

(Handouts)

TEN WAYS TO UPGRADE YOUR MANUSCRIPT

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Aside from the huge issues of Plot, Characterization, and Theme, dozens of small devices lie in wait, ready to make a manuscript better. Simply by applying the following techniques, authors have moved their manuscripts from Good to Publishable.

The following methods are applicable to both fiction and non-fiction. Most are so simple you could call them “tricks.”

1. ALWAYS END YOUR SENTENCES WITH THE STRONG WORD.

(The single most important tip)

By saving the strongest word for last, you infuse your manuscript with power.

Do this in sentence after sentence, and your whole manuscript will resonate with power. With drama. (Most well-known authors do this instinctively).

Example: (weak) “An outpouring of blood escaped from his wounds.”

(better) “From every wound came an outpouring of blood.”

2. CHANGE THE ORDER OF SENTENCES.

(Second most important tip)

For maximum drama, put the set-up part of the sentence first---and “what happens” last. (“Set up” means times, settings, distances, moods)

Example: (weak) “She walked to school on Mondays.”

(better) “On Mondays she walked to school.”

Example: (weak) “He fell out of the tree after his fingers slipped.”

(better) “His fingers slipped and he fell out of the tree.”

3. USE SIMPLE PARAGRAPHING AND PUNCTUATION “TRICKS” TO ADD DRAMA.

By isolating key words, or key ideas in their own sentences, or their own paragraphs, you highlight them—and make the reader notice. Drama follows automatically.

Example: “Jake swallowed the whole chunk of meat without thinking.

And choked.”

Likewise, much-admired authors like Harper Lee use punctuation to add drama.

Example of semi-colon: (From “To Kill a Mockingbird”) “Mr. Tate handed the rifle to Atticus; Jem and I nearly fainted.”

Example of colon: (From “To Kill a Mockingbird”) “Everybody’s appetite was delicate this morning, except Jem’s: he ate his way through three eggs.”

Example of dash: (From “A Clown in the Trunk” by Maralys Wills) “Never mind all those suitcases stuffed with sweaters and jackets, once again the garb-de-jour was shorts—an Alaska neatly customized for Rob!”

Example of Ellipses: “He croaked in a scratchy voice, ‘You’re a . . . whore.’”

4. ADD SENTENCE VARIETY—WITH SHORT . . . OR LONG . . . SENTENCES

Don’t get trapped in endless, medium-length sentences. Make some sentences short. One word. Just a few words. Then juxtapose sentence fragments with sentences that are very long and seemingly go on forever, as if the reader had all the time in the world. Pretend he does.

5. USE PREPOSITIONS TO ADD MORE SENTENCE VARIETY

Don’t fall into a repetitious Subject . . . Verb . . . Object pattern. Try starting your sentences with prepositions. They add instant variety.

Possible prepositions: “Under” “Over” “From” “Beneath” “Into” “Beyond” “Within” “Besides” “Outside” (There are many others)

Example: “Outside his line of sight, he sensed something threatening had crept closer, that if he didn’t turn around immediately, the thing would leap on top of him.”

Prepositions can be chosen arbitrarily. Complex sentences almost always flow from a prepositional start.

6. UPGRADE ALL DIALOGUE

The beauty of being a writer is we have time to make our characters wittier than we are. Or more cutting. Or more concise. Or more brilliant. Or better informed. All characters in books must say interesting things. Nobody can afford to be boring. Good dialogue gets that way by constant upgrading . . . sometimes over and over.

Characters never say the dull, boring things we hear at the grocery store everyday.

7. GET RID OF MOST “AS” SENTENCES

Don't string your sentences together with “As.” This construction quickly becomes noticeable.

In most “As” sentences, both halves of the sentence are weakened.

8. USE ACTION TAGS FOR DIALOGUE . . . CAREFULLY

Instead of the constant use of “said” (luckily, an invisible word), tie your dialogue to some bit of action on the part of the protagonists. Action tags eliminate the need for most other identifying tags.

Start with the premise that every character has his own paragraph. He owns it. Anything he says or does in that paragraph belongs to him. If he DOES something, there's no need to identify him again when he SAYS something.

Example: “John sat in his room looking miserable. ‘Seems like every one of my friends is gone. Can't find any of them.’”

Example: “The Spanish Consul stopped abruptly. Turning, he wheeled toward Dinah Shore with his face radiant and his arms outstretched, the quintessential adoring Spaniard. ‘Ah . . . Dinah! Dinah!’ He swept her hand up to his lips.” (From “A Circus Without Elephants.”)

Caution: Action tags can be overdone. Too many, and they become intrusive.

9. FOR DRAMATIC EFFECT, INCLUDE PAUSE FOR REACTION TIME

All dramatic scenes need statements of lesser importance throughout the scene—to slow down the action, to give the reader (and the scene’s characters) time to react. These pauses are always statements of lesser importance. The reader hardly notices them. Yet they are vital for keeping the reader’s attention locked in the scene.

Such “reaction” time beats might include an observation about the passage of time; a sentence about the strangeness of the setting; a sentence about background sounds; a sentence about the expression on a character’s face; a sentence about someone tapping his fingers, or drumming his shoes; a sentence about somebody moving in the background; a sentence about the weather; a sentence about someone tugging on his clothing.

10. MAKE YOUR DRAMATIC SCENES LONG . . . AND LONGER.

All truly dramatic scenes are long.

It’s impossible to get meaningful drama out of a paragraph . . . or even a page.

Most dramatic scenes in most good books go on for pages. Ten printed pages, at least, seems to be a minimum.

Scenes are enlarged by the inclusion of a thousand small details (as per the suggestions in # 9). Many of the details won’t be important . . . yet they contribute to the overall drama.

SECOND REQUIREMENT FOR DRAMATIC SCENES: HEART-STOPPING EVENTS.

Think of the books you’ve loved—you always know those dramatic scenes when you see them. They’re about Danger; Passion; Murder; Betrayal; Sabotage; Death.

Remember—most readers read most novels for the sheer emotional pleasure of their dramatic scenes.