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Top 12 Mistakes of Amateur Writers

Written by Chaitali Gawade | September 16, 2015

When I was a new writer, I wondered why I kept getting rejection letters. I was tired of never making it past the slush pile. I wanted to get an acceptance letter from one of my ‘dream markets.’

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Doubt started creeping in, making me question my ability as a writer.

Fortunately, I kept at it. Here are twelve major mistakes that I learned to avoid. Hopefully they can help you achieve your dreams of publishing success.

1) Grammar

“A man’s grammar, like Caesar’s wife, should not only be pure, but above suspicion of impurity.” – Edgar Allan Poe

No self respecting editor is going to reach the end of a story if it is riddled with grammar mistakes. It shows lack of commitment to your writing and states loud and clear of newbie status to the craft of writing.

2) Avoid purple prose

“Atticus told me to delete the adjectives and I’d have the facts.” – Harper Lee

A story decorated with adjectives and adverbs isn’t necessarily a mark of a good writer. Rather than inviting the reader in the fictional dream, it pulls the reader out of the story. Don’t spend too much time shaping sugary sentences, forgetting to get to the heart of the conflict.

3) Sentences beginning with infinite-verb phrases

As a ground rule avoid opening sentences with an infinite-verb. Consider the following sentence “Plucking the budding shoots and watering the pots, she retired for the night.” It implies that all the actions of the subject are simultaneous. The only exception to this rule is when you want to slow the action or create more tension in an important scene.

4) Get rid of passive voice

Passive voice is weak and doesn’t leave much of an impact on the reader. It lacks the force of active voice. Furthermore, passive voice tends to sound pretentious and does little to invite the reader into the story.

5) Over description

“Description begins in the writer’s imagination, but should finish in the reader’s.” – Stephen King

Yes, you want your reader to be able to imagine the exact shade of the blue door in your story. But after a

while it gets tedious for the reader. It is not only a question of how you describe but also how much you describe. Too much description leaves the reader feeling as if the writer is talking down to them rather than *to* them.

6) Too many words and not saying enough

Be clear and concise in your writing. A good way to practice this is to try writing flash fiction. It forces you to sharpen your sentences and quickly getting to the heart of your story. Edit your sentences thoroughly to tighten your writing.

7) No sentence variation

Using the same structure and length of sentences can get redundant for a reader. Try varying sentence length and structure to break the monotony.

8) Get rid of adverbs

“I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs, and I will shout it from the rooftops.” – Stephen King

Avoid using adverbs, especially in dialogue attribution. Adverbs give the impression of a weak writer.

9) Use of clunky words that require the help of a dictionary

You have a rich vocabulary but that does not mean that the story has to be riddled with every uncommon word you know. The point is not to impress the reader with your rich vocabulary but to tell the story as best as you can.

10) Sensory detail

Most of us tend to do justice to the sense of sight in our stories. However, the sense of smell, sight, touch and taste are largely neglected. These are powerful tools for a writer to plant the reader firmly into the story.

11) Show don't tell

“Don't say the moon is shining. Show me the glint of light on broken glass” Anton Chekhov

This is the advice given to most writers at the start of their career. This however takes time to bring in practice. It requires conscious effort. Practice till ‘showing’ becomes instinctive to your writing.

Don't say, “John is angry”. Show John swearing, lashing out, and tearing things to pieces.

12) Clichés

Nothing can make a reader abandon your book faster than an overused cliché. Avoid them like a dreaded disease.

Bio: Chaitali Gawade is a writer fueled by tea and coffee. Her work has been published by Twenty20 Journal, Daily Love, Postcard Shots, Duckbill Anthology and Vagabondage Press, among others. Check out her writerly musings at chaitaligawade.com

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