

Say What You Mean

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Clarity

There's nothing more frustrating for a writer than having a reader look up from your manuscript and say, "I don't get it." The author's entire job is to make sure the reader "gets it." Unfortunately, in between those two ends, a whole lot can go wrong with the equation.

Writing is communication, first and foremost. The author must communicate to the reader exactly who, what, where, when and how. The story, the author's vision, depends entirely on clear, concise relay of concepts from the writer's mind to the reader's. The responsibility for that communication lies solely with the author. If our reader doesn't "get it," the flaw almost always lies with the writing.

For this reason, I believe clarity trumps all other skills on an author's "must learn" list.

You must be able to convey what you see in your mind's eye clearly to the reader.

You must be able to translate your images, thoughts and emotions into words that are digestible and well defined.

You, the author, must be able to communicate exactly what you want to the reader, and the only way to do this is to get the right words in the right place at the right time.

It's not nearly as easy as it sounds, but it is, absolutely vital. If you want a reader to see what you see, to feel what you intend them to feel, and to respond in the way you wish, then you must learn to communicate with the utmost clarity exactly what you intend to. In essence, you must say precisely what you mean.

The Right Word

A writer is told repeatedly that they must not use the same old words over and over. Mix it up, don't repeat—both very good advice. However, that overpowering urge to use new words can also get an author into trouble in the clarity arena.

Words can have multiple meanings. They also can have subtle differences or implications that our basic understanding may be unaware of. When we snatch a word to insert into our prose, however, we'd better be absolutely certain that we fully grasp its nuances.

Nothing is more jarring than coming upon a word that just doesn't fit into the sentence. Even more disastrous is when the word implies something entirely different than the writer intended.

Expanding your vocabulary is a wise idea for any writer, but when doing so make certain you are confident and knowledgeable in the complete, accurate meaning of the words you choose to employ. If in doubt, err on the side of omission and select a word you can be sure of.

Examples:

Smirk is a word that is often used to the wrong effect. Very few likable characters do a lot of smirking. Yet we see the word used overly, often executed by hero or heroine who is meant to be sympathetic.

You read a lot of hissing in dialogue tags. "Go away," she hissed. It is physically impossible to hiss a word or words that do not have S's in them.

Refute/Rebut: Refute means disprove with evidence, rebut is the word most authors actually mean when using refute. Unless there's a courtroom or damning photos involved, refute is usually not the appropriate term.

Chronic/Acute: Chronic means long-term, not severe or extreme. Chronic pain means lasting a long time and has little to do with severity. Acute pain means sharp or intense pain.

Impossible: If you say something is, then you'd better not have it happen in the next sequence. Seriously, if it's impossible it can't be done.

Inconceivable: Like impossible, not able to be imagined. So if they are imagining it, it's probably not "inconceivable."

The Right Subject

Action in a story is probably the most easily convoluted by clarity problems. Things are happening, people are moving around verbs are attaching to subjects, and the author has to keep them all straight in both their mind and the reader's.

Improper sentence structure can twist the verb/subject relationship so that the wrong thing is doing the wrong action. In the best case, the reader will stop and sort out what the author really meant. In the worst, you can lose them completely. Neither is good for the story.

Make sure your sentences clearly say what you intend, and pair each action with its proper owner. The reader will thank you for it in more ways than one.

Examples:

I leaned down and touched the girl lying near the pool with eyes like dark glass.

Who has eyes like dark glass in this sentence? As it stands, the pool does.

She reached for the book the sorcerer had left on the table with shaking hands.

Whose hands are shaking? The table's? The book's? The sorcerer's or the girl's?

When an action's owner is ambiguous, the reader has no choice but to make that call. In that case, the author has lost control of the decision and can't assume the meaning will come across as intended. The same rule applies to description.

Remember that unless you make it crystal clear, the reader will automatically attach an action or description to the closest subject in the sentence. Proximity will rule if you are vague, and so in the first sentence, the mind hears that the pool has eyes like dark glass, and confusion results.

Most readers will be able to figure it out, but the author's job is to make things easy for them. Struggling to decide what is meant by each sentence will kill the

enjoyment of even the most interesting story. Don't make your reader work harder than necessary. Do your work well, and they won't have to.

The Comma Snag

Bad commas kill clarity. A comma in the wrong place, or even in the right place, can completely shift the meaning of a sentence. Commas affect everything from personal address, to the aforementioned, subject ownership. Make absolutely certain your punctuation is saying what you want it to.

Examples:

I helped my uncle, Jack, off a horse.
I helped my uncle Jack off a horse.

Speak friend and enter.
Speak, friend, and enter.

Run Joey to school.
Run, Joey, to school.

While we were eating a rattlesnake approached our campsite.
While we were eating, a rattlesnake approached our campsite.

The panda eats shoots and leaves.
The panda eats, shoots, and leaves.

In each case above, comma use completely alters the sentence's meaning. Certainly, these are simplistic and fun examples. The important thing is to understand that putting a comma in the wrong place can give a VERY different result than you intended.

Sometimes commas in lists can reduce confusion.

My uncle willed me all of his property, houses and warehouses. (This means there were two types of property that I was willed: houses and warehouses.)
My uncle willed me all of his property, houses, and warehouses. (This means my uncle willed me three things: property, houses, and warehouses.)

Twisted Purposes

A more subtle clarity problem and one much harder to remedy, relates to purpose. I've said that an author must lead the reader to understanding, must allow the reader to discover and decide for themselves what the story is trying to tell them. But here we have an area where our writer has slightly less control over the outcome.

Suppose you write a character that you intend to be the hero, and the reader finds them somehow heinous. What if your villain comes off so sympathetic that the average reader ends up rooting for them? Either situation is great if you intended for it to happen, but if you didn't, if that perspective will lead to gross disappointment when your climactic finale arrives, you may be in a little trouble.

As you get deeper into this, all types of problems can crop up.

If a particular action or gesture is too vague, it can lead to the wrong assumptions. This is where picking the right word comes so vitally into play. When I mean for a character to express sympathy, a nervous chuckle beats a guffaw any day. When a character is nervous, I want a timid glance, not a glare.

The same thing holds true on a larger scale. One word errors are easy to fix, but what if the general character is off? What if a place that you meant to be serene and relaxing comes off as terrifying or horrifically boring?

When you believe a character is acting out of selflessness, and your readers feel that the motivation is manipulative or reeks of martyrdom, then clarity has to be addressed.

Keep in mind, of course, that I am speaking of a consensus. No author will be able to lead every reader to the proper conclusion/interpretation. However, concise writing will have the desired result with the majority of readers. If most people don't come to the conclusion you desire, then look to your words for the reason.

Nine times out of ten, that's where it will lie.

All in Your Head

An author spends a lot of time in their story. They write, and re-write, edit, revise and tear down and re-assemble it. Often they have most of it memorized by the time they're through. Also often, they can get a little fuzzy about what is and isn't actually down on the page.

Because we know so much about our story, about our characters and our world, it is easy to think that something is obvious when, in fact, it isn't. It's very easy to think that you have made something clear when the reader is not privy to a significant bit of information that would allow them to "get it." Keeping in mind that the reader will not have any knowledge that we do not lay out on paper for them is vital.

We never want to over explain, but under explaining is an equally terrible sin.

Remember, too, that rule of proximity. If something is explained in passing on page four, do not expect the reader to remember it exactly on page 100. Some readers will, certainly, but a dash of reminder or subtle hint is often needed to bring your carefully lain fact back into the foreground for application.

Here is where a reliable group of beta readers or a critique circle comes into play. No one can write perfect clarity in a vacuum primarily because, as the author, you have insider information. It is impossible to know objectively whether or not your intent is working and your meaning is clear. Multiple reads from others will rapidly show you where you have faltered or waxed confusing.

Of course, those opinions are no good unless the author takes them to heart. Always remember your advantage of having outside knowledge. Trust that if your audience is confused, they have a valid reason. There is a missing piece somewhere, and it is your job to find it and make sure that what you meant to have on the page is actually there.

Listen to feedback. It is the best and most accurate prediction an author can have of how a story will be interpreted and received.