

COMMON NEW WRITER MISTAKES

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First Things First

- If it works, it works
- Don't go looking for problems in your writing. If people read it and want more, you're doing something right.
- But...If they say it's "slow" or "they couldn't get into it" or "it didn't keep their interest" then you might want to see if you're doing one of the following.

And Another Thing Before We Start

- Every single mistake we're going to talk about today has been done at least once in a very successful book.
- At the end of the day, story trumps everything.
- The goal is to get out of the story's way so your readers can experience it.

Mistake One

Having a Character Describe Their Own Reflection

The Issue

- Usually writers learn not to use a mirror to do this and instead use a convenient reflective surface instead, but it's all part of the same issue.
- If you're realistically in first- or deep third person point of view—in other words inside your character's head—how likely are they to look at themselves and spend a lot of time thinking about how they look?
 - Especially with dramatic words like “striking violet eyes and lush brown hair”

It Can Work

However, here's an example from a book that has sold over 100 million copies

“I scowl with frustration at myself in the mirror. Damn my hair—it just won’t behave....I roll my eyes in exasperation and gaze at the pale, brown-haired girl with blue eyes too big for her face staring back at me, and give up. My only option is to restrain my wayward hair in a ponytail and hope that I look semi-presentable.”

It Can Work (Cont.)

- For the curious, that was from *50 Shades of Grey* by E.L. James.
- Why does it work? Because the paragraph stays in character even though she's describing herself.
- But, as a new writer, especially if you're trying to go the trade publishing/ agented route, it's risky to start a story this way.

A Better Approach

- So what can you do?
 - Don't describe the character at all. Does it actually matter what color their eyes are? And will readers remember even if you tell them?
 - Only include details that are relevant to characterization and their experience of the world.
 - For example, *Luke sifted through the pile of castoff shirts, muttering darkly to himself when the only shirt that came remotely close to being big enough to fit him turned out to be puke green and torn in five places. Great. Just what he needed.*

A Better Approach (cont.)

■ What else?

- Have someone else describe the character. Even better if it reveals something about both the character and the one describing them.

- *“My son is the oaf at the end in the mismatched socks.”*

Luke pretended he hadn't heard his mother, but secretly he was pleased she'd noticed the socks he'd chosen so carefully that morning just to annoy her.

- *“My son is the one all the girls can't stop staring at. He got his father's looks.”*

Luke cringed. He loved his mother, but the only reason the girls couldn't stop staring at him was because he was tall, gangly, and had forgotten to brush his hair so it stuck out in ten directions, all of them the wrong one.

A Better Approach (Cont.)

- What else?
 - Have the character describe themselves in their thoughts in opposition to someone else in their life.
 - *Sarah waved at Hilary, wincing in envy as men turned to stare at Hilary's statuesque figure and curves, something Sarah would never have, no matter how long she lived.*

Final Thoughts

- Notice that it's far easier to describe a character negatively if you're in their point of view. Otherwise they'll sound arrogant and obnoxious and you lose reader engagement.
- The only time you can get away with it is if they're privately defending themselves from someone's unfair criticism.
- Either that, or make it so over-the-top that we love them for being so brashly self-involved.

Mistake Two

Writing a Great Beginning That Doesn't Fit the Story

The Issue

- This is usually a consequence of misapplying the advice to start a story in a way that will grip or “hook” the reader which generally defaults to starting with an action scene.
- That works if your novel is a non-stop action-packed adventure.
- But what if you’re writing a slow-paced romance? Or a literary novel about grief? Or a science fiction novel about the deeply personal experience of raising a clone of yourself?

Why Doesn't It Work?

- Starting with an opening scene that doesn't match your novel makes the wrong promise to the reader and attracts the wrong audience.
- It may very well get you sales, but it won't get you fans.
 - Those who like what you're actually writing will never buy it in the first place.
 - Those who wanted a story like the beginning promised will be disappointed when the rest of the book doesn't match the promise of the first chapter and will never buy you again.

A Better Approach

- Write an engaging first chapter *for your type of reader*.
- That means you have to know what you're writing first, which may mean you only write the first chapter (or significantly revise it) *after* you've written the rest of the novel.

Mistake Three

Describing Every Last Action in Detail

Why Doesn't It Work?

- It's boring.
- Most daily actions are filler. They aren't the heart of the story.
- Readers don't care that Joe woke up on the left side of the bed, turned off his alarm, walked to the bathroom down the hall, took a shower, and put on jeans and a t-shirt. Readers want to get to the part where Joe's school is blown up by an alien spaceship.

It Can Work

- I once read a short story where it described the character starting his day while obsessing over a breakup. The reason it worked is because in the background the apocalypse was happening. By describing the character's activities in detail the author was highlighting how self-absorbed the character was and introduced an element of humor into the story.

A Better Approach

- Start as close to the action as you can without losing your readers.
 - Make sure they have an idea of when and where and who but skip all the boring bits.
- Example:
 - *Joe stared out the window as Mr. Rogers droned on about Shakespeare's influence on modern literature. Honestly, who cared? Two more months until graduation and he could leave all these stupid classes behind and go on the road with his band. He narrowed his eyes as something bright streaked across the sky. What was that? He sat up straighter as it hurtled towards the school.*

Mistake Four

Info Dumps

The Issue

- You as a writer want readers to know certain information, but you don't know how to give it to them, so you just stop and dump it into the story in a paragraph or ten.
- Usually this involves history or the current political situation. It can also happen when a writer has done a lot of research they want to share.
- Some authors try to be clever and introduce it through dialogue but this still fails more than it succeeds.

Why Doesn't It Work?

- It kills the momentum of the story. Readers care about characters and their struggles, and until you make the information you're trying to give your reader matter, they don't want to hear it.
- Even worse is when it's out of character.
 - E.g., *“Hi, my Aunt Sylvia, a stay-at-home mom who's been married to my Uncle Todd for the last ten years. How are you?”*

Why Doesn't It Work?

- The worst offender of all is the prologue as info dump
 - If your entire prologue is just there to give a history of your world, you probably don't need it. Make your reader care about someone first and then give them the information they want.
 - Readers want to be drawn into a story. Giving them a history lesson first isn't likely to do it unless you make it as engaging as the story, but even then you're generally asking your reader to engage with your story twice.

It Can Work

- Certain genres are more accepting of this than others. Sci-fi, for example. But it can still be overdone even in those genres.
- *Nova* by Samuel R. Delaney
 - This book is one giant info-dump, but it works for the most part because it has a lot of characters that don't know one another and a philosopher character who likes to muse about history and art and life so dumping information is in character for him.

A Better Approach

- Only provide as much information as is needed in the moment.
- Keep it to information your characters would want *and* know *and* notice.
- In science fiction and fantasy, sometimes text excerpts are used at the beginning of chapters to deliver this kind of information. (E.g., Robin Hobb's Fitz books and Frank Herbert's *Dune*)

A Better Approach

- If you have information that doesn't need to be in the story, but that you want to share with your readers, either (a) put it in an Appendix at the back of the book, (b) post it on your website, or (c) offer it as a freebie that people can receive if they sign up for your mailing list.
 - If you get famous enough, you can even publish a detailed compendium.

Mistake Five

Failure to Make the Reader Experience the Scene

The Issue

- The writer fails to describe the scene in enough detail for the reader to picture it. This is sometimes referred to as “white room syndrome.”
- A more advanced version of this issue is when a writer doesn’t use the five senses. What does this place look like, what does it smell like, what can the characters hear, what do they feel, and what do things taste like when the characters eat something?

Why Doesn't It Work?

- Visual readers need something to picture to engage with your story.
- Also, if you don't provide details, your reader will provide them. And when you later refer to something in the scene that you failed to describe, that will throw the reader out of the story because they pictured it differently.
- Failure to engage the five senses keeps the reader on the surface of your story. You want to immerse them in your world. Drag them under and don't let them go until the end.

A Better Approach

- Use description of your setting to also show characterization.
 - E.g., *“The slight fragrance of lavender that lingered in the room made her smile, reminding her of summer days spent in the country with her grandmother.”*
 - E.g., *“He grimaced as the slight scent of lavender assaulted him, flashing back for just a moment to the ninth-grade teacher who’d always worn the scent and had slapped him across the face for cussing the day he broke his leg.”*

Mistake Six

Prologues

The Issue

- Some writers rely on a prologue to provide an introduction to the story world. (It's basically one big info dump.)
- Or they use a prologue to try to make the story interesting because their first chapter doesn't actually start where the story starts.

Why Doesn't It Work

- Note that I saved this one for last because those who love prologues will defend them to the death. Prologues can do no wrong for some writers. But...
- It's an instant red flag if you're trying to go the trade-published route. So if you're a new writer and you want an agent and publisher, you should avoid a prologue simply because it's a red flag of potential issues and you don't need to start your submission that way.

Why Doesn't It Work

- Let's say that isn't a concern for you. Why do so many prologues not work?
 - Often, they're something really interesting that has nothing to do with the story you're telling. You ask the reader to engage with Character A in the prologue and then the novel is about Character B and there's no clear connection between the two.
 - Or they provide information that readers can't care about yet because readers have yet to meet a character this matters to.
 - Or the prologue is written with too much distance to engage the reader. I read one recently where the characters were never referred to by name. There was nothing as a reader for me to latch onto.

It Can Work

- *The Eye of the World* by Robert Jordan starts with a six-page scene showing Lews Therin Telamon's last moments. This works because it's active and introduces the concept of the wheel of time and magical powers which we need since the first chapter starts with a farm boy.
- *Seer of Sevenwaters* by Juliet Marillier starts with a two-page scene where a man is thrown overboard and knocked unconscious. This works because we need to know a little about who he is until he regains consciousness 30 pages later.

A Better Approach

- Find a way to incorporate the information in the prologue into your story at a point where it matters to the reader.
 - Think about Harry Potter and where that starts. Not with a prologue giving us the background on Voldemort and who all the main characters are and how they've reached this point. It starts with Harry. And then we the readers learn things as he learns them.
 - (This is also why many stories that have an incredible amount of information to give the reader include an outsider or newcomer character that has to be told about everything that readers would want to know. So all that information can be naturally delivered as part of the story.)

Questions? Discussion

Contact Info

This presentation was drawn from a chapter in my book, *[Writing for Beginners](#)* by M.L. Humphrey. (The audio version is still called *The Beginning Writer's Guide to What You Should Know*.)

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