

# Author's Club

## 8 Helpful Writing Hints

### 1. Kill Clichés

Cliché is the enemy of every author. And you recognize it when you see it, right? We're talking about things like this:

- His eyes were blue enough to swim in.
- She felt a sharp pain, as though cut by a knife.
- The breeze whispered softly through gently waving trees.

It's like watching a movie we've all seen before. It's language that's stale, old, past its sell-by date.

But cliché creeps in all over the place. The flame-haired passionate redhead? She's an old, overused stereotype.

The midnight hostage exchange in a deserted warehouse? Seen it, read it.

The rose-covered cottage with a smiling old lady and lots of home-made cakes. Yep, nothing new there.

The simple fact is that wherever you grab for pre-made stereotypes – scenes, people and settings that we've seen a million times before – you bore your reader that tiny bit. You distance them from the text, when what you want is to hug them close.

So, look for clichés everywhere.

Then kill them.

### 2. Be Accurate

Let's start with an example. Consider this sentence:

She lay in the early morning light listening to the roar of traffic softly rising like mist in the streets.

What do you think of that? Good? Bad? Half and half?

I hope you said that it's an awful sentence, because it is. If I were an agent and I encountered this sentence on page 1 of a submission, I would read no further. Why? Because the writer isn't in control of their language and that proves to me that they aren't yet ready to go pro.

So let's see what's wrong.

“She lay in the early morning light” – that's fine. Nothing wrong with that.

“listening to the roar of traffic” – yep, OK. (Although why is there a roar of traffic in the early morning? Unless there's a very specific setting which answers that question, I worry that we're not really dealing with early morning here, in which case why say so?)

“softly rising like mist in the streets” – OK, that's where this sentence collapses completely. If traffic roars, it can't softly rise. You could have a murmur of traffic doing something softly. Or a roar of traffic doing something loudly or violently. But roar + soft just doesn't work. The two ideas are fighting each other.

And that's not all of it. Mist doesn't rise, it just hangs. It's a stationary image, not a moving one. So that's another fail.

And why say ‘In the streets’? Obviously cars are in streets (so why bother to remind us?) And if you want to talk about a slow-rising mist, then isn't that more naturally a rural metaphor? In which case the word streets again introduces an awkwardness.

In short, the writer of that sentence failed the Accuracy test, because they weren't sure enough what they wanted to say and ended up just serving up a mess.

Oh, and if you think I'm being picky here, then I admit it:

YES! I'm picky.

So should you be. **Prose style matters** – and it's good that it matters!

Books are made out of sentences and sentences are made out of words. If you're not very picky indeed about your word choices and sentence constructions, you will never be (or deserve to be) a real professional author. So be picky. It's the first ingredient of success.

### 3. Keep It Short

When you write, treat your manuscript as though you had to pay \$.10 a word for the privilege of writing. Look at this paragraph, for example:

He walked slowly away, trying not to make any kind of sound. His feelings were in a turmoil, roiling and boiling, a tumult of emotion. He couldn't help reiterating to himself again and again that he had done the right thing; that he had done everything he could. He insisted to himself that she, too, would surely see this one day.

Ugh. Let's try that again. Here's the same example, tightened up.

He crept away, his feelings in turmoil. He had done the right thing, he told himself. One day, she would see this, too.

Almost a third of the length. And everything about it is better. It doesn't just say it faster, it says it better. In the first version, all that verbiage just got in the way.

And again: you just can't be too picky here.

Let's say you had a sentence in your book that was 12 words long, when it could say the same thing in just 9-10 words. Would you make the change? Or would you just think, nah, who cares?

I certainly hope that you said you'd make the change, because look at it like this. What if you write a 120,000 word book that could be reduced to 90 or 100,000 words without losing any material content? That book would be 20-30,000 words overweight . . . and would be way too baggy for any top-end literary agent to get involved with. But you will only cut that 20-30,000 word surplus by finding the 2-3 unnecessary words in that 12 word sentence and cutting them out. That's what that part of the editing process is all about. There are no shortcuts.

In short: good writers work at their writing. Getting your prose style right is all about acute attention to detail.

If a bad sentence bothers you, you just need to keep going until you get it right.

You have to care about your sentences –  
because your entire novel is made of them!

If you're not open to **cutting your work** in service of your novel, making it the best you can, we're in trouble.

## 4. Trust Your Reader

Another amateurish trait is that of not trusting the reader. We get many clients who write something rather like the following:

He rolled in agony. Fire shot through every limb. He felt like screaming out in pain. His entire face was distorted with the grotesque effort of not shouting out.

That uses many very forceful words (agony, fire, screaming, distorted, grotesque). You don't need that many words to do the job. It's as though the writer of this snippet doesn't trust the reader to get the point, so he/she keeps making the same point again and again like some classic pub bore. Readers will 'get it', as long as you write in clear, forceful, non-repetitive language.

Here's another example.

What do you think of the following little dialogue / micro-scene?

"Yes?" I nudged.

“Yes, only . . .” she hesitated, then stopped completely. Waved her hands at me to signal she was done, or that I should look away. Some gesture like that.

“So, yes, we should invite him?”

“Of course. Fine. Whatever you want. It’s not like I care.”

We don’t know what’s going on here of course – presumably, if we read this in a book, we’d have more background to make sense of it all. But it’s pretty clear, isn’t it, that the woman here has some set of quite strong, deep emotions about the guy they might or might not invite to something – and she’s not that keen to talk about what she feels.#

And you got all that, without the writer having to spell anything out at all. The writer just dropped stuff on the page and let you figure it out.

So now take a look at this way of doing things:

“Yes?” I nudged her, anxious to know what she would think.

“Yes, only . . .” she hesitated, then stopped completely. She waved her hands at me to signal something. I guess she was quite conflicted about me inviting him. Maybe she was a little bit angry, plus a little embarrassed. Her body language was more than consistent with these two emotions, so I decided that I should try to clarify the situation in order to identify her opinions more precisely.

“So, yes, we should invite him?” I said, hoping that this time I would get a more detailed answer.

“Of course. Fine. Whatever you want. It’s not like I care.”

But although she said she didn’t care, it was evident to me that she did. As a matter of fact, when she spoke the words “whatever you want”, it struck me that maybe she was being passive-aggressive, that although she said “whatever you want”, maybe what she actually means was, “No, I’d prefer not to see him.”

That’s terrible, right?

And it’s terrible, partly, because this version of the dialogue massively breaks the “keep it tight” rule. But it’s also terrible because it just lectures the reader in this horrible heavy-handed way on stuff that the reader can perfectly well figure out for themselves.

It’s even worse than that, actually, because in the first example, all the nuances of the situation were left open to the reader to figure out. In the second example, all that clunky explanation just crushes the nuances underfoot.

The moral of this story? Trust your reader. They’re smart like that.

## 5. Cull Those Adjectives

To stick with this theme, and especially when it comes to descriptive writing, double adjectives are almost always a no-no. The second adjective almost always weakens the first.

You want an example? OK, so take a look at this:

He leaned over the black iron railings, the coarse grey cloth of his sleeve catching on the sharp, treacherous spike.

Deleting any superfluous adjective improves this description straightaway:

He leaned over the iron railings, the coarse cloth of his sleeve catching on the sharp spike.

That's better, right?

But I hope you notice that we can go one step better again. Every sentence needs nouns and verbs, while adjectives are definitely optional. And in many cases, a sentence just doesn't need any adjectives at all.

So in fact, the best way to write that sentence would be simply:

As he leaned over the railings, his sleeve caught on the spike.

Good writers use adjectives sparingly. And if you're in doubt, write the sentence without the adjectives and see if it works better. If it's actually missing something then reinsert the adjective. Your prose will instantly tighten and feel more alive, more taut.

## 6. Mix Your Rhythms

Short sentences are strong. So use them. But too many? All short sentences? They'll irritate the reader. You'll annoy them. A lot.

Aren't you annoyed already? I bet you are.

Equally, if you work with only longer sentences, you risk losing the reader, who'll miss that bit of grit, of sharpness, that shorter sentences bring.

The same thing applies across the board.

- Description is great, but too much of it? Every small thing described? You'll lose the reader.
- Abstract nouns are great – but big blocks of them? You'll lose the reader.
- Emotional language is great. It's a big part of why we read. But constant examination of every small emotion? Yep, you know what I'm going to say: you'll lose the reader.

The secret, always, is variety – and flexing your language according to the mood and moment of your story.

So if your hero gets brutally dumped by his long time partner? Then look in detail at his emotions!

But if you're in the middle of a tense action scene? Now's probably not the time for all that.

Of course, it sounds obvious if you put it like that, but it's not always so obvious as you write your text. One great trick, used by plenty of pro authors, is to read your work aloud. If it starts to grate with you, or if the rhythms seem awkward to say, then stop and rewrite!

It'll be worth your time, guaranteed!

## 7. Work Those Nouns, Work Those Verbs!

Look at these examples, and figure out what's wrong with them:

- He said loudly, raising his voice so she could hear it across the field.
- She jumped high in the air.
- He said as quietly as he could.

In most cases, of course, you'll do better to simply cut out the adverbs (the things that describe the action – like loudly, high, and quietly). English is rich in vocabulary so in most cases, there are neater ways to say what you're after. For example:

- He called to her (adding, across the field if you want).
- She leaped.
- He whispered.

I'm not saying those replacements are always better – you have to use your judgement given the particular place you are in your story. But as a rule of thumb? Ditch the modifiers and let the verbs do the work.

There's a similar trick to see whether your nouns (words for objects) are working hard enough for you. Compare these two examples:

- He passed her some food, on an old white plate.
- He gave her lamb tagine Big scoops of it, mounded on a plate of old porcelain, with a faded floral rim.

The first sentence is very bland, partly because all of the component words are very bland. If you listed all the commonest words in the English language, then pass, food, old, white, and plate would surely be amongst their number.

The second sentence has some much less common words, lamb, tagine, scoops, mounded, porcelain, faded, floral, rim. Because those words are less common, they feel tangier to the reader. They burn brighter in the reader's imagination.

Again, I'm not saying you can use this trick all the time – your judgement has to come first; sometimes simple is good – but it's worth bearing in mind. If you read over your prose and find it a little bland or lacking in energy, then giving (especially) your nouns and verbs a bit more zing will make a huge difference.

## 8. Add Some Little Flashes Of Genius

You'll occasionally find a phrase that perfectly captures something: an unexpected word use that shocks a reader into understanding. Here are some dazzling examples of what we mean:

“A quick succession of busy nothings.”

“One moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in.”

“I shall be dumped where the weed decays, and the rest is rust and stardust.”

These are snippets from writers of genius – Jane Austen, Graham Greene, and Vladimir Nabokov. Never try forcing this on your every paragraph or page (they didn't). Only a scatter of diamonds here and there has effect, so go for it, if you can.

And if that seems a bit daunting to begin with, then start small.

The main trick in writing well is simple:  
You just have to care enough.

We mean that pretty literally.

Let's say, there's something you want to convey. Something, let's say, about those moments of transition in childhood, when new possibilities suddenly open up.

You're talking about a semi-magical moment, so it would be great if you could find a description that had a little magic to it. But how to do it?

The answer is, you write something and see how you feel about it. Maybe this, for example:

It was one of those moments in childhood, that suddenly seemed rich in possibility.

That's OK, right, but not exactly magical. So just let your imagination find what you are trying to say? What is it that for you conveys that idea of 'rich in possibility'?

As soon as you ask that question, you might start finding some answers. For example:

It was one of those moments in childhood, where the future suddenly bloomed, like a field full of poppies

A moment in childhood, where a window swung open, letting in the sunshine, letting in the future.

Or of course, you might end up with something like Greene's own version:

"One moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in."

Bear in mind, he probably didn't write that sentence cleanly at the first time of asking. He probably wrote something, felt it wasn't quite right, then fiddled with the sentence until he was happy.

That's how writers write. Dissatisfaction + more work = the route to better writing!