

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?

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