

Top 10 Writing Mistakes for Nonwriters Who Write*

10

Not Reading

Sounds ridiculous, right? When I was becoming a writer, I thought so too. But it's not just reading. It's reading like a writer. Ask yourself, "how do I read the journals that I want to get published in: like a writer or like a scientist?" If you want to get better as a writer, start reading like one.

9

Using Consistent Verbs

In speech, we use a lot of the same verbs, especially "to be" and "to do." But writing is not speaking. It should reflect more structured thought. We have the luxury of many fantastic verbs in English. Evaluate your writing and find other verb possibilities already in your sentences (hint: look for nouns).

8

Using Inconsistent Nouns

Where we don't want to mix things up is our use of key terms. If we get too creative when we describe what we're talking about, we can lose our audience. As a simple example, "this team," "the investigators," and "our group" should not be used to describe the same bunch of people. Pick one and stick with it.

7

Overusing and Inventing Abbreviations

Unless you're Watson and Crick (although you might be...), don't abbreviate anything that's not already commonly used in the literature (wikipedia doesn't count). Be careful what you take for granted in your field. BM means both bone marrow and bowel movement, and if you're studying patients with metastasized bone cancer on long-term opioids, you might want to spell these out.

6

Deemphasizing What's Important

Everybody wants to know whether to use passive voice or active voice. That's like asking "which is better, heads or tails?" Understand the point of your sentence—if it's the *actor* or the *action* that's important—and shape the structure accordingly.

5

Writing Sentences that Trail Off

The train of your brilliant idea is chugging down the track. Then you throw in an afterthought that derails your momentum. Your readers lose their momentum too—and probably their interest in your work. If you need that afterthought, write another sentence. After all, you've got the entire paragraph.

4

Having Too Many Words Between the Subject and Its Action

Momentum can derail at any point in a sentence, not just at the end. If your readers have to wade through a litany of descriptors to discern what actually happened, simplify your language. Place the noun and its verb in as close proximity in the sentence as possible. Adjacent is the goal.

3

Apologizing for Assertions

Again, I don't mean to suggest that you're not one of the greats, but Darwin and Galileo had the Vatican breathing down their necks when they published their initial treatises. Don't be a jerk about your work, but save the qualifiers to the discussion of limitations instead of peppering at every opportunity (see #5 & #4).

2

Believing that the First Draft Must Be Perfect

My favorite 2 forms of perfectionism: (1) feeling stymied by the blank screen and (2) attaching myself to the words I've already written. Both get in the way of completing a draft and neither help me reach my goals. If you're like me (you've read this far, haven't you?), stop worrying about that first draft. Go in knowing that you're writing the worst stuff you can imagine. Rest assured: anything can—and will—be edited, even if you think it's perfect.

1

Trying to Sound Smart

I get it. You're educated. In fact, the more educated and specialized you are, the fewer people will know what you're talking about. Unless you've got an evil plot to take over the world, help us all out. Write clearly. Save the convoluted construction for your dissertation advisor. No one else will forgive you.

Hope J Lafferty, AM, ELS, offers a 1-hour talk on the Top 10 Writing Mistakes and a variety of longer programs and services to help nonwriters, such as physicians, scientists, and engineers, who write. See the current list at www.hopelafferty.com.

*not only nonwriters make these mistakes

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