

**DEBORAH RANEY's** first novel, *A Vow to Cherish*, inspired a World Wide Pictures



film and launched her writing career after 20 happy years as a stay-at-home mom. Deb's newest novel, *The Face of the Earth*, released in May from Howard/

Simon & Schuster. She and her husband have four children and four grandchildren, who all live much too far away. You can learn more about her at [debraney.com](http://debraney.com).

**Self-editing:**

## Search And Destroy

*By Deborah Raney*

Speaker attributions or tags (*he said, she asked*) are necessary in fiction to keep the reader from being confused about who said what, and sometimes to show the manner in which the speaker said the line (*he muttered, she whispered*). But too often, when I'm editing my manuscript, I discover I've been heavy-handed with speaker attributions and have used those tags in places where they aren't needed.

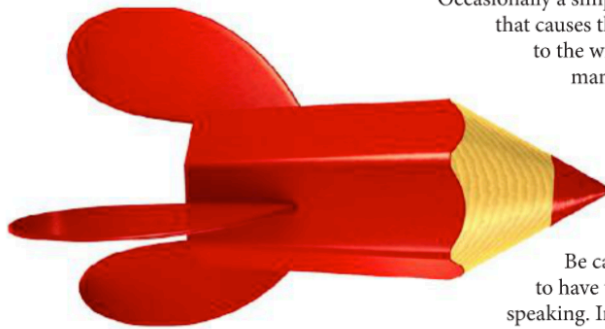
I always search my manuscript for "he said" (which also picks up instances of "she said") in an effort to eliminate as many unnecessary attributions as possible.

Be careful, too, about redundancies. *She muttered under her breath. He whispered quietly.* Is there any other way to mutter? Isn't *quiet* the definition of a whisper? If the verb is clear on its own, let it stand alone.

And don't forget that a character shouldn't "laugh" or "smile" a line (as in, "You're too funny," she laughed.) though she might get away with "huffing" or "whining" a line (as in, "Not me," she huffed.)

As a general rule, it's best to avoid flashier tags (declared, retorted, opined, etc.) and stick with "said" as your go-to attribution. "Said" tends to be invisible to the reader. You don't want speaker attributions to draw attention to the writing itself, thus taking the reader out of the story.

Occasionally a simple "he said" injects an important rhythmic beat into the sentence that causes the reader to pause for effect or that adds a lyrical, musical quality to the writing. This is one of the main reasons I recommend reading your manuscript aloud at least once before calling your first draft finished.



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Be careful to not be too aggressive in killing attributions. It's better to have too many tags, than for the reader to be confused about who is speaking. In scenes where there are two or more characters of the same gender, it's often necessary to use a tag to identify which "she" you mean. Avoiding confusion for the reader trumps other rules about speaker attributions—for that matter, avoiding confusion for the reader probably trumps *any* other rule of writing.

A tip: Try this idea as you write to help you use speaker attributions effectively. Write long blocks of dialogue with no speaker attributions at all, then, when you go back to edit the scene, insert the beats (action) and tags (speaker attributions) wherever they seem necessary for clarity, rhythm, or to show rather than tell. This method works well for me.

While you don't want to overdo beats—*she sighed, he raked a hand through his hair*, etc.—often an action beat that serves as an attribution is less likely to draw attention to itself, and more likely to help a writer show instead of tell.