

Journalism/Creative Writing Extended Project Fiction Track

Step Ten: Things to Avoid

We've gone over these earlier in the class, but I just wanted you to revisit them and scour your work so far and see if there's anything you need to change or replace.

Go through this list (it's a combined list of things I've given you before) and make sure you don't have any of it in your work so far. If you do, go ahead and change it now/stop using them moving forward. It will make your piece stronger.

10 Weak Words to Cut from Your Writing:

1. **Suddenly**–The only time you should use “suddenly” is when something is *actually* sudden. It shouldn't just be your introductory word to a sentence/paragraph because you need some sort of a transition. Besides, even if it is sudden, it is typically *better to describe the thing that was happened suddenly* rather than just use the shortcut of the word “suddenly.”
2. **Then**–“Then” is just filler. We know that one thing happens, THEN another thing happens. Duh. Just take out “then” and typically the sentence still works (and sounds stronger as a result).
3. **Very/Really**– We all know the rule: don't say you're “very tired”, say you're exhausted. Using a weak word and tagging “very” or “really” on the front doesn't make it stronger. Just pick a stronger word.
4. **Is/Was**–We've already talked about these, but using is/was is using passive voice. It's telling, not showing. Whenever you tell me something that IS or WAS, there is no action attached to it.
5. **Started**–There are very few instances where the term “start to” is necessary. Just cut it!
6. **Just**–Basically, ask yourself: will it make sense if I delete “just”? Ninety-nine percent of the time, the answer is yes.
7. **Somewhat/Slightly**–If a character does something slightly or somewhat, the word you're using is probably too strong for the scene (its like the opposite of using very/really with weak words). Oftentimes you can remove the word “slightly” and it reads just fine. Only use slightly/somewhat when there is absolutely no weaker word to describe.
8. **Somehow**–Using “somehow” is a make of lazy writing. The reader feels like they missed something–and they did, because there is a missing link in your chain of information. Only use “somehow” when the character's POV is the one missing information.
9. **Seem**–Chances are, if you're using the word “seem” to describe something, you're just weaseling your way out of action. Yes, the POV charter is

- perceiving something (so it “seems” to them), but you don’t have to tell us that. It’s assumed. Just tell us what they are perceiving and how.
10. **Definitely**–Definitely is pretty useless. It’s like the narrator insisting that what they believe is true, but in a totally dry, muddy way that just makes it harder to read the sentence. You can almost always cut this word.

Bland Descriptions:

Bland descriptions of bland moments are normal and necessary. The only thing you want to watch for is not being basic enough. Don’t waste your readers time on things that don’t actually matter.

For Example:

He stood from the chair and walked across the floor to the window.

This is too wordy for such a simple action. Simplify the sentence, like so:

He stood and walked to the window.

Moment/Second/Minute:

Most of the time, these words don’t add anything and are therefore unneeded.

He sat down for a moment, sipping his coffee.

vs.

He sat down and sipped his coffee.

Keep an eye on your “was”

A quick, powerful way to tighten up your writing: try and cut down on using the word “was” by at least half and rephrase those sentences to have more active, dynamic verbs and more robust descriptions.

Compare:

She was wearing a white dress that offset the tan of her skin, and her hair was coiffed into tight ringlet curls.

vs.

The dress hugged her figure, the white fabric a bright contrast against her late-summer tan. Her hair, coiled into tight ringlets, bounced around her shoulders.

If you cut “was” out of the equation, all of a sudden all of your sentences are going to require action verbs. Stuff will have to happen. And that can only be good for your writing.

Cut Out “Thought” Words

Challenge yourself to not use “thought” words as you write. These include: think, knows, understands, realizes, believes, wants, remembers, Imagines, desires, wonder, and a hundred others you love to use.

So, you wouldn’t write, “ Kenny wondered if Monica didn’t like him going out at night.”

Instead you would have to unpack it to say something like, “The mornings after Kenny had stayed out late, after the last bus had left, he’d had to bum a ride or pay for a cab and would get home to find Monica faking sleep. She never slept that quiet. Those mornings, she’d only make coffee enough for herself. Never him.”

Instead of the characters knowing anything, you had to present the details that allow the character to know them. Instead of a character wanting something, you have to describe it so that the reader wants it, too. Thinking is abstract. Knowing and believing are intangible. Your writing will always be stronger if you just show the physical actions and details of your characters and allow your reader to do the thinking and knowing.

Warning Signs of Amateurish Writing

1. Excessive Punctuation

Refers to sentences that end in two or more !, ?, or worse, ?!. But it also refers to frequent exclamation point usage.

2. Unrealistic Character Actions

A character gasps dramatically at stunning news. A wounded character “suddenly finds the strength” to run. A character who was just crying is now laughing. See the pattern? Beyond action, this applies to dialogue. No realistic sibling would say, “Hey, lil’ bro.”

3. Opening Every New Scene the Same Way

A lot of new writers will open a scene with a character waking up. That’s only natural, right? I mean, if you think of the start of your own day, it starts with waking up. Even if you don’t start by a character waking up, it’s important to be mindful that your scene openers don’t follow the same pattern. It can start to get melancholic. Mix it up a little! Play around with your openers. It’s fun to get creative with it. If you’re editing, it helps to cut everything up till where the action starts.

4. Unnecessary Scenes

If you keep a scene you had to cut just because you like it, that’s a bad sign. If the story still reads fine without the scene, that’s a good sign it should be cut.

5. Unnecessary Word Choice

This applies to two things: One: filler words like was, that, and so. Two: using out-of-place words to make your writing “more intelligent,” especially if you use a thesaurus.

6. **Imbalanced Dialogue**

The trick with action writing is to balance dialogue and, well, action. On one end of the scale, you can have a scene that's all dialogue and little action. It can get boring. Your readers are thinking, just do something already! On the opposite end, however, it's all too common to have scenes that are all action. Just say something already!

7. **Poor Pacing**

Fast pacing is when the scene seems to move quickly, like a chase scene. Slow pacing is, you guessed it, slow; like a heartfelt scene. But mess it up, and your readers will either get overwhelmed by the speed, or bored by the gradual pulling along. Quick words and short sentences make fast pacing. While longer words, more punctuation, and lengthy paragraphs tend to slow the writing. Neither are "bad."

8. **Static Characters**

Your readers want a diverse, entertaining cast of characters. And to pull it off, they can't be duplicates of one another. They also can't be stereotypical, cookie-cutter characters.