The Top 7 Mistakes Writers Make

These are the most commonly committed mistakes I've seen in manuscripts from writers over the past thirty-plus years. If you master these few problems, and if you've written a good story in the first place, I guarantee your work will be worthy of publication. Not only that, but it will grab the attention of the agent or publisher because more than likely these problems still will plague all the other manuscripts in their inbox that day. I was going to number them, but they're all really tied for first place anyway:

Allowing the Narrator to Use Physical and Emotional Sense Verbs

Try not to let the narrator use the sense verbs (saw, could see; smelled, could smell; heard, could hear; felt, could feel; and so on). Instead the narrator should Just Describe The Scene and let the reader see, hear, smell, etc. right along with the character. This is a big part of what writing instructors mean when they say "Show, don't tell." Instead of letting the narrator write "She heard the doorknob turn and the door squeal open" just have him write "The doorknob turned and the door squealed open."

Using Past Tense When Past Progressive Is Necessary to Indicate Ongoing Action

This one causes action to seem to start abruptly and unnaturally. "When the sheriff walked into the saloon, several men stood at the bar and others sat at tables. Still others walked up or down the stairs." Do you see the men suddenly stand, sit, and walk as the sheriff came in? What you want here is to create a sense of ongoing action: "When the sheriff walked into the saloon, several men were standing at the bar and others were sitting at tables. Still others were walking up or down the stairs."

Using Throw-Away Verbs

- Gave—Allow the narrator to use "gave" as the verb of a sentence only if something physically changes hands. If your narrator routinely says of a character that he "gave" her a smile or a nod or a shrug or a wave or a kiss or a hug or a sneer or any of the fifty b'jillion other things bad narrators make good characters give each other, make him stop. He didn't give her a nod or a smile or a wave. He nodded or smiled or waved.
- Sat or stood—Believe it or not, these are used as throw-away verbs even more often than "gave" is. Don't allow the narrator to say the character stood unless she was lying down or sitting, or that she sat unless she was lying down or standing. In other words, if we have a sense the character's already standing, don't let the narrator write that she "stood and looked (or stood looking) out the window." If she's already sitting at her desk and has just hung up the phone, don't let the narrator write that she "sat tapping her pen on her desk." She was already standing or sitting, so in actuality the first character "looked out the window" and the second "tapped her pen on her desk."

When I receive a manuscript for editing or even just for formatting (meaning it's already been edited), one of the first things I do is a Global Search and Replace (Find and Replace) for bad-use instances of "gave," "sat," and "stood." Unfortunately they're always there.

Giving Possession to Inanimate Objects

Don't write "she pushed her glasses up her nose's bridge" or "she leaned on the chair's back" or "she slid up to the couch's edge" or even "she leaned on the ship's rail" or "she crossed the town's main street." It's much less awkward to write "she pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose (or just 'farther up her nose')" and "she leaned on the back of the chair" or "she slid up to the edge of the couch" or even "she leaned on the rail" or "she crossed Main Street." Those last two look a little different. That's because we already know she's on a ship, and of course she's crossing the main street of the town; what other main street would it be?

This actually brings to mind a close cousin of this possession problem: Don't let your narrator write that "She shuffled the dominoes in front of her" or "She sipped wine from her glass." Really? I mean, think about it—what other dominoes is she going to shuffle? From what other container is she going to drink? "She shuffled the dominoes" and "She sipped her wine" will suffice, and you won't be bogging down your story with unnecessary nonsense.

Assigning Human Traits to Human Parts

Don't assign human traits to human parts (or traits that apply to a whole creature to the creature's parts). Writing that "a voice said" something is like writing "his eyes saw" or "his legs raced frantically down the street" or "his head (or eyes) looked up from the menu" or "his ears heard sirens several blocks away" or "his fingers felt their way along the shelf" or "his hand crept toward the pistol on his hip." These are basically awkward constructions and are similar to misplaced modifiers.

Abusing Tag Lines—A tag line, which is the only bit of narrative that can be connected to a line of dialogue with a comma, consists of a noun or pronoun and a *verb that indicates a form of utterance*. Here are some of the primary forms of abuse:

- Attempting to make tag lines "interesting"— Some writing instructors erroneously teach writers to alternate the verbs in their tag lines "to make the tag lines more interesting." The fact is, you don't *want* your tag lines to be interesting. The tag line should be as flat and boring as possible so the reader can all but skip over it and get back to the story. Under no circumstances should a tag line draw the reader's interest from the story.
- Using archaic reverse constructions in tag lines—There's never a good reason for a narrator to use a reverse construction ("said John" instead of "John said"), in a tag line or otherwise. It's an archaic construction, and its repeated use is distracting.
- Using adverbs in tag lines—"Don't use adverbs in tag lines," Harvey said stringently. Using adverbs this way is an unconscious (usually) attempt to dress up what the writer sees as a boring construction. You're right. Tag lines are boring. They aren't part of the story, so they *should* be boring.
- Using verbs that are not a form of utterance in tag lines—The best verb for a tag line is "said." A character can't "grin" or "cut in" or "snicker" or "shrug" a line of dialogue. (I actually collect inappropriate verbs that I've seen in tag lines over the years. To get a copy of the current list, email me. It's pretty humorous.)
- Overusing tag lines—Tag lines exist only to let the reader know which character's talking, and they should be used for that purpose only when they're absolutely necessary. If there are only two characters in a scene, for example, you don't need many (if any) tag lines because the reader can tell from the alternate paragraphing which character is speaking at any given time.

Putting Descriptive Narrative After the Dialogue

Once the reader has passed the closing quotation mark, he's already "heard" the character. Any description of the character's voice the narrator adds after that changes the reader's perception and forces

him to go back and re-read the dialogue. And of course, it's never a good idea to interrupt the reader. When such a description is necessary, it should always occur immediately before the dialogue.

This is especially important for character identification when more than two characters are engaged in dialogue. If you use tag lines (John said, Sheila asked) in that situation, put them ahead of the dialogue as well so the reader knows in advance which character is speaking. If you have a brief descriptive narrative, you don't need a tag line as well. In other words, if you write *John frowned* as an introductory narrative, that's all you need. There's no reason to add a tag line, such as *John frowned and said* or *John frowned and asked*.

If you take care of these seven errors, which in most cases are examples of your narrator overstepping his bounds, your manuscript will outshine others in the stack.

Harvey Stanbrough