



TOP TEN FIXES THAT CAN MAKE A MANUSCRIPT SHINE

by Sylvie Kurtz

Over the years I've looked at hundreds of beginner writers' work. Here are the top ten mechanical problems I see over and over again and their fixes. I've listed them in no specific order.

1. **Vague Language.** Many beginner writers write with vague language. They see the image clearly in their heads and forget that the reader can't crawl inside their mind to view the same image. What shows up on the page lacks sharp definition and becomes dull gray: *the dog ran in a field of flowers*. Judgments, such as beautiful, ugly, fantastic, and ordinary, also fail to create pictures. What you and I consider beautiful could prove worlds apart.

- Fix: Use concrete, specific, colorful language that will pop vivid images in the reader's mind to keep him reading. This anchors him into your fictional world and makes him feel part of the adventure. What do you want the reader to see? *The golden retriever puppy frolicked in a field of bluebonnets*. Sensory details, such as hot, musty, sweet, screeching, purple, create physical experiences in the reader.

2. **Telling.** Beginners often write as if they're telling an incident to someone over a cup of coffee. The problem with telling is that it's flat, often dull. Telling also tends to flatline emotions, because it's distancing. If you tell the reader that the character is sad or angry or happy, you cheat the reader out of the experience, and the experience is why he's reading. Telling is vague, intangible, and abstract. It creates no picture and rarely implies emotion. *She was nervous*.

- Fix: Show. Relate the information from a specific character's point of view. Become the character. Show what's happening in real time, using dialogue, thoughts, feelings and actions. What's she worrying about, fearing, hoping? What's she doing? *She sat knees pressed together, fingers working on some sort of invisible scarf. Will this waiting ever end?* The nervous tension shows without having to name the emotion.

3. **Passive Voice.** The verb *to be* in all its forms (is, are, was, were, am, be, been, being) tends to result in a passive voice. Passive cousins also include: begin, become, do, has, and seem. These vague constructions tend to have the subject being acted upon, or leave out the subject altogether. *The novel was being penned by the writer*.

If you use begin, then the action stops. *He began to play the piano.* All you're giving the reader is the first few notes.

- Fix: Go for strong verbs. Active verbs propel your story forward. They produce motion, emotion, and image, which engage your reader's mind and keep him involved with what's happening on the page. Often all you have to do is turn a sentence around to let the subject do the acting. Now, technically, *The writer was penning the novel* is active, but by avoiding the -ing, you can achieve a faster, more immediate action, and a clearer image. *The writer penned the novel.*

4. **Stilted Dialogue.** For some reason, beginner writers want their characters to all speak perfectly.

"Nancy, I am going to the store in a moment. Would you like to come with me?" Anne asked chirpily.

"Why, yes, Anne, I would like to come with you."

"Okay, Nancy, I am leaving in five minutes."

"Yes, Anne, I will be ready by then."

- Fix: When someone calls on the phone, you can usually tell who's talking by the sound of their voice. Characters also need to sound different from each other and reflect who they are. Think about what makes your character stand out: grammar, word choice, dialect (use sparingly), speech pattern, pet phrase, sentence structure, internal dialogue, and action. Real people rarely use each other's names in conversation.

"Hey, Nance, I'm going to the mall in a bit." Ann's voice chirped like a goldfinch on the other end of the line. "Wanna come with?"

Nancy jumped at the chance to get out of the house that had grown claustrophobic these last few days. "Would you mind stopping at the farmer's market on the way home? I want some fresh corn for dinner."

"No problem. See you in five."

5. **Dialogue Tags.** Beginner writers often want to add color lacking in the rest of their manuscripts by using creative dialogue tags. *"I'm leaving," he announced. "He's gone," she wailed. "Will you be okay?" she commiserated.* This tends to show ("He's gone"), then tell (wailed). You don't need both. And reading too many of these fancy tags in a row can get tedious.

- Fix: If you need a tag, stick to said or asked. Said and asked are invisible to the reader; anything else brings attention to itself and slows down the reader. Even better, use action to show the emotional state of your character. *She patted her friend on the back. "Will you be okay?"*

6. **Adverb Overuse.** The first place beginners want to add an adverb is after a tag to shore up weak dialogue. *She said icily. He said fervently. She said evasively.* This tells rather than shows. The second instance where beginners tend to go on adverb overload is to shore up a weak verb. *He walked quickly.*

- Fix: Let your dialogue speak for itself. Instead of "*How would I know?*" *she said icily*, let her anger show in her choice of words, "*How in the world would I know?*" Or add an action that shows her anger. *She slapped the book on top of the table.* "*How would I know?*" Instead of using two weaker words to show an action, look for one stronger verb, and allow that verb to show emotional state. How does your character walk? *He ambled.* *He strode.* *He scurried.* All three reflect a different emotional state.
7. **As and -ing Sentence Constructions.** As and -ing imply that the action in both clauses happens at the same time. This often leads to physically impossible action. *Crossing the room, he plopped down on the recliner.* You can't cross a room and sit down at the same time. These constructions are considered hack and dilute both actions.
- Fix: Use these constructions sparingly. If you must use one, make sure both actions can happen at the same time. Most people can, for example, walk and chew gum at the same time.
8. **Filters.** He saw, he knew, he felt, he heard, he smelled are all filters that distance the reader from the action, making him feel as if he's stuck in the back of a theater rather than standing on stage with the characters. *He heard the stairs creak.* *He saw the shadow move across the wallpaper.* *He felt ice brush across his skin.* *Then he smelled sulfur and knew death had found him.*
- Cure: To achieve a more immediate effect, often all you need to do is remove the filter. *The stairs creaked.* *A shadow stretched across the wallpaper.* *An icy finger brushed against his cheek, and the reek of sulfur filled the room.* *Death had found him.*
9. **Weedy Words.** Words like *just*, *always*, *really*, and *very* don't add anything to a story. Qualifiers like *probably*, *might be*, *kind of*, *little*, *a lot*, *quite*, and *rather* only add hesitation. Also the problem with *thing is* or *it is* or *they were* is that they don't evoke sight, sound, taste, touch, or smell. These insubstantial words water down your prose. *She was rather tall.* How tall is rather? And if the reader stops to try to figure out what your *it* or *that* stands for, you're yanking him out of your story dream, which can distract him long enough to put down the book. *It was a dark and stormy night.*
- Fix: Weedy words are fat and flab you can easily cut for leaner prose. *The top of her up-do swished against the ceiling.* Look for concrete and specific words that convey precise meaning. *Lightning crazed the night sky.* *Thunder shook the house.* *And rain pelted the windows in frantic fists.*

10. Information Dumps. New writers often feel that a reader needs to understand a character's whole history before she can get the story. This leads to stories starting with huge information dumps that numb the reader.

- Fix: Start with action to hook the reader into your story. Make her ask a question that forces her to read on to get the answer. Weave background information through the action and dialogue. Give information to the reader as he needs it to understand what's going on and why and no more.

Good writing uses concrete, specific, colorful language, and strong, active verbs to create vivid images. These pictures produce immediacy that anchors the reader into your fictional world. And when she reaches, 'The End,' she wonders where time went. In reality, we're not story tellers, but story weavers.

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