

5. STYLE: CHECKLIST FOR FICTION WRITERS

As you begin to develop your outline, and then the actual text of your novel, you can save time and energy by making sure that your writing style requires virtually no copy editing.

In the narrative:

1. Do any sentences begin with the words “There” or “It”? They can almost certainly benefit from revision. (Compare: There were three gunmen who had sworn to kill him. Three gunmen had sworn to kill him.)
2. Are you using passive voice instead of active voice? (Compare: Is passive voice being used?) Put it in active voice!
3. Are you repeating what you’ve already told your readers? Are you telegraphing your punches?
4. Are you using trite phrases, clichés, or deliberately unusual words? You’d better have a very good reason for doing so.
5. Are you terse? Or, alternatively, are you expressing your thoughts with a perhaps excessive plethora of gratuitous and surplus verbiage, whose predictably foreseeable consequences, needless to say, include a somewhat repetitious redundancy?
6. Are you grammatically correct? Are spelling and punctuation correct? (This is not mere detail work, but basic craft. Learn standard English or forget about writing novels.)
7. Is the prose fluent, varied in rhythm, and suitable in tone to the type of story you’re telling?
8. Are you as narrator intruding on the story through witticisms, editorializing, or self-consciously “fine” writing?

In the dialogue:

9. Are you punctuating dialogue correctly, so that you neither confuse nor distract your readers?
10. Are your characters speaking naturally, as they would in reality, but more coherently?
11. Does every speech advance the story, revealing something new about the plot or the characters? If not, what is its justification?
12. Are your characters so distinct in their speech—in diction, rhythm, and mannerism—that you rarely need to add “he said” or “she said”?

Assignment:

Write a letter to yourself on “Why this checklist is garbage”: The purpose is to articulate your own motives for writing in a particular style. If you can’t come up with good reasons for ignoring the checklist, reconsider your stylistic habits.

From Write a Novel (<http://crofsblogs.typepad.com/novel/>), a resource created by Crawford Kilian, Communications Instructor at Capilano College, North Vancouver BC.

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