and emotional connections drag us into a story, and as first-time writers, we want to dive into the exciting stuff. The result is a host of novels that lack a story world and happen in a fog. Without any details, readers will picture clichéd scenes in their heads to fill in the missing setting, and that makes your book forgettable.

Solution: In the first paragraph of each new scene, include at least one unexpected or striking detail—an ironing board in the hallway, a printer singing in the office, or an old soda stain in the shotgun seat of the hero's new ride. Providing a quick, specific detail won't erase the need for complete descriptions in your book, but it will give readers' imaginations an interesting building block to play with.

Tips for Your Read-Through

When you comb through your manuscript to do these quick edits, here are a few final suggestions:

1. Print out your book. Your eyes are probably tired of the screen, and holding your words on tangible paper is special. Plus, Facebook isn't a click away and you might actually accomplish something.

2. Read the text aloud. (If you're lucky, have *someone else* read it to you.) Hearing your words will help you process them differently than when you wrote them, and you'll detect pacing issues, repeated phrases, and typos you wouldn't have noticed without audio support.
3. Have fun. You wrote a book. That's super cool.

That's it. Time to tear through your beloved manuscript and then kick it out into the real world!

Chapter Seven – Three Lies about Stylistic Editing (and Why They Hurt Your Writing)

By Gabrielle Pollack, Staff Writer, and Brianna Storm Hilvety, Managing Editor

Editing is easy to overdo. You open your latest draft to restructure a scene, but as you reread your work to get your bearings, you can't resist tinkering with a clunky paragraph in the previous chapter. Then you remember a worldbuilding element you need to research so you can use it to set the mood when your protagonist meets her love interest. And soon you've spent an hour brainstorming the perfect analogy for his blue eyes.

Maybe you agree that this is an unproductive approach to fine-tuning a manuscript. It lacks direction, right? But that's not the true problem—or danger. When you obsess over a segment of prose, making change after change without moving on, you'll lose perspective and kill the heart of your story. You'll miss the line between too much editing and not enough.

How can you straddle that line, though? Grammar books won't tell you how to hone your voice and style. They address black-and-white rules, not the kaleidoscope of creativity. How do you discern when you've gone overboard with the metaphors or a wacky description is confusing? How many details are excessive?

The answer to those questions is in your outlook. Do you understand the *goal* of stylistic editing? If you don't, you'll either become trapped in an endless editing cycle or put away your red pen prematurely. You need to be able to debunk the misconceptions writers often have when they start playing with words and sentences.

Lie #1: Stylistic Editing Is about the Author

I'll bet that you don't dream up stories so you can hoard copies in a cave like a book dragon. You write to be read, to engage, to impact. Thus, your audience needs to be at the forefront of your mind when you're preparing your material for publication.

Professional editors live by the principle that the reader is the axis for their decisions. When they clash with authors, they don't apologize or retreat—they plead the reader's case. A convoluted sentence needs trimmed down, or an obscure term needs replaced with plainer language. Editors don't suggest these changes to fulfill personal preferences but to remove obstructions to the reader's enjoyment and understanding of the story. Stylistic editing is about bringing the text to a level of clarity that leaves little room for misinterpretation.

Focusing on readability will help you achieve balance. Instead of spending hours spiffing up a sentence that doesn't contribute to your story's meaning, you cut it. Instead of packing your story with a thousand details, you include only enough to color the moments that matter. Revising from the reader's perspective reduces unnecessary deletions and additions.

Every reader is different, though. How can you predict what they want? To avoid attempting to please everyone, edit for your *ideal reader*. If she favors literary stories, keep crafting those flowery descriptions. But if you're targeting fans of mysteries and thrillers, concentrate on tight pacing and worry less about "show, don't tell." Your audience determines your style.

Lie #2: Stylistic Editing Is about Prose

Stylistic editing concerns all the tiny pieces that make a paragraph both beautiful and functional. So how can it *not* be about prose?

Strong writing is transparent, like a windowpane readers press their noses to and forget about because they're awed by the view. Each phrase should turn into a mental picture. If you try too hard to sound eloquent, your prose—the window into your story world—will become ornate like stained glass. Have you ever looked through a stained glass window? You couldn't see much, could you? Overly decorative prose has a similar effect on readers, distancing them from the story so they can't experience the emotions and discoveries it has in store for them.

Now, that doesn't mean you can't ever be artistic with your wording like Daeus talks about in his article inspired by *The Book Thief*. Poetic prose can enhance a story's emotional impact and surprise readers with delightful imagery. But, to circle back to point number one, your goal should be to *communicate* (emphasis on the reader) rather than to *impress* (emphasis on you). This involves being specific and distinguishing when to go into depth versus give a summary. If a unique simile conveys your intent better than a nondescript statement, then use it. Just don't disregard the power of simplicity either. And always consider what's appropriate for your genre.

Lie #3: Stylistic Editing Is about Perfection

Perfectionism can drive you to polish your manuscript to death. No matter how thorough you are, you still might overlook a typo or a patch of prose that slows the plot. You can't shield yourself from criticism, and years after publishing a story you may wish you'd executed your ideas differently. If you hope to satisfy every person who comes into contact with your writing, you'll end up frustrated.

The saddest consequence of letting fear control you is that you'll never reach any readers. You'll chain yourself to your desk chair, believing that your stories must be faultless to be valuable, and waste time and energy striving to meet an impossible standard. Again, this issue stems from focusing too much on yourself over others.

When you edit to connect with and relate to readers instead, letting go becomes less of a struggle. Not every reader will praise your story. But those who are meant to be touched by it will appreciate your hard work.

Your Mindset Determines Your Aim, Not Your Effort

After digesting all this advice about editing with restraint, you might be starting to form a new misconception. But let's knock it flat: your ideal reader is *never* an excuse for sloppiness. Instead, thinking and praying about that person should motivate you to edit with care. Whether you're writing for children or adults, lovers of fantasy or historical fiction, you need to pay attention to the nuances of grammar, plot, and character. The benefit of a reader-focused mindset is that it helps you separate yourself from your work so you can freely edit chaotic drafts into compelling masterpieces.

Conclusion

God created the universe through the power of words. Through the words we weave together, we have the opportunity to sub-create imaginative plots and authentic characters after His example.

Words have a strong effect on readers, not only revealing the characters in a book but also defining and shaping them. Your style and sentence structure determines how readers will experience your story—which in turn tailors their response to it.

Refining your style isn't always a glamorous task. Evaluating and tweaking a manuscript at the sentence level takes work. Nonetheless, the details matter. Great authors know that their wording impacts readers, and they craft stories accordingly despite—or perhaps because of—the labor of love it requires.

Hopefully this e-book has given you the tools you need to better sharpen your style.

Now, what kind of author will you be?