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Common Fiction Mistakes

0 Comments

I am irritated by my own writing. I am like a violinist whose ear is true, but whose fingers refuse to reproduce precisely the sound he hears within. **Gustave Flaubert**

I've been editing for a while now and have noticed some patterns amongst new/beginning writers. Actually, I've noticed these with established writers, too, so don't peg yourself a "beginner" because of this list!



When I started writing in the 90s, I knew very little about the craft. I just knew when I had a compelling story idea and wanted to get it down on paper for the masses to enjoy. I didn't realize my readers would enjoy it more if I took the time to make it the best it could be. Consequently, I made a lot of mistakes. In fact, it's tough for me to go back and read those first few published books without a little shiver running down

my spine. Oh, how I wish I could return to the scene of the crime and edit them properly!

SO, WHAT MISTAKES ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT, ANYWAY?

The following is a list of common mistakes writers make. I know these issues well, because I've struggled with many of them in my own writing.

MISTAKE #1: Weak opening paragraphs and lines

I'm sure you've heard this a thousand times, but the opening of your story needs to hook the reader. How do you do that? Jump right into the action. Start with a line of dialogue, and make it one that raises questions. Or, start with an action that makes

the reader wonder where the story is headed. Do not start with a simple opening line or with lengthy descriptive narrative. Hook the reader right away and continue to hook him at the end of each chapter.

MISTAKE #2: Telling, when you should be showing

If you haven't figured out the difference between the two, please check out the lesson on "Show Don't Tell." This is such a common problem. "Telling" the story (i.e. Jane's eyes were blue) when you should be showing it. (Karl stared across the room, taking note of the fact that Jane's eyes matched her pale blue blouse). It's quite a temptation. Pay close attention!

MISTAKE #3: Overuse of passive verbs

If your sentences contain a lot of passive verbs (is/are/was/were) you're probably using the passive voice. Choose strong, active verbs to make your manuscript sizzle!

MISTAKE #4: Repetition

(i.e. starting sentences and chapters with same word without realizing it). Writers tend to have "pet" words (words that appear repetitively throughout the document). Check your manuscript carefully for repeated words, paying particular attention to the words you use to open a sentence.

MISTAKE #5: Characters lacking depth.

Read through your manuscript to see if your characters are layered enough. Check their motivations. What makes them tick? No cookie-cutter characters, please.

MISTAKE #6: Creating characters that are too perfect.

Sometimes, in the quest to create variety, a writer will present characters that are just too, well, perfect. Problem is, there are no perfect people in the world, and readers know it. Be careful not to make your bad guys all bad, or your good guys all good. We're all a little of each, you know!

MISTAKE #7: Making all characters same race/dialect/region, etc.

This is something that is often overlooked by writers. Add some variety to your characters. Don't make them all alike.

MISTAKE #8: POV issues.

For a thorough introduction to POV (point of view) refer to our lesson on the subject. Basically, you want to stay in one character's head/thoughts per scene. No head-hopping. No jumping around. This is a major temptation for newbies. Become a POV purist!

MISTAKE #9: Poor plotting

I see a lot of weak/predictable stories. Not just poorly written stories, mind you, but story ideas that just aren't "great" conceptually. Usually there's not enough to them. Lay out a careful plotline, making sure you've got a "real" story before committing to it. And please, please make sure you have that "belly of the whale" scene at about the 2/3 point in the story—the point where the reader wonders how/if the characters are going to make it. This is critical, regardless of the genre.

MISTAKE #10: Poor balance of narrative and dialogue

Some books are narrative heavy and others are dialogue heavy. Keep an eye on the balance between the two. If you find that you're filling page after page with dialogue, mix it up by adding plenty of narrative. Instead of tags (he said/she said) add beats of action. Watch out for lengthy sections of narrative. Writers often slip into passive voice when the narrative goes on too long. And remember, the reader needs a good amount of white space on the page to rest the eye. Keep that in mind as you bounce back and forth between sections of dialogue and narrative.

MISTAKE #11: Weak, rambling settings

Be creative about your settings. Don't always choose the same places. Consider using your setting as a character. I did this in my book *Hurricane*, where Galveston Island became a character in the story. Be careful about your description of settings, too. Instead of narrating, use "The Red Pillow Approach." Here's how you do that. Instead of describing an entire room, pinpoint one unusual element in that room. For example, instead of telling: "This room had a brown chair, a brown sofa and blue drapes," hone in on the one thing that doesn't make sense to the room. The random red pillow on the sofa.

MISTAKE #12: Believability

Is everything in your story completely believable? If you're using humor, you might get away with a bit of suspended disbelief, but in serious pieces it's a lot tougher. Make sure everything is as realistic as it can be.

MISTAKE #13: Timeline and consistency issues

Make sure the thread of action makes sense, and double-check things like eye color,

hair color/length, etc.

MISTAKE #14: Overuse of adverbs

-ly words are not your friend, at least not in professional writing. You can sprinkle in a few, but not many.

MISTAKE #15: Information overload

Perhaps you don't even realize you're doing this. Your story will be moving along nicely, and then, bam. You start to dump information – often back-story – to bring the reader up to speed. Whenever you have important information to add, do so in snippets. A little goes a long way.

MISTAKE #16: Inverted sentences

I see these a lot when editing for new clients. Writers twist up their sentences, putting action in the beginning when it should be at the end (or vice-versa). Look at your sentences and ask: "Is this the best way to say this?"

MISTAKE #17: Lack of tension/conflict

Some editors like to see writers ratchet up the tension on every page. This can be done internally and externally. Even if there's no external tension (say, no hurricane blowing in off the Gulf) your POV character might still go through internal storms.

MISTAKE #18: Purple prose

Trying to "high-brow" or write in an unnatural way. Beware of flowery language. Unless you're a true literary writer, you'll want to stick to the basics, and not write to

impress.

MISTAKE #19: Sermonizing

If you care more about the “point” (the message) than the story/characters, you’ve got a problem. You want readers to fall in love with your characters and woo them with your gentle message.

MISTAKE #20: Inflexibility

I’ve met a lot of people who are so married to their story that they refuse to make any changes to it. This is a huge no-no if you want to work hand-in-

hand with an editor on your project. While you might have a great story, there will always be ways to make it better. Lean on the professionalism of those God places in your path. Let them help you through the process—and don’t take offense. Have a teachable spirit.

ONE MORE TO ADD TO OUR LIST:

Don’t make assumptions with your research. Look it up. Be sure of your sources and mindful of your “Rule of Threes.” (Verify your source three times.)

Don’t be embarrassed by the mistakes you make along the way. We all make them. Learn from those fiction errors and be stronger for it.

BLUNDER-MANIA!

- This should make you feel better about your mistakes. [Check out this site to see hundreds of literary blunders.](#)

- Another great site that points out [book errors](#). Here's another fun one. Take a look at this site to see [hundreds of movie slip-ups](#).
- [More movie mistakes](#) here!

GREAT SITES THAT POINT OUT FICTION MISTAKES

- [Five Fiction Mistakes that Spell Rejection](#)
- [Avoid These Common Fiction Writing Mistakes Like the Plague](#)

POLITICAL SPEECH BLUNDERS & BLOOPERS

- Check them out [here](#)!

FACTUAL ERRORS IN SONG LYRICS:

- [These](#) are fun!

RECOMMENDED READING

- [The 38 Most Common Fiction Writing Mistakes](#) (by Jack Bickham)

By JThompson
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Fiction Lessons

Edit

← Seven Secrets to Creating the Perfect Ending

Editing: Show, Don't Tell! →

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