

Jerry Jenkins Writers Guild Thick-Skinned Advice for Writers

For all writing:

- *Develop a thick skin.* Every piece of published writing is a duet between editor and writer, not a solo.
- *Avoid throat-clearing*, an editor's term for a story or chapter that finally begins after a page or two of scene setting and background. Get on with it.
- *Choose the normal word* over the obtuse.
- *Omit needless words.*
- *Avoid subtle redundancies*, like: "She nodded her head in agreement." The last four words could be deleted. "He clapped his hands." What else would he clap? "She shrugged her shoulders." What else? "He blinked his eyes." Same question. "They heard the sound of a train whistle." *The sound of* could be deleted.
- *Avoid the words up and down* — unless they're really needed. He rigged [up] the device. She sat [down] on the couch.
- *Usually delete the word* that.
- *Give the reader credit.* Once you've established something you don't need to repeat it. And avoid quotation marks around words used in another context, as if the reader wouldn't "get it" otherwise. (See how subtly insulting that is?)
- *Avoid telling what's not happening.* "He didn't respond." "She didn't say anything." "The crowded room never got quiet."
- *Avoid being an adjectival maniac (A.M.).* Good writing is a thing of strong nouns and verbs, not adjectives. Use them sparingly. Novelist and editor Sol Stein says one plus one equals one-half, meaning the power of your words is diminished by not picking just the better one.
"His big, fluffy winter coat was warm and toasty."
Better: "He chose his toastiest coat and ventured out."
"The big, wet dog made its way down the hard, cold steps and nervously padded over to the redbrick fireplace where he lay on a ratty, tattered carpet remnant."
Better: "Buck shook the rain from his coat and gingerly made his way to the basement, where he stretched out on the piece of carpet before the fireplace."
- *Avoid hedging verbs:* smiled *slightly*, almost laughed, frowned *a bit*, etc.
- *Avoid the term literally* — when you mean *figuratively*. "I literally died when I heard that." "My eyes literally fell out of my head." "I was literally climbing the walls."
- *Avoid too much stage direction*, feeling the need to tell every action of every character in the scene, what they're doing with each hand, etc.

Especially in fiction (*but also in nonfiction anecdotes*):

- *Maintain a single Point of View (POV) for every scene.* Failing to do so is one of the most common errors beginning writers make.
- *Avoid clichés*, and not just words and phrases. *Also situations* (beginning with the main character waking to an alarm clock; describing self while looking in a mirror; having future love interests literally bumping into each other at first meeting, etc.).
- *Avoid on-the-nose writing* (a Hollywood term for writing that exactly mirrors real life without adding to the story).
- *Resist the urge to explain* (RUE). Marian ~~was mad~~. She pounded the table. “George, you’re going to drive me crazy,” she said, ~~angrily~~.
- *Show, don’t tell.* If Marian pounds the table and chooses those words, we don’t need to be told she’s mad.
- *Avoid mannerisms of attribution.* People *say* things; they don’t wheeze, gasp, sigh, laugh, grunt, snort, reply, retort, exclaim, or declare them.

John dropped onto the couch. “I’m beat.”

Not: John was exhausted. He dropped onto the couch and exclaimed tiredly, “I’m beat.”

“I hate you,” Jill said, narrowing her eyes.

Not: “I hate you,” Jill hissed ferociously.

Sometimes people whisper or shout or mumble, but let your choice of words imply whether they are grumbling, etc. If it’s important that they sigh or laugh, separate the action from the dialogue: Jim sighed. “I just can’t take any more,” he said. [*Usually you can even drop the attribution he said if you have described his action first. We know who’s speaking.*]

- *Specifics add the ring of truth*, even to fiction.
The 4:06 train was two minutes late, Marge thought as she stood drying dishes before the west-facing window that looked out on the Burlington-Northern tracks. She wondered if there had been a problem at the depot at Main and Walnut that would keep Jim from getting home on time.
- *Avoid similar character names.* In fact, avoid even the same first initials.
- *Avoid mannerisms of punctuation, typesyles, and sizes.* “He...was...**DEAD!**” doesn’t make a character any more dramatically expired than “He was dead.”

© 2015 by Jerry B. Jenkins

If teaching from this, credit the Jerry Jenkins Writers Guild

Do not reproduce without specific written permission