

20 Ways to Improve Your Story



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1. Keep opinions to yourself

A major pitfall of the amateur writer is to cheat by describing scenery with an opinion, when they should make the scene project that feeling upon the reader without telling them how to feel.

Unless the narrator is an integral part of your storyline, descriptions in third-person narration should not contain opinionated words. Do not tell the reader that the dark forest is scary, eerie, ghastly or horrible. Show them through vivid description and character action. When you leave the description open to interpretation, the reader becomes more involved in the story process.

Opinionated words do have their place. They should be closed inside of monologue or dialogue to develop characters. Show the setting objectively and then make your character react to it. This way, the scene is written to make the reader develop their own opinion.

For example, some people would feel perfectly at home in a swamp or cave. Others would find it dreadful. It accomplishes nothing to describe your swamp as a “dreadful swamp” in the setting description. Show us why most people think it is dreadful. You will have to work harder but your efforts will be well-rewarded.

Conjure up the elements that people associate with dread: creepy crawlies, putrid smells of decay, fog, sounds and twilight.

Let the reader use their imagination and form an opinion and they will be more willing to accept the character’s reaction to the setting.

2. Cause and effect

Cause followed by effect draws the reader into your world. Describe action with the active noun first, follow this with the action that takes place, and then show the effect of the action.

Some writers attempt to sound eloquent by structuring the sentence with the effect first. While this works for a humor column, it has no place in fiction. Cause naturally precedes effect in the real world. If you craft an action scene to model reality, the reader will be able to make a smooth visualization of the scene taking place.

This out-of-order structure can jar the reader right out of the story. Active passages should flow straight from the page to the reader's imagination. This increases the believability of the story.

3. Activate the senses

Use the character's bodily senses to draw the reader in: sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch. In areas with major conflict, try to plant one or two sentences related to the setting, objects or characters and tie them to the senses of your protagonist.

Make it a point to activate one to three senses before conflict so that the upcoming scene feels more realistic to the reader. This temporarily magnifies their attention and, as a result, the conflict has a greater impact.

4. Emotional thermometer

An “emotional thermometer” is designed to reflect the power of your writing. The standard protagonist will display normal responses to a situation. Their body language will tighten up under stress and relax during joy. Out-of-context reactions indicate a mental illness (the trait of a villain or anti-hero).

Readers love body language. There should be slight movements and actions to give the reader a signal about how the character feels. (Show fear, nervousness, anxiety, etc.)

People like to read into a character’s mannerisms and reactions. These aren’t brain-numbing mysteries. They are easy-to-interpret signs that we use everyday. Also, body language utilizes the power of cause and effect.

Example A: “Paul tore the letter open. Sarah was nervous.” (This is grammatically correct but it sounds like stage directions.)

Instead of summarizing how Sarah feels, show the reader how she feels through body language.

Example B: “Paul tore the letter open. Sarah bit her lip.” (Better)

Action and body language enhance dialogue, especially in moments of high drama such as arguments, physical fights, sex, personal loss or the death of a loved one.

Arm movement says a lot about how a character is reacting, even if they try to hide it with a poker face.

Example: If Ted initially had his arms clasped behind his back, he was at ease, comfortable and relaxed. If he feels uneasy, he will draw his arms forward and clasp his hands together against his body to guard himself. Crossed arms is a bolder version of guarding and can sometimes be considered hostile.

Body language can be a coping mechanism or used to engage in mirroring behavior in order to build rapport.

We know that dialogue is delivered a number of ways. Body language can set the tone of the dialogue. Pointing, along with a short command, signifies an order. Facial expressions can show the speaker's demeanor. Use body language to demonstrate a change in a character's mood.

As writers, we read with an analytical eye because we understand the nuts and bolts of writing. Most of the time, we observe and use body language everyday without really thinking about it. Great writers study people and their body language. (You should be able to find a book about body language at your local library and watch people closely, without their noticing of course.)

5. Verbs are friends

Proper verb choice is perhaps the quickest way to elevate the quality of your writing. Don't "put" on your shoes, "slip" them on. Verbs are used to package the scene for the reader's imagination. They should be concise and bring images or feelings to mind.

Example A: "He held the shield against himself." (This is weak.)

Choose a verb and sentence structure that presents more visual detail and effort for the movement.

Example B: "He braced against the shield." (More effort is being made, his whole body is moving, and there is a sense of urgency.) This is because the action seems more important to the character and this will carry through to the reader. If your character doesn't care, neither will your reader.

Often times, words like was, have, had, were, is, would, should and could are unnecessary. (If you have Microsoft Word, click edit at the top left of the window and scroll to find. Replace the words with power verbs.)

Sometimes the correct verb will already be in place. Simply change “I was explaining” to “I explained”, “had to work” to “slaved”, “was aimed” to “aimed” and so on.

Other sentences will need to be completely restructured. For example, “She was never embarrassed by Maria” to “Maria never embarrassed her.”

In rare cases, you can intentionally plant the word ‘was’ before the verb to create a soft visual.

Remember, when evaluating a verb, ask yourself the following two questions:

- Is it as visually descriptive as possible?
- Will another verb show more exertion for the action?

Exertion doesn’t always mean physical power. There can be a tremendous exertion of concentration with the use of fine motor skills or in tactical decision-making.

6. Give the readers cookies

Readers love to play detective and figure out the story for themselves. It satisfies them with a sense of accomplishment.

Example: “The office was stressful.” (Show this.)

In fact, you don’t even have to mention the word stressful, if you create the scene properly.

Describe the business people working at high pace, the knots of the men's ties are loosened. Sweat beads down the supervisor's forehead. He clamps a pen between his teeth and punches characters into a keyboard.

Do not make simple statements to tell the reader about a character's mood.

Example A: "Michael became bored." (And so does the reader.)

Have Michael check the time of his watch, drum his fingers against the table, click a pen repeatedly, sigh or roll his neck.

Use subtle hints and indicators of emotion in your scenery to allow the opportunity for people to read your character by his or her actions.

7. An interactive setting

Use objects and surroundings to your advantage. If you present only the visual aspects of a room, the description will seem sterile and lifeless.

Create a crackling fireplace to cover the auditory sense, a smell of leather, paint or charred wood, a feeling of warmth. Are there pictures on the wall? What is on the desk? A business card? What colors were used in the business card? Is it a sharp and professional black and white? Or more relaxed, filled with color and artistic looking? This is a unique way to tell the reader about a character's personality.

Objects can convey messages to the reader. For example, instead of using the car as a vehicle to get from the hospital to the airport, have some fun playing with the objects in your story. If it's raining outside, you will need windshield wipers. What noise do they make? There is a car alarm, heater, air conditioner, windows, mirrors, horns, and so on.

This emphasizes cause and effect with common objects and strengthens the believability of your story. The reader will be hooked in.

A coffee mug can be held various ways, shattered and contents can be spilled. Don't waste good characters by trapping them inside of a cardboard setting.

8. Organize a parade

Seat your character on a bench and force them to watch the townspeople stroll through a crowded street during a festival. What would your character have to say about the setting?

A rich fantasy setting is made by brainstorming about the town, seasons, weather, festivals, customs, religions and people. A new culture is formed.

How do servants behave? Men drinking at a bar? How do the children interact with their mothers and fathers. How does the general public feel toward your character? How do they treat the elderly? Your descriptions should be in proportion to importance.

9. Handling exposition

Dumping chunks of background information, character descriptions and continuous dialogue will distract from the scene. Exposition longer than three sentences should be broken up by using interior monologue, dialogue and descriptive action.

This is vital in a screenplay. Except for cases of artistic-effect, never use voice over for exposition. It is cheap and bores the audience.

Remember to incorporate all of the above tips into your toolbox and you will be able to chop exposition up so that information is seamlessly transmitted to the reader.

10. Speech tags

Example of redundancy: “Why didn’t he invite you?” she asked. “Well, you know Marcus,” he replied. “That pig!” Becca exclaimed. (We know she is asking because of the question mark and we know she exclaimed because of the exclamation point.)

Common speech tags like, said, replied, answered and returned do not draw the reader’s attention and serve to denote the speaker. Use these common speech tags when there is no change of mood and you need to show the speaker.

Example of bad speech tags: “Change the name,” Gabby insisted. “But I like it,” Francis murmured. “Well, I suppose,” she chuckled.

This comes back to body language. When you see a bad speech tag, you’re cheating yourself out of a sensory description. Speech tags interrupt the flow of good dialogue.

Fortunately, they are very easy to fix in revision. The speech tag will give you an indication of how to present the body language.

For example, replace “he demanded” with a short sentence to show the he is demanding through body language.

Descriptive character action placed before, during or after dialogue marks the character as the speaker. This way, you can avoid using a tag altogether.

The reader will better visualize the scene if it can be livened with body language and mannerisms. More reality is brought to the story because the reader can identify with the sensory descriptions. Why use one word to describe how your character spoke, when you can use a detailed sentence or two?

11. Get specific

Restrict the use of adverbs like: some of, most of, mostly, very, extremely, totally, completely, wholly, entirely, utterly, really, quite, rather, somewhat, slightly, fairly and great.

Don't use three adjectives in a row when you could just pick one precise adjective or an active verb.

Replace vague words like something, anything, and everything with specific nouns.

Cut unnecessary prepositions like: by, has, for, of, on, managed to, began to and started to. They will slow the action down and stifle the reader's visualization.

12. Simplify

Cut out gobbledygook and simplify wording:

In regard to: *about*
 In the event that: *if*
 A sufficient number of: *enough*
 In the vicinity of: *near*
 Were in agreement: *agreed*
 On a daily basis: *daily*
 Were in attendance: *attended*
 On the occasion that: *when*
 At this point in time: *now*
 Are of the belief: *believe*

13. Past tense

Don't be afraid to fully embrace past tense and drop the –ing clause. It doesn't create immediacy, it presents the sentence in a confusing manner.

The –ing clause can be used sparingly by placing them in the middle of the sentence. Save it for a verb in the middle. Link the –ing clause with a verb that is a lasting

sensation. (burning, stinging, bleeding, numbing, falling, etc.) This is a master's trick. Be confident with your writing and embrace past tense.

14. Character building

What does your character do when nervous, afraid, shy, embarrassed, confident and angry?

Dialogue can be individualized to mark the speaker and enhance characterization. Perhaps the character occasionally begins or finishes a sentence with the same word.

Does the character use a certain exclamatory statement? Are there individual mannerisms? For instance, a character that wears glasses could constantly adjust them.

Give main characters specific mannerisms, speech patterns and nervous habits and use the power of body language.

15. Pacing

As a general rule, longer sentences evoke slow-motion, panoramic visuals and short choppy sentences will jumpstart pace and tension during action scenes. Split sentences up to eliminate conjunctions during action.

Gerund trick: A dash can be placed between a gerund and noun or gerund and adjective to speed the pacing during action.

Example A: "William threw a fractured glass window to the floor."

Example B: "William threw a fractured-glass window to the floor." (Faster pace)

Adverb trick: The -ly clause can be cut from the end of an adverb to reduce the word by one syllable and create an adjective.

Example A: “Rocks fill the hole merely by chance.” (The two syllable adverb seems out of place.)

Example B: “Rocks fill the hole by mere chance.” (This opens the flow and the pacing is not interrupted.)

16. Conflict

In wrestling, an opponent “sells” a move to show the crowd how devastating it was. In film, great actors are totally immersed in their character’s reactions to the scene. The audience is drawn into the performance and the outcome is magnified.

The protagonist must be tested as a person to become a hero. The reaction to conflict is almost always more important than the action.

Conflict in first person: Accounting for time can be complicated in first person. Outline the peaks of conflict that take place and jump from one peak to the next. (A couple of minutes later, three hours later, the following week, etc.) Transitions like these can be used to account for time where nothing notable happened. You don't want to write about the thirty minutes your character spends sitting on the toilet unless it has some conflict.

Think of the peaks of conflict during your character's day. The conflict should advance the plot and you will notice a nice increase of pace.

Don't explain that something big took place in one of these time gaps or your reader will feel cheated.

Example: “Michelle packed up and left me last night.” (Show, don't tell.) The reader wants to see the argument and the fighting, her stomping out and slamming the door. Call the police if you must.

17. Ticking clock and quests

A ticking clock elevates the overall level of suspense but it comes with a high price. When the reader takes note of the deadline, every scene containing a character tied to the ticking clock automatically loses suspense. The reader knows they are in no real danger because they have to make it through until the set deadline. Bad things could still happen to a secondary character but that isn't as important.

An improperly used ticking clock adds another layer of disbelief. Secondary characters can be built and placed in major conflict.

The best alternative is to attach the ticking clock to a secondary character or an element of extreme importance to the POV character. For example, the impending doom of a planet, city, species, etc.

The suspense of a quest usually develops around the middle of the story. You can pull suspense to the beginning of the story by introducing elements that are required to reach the goal of the quest. For example, a map or relic with clues is vital to the quest and can be introduced at the beginning of the story. This way, the quest can be jeopardized long before the characters get to the heart of the quest. The map could be stolen and chases could ensue. The characters might have to hide it.

18. Scene structure

Please use outlines. I recommend outlining your story. This organizes your creativity by chapter. Even a loose structure helps. Take the notepad or voice recorder full of ideas and sort them out by chapter. Decide how the characters will interact. The ideas should contribute to the plot.

Who wants to sit and freewrite 90 pages, spend sixty hours revising and then have to cut 50 pages?!

Try to assign three scenes to each chapter of your story. Each scene should drive the plot forward. Begin by defining the objective of the scene. Then find the problem that causes the conflict. Next, decide the outcome of the conflict. Lastly, confirm that the scene either resolves or advances the original problem. (Something has to develop.)

For story and hero archetypes, I recommend reading Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Explore myths, fairytales, Ovid and Homer.

19. First person interior monologue

“I thought” and “I felt” statements have no place in first person POV. This comes back to redundancy. Interior monologue already suggests that the character is thinking. Feelings should be expressed and described without using “I felt.”

Answering questions with interior monologue is fine but be careful not don't overdo it. Each line of thought should have a purpose. Don't go in circles with meaningless babble. Instead, build the character through their actions, choices and reactions to conflict. Opinions and generalizations work best with interior monologue.

20. Jack in the box

“There is no terror in a bang, only in the anticipation of it.”

-Alfred Hitchcock

Cause and effect placed inside a strong setting will suspend the reader's state of disbelief. This works by establishing rules to your setting and your characters must follow these rules. This gives your story world a firm foundation. The rules of the setting reassure the reader with examples of order and stability. The reader will relax and trust in you, the author, to stay within the boundaries that have been set.

Tension comes from the contrast between what is considered normal conflict in your story and the anticipation of the chaotic, like an emerging element of surprise.

If you introduce too many supernatural or alien elements into the story, it becomes unbelievable. (It becomes a bad comedy.)

This is a classic horror formula. Other forms of fiction can crank the tension by introducing elements that threaten the stability of the setting. Tension comes with the anticipation. You can allude and indicate the potential for chaos to keep the reader on the edge of their seat. Tension works like a rollercoaster. It's not being high that gives the thrill, it is the contrast of up and down and left and right. Remember, tension must fall back to normalcy in order to rise.

3 Final tips

1. Limit the protagonist

Characters shouldn't be lucky. Make sure to establish the limits of your protagonist's resources. How many bullets are left? If readers know the character's limits, they will share the sense of panic and urgency.

2. Write to please

If you're writing for publication then you're writing for an audience. If you want to be serious about writing, read books about the craft of writing and read novels in your genre, especially the bad ones. Try to dissect them and then return to the pen. Attack your novel and be super critical, know your archetypes and know your market. Write your dream to satisfy the reader and not yourself.

3. Mug your muse

Creative ideas have been shown to come to people while they are showering, bathing or in their waking moments in the morning. If you are trying to work out a difficult scene, soak in a hot bath.

Also, you can unlock the gates to your creative unconscious by meditating. It has the same physiological result as the aforementioned activities.

About Writefine

Writefine officially opened September, 2007

Writefine is dedicated to helping beginning and struggling writers.

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