

Writerisms and other Sins: A Writer's Shortcut to Stronger Writing

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Writerisms: overused and misused language. In more direct words: find 'em, root 'em out, and look at your prose without the underbrush.

1. **am, is, are, was, were, being, be, been....**combined with **"by"** or with **"by....someone"** implied but not stated. Such structures are passives. In general, limit passive verb use to one or two per book. The word "by" followed by a person is an easy flag for passives.
2. **am, is, are, was, were, being, be, been....**combined with **an adjective**. "He was sad as he walked about the apartment." "He moped about the apartment." A single colorful verb is stronger than any **was + adjective**; but don't slide to the polar opposite and overuse colorful verbs. There are writers that vastly overuse the "be" verb; if you are one, fix it. If you aren't one---don't, because *overfixing* it will commit the next error.
3. **florid verbs**. "The car grumbled its way to the curb" is on the verge of being so colorful it's distracting. {Florid fr. Lat. floreo, to flower.}

If a manuscript looks as if it's sprouted leaves and branches, if every verb is "unusual," if the vocabulary is more interesting than the story...fix it by going to more ordinary verbs. There are vocabulary-addicts who will praise your prose for this but not many who can simultaneously admire your verbs as verbs and follow your story, especially if it has content. The car is not a main actor and not one you necessarily need to make into a character. If its action should be more ordinary and transparent, don't use an odd expression. This is prose.

This statement also goes for unusual descriptions and odd adjectives, nouns, and adverbs.

4. **odd connectives**. Some writers overuse "as" and "then" in an attempt to avoid "and" or "but," which themselves can become a tic. But "as" is only for truly simultaneous action. The common deck of conjunctions available is:
 - o when (temporal)
 - o if (conditional)
 - o since (ambiguous between temporal and causal)
 - o although (concessive)

- because (causal)
- and (connective)
- but (contrasting)
- as (contemporaneous action *or* sub for "because") while (roughly equal to "as")

These are the ones I can think of. If you use some too much and others practically never, be more even-handed. Then, BTW, is originally more of an adverb than a proper conjunction, although it seems to be drifting toward use as a conjunction. However is really a peculiar conjunction, demanding in most finicky usage to be placed *after* the subject of the clause.

Don't forget the correlatives, either...or, neither...nor, and "not only...but also."

And "so that," "in order that," and the far shorter and occasionally merciful infinitive: "to..{verb}something."

5. **Descriptive writerisms.** Things that have become "conventions of prose" that personally stop me cold in text.

"framed by" followed by hair, tresses, curls, or most anything cute.

"swelling bosom"

"heart-shaped face"

"set off by": see "framed by"

"revealed" or "revealed by": see "framed by." Too precious for words when followed by a fashion statement.

mirrors....avoid mirrors, as a basic rule of your life. You get to use them once during your writing career. Save them for more experience. But it doesn't count if they don't reflect...by which I mean see the list above.

If you haven't read enough unpublished fiction to have met the infamous mirror scenes in which Our Hero admires his steely blue eyes and manly chin, you can scarcely imagine how bad they can get.

limpid pools and farm ponds: I don't care what it is, if it reflects your hero and occasions a description of his manly dimple, it's a mirror.

As a general rule...your viewpoint characters should have less, rather than more, description than anyone else: a reader of different skin or hair color ought to be able to sink into this persona without being continually jolted by contrary information.

Stick to what your observer can observe. One's own blushes can be felt, but not seen, unless one is facing....a mirror. See above.

"as he turned, then stepped aside from the descending blow..." First of all, it takes longer to read than to happen: pacing fault. Second, the "then" places action #2 sequentially after #1, which makes the whole evasion sequence a 1-2 which won't work. This guy is dead or the opponent was telegraphing his moves in a panel-by-panel comic book style which won't do for regular prose. Clunky. Slow. Fatally slow.

"Again" or worse "once again." Established writers don't tend to overuse this one: it seems like a neo fault, possibly a mental writerly stammer---lacking a next thing to do, our hero does it "again" or "once again" or "even yet." Toss "still" and "yet" onto the pile and use them sparingly.

6. **Dead verbs. Colorless verbs.**

- walked
- turned
- crossed
- run, ran
- go, went, gone
- leave, left
- have, had
- get, got

You can add your own often used colorless verbs: these are verbs that convey an action but don't add any other information. A verb you've had to modify (change) with an adverb is likely inadequate to the job you assigned it to do.

Colorless verb with inadequate adverb: "He walked slowly across the room."

More informative verb with no adverb: "He trudged across the room," "He paced across the room," "He stalked across the room," each one a different meaning, different situation. But please see problem 3, above, and don't go overboard.

7. **Themely English**

With apologies to hard-working English teachers, school English is not fiction English.

Understand that the meticulous English style you labored over in school, including the use of complete sentences and the structure of classic theme-

sentence paragraphs, was directed toward the production of non-fiction reports, resumes, and other non-fiction applications.

The first thing you have to do to write fiction? Suspect all the English style you learned in school and violate rules at need. Many of those rules will turn out to apply; many won't.

{Be ready to defend your choices. If you are lucky, you will be copyedited. Occasionally the copyeditor will be technically right but fictionally wrong and you will have to tell your editor why you want that particular expression left alone.}

8. **Scaffolding and spaghetti.** Words the sole function of which is to hold up other words. For application only if you are floundering in too many "which" clauses. Do not carry this or any other advice to extremes.

"What it was upon close examination was a mass the center of which was suffused with a glow which appeared rubescient to the observers who were amazed and confounded by this untoward manifestation." Flowery and overstructured. "What they found was a mass, the center of which glowed faintly red. They'd never seen anything like it." The second isn't great lit, but it gets the job done: the first drowns in "which" and "who" clauses.

In other words---be suspicious any time you have to support one needed word (rubescient) with a creaking framework of "which" and "what" and "who." Dump the "which-what-who" and take the single descriptive word. Plant it as an adjective in the main sentence.

9. **A short cut to "who" and "whom."**

- o Nominative: who
- o Possessive: whose
- o Objective: whom

The rule:

4. **treat the "who-clause" as a mini-sentence.** If you could substitute "he" for the who-whom, it's a "who." If you could substitute "him" for the who-whom it's a "whom."

The trick is where ellipsis has occurred...or where parentheticals have been inserted...and the number of people in important and memorable places who get it wrong. "Who...do I see?" Wrong: I see he? No. I see "him." Whom do I see?

5. **"Who" never changes case to match an antecedent.** (word to which it refers)

I blame them who made the unjust law. CORRECT.

It is she whom they blame. CORRECT: The who-clause is WHOM THEY BLAME.

They blame HER=him, =whom.

I am the one WHO is at fault. CORRECT.

I am the one WHOM they blame. CORRECT.

They took him WHOM they blamed. CORRECT---but not because WHOM matches HIM: that doesn't matter: correct because "they" is the subject of "blamed" and "whom" is the object.

I am he WHOM THEY BLAME. CORRECT. Whom is the "object" of "they blame." Back to rule one: "who" clauses are completely independent in case from the rest of the sentence. The case of "who" in its clause changes by the internal logic of the clause and by NO influence outside the clause. Repeat to yourself: there is no connection, there is no connection 3 x and you will never mistake for whom the bell tolls.

The examples above probably grate over your nerves. That's why "that" is gaining in popularity in the vernacular and why a lot of copyeditors will correct you incorrectly on this point. I'm beginning to believe that nine tenths of the English-speaking universe can't handle these little clauses.

10. "-ing.

Shouldering his pack and setting forth, he crossed the river..." No, he didn't. Not unless his pack was in the river. Implies simultaneity. The participles are just like any other verbal form. They aren't a substitute legal everywhere, or a quick fix for a complex sequence of motions. Write them on the fly if you like, but once imbedded in text they're hard to search out when you want to get rid of their repetitive cadence, because -ing is part of so many fully constructed verbs {am going, etc.}

-ness

A substitute for thinking of the right word. "Darkness," "unhappiness," and such come of tacking -ness (or occasionally - ion) onto words. There's often a better answer. Use it as needed.

As a general rule, use a major or stand-out vocabulary word only once a paragraph, maybe twice a page, and if truly outre, only once per book. Parallels are clear and proper exceptions to this, and don't vary your word choice to the point of silliness: see error 3.

CHERRYH'S LAW: NO RULE SHOULD BE FOLLOWED OFF A CLIFF.