



FTHRW Online Workshop – June 2006

Self-Editing How To Be Your Own Best Enemy

Presenter: Julie Mensch (w/a Julianne Goodman)

Course Description:

Tired of rejections piling up beside your PC? Is your manuscript lacking that special sparkle? This informative and interactive workshop will help identify the "Big Baddies" of writing fiction, so you can trash them before an agent or editor trashes your submission! Writers of all levels can benefit from this comprehensive last minute checklist before submission.

About the Instructor:

Julianne has been fascinated with mythos and legend for as long as she can remember. She likes her fantasy dark and her history as accurate as possible. Julianne grew up in the Dustbowl of the Midwest—hence her flights of fancy. Since then she's lived in all parts of the country and traveled abroad. She currently resides in North Carolina. A published nonfiction author, her novel HETAERA was a 2004 RWA Golden Heart finalist and she will be featured in an upcoming speculative romance anthology from Zumaya with her erotic paranormal story, "Seduction in Blue."

INTRODUCTION

Thanks to all of you who signed up for this workshop. I don't claim to be an expert on the topic of editing—I'll leave that to Strunk and White. ☺ But after years of pouring over fiction-writing texts and judging contests, I've seen some common themes emerge. I'll be sharing them with you over the next few weeks.

Our schedule will be as follows:

Lectures will be posted on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays of this class (with the exception of this first week, when I will post today and then again on Wednesday.) All lectures will be clearly marked in the subject line, for those of you who prefer to skim. ☺

I like for all participants to be as interactive as possible—sometimes your question will clarify for someone else or will spark a new question. Please

don't be afraid to speak up! We respect your right to lurk, but this class will be more interesting with your commentary.

I will clearly mark all responses and lectures in the subject line of my posts. I ask that you please do the same, for example: "Mary's question for Julie", or "Mary's response to Susan", etc. It is so much easier to wade through posts when you have accurately titled them! 😊

Please remember that all writing is SUBJECTIVE! This course is about one person's opinion, albeit garnered from years of study, but still.... If at any time you disagree with my posts, you are certainly entitled to voice your opinion.

We are going to cover a lot of information. If you have a project that is near completion, you may choose to implement each editing lesson with your current WIP. I will suggest "homework" from time to time, that you may want to try to complete. Waiting until the end means you have less time to ask me questions.

Lesson One-Six Degrees of Separation

Good morning and welcome to all of you who have taken the next step in perfecting your manuscripts for publication: the self editing process. Being able to rework your manuscript with an objective and discerning eye will help you to stand out as a top-notch author. I thank you, your editors and agents will thank you, and most of all your readers and critics will thank you!

Most of our work is based on my chapter, "Facing Your Harshes Critic: Self Editing", found in the FANTASY WRITERS COMPANION. For more information on ordering, please visit www.dragonmoonpress.com or contact me off list. Whew! Enough promo, let's get to the good stuff!

Editing

Most people shudder when faced with having to pore over every word, every paragraph, every scene and page of a novel. I've heard some newbie authors state that they don't need to worry about "that stuff" because that's what an editor is for, right?

Wrong.

I'm a firm believer that good editing can make a mediocre book great, while bad editing can reduce a good book to nothing more than kindling. You want to make a decent living at writing? You have a completed manuscript in front

of you, yes? Then you have to come to grips with that tough critic inside you and begin the hardest phase of this creative process: editing. There's no room for ego, over attachment or emotion during this process. All of those hours you slaved to put print onto your screen mean nothing. Check your creativity at the door, and roll up your sleeves because it's time to get to the drudge work of writing.

In this online class, we are going to work through the very thorough and sometimes painful process of polishing and perfecting. At least until your editor gives you your line and copy edits <laugh> but by then you should have a portion of your advance check, to cushion that blow.

No one is going to pay you for editing, but the rewards are priceless. Editing is what separates those who write from those who write as a profession. It's what editors call "easy to work with" and "stellar professional."

In my years as an author and educator, I've been asked to critique many unpublished manuscripts. The following weeks' lessons are a compilation of what I call "Julie's Big Baddies" of writing fiction. Trish should be uploading a copy to our files section, but if you can't access it, let me know.

Before we begin, let's assume for a moment that you've risen above standard grammatical errors and typographical errors. You know how to write basic sentence structures and how to format your manuscripts for submission. We're going to take a closer look at those "Big Baddies" as they relate to plotting, pacing and other important components of telling more than just a good story, but a DARN good story.

As the title indicates, it isn't enough to type "The End", hit spell check and call a novel complete. Every author has common writing habits—and I don't mean staying up way too late, letting the housework go, or drinking too much coffee—that weaken their writing. For space and time constraints, I'll hit on some of the most common.

Then, after we've covered the bad habits, I'll give you the chance to anonymously post some lines from rejections, and we'll try to identify what could be your secret bad habit—the ones you might have lurking in your blind spot.

Before I dive into our bad habits, let's talk about **objectivity**. While this portion of the workshop may not seem particularly innovative, it is absolutely necessary for any author starting the editing process.

An essential component to being an effective editor is the ability to view your writing with an objective eye. It's difficult, true. You've spent months, perhaps years, crafting this masterpiece. But every artist knows you don't slap some paint on a canvas and call it finished. You need time to become objective about your work, to fine tune your focus and to polish your little gem until it sparkles. Then you can send it off for someone else to admire.

Six Degrees of Separation: Getting out of the Write Frame of Mind

After you have completed your manuscript, this living, breathing essence of your soul, the first thing any smart author will do is put it aside before the editing phase. Preferably for a week or two, but at least a few days if you're up against a deadline. I once read that Ray Bradbury finishes a first draft and put it on a shelf in the closet of his office and doesn't touch it again for a year. Not a bad system, but your time constraints may not allow for such a lengthy cooling period! I know mine don't.

So, set it aside. Spend your free time reading something enjoyable while you take a break from the creative process. That's right, I'm giving you permission to READ!

Every book is a learning process and you need time to digest what you've learned on your last foray. Take time to clear your mind of the words you bled onto the pages, time to become objective, time to separate yourself from your work. And while we are on this subject, let me just state for the record, people, you are a word smith. Your art form is working with words. If editors, agents or your fans aren't responding to what you have been writing, then rework your words. *Your books are not your children!*

I'm not sure how you feel about this, but I visibly cringe whenever I hear an author state (usually in an awe-filled or supercilious tone) that her books are her babies. Writing is your chosen profession; it is work. While you may feel as if you have just given birth, please resist the urge to think of your books as your children, because unlike your true children, you can change any and everything about your books in order to make them better! That, ladies and gentlemen, is why your books will NEVER be like your children. Try changing something innate about your child, and see how far you get. Go on, I dare you. ☺

Learning to separate yourself from your work will come in handy when you get to the next phases of writing: revision and submission. You must learn to disconnect yourself from your work so you can utilize the critiques of others and understand that rejections do not pertain to you personally but to your novel. Nothing in this business is personal, it's business. It's work.

When next you pick up your novel for editing, try to pretend it isn't your life in those pages.

When you feel confident that you can objectively evaluate your own writing, find a quiet spot where you can **read through the entire book in one sitting**. I know authors who revise as they write the first draft and others who go on retreat at the end of the completed first draft. They hole up in some remote location and switch to editor mode with more aplomb than the Sorting Hat weeds out the Slytherins from the Griffyndors. I champion the latter approach for two reasons. First, trying to revise as you write can kill your inner muse—especially if you are writing on deadline. And second, composing is a vastly different process than editing. Having a place to edit that is different from your creative workspace is a great way to divide those two actions.

So, print off a clean copy of your manuscript, head to a favorite hotel or bookstore (if you can't secure a new space in your home for editing) and load up with munchies and plenty of strong coffee. Grab a series of colored highlighters and sticky notes. **You'll catch more inconsistencies on paper than you will on your computer screen**, but if you MUST work online, I have two suggestions.

First, change the font in your completed project to a different font.

Second, increase the size. If you write in Times New Roman, change the format to Courier and vice versa.

It's amazing how that simple change can trick your brain into thinking you're reading a whole new novel. Then bump up the size, because your eyes are going to get tired.

Hopefully you have mastered your word processing program so you can highlight passages in different colors. If you don't know how, have a friend show you, or contact me offlist because we'll use that trick to help edit.

LESSON 2

Happy Wednesday! It's raining here in the Carolinas—perfect weather for editing (yes, there is such a thing)! Thanks to all of you who posted—good discussion is always much appreciated. We're going to start today with Big Baddie

#1. These are in no particular order and encompass common errors in many areas of fiction writing including plot, characterization, outline, and grammar.

Now that you have your editing space defined, let's begin with the "Big Baddies" that will cause any reader to lose faith in your ability to tell a good story. For a moment, I want you to pause and reflect on that last sentence: poor writing can make your readers lose faith in your writing. Think for a moment of any author that you began reading with gusto, only to become less enthused as the book progressed. Have you ever tossed a book against the wall because you felt gipped, tricked or outright disbelieving of a plot twist or characterization? Then you know how easy it is to lose those readers. Any reader, editors included, wants to lose themselves in your pages. They're willing to play along, at least until you prove otherwise.

So be smart and avoid the Big Baddies like the plague. Those Baddies are the gremlins that infiltrate your writing and make it less enjoyable. Less saleable. They encompass the main flaws inherent in freshly drafted manuscripts, the ones that make editors and agents cringe. This list of Baddies is by no means comprehensive (that would take far longer than our two weeks!) but this will introduce you to the laborious task of self editing. And remember, that this course, like almost every aspect of writing, is SUBJECTIVE. You may not agree with everything I present, but I'm asking you to keep an open mind. Just consider my presentation as a critique—use what works for you and let go of the rest. :)

Big Baddie #1-The Throwaways

Throwaways are any agent or situation that can be effectively cut without changing the overlying story. The first of these are typically found in the form of prologues.

I've had the good fortune to chat with many editors over the years and most are of the same mind when it comes to prologues. If possible, find a way to tell the story without them.

Prologues weaken the immediacy of the reader's immersion into the story by giving us a diluted prelude to what actually happens in the story. I've even seen prologues with action that takes place years, decades, even centuries prior to the real action or conflict taking place in the novel. It's a favored trick of time travel or paranormal authors. So, why are they a Big Baddie? No one wants to fall in love with characters only to discover the real action and characters the novel focuses on aren't the ones they thought! It's a form of cheap trickery: the ol' bait and switch. This holds especially true when the characters you introduce in your prologue don't return to the spotlight for half the book, if ever. Don't laugh, I've seen it.

Now, I've seen some decent prologues: ones that included actual characters from the actual story taking place. But by and large, prologues are a weaker form of writing. You're establishing that you cannot set up the story mood, character motivation, or plot point without resorting to an "easy out" of pushing it all up front. I'm not saying that prologues should be banned. There are authors that have used them to good effect, but a truly talented storyteller can find a way to insinuate emotion, plot and setting without resorting to a prologue. It's too tempting to insert a few "throwaway" paragraphs or pages of mood, isn't it?

"But, Julie," you whine. "I'm establishing my serial killer's motivation and the setting for my futuristic romance. I NEED my prologue."

My response is an enthusiastic, "Maybe."

Think of telling a story as a fishing analogy. You don't want the fish to see the frying pan before you've tossed in your line. You want to reel him in slowly until you're sure the hook is imbedded.

It takes more finesse to write without a prologue, just like it takes a certain finesse to land that big fish. And a NY editor or agent is a mighty big fish.

And since we are talking about prologues featuring characters we shouldn't get attached to, let's discuss another "throwaway" in writing: the dreaded "Character with No Name" or CNN. A CNN is the Captain, the Wizard, the Woman, the Killer, the Monster, etc. ad naseum. A CNN is any unnamed character who receives undue attention from the author. The most common trespass is to place a CNN in a prologue, I suppose in a failed attempt to create uncertainty or mystery, but I've seen them materialize in sagging mid-sections of many a manuscript.

Now, don't get me wrong, not every character needs a name. So, how do you know if you have a CNN?

If my heroine walks into a java hut to order coffee, we don't need to know that the coffee barista had a bad childhood or beats his wife. It's enough to know that the barista gave our POV character a cup of joe just the way she ordered it: hot and sweet. His function is simply to fill her order. No name necessary. End of his function and his one line of fame in the spotlight.

The problem arises when the character is given undue importance. He becomes a POV character (but still has no NAME) or has a lot of important dialogue. Say the barista in the above example turns out to be the serial killer in your story, the ultimate evil doer bent on destruction of the heroine's world. Important, yes, but no name? Who will remember him? Your readers will feel tricked at the end of your tale.

Here's a radical thought. If the character is so fascinating and integral to the plot that cannot tell the story without him, then perhaps that character ought to have a name so that the reader can identify with and remember him!

No one gives a rat's patoot if an old withered King quaked in his tower by the sea; they want to know who he is and why he's so afraid of unicorns. (See "The Last Unicorn" by Peter S Beagle, FMI). Otherwise our poor King is the epitome of a throwaway character.

Conversely, it is not acceptable to simply go in and name every character in your book. Names have an important function in fiction. They cue the reader into paying special attention. A name signifies that there may be some greater importance for this character than what is currently depicted. You don't want to introduce a character by name unless you have a specific reason for doing so.

If you can't substantiate why a particular character is in your main POV focus, then perhaps that throwaway character should be tossed into the round file or could be used in another book to better effect. Introducing minor characters who will appear in an overall story arc that stretches across several books is acceptable, but be certain that this character has some degree of importance in this book, or your reader will lose faith in your ability to lead them through the world you've created.

We'll discuss this in more depth in my next Big Baddie. There are ways to tighten your writing. One of them is to insure that every character has a purpose for being "onstage."

So, for today, if you've written a prologue, ask yourself these questions:

1. Why did I choose to start the story here?
2. How would my novel be changed if I started in chapter one?
3. Could I thread the information from the prologue throughout my novel for a more subtle effect?
4. Why is it imperative that the story begins with these chapters instead of chapter one?

You should have some pretty convincing reasons for keeping that prologue. If you don't, you might want to consider deleting those chapters or rethreading them later in the story.

And each of you should check your story for CNNs or throwaway characters. Ask yourself these questions:

1. Does this character have/need a name? Why?
2. Is there a named character that does NOT perform a major function in my plot? If so, how could I revise?

That's the end of your first lesson. I do want to mention that when I am editing, I "cut" sections of my novel and paste them into a separate document. That way, if I feel I really do want to keep them, I can repaste them back in. It's a very handy trick: I've deleted a whole scene and rethreaded it into a novel later in the book. Sometimes it's easier than just deleting those words or phrases, because you can let them go when the book is truly completed: you don't have to commit to trashing them now.

LESSON 3

Greetings, everyone and welcome to the next self-editing lesson! Today we're going to talk about making every word golden in your novel: to tighten your characterizations so that you have the greatest impact. After this lesson we'll be moving on to lazy writing habits and clunky pacing errors.

One way to tighten your writing is to insure that every character has a purpose for being “onstage” in your story at any given time. Chefs hold to the rule of three in creating a new delicacy. That is, they use three main flavors within a recipe. Any more and the recipe becomes a mishmash of tastes, the original flavor lost and overwhelmed by the sensory stimulation on the palette. The same holds true in writing scenes with characters. More than three to five and you've overdone your scene, as in the next Big Baddie — the Cast of Thousands.

Big Baddie #2: The Cast of Thousands

As authors, we tend to know our characters intimately, as if they were flesh and blood. As Supreme Creator in our worlds, it's our job. But not every character in every aspect of your plot may be necessary to tell your story. Less can be more, especially in fiction.

Part of being a good storyteller is knowing when to cut the fat from the meat of your tale. The empty carbs in writing, to use a popular dietary analogy. A Cast of Thousands is like a diet of potatoes, pasta and beer. It's heavy, bland and unfulfilling, not to mention Atkins Unfriendly. ☺

There are three categories of an overlarge cast.

First, the spotlight hogs. “Spotlight hogs” are those wonderful secondary characters who inadvertently steal your main character's thunder. It may be as simple as an attempt at inserting humor where your secondary character steals the show with his/her antics. Or a sidekick who gets in one too many jabs at the ultimate bad guy in the final battle. Check your work carefully to be sure your hero and heroine are getting most of the glory. It's usually pretty simple to identify. If your critique partners (or you!) are falling in love with your secondary characters, that could be a clue that you've got a spotlight hog.

The second category is a little more difficult — the “Two-in-Ones” or multiple characters who perform essentially the same function within the plot.

As you go through edits on your manuscript, ask yourself if you have too many characters for each scene. If you have five or more named characters going about their business "onscreen", chances are you've got some excess flab. There are some exceptions, but if you can cut or condense characters it can allow for deeper characterization of the remaining individuals and help prevent two-dimensional cutouts from appearing onscreen. The following key questions can help you edit down the creation of a heavily populated scenes:

1. -What is the character's main function in the story? How would the story change if the character was deleted?
2. -Can you cut someone out of the spotlight?
3. -Can you combine two or more characters into one?
4. -Will they serve the same function? -Do we need to know the character's name (i.e., he has some major significance)?

Too many characters can take the focus away from your lead POV characters and/or lead to head-hopping, cheating your reader out of personal emotional impact. We don't know who to follow, because frankly everyone is fighting for our attention.

Take the following example of a single scene in a chapter:

Stalked by a serial killer with a penchant for plus-size redheads, Jeannie is a thirty-something divorcee who is attracted to her neighbor Leon as he works in his garden. Assisted by her nosy neighbor, the elderly Lucy, Jeannie sets up a chance meeting with Leon using Lucy as an excuse. Jeannie's best friend, Marla, assists Jeannie in picking out the perfect outfit while warning her to be careful of Leon's womanizing friend Bert. Suddenly Jeannie's coworker Becky appears on Leon's front porch, wearing a man's shirt and not much elseâ€¦

Confusing, eh? Even I had to go back and reread it.

For a single plot point, there are far too many characters on the scene, even though one, the womanizing Bert, is off-screen at the moment. The reader can quickly become frustrated and confused at the number of named characters thrust into their consciousness. Who is the best friend? Which one is the neighbor? Should we care that Becky is on Leon's porch?

I sure don't.

For our purposes, this scene has too many guests coming to dinner. Can you think of a way to trim the “Two-in-Ones” from the scene?

What if the neighbor Lucy and the best friend Marla served essentially the same function: to help get Leon and Jeannie together? Do they really need to be separate characters?

And let's take the final category, the “Naming Game” to further analyze this scene. As we discussed earlier, names signify importance. If the womanizing Bert is absolutely integral to the plot, maybe we can mention him after Jeannie and Leon have started a romance—save him for more impact on the romance and cut him out of this overcrowded beginning scene. And if we determine that he isn't important, why have him introduced at all? If Leon and Jeannie are fighting off a serial killer, loser-boy Bert isn't going to have that much impact, comparatively.

By trimming down your cast, you can find better focus for your scene and the pacing of your plot. Perhaps you'll discover scenes that can be trimmed away completely: save them in a separate file in case you want to resurrect them in another book later. Maybe womanizing Bert is a better foil for a second book, where Marla is the heroine—especially since there's already the tension built in—Marla knows alllll about him and his evil ways! If the main focus of the scene isn't moving the story along, then you can probably cut it without changing the end result of your plot points.

So, for your next assignment, make a list of every character in your novel, from the major POV characters to anyone who is mentioned by name or alluded to in your novel. And don't forget PETS. Yes, those critters count if they have a name and a distinct personality. Don't forget to list those secondary and tertiary characters: even the ones without names. I like to color code my lists, or segregate them by main characters, secondary characters, and other. Then, I include a very brief “bio” for each character listed to track their main functions. This way you can easily see if you have listed similar functions such as “brings the hero and heroine together” or “keeps the heroine from trusting the hero” that could signal characters who could be combined. If the chore of listing your own characters in a novel gets tedious, imagine how exhausting it could be for a bleary eyed editor to keep your cast straight!

Another trick I use is to pick one color for each type of character (main, secondary, or other) and use the color highlight within a single scene to check for overcrowding. If my scene looks like a carnival exploded on it, I've got too many characters spoiling the scene.

Some of you have questions regarding editor or contest feedback. This Big Baddie is an imperative edit check for anyone who has had an editor or agent report any of the following:

"While the story was nice, I just didn't fall in love with your hero/heroine." (Could mean that other characters stole your POV characters motivations or spotlight: the dreaded spotlight hogs!)

"I had trouble believing the characters would react in that manner." (Could be symptomatic of many issues, including plot machinations involving weak characterizations or too many similar characterizations)

Other editor-ese words that may be symptomatic of a cast of thousands are:

"Formulaic" =Pat story, typecast or stereotyped characters, and predictable turns of event.

"Familiar"= Too many competing books or similar characterizations of your characters-nothing outstanding

"Not compelling enough"= Lacks emotional resonance, doesn't draw readers in or may not succeed in holding their attention. Not memorable.

There's no perfect science for diagnosing your plot woes, but a cast of too many characters performing the same essential functions becomes repetitious and lack luster. This is your chance to really take a hard look at your characters before we move into the next Big Baddie: Lazy Writing/Clunky Pacing.

LESSON 4

Happy Monday to everyone! Today we are going to whip our manuscripts out of the excess flab of writing. Everybody ready..and bend, and stretch and...what? You aren't with me? C'mon now, no lazybones allowed in this workshop. ☺

Lazy writing is perhaps the number one downfall of writers who haven't yet learned the craft of revising a manuscript into something saleable. When I reference "lazy" writing, it doesn't mean that you aren't working hard at your craft; it's simply a term to state that there may be a more difficult approach that will garner you better results. It's that slipping into old habits instead of remaining ever-vigilant to your writing "blind spots" that makes your writing flabby.

Big Baddies #3-Lazy Writing/Clunky Pacing

Let's start with clichés and redundancies.

Hotter than a June bride in a feather bed.

Clichés are when the author resorts to commonly used phrases, stereotypes or concepts—cold as ice, black as coal, running to the neighbor's to borrow a cup of sugar, beer-guzzling construction workers and fat cat business tycoons—that are as tired and stale as the air in my office cubicle. They are less than effective, unless they are an attempt at humor, but even then, as writers, can we not think of a better way to describe such instances? A writer can "explode" or chance an existing cliché to great effect without resorting to the same tired lingo that makes a reader's eyes glaze over.

One way to remedy this Big Baddie is to use your POV character's unique background to create your own analogies without resorting to clichés. Take a color, for example—red. How would a privateer captain describe it? A temple courtesan? A vampire bent on self-destruction?

Each of those characters would have a different and unique reaction to that color, not to mention the many other aspects of your plot and scenes.

Also take into consideration your character's gender. Males tend to be less descriptive than females. A male character might be reminded of something from his past, something with a tangible, physical response as in the following example:

Her lips were red, really red. The color of ripe cherries, like she'd been sucking on one of those cheap drugstore lollipops before entering his office. Cherry red. The same tint as the first car he'd owned in high school—the first place he'd made it with a hot piece of ass he didn't have to pay for. He licked his own lips, an involuntary reaction to the memory, and shuffled the papers on his desk while she settled into the chair.

Now, compare that passage to the following:

He wore a shirt the color of her grandmother's roses. She'd never seen such a color before, on a man. Cerise. The heady saturation of it made her feel giddy and youthful, especially on a young man like him. He vibrated unconscious sensuality like concrete sends off waves of heat on a summer day. She wanted to bury her face into the collar of his shirt, just as she'd inhaled the scent of roses in her grandmother's garden so long ago. Oh heavens, what was that saying? She should remember it? Ah, yes. Youth and sexuality were wasted on the young.

Do you see how using a character's POV to describe something as simple as a color can add depth to your characterization and keep you from using clichés to compare?

Don't be redundant and superfluous.

Now let's address redundancies. These phrases clutter your writing. They make what you say less important. Phrases like "circle around" (is there any other way to circle?), "young child" (have you ever seen an old one?), "gather together" and "jumped up" are excessive.

She didn't "sit down" in the chair— she "sat" in the chair. He didn't "stand up," he "stood". Wherever you can make one word do the work of several, you should consider using it. Your writing will be tighter and more evocative, especially if you can avoid repeating yourself. J

Pete and repeat

Repeats are when you echo a statement or sentiment within a short space— often less than a page or two, but I've seen repeats within a paragraph span. For example, if you wrote:

"The knight contemplated his next move, the most merciful maneuver that would end the battle" at the top of the page, and then later you add, "Sir Ralph considered what would be his next strike for victory and what would

be the most compassionate” at the bottom of the page, you’ve used up your words in an unnecessary repetition.

Slowly and cautiously read on—or just “scan” it.

Adverb use is another potential minefield. As above, it uses multiple words to do the work of one powerful verb. Why used “walked briskly” when you can use “strode”, “sauntered”, “stalked” or “sped?” And those are just “s” verbs! Think of better ways to depict the emotion behind the action.

One way to check yourself is to use the Edit/Find or “Search” function of your word processor to look for “-ly” in your manuscript. How often are you using adverbs? When possible, try to revise them out of your manuscript text.

One very common place authors tend to overuse adverbs is with dialogue tags. These can almost always be dropped. i.e: don’t tell us a woman “snapped angrily” at her husband. Show us—even through the use of non-verbal tags:

“I don’t know. It might be difficult to get away alone. Maybe you could meet me at the airport? You could do that, right?” His fingers played along the back of her neck. She could feel them curl, as if he was about to grip her tender skin. “Stop it!” She slammed the teapot on the stove. “You’re always hounding me.”

These non-verbal tags, also called beats, are a powerful way to use language to get your point across. We’ll go into more detail about that in another lesson.

Let your dialogue and your verbiage do your work for you. Cut the adverbs and the sloppy dialogue tags. In fact, cut all but the necessary tags that must be maintained for the reader to understand who is speaking. And though I’m stating that you should vary your word choice, people don’t really laugh, snort, growl, smile or grimace words. If you plan to use those attributions, make them an action. To do otherwise indicates you are a novice writer. For example:

“Quit playing around.” She laughed. Her voice was like sunshine in Seattle. “I’m serious.”

Not: “Quit playing around,” she laughed.

To improve the pacing and tension of your story, say what you can in as few and precise words as possible. It doesn't matter how in love with a phrase or passage or even a whole chapter you may be—as we've established in previous exercises, if you can condense or cut without changing the voice or story, then do it. Save them in another file for possible reuse.

So, your exercises for today:

- Check your chapter for the POV specific characteristics in description of the setting or other characters. Pay special attention to your POV character's background, gender, and upbringing! They should not all sound the same.

- Comb your chapter for redundancies—both repeated words and phrases like “hands clasped together”

- Perform a search for -ly phrases and revise for more specific word choices. I once heard an editor state that if he found more than three adverbs in a span of five pages, he didn't keep reading. Scary! Be specific and tighten your writing.

As I've said before, if you find this too painful, save your chopped bits in a separate file, granting you the freedom to slash away without fear of losing something important. Then later, you can determine if what was removed should remain deleted. When I follow this approach, I review the pages of sentences, paragraphs and phrases with an odd sense of accomplishment. You will, too. It's like dieting successfully. You'll get over the pangs after a while and stop repeating your flab-grabbing mistakes.

LESSON 5

Happy first day of summer, everyone! I hope you've squirreled away from the heat and are busily editing your manuscripts. It's one great way to avoid a sunburn. ☺

We have only two more lessons, and the class ends this week, so if anyone would like to start posting questions, please feel free to do so. I want us to be able to discuss any and all issues you might have with trying to edit your own work, or recognizing when a rejection or contest comment is signaling an editing "blind spot."

So, let's dive into our next assignment!

Big Baddie #4—Passivity, Repetition, and Grammatical Errors

Passive voice is one of the most misunderstood "baddies" on the block. Hopefully this lesson will clear it up for you.

Passive voice is when an action is not attributed to a subject—things "happen" to a character instead of the character "making" them happen, i.e.:

"She was being led from the stable with her hands bound."

Instead of:

"They bound her hands and led her from the stable."

Sometimes passive voice is intentional. We will discuss when and how to use it effectively. But readers will lose faith in your ability to tell a compelling story if you overuse passive voice.

Uses for passive voice

Authors can use passive voice to disassociate the reader from an act or situation.

Authors can use passive voice to intimate helplessness on the part of her character—but again use this trick sparingly or it becomes tedious.

Remember that no one wants to read a story about things that just happen to a character. We want the larger-than-life I-would've-done-that characters who transcend our human failings.

So, how can you tell if you are using a passive voice?

Some authors claim that you should do a search on -ing words and change them to avoid passive voice. There is much confusion, I think, in the writing world about the dreaded -ing words.

Some -ing ending words are gerunds, or words that end with an -ing that can be used as an adjective or noun, i.e.: "We liked her writing." The word "writing" is a gerund. Nothing wrong with that.

What can be problematic is when -ing verbs are paired with an auxiliary or "helping verb" such as be, been, being, do, does, did, are, am, is, was, were, have, has, or had. It's more concise to use the simple form of the verb instead of the participial form, i.e.: "They had" as opposed to "They were having" or "It took" instead of "It has taken." There are some instances when that particular verb form is needed, but not as often as it might appear in your unedited manuscript.

Also watch for over-reliance on participial phrases, particularly ones that begin with present participles—those -ing verbs again. They indicate a weaker writing style because the action in the phrase is less important than the action in the independent clause. The actions can also be impossibly linked, as in the following example:

"Running across the room, she yanked the door open."

Technically, one cannot run across the room and yank the door at the same time.

Also limit use of "ing/as" dependent clauses (typically the adverbial clause because they modify the verb in the sentence) which indicate parallel actions like:

"Tugging up her tight jeans, Kira disappeared into the bathroom."

Although it's possible, the actions linked above are difficult to complete simultaneously. I catch this one in a lot of unedited love scenes!

So, watch those linked adverbial phrases that appear difficult to execute simultaneously! (I'd really like to display that on my bumper for those who insist on talking on their cell phones whilst navigating rush-hour traffic on a six-lane highway—but I digress.)

Pete and Repeat, revisited

Repetition of word choices or phrases is another common mistake—one that all of us make. An author with a distinct voice will have a defined speech pattern. It's what makes us unique, and is usually a sum of experiences during our formative years. As writers, we must revise those "trigger" phrases from our work—before a reader does it for you! You don't want to be asked at your next book signing, "Do you know how many times you referred to the ship as "immense"? J

If you read a word more than twice in a short space in your manuscript—say three paragraphs—try doing an edit/search and see how often it pops up in your manuscript. It could be a trigger with you.

Another really excellent way to curb repetition is to use voice-recording software or to read your novel into a tape recorder and play it back. You'll be amazed at how many errors you'll catch. I once counted twenty-six various descriptions of an "upset" stomach in a single chapter of a first draft. Things like, "his stomach roiled" and "his gut clenched" and so on. Dang, that hero wouldn't have been able to leave the chamber pot, let alone draw a broadsword! Sometimes using a phrase as an action (in this case the upset stomach) can be your trigger for repetition. I've seen other cases of heroine's that "worried" their bottom lips so often that I wondered how she had lips left to kiss the hero with.

Don't get so caught up in telling a story that you fail to choose your words carefully. Resist the urge to over explain. Give the reader only what is vital to know at that moment and move on.

Grammar slip ups

An editor once told me that a manuscript was destined for the bottom of the slush pile if it contained the following types of errors within the first three pages. Watch your use of contractions, possessives and plurals. **Spell Check will not guide you through grammar.** Sometimes spell check functions are wrong! Spelling and grammar are some of the few aspects of writing you either get "right" or "wrong," so they're also some of the few areas you can guarantee your manuscript is saleable.

If you understand you can't rely on spell check for everything, then you should be able to recognize the difference between words that sound the same, such as "heirs" and "hairs" or "reigns" and "reins." Also check for mistakes masquerading as acceptable words. Typing "he" for "hers" is a

typo, but you won't catch it without a thorough read through during the editing phase.

Here are some other handy tips:

Possessives like his, hers, ours, and yours don't have an apostrophe. "Its" is a possessive. It doesn't require an apostrophe either.

Contractions, however, do. The apostrophe signifies the missing letter/letters when two words are combined. Get into the habit of saying "it is" any time you type "it's" to make sure you aren't using it as a possessive.

Plurals never require an apostrophe.

Before we move into the last Big Baddie of Dialogue, you may want to remember that ellipses ... are for gaps in thought. If they end a sentence, you should have four of them (three dot ellipses plus one to end the sentence). Dashes "—" are for interruptions.

Your assignments for today are to try the following:

-Perform an edit/search on your chapter for -ing words. Check to see how the word is being used. Is it passive writing? If so, did you use it for a specific impact? If not, how can you revise? Did you mistakenly link two actions using an adverbial or participial phrase? How could you tighten your writing?

-Read your chapter into a recorder and listen for repeated words or phrases. Revise them for the most impact in your manuscript.

-Give your chapter a thorough read through for grammar or spelling errors. If you aren't sure, consult with a partner or someone you trust regarding issues, or buy a reliable book. Like a dictionary. Or a thesaurus. Do not trust that an editor will overlook your simple mistakes because your story is so wonderful!

LESSON 6

Well, we've come to the final lesson of this Self Editing course. I hope that each of you have found some tidbits that resonated with you. I will be teaching this course again for a month long session with the Carolina Romance Writers in November, if anyone is interested in passing the word along.

We have reached the final Big Baddie #5: Talking the Talk.

This final lesson pertains to dialogue, one of the most evocative areas of your novel. In this lesson we will cover dialogue in relation to gender and brevity, dialogue tags, talking blue and dialects.

Dialogue is the speech of your novel. For some, it is the most difficult aspect to portray. Cadence, flow, characterization—it all comes down to dialogue. This section will help you address some standard problematic areas regarding dialogue in your own writing.

I have an assignment for you.

Go to your local shopping center and eavesdrop. Listen to how people speak.

By nature, most humans do not use overly-narrative, preachy, stilted and info dumping to communicate their thoughts. Sometimes when we put words on paper, we forget what normal conversations are like in our urge to create "art" or to get our plot points across. We forget that we are no longer bound by the conventions of a classroom. Yes, Virginia, there really is a place for fragments in good fiction!

In a mall, you'll get a huge cross section of the population and a feel for how much is implied—both verbally and nonverbally—during the course of normal conversation.

After eavesdropping, check your own work for consistency and flow. Are you overstating your dialogue?

Aside from paying attention to stylistic differences between genders, races, or status, a useful technique is to identify certain dialogue patterns with specific characters. Remember our discussion about authorial voice and repeated phrases? Repetition weakens the main body of your writing, but people can and do repeat key phrases. They have patterns of speech. The art is to convey them without too much or too little repetition!

If you create a few idiosyncrasies for your characters, your readers can then associate such language or gestures with those individuals. Think of a specific phrase or gesture associated with a teenager. How about a cowboy? Detective? Priest?

Are you writing characters with a foreign dialect, including “alien”s? You can give them speech patterns outside of normal conventions for a less native English speaker. And resist the urge to over-explain setting during dialogue. Otherwise you may risk sounding stilted or overly expository as in the following passage:

“Hello, Vixylert. I’m glad to see you aren’t working in the pixie factory during this lovely, but unusual 70 degree weather on Treruse Nine,” pontificated Fred.

“Yes sir, meesar sorry, sir,” said Vixylert. “please to forgives mes for the intrusion.”

Some authors try to “sneak” passages about the setting into dialogue—which is a great concept, but has to be handled carefully.

Now, let’s talk about dialogue tags. Yes, I recommend avoidance of repetition, but most of the time “said” is good enough, especially in dialogue or exposition that is speculative. It’s less obtrusive. Hardly noticeable, really, and that’s the point.

We want our readers to be enthralled with what’s being said, not how it’s said. Don’t give your readers a new “sound” at every speech—she whined, he cried, she sighed, he gave a surprised ejaculation (don’t even get me started on that usage!), they whimpered, and as I stated earlier, people cannot laugh, snort, growl, smile or grimace words. Descriptive tags such as these should be like sprinkles on a birthday cake. You don’t want a whole mouthful all at once. Use them judiciously or use them in a physical action:

“Let’s move this barge!” She grimaced. “The evil Overlord approaches.”

In fact, you can cut all but the necessary tags that must remain for the reader to understand who is speaking. Renni Browne and Dave King, authors of *Self Editing for Fiction Writers*, call the non-verbal tags that identify a speaker “beats.” In the example above, “she grimaced” is a “beat” not a dialogue tag. You could also write:

“Let’s move this barge!” She punched him on the arm. “The evil Overlord approaches.”

See how that works?

Be certain that your dialogue serves a purpose. At the same time, don't use it to convey too much information. Tell your reader what is absolutely imperative for them to know at that time. And only have your characters say what they'd naturally say in that situation—it might not cover everything you want your readers to know, but that's how human nature is. We aren't all open books. You must be ruthless with this, and remember that emotion can be represented by actions and not simply words.

The Four Lettered Bombs

Another major component of effective dialogue is knowing when to use profanity. The fiction market is not your high school English comp class—sometimes cursing is the best way to get your point across. Remember to use profanity for a purpose, and, unless you're Neil Gaiman and writing the award-winning *American Gods*, use it sparingly! Check with the lines you are targeting for specific information or ask the editor themselves if you are unclear.

There is still much debate over approval for pushing the proverbial envelope of decency. Your jury, the editors, will look on any profanity with some trepidation. When in doubt, don't. But if your character is a street smart thief, maybe a curse is just the distinction you need to bring him to life. And as we all know, sometimes nothing else will do.

Author Stephen King said in his National Book Award acceptance speech that authors need to be honest with their work. This includes adding an element of realism to a stressful situation and possibly using profanity. In his words, when faced with an impending death bed scene:

"Folks are far more apt to go out with a surprised ejaculation (!), however, then an expiring abjuration like, 'marry her, Jake. Bible says it ain't good for a man to be alone.' If I happen to be the writer of such a death bed scene, I'd choose 'son of a bitch' over 'marry her, Jake' every time."

Stand up comedians have a term for this—working blue. It's the difference between Bill Cosby's set and anything from Eddie Murphy or Robin Williams. Judy Carter, author of *Stand Up Comedy: The Book* cites a great example of how there are alternatives to working blue:

"Comedian Jordan Brady is now legendary for using something other than the deaded "f-word." When he had to clean up his act for a morning show,

Jordan told the joke this way: "The only thing I like about porno movies is the early seventies jazz theme music—'bau-chicka-boom-bau.' When you heard that music, you knew what was going to happen." "The housewife is all alone, the gardener comes in for a drink of water and he could have drank from the hose, but instead he wanted 'bau-chicka-boom-bau.'"

Just as it is with comedians, there are options for writers. If you feel you must use profanity, and you don't care for working blue, try making up your own, a la Robert Jordan. "Aemon's Bones!" and "Odain's Eye!" even "Great googly moogley!" are great ways to exercise your right to curse while keeping your prose out of the blues.

Dialects: You're not from around here, are you?

Now ye scurvy dogs, let's discuss dialects. Again, this can be a dialogue enhancement, but best used sparingly. I recently read a *Blaze, Midnight Touch* by Karen Kendall that did a great job of insinuating dialect.

You don't want to require your readers to use a translator to make sense of your speech. Scottish brogues are nigh impossible to understand, as anyone who has traveled to Scotland can tell you. So is Gaelic. Any non-English speech should be used as a subtle flavoring to your tale, not the meat and potatoes of it.

"Och! Willna ye ar ye gwan te take off yer bloos o' shud I cut it off ye with me pigsticker, missy?"

Besides being difficult to understand, there is too much "flavoring" for this simple phrase.

You will also want to avoid using faux archaic or Middle English speech patterns. Words like *twas*, *harken*, *yore*, *yon*, *forsooth*, *verily*, and *doth* don't add character—they make you sound like an amateurish hack. Such word choice will grab an editor's attention, and not in a good way. If you wish to establish an archaic tone to your text, resort to formal English. It has the feel of a foreign land without resorting to posturing.

Call It What It Is

A word for paranormal authors. Please refrain from throwing in the odd "foreign" word when doing your world building. A good rule of thumb is that if it looks, walks, talks, smells, eats and hops like a rabbit, call it a rabbit. However, if it talks, walks, and eats like a rabbit except for the purple fur,

three-inch claws and bat wing ears, then you are safe calling it something else. It all goes back to making choices. ☺

Unleashing your Inner Editor

Whew! We've reached the end. Now that we've covered some of the basics of revision, let me show you a great example of how in-depth self editing can be. Let's combine what we've learned so far and apply it. There is so much to consider when polishing your draft into a saleable piece.

Take the following passage in desperate need of revision. It has the bones of a good story, but not the refinement to make it great. I'll place my revisions in double parentheses (()) so you can follow along and see how bloody editing can be. It's rewarding and kind of fun, once you've learned sufficient objectivity. Here is the passage without edits:

"Leave me alone," Daphne hissed angrily. She walked to the stove and picked up a pot. She slammed the pot down into the sink, splattering the burnt oatmeal around the kitchen. She went over towards the back door and grabbed the knob. "Daphne, I'm sorry," he sighed. "Please will you not come back and discuss this pressing issue with me?" "Talk?" She moaned. "What is there to talk about?" "Please?" he wheeled. Daphne paused. Daphne's hand was on the doorknob. He was wheedling again. She hated weaklings, ever since that day long ago when her father had pleaded with her mother not to leave them.

Now the edits. It all starts with a red felt tip pen...

"Leave me alone," Daphne hissed angrily ((hiss is reserved for sibilant ending sounds-revise word)). She walked to the stove and picked up a pot. She slammed the pot down ((slamming indicates a downward motion, unnecessary repetition)) into the sink, splattering the burnt oatmeal around the kitchen. She went over towards ((it's "toward"-no "s"—common mistake)) the back door and grabbed the knob. ((started the last 3 sentences with "She". Telling, not showing, Revise)) "Daphne, I'm sorry," he sighed. ((Sighing is not a speaking action)) "Please will you not come back and discuss this pressing issue with me?" ((stilted)) "Talk?" She moaned. "What is there to talk about?" "Please?" he wheeled. ((too many colorful tags.)) Daphne paused. Daphne's hand ((repeated use of name separates us)) was on the doorknob. He was wheedling again. She hated weaklings, ever since that day long ago when her father had pleaded with her mother not to leave them. (info dump backstory! Interrupts the flow of the tense scene)

There are many ways to complete the editing phase. Some print it out and use a highlighter or red pen to mark in comments. I strongly suggest that you print out your manuscript at some point in the final editing phase. Others use the Revisions and Comments feature in their word processing program. If you're not computer savvy, you can use the above format of parentheses or using all caps to draw your eye to your edits.

If all else fails, get a critique from another author your trust. Or several. Be leery of spreading your work on every loop and group you find. Search for authors whose skills are at or slightly above your own. Never, never, never hand your work to a published author, unless you have an established relationship that can withstand a professional critique. Not only is this bad form, but most authors will not read another's work, for legal reasons. If you are mentored by a published author whom you respect, count your blessings!

I would also recommend avoiding editorial services for a fee. Most are nothing more than an attempt to make money off of someone else's dreams. Remember money flows TO the author, not the other way around. You should not pay an editor to read your work. They pay you for the privilege of publishing it. Aside from parting with your money, you may get little to no useful feedback or worse. They might completely lead you astray. Your best bet for getting sound editorial advice is to keep writing, keep self editing, and keep submitting. Eventually editors will recognize your growth as an author and will make more substantial comments on your work.

An Editor's Epilogue

Now that you know the Big Baddies, I make one last suggestion for what to do after you have completed your edits.

Put your novel away.

Maybe only for a week. Then, sit back and read it cover to cover. Keep a pile of sticky notes or a highlighter handy. Every time you pause to look up, catch yourself "skimming" or break to eat or sleep—highlight that section. It's a section that may need to be revised to better captivate your audience.

I learned this trick from an editor and I have to say, it does wonders for your writing. If you're boring yourself (and yes, I'm taking into consideration that you've read and bled these pages so many times you could cite them in your sleep) then how do you expect to catch the bleary eyes of an editor wading through mountains of mediocre manuscripts looking for that one perfect gem to fill out the line...?

There are many fantastic books on the topic that you can use to further enhance your skills. Here's just a few:

How to Write a Damn Good Novel !! by James Frey

The First Five Pages: A Writers Guide to Staying Out of the Rejection Pile by Noah Lukeman

Writing the breakout Novel by Donald Maass

Elements of Style by William Strunk Jr et al.

There is so much that goes into the preparation of a good novel. Putting words to paper is just the beginning of the journey. Elements of editing like good pacing, tight dialogue, little repetition, and excellent grammar are what separates the pros from the unpubs. Remind yourself that every novel or short story is a learning experience, and you will improve every time. The more you write, the better you will become.

Good luck and good editing!

Q&A

Q: What is Stilted Dialogue?

A: Stilted conversation is any dialogue that sounds/reads unnaturally. Picture your first date. That awkward discussion...you're not exactly sure what he's saying, and he obviously doesn't quite get your sense of humor...

That's the best example of "stilted" I can think of. ;)

In novels, "stilted" dialogue is overly wordy, too expository, too revealing, or uses unnatural dialogue patterns.

Some really good examples of stilted conversation that come to mind are:

-repeated use of a character's name This one drives me crazy! No one continually uses names in discussion, unless they are a telemarketer! It's the: "Well, Jim, as you know, I am a brain surgeon." "Why, yes, Brian, I did know that." "Jim, are you aware that you have a tumor." "No, Brian, I didn't know that." etc.

-infodumpy dialogue People naturally omit, avoid and downright lie (even heros and heroines!) about things. Do yourself a favor and make your characters appear more real by doing the same. If your heroine had a bad childhood, she isn't going to completely spill her guts to everyone. Even very good friends may have difficulty dragging it out of her. Err on the side of brevity and thread your information through small glimpses in the dialogue and her physical reactions.

And don't underestimate the power of passive aggression! How many people do you know will come right out and ream someone out when they are upset? Most of us react passively, slamming a cup down, kicking the door shut, purposefully changing a tv channel when you KNOW your spouse was watching something. Add a little mystery to your dialogue by having your characters reveal their REAL feelings and thoughts little by little. One of my favorite heroes swears up and down he doesn't care about the heroine—he tells himself all the time, but it doesn't stop him from physically demonstrating how he really cares by doing nice things for her—leaving her clean clothes after an altercation with the bad guy, shifting position to block the wind from her, etc. He grumbles to himself the whole time, but...it's endearing. Readers know exactly how he feels, before he does. The romantic tension is created as the reader wonders WHEN he is going to figure out what we already know for himself!

—archaic/overly proper dialogue Hardly ANYONE speaks in proper english. It's why I suggested you eavesdrop in a mall. We communicate through a series of fragments, questions and physical responses. Consider the following:

"Are you going to eat that?" she asked. "I do not know." He shrugged. "I might. Do you care to eat any more?" "No. I am too full." She pushed her plate away.

It reads far more stilted than:

"Are you gonna eat that?" she asked. "Eh." He shrugged. "Maybe. You?" "Nah. Too full." She pushed her plate away.

And while you are considering that, notice that in that example, I only used a dialogue tag once. The other nonverbal beats illustrate who is speaking without a tag. So another way to have stilted conversation is constant use of he saids/she saids...

-forgetting physical responses in dialogue I once had a writing class create a dialogue segment of ONLY questions. And none of the questions could

directly answer the other, yet there had to clearly be communication between them. Let's see if I can whip up an example:

"Do you think it will rain?" he asked, folding the next page of his newspaper. "Is the dog inside?" she asked, her eyes scanning the latest sales leaflet. He peered over the top of the paper. "Have you seen Muffin's leash?" "Who ever heard of naming a Rottweiler 'Muffin'?" She rolled her eyes.

Okay, that's a small segment, but you get the idea. You can say a lot while deliberately saying "nothing" in your dialogue. How many mother-in-laws have perfected the art of saying "It's fine, dear," when you know quite CLEARLY that it is NOT fine with her.

Q: Interpeting Contest Judge comments

A: The first thing I've learned over the years is that writing and judging are subjective. I really like things in threes...three uses for scenes, three major characterization tics for my main characters, and three judges or crit partners that point out the SAME thing before I change it.

It might be that this particular judge just doesn't like your style. So be it. If you suspect she over uses that particular word, that's just more support for not changing it. Remember that you cannot and will not please everyone with your writing.

Not even editors.

You are, all of you, word smiths. Your craft is your specific voice. If an editor doesn't like the first words you wrote, write others. But stay true to you. Your writing is the sum of your experiences, your outlook on life, your level of education and area of origin. You should protect your writing "voice" like a rabid wolf. Don't let anyone feed you words or ways to state something—that's for you and your character to discover.

If someone doesn't "get" you, then don't lose sleep over it. Just move on. But if the same passage continues to garner you remarks, consider revising it.

Suggestions for knowing which scenes can be cut...well, the best suggestion I have heard is to ask what three functions your scenes perform. Each scene should perform at least three functions. :) If you haven't heard this before, let me know and I will elaborate.

Q: Can you elaborate on what you mean by three uses for scenes?

A: If you haven't already checked out the book called "Scene and Sequel"—run, don't walk, to your nearest bookstore. I don't have it in front of me, or I'd give you the author's name but you should be able to locate it easily. It's a staple.

Scenes—when to cut—

Every scene in your novel should perform at least 3 major functions, or consider ways to revise and condense. Some major functions are: establish deep characterization, define a major plot point, or create a mood/setting for the novel. If your scene only serves one or two functions in your novel, consider how you could cut the important "meaty" parts of that scene and combine or add it to another scene for a better effect.

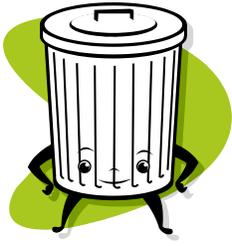
Ask yourself, what is it about this scene that is so important? Is it the surprising revelation your character reveals during dialogue? Is it the flowing prose that establishes your Gothic setting? Is it the oh-so-important first kiss?

Best if that scene incorporates ALL three of those things. If it doesn't, find a way to do it. Your writing will be much tighter and every scene will be a page turner that your reader won't want to put down.

Then, follow up those stellar scenes with "sequels" which are the breaks for passage of time and reflection about what just happened in that last scene. "sequel" passages are typically much shorter in length than your scene and they give the reader a necessary break from the "action" passages (scenes) to indicate time passage and for the reader to catch her breath.

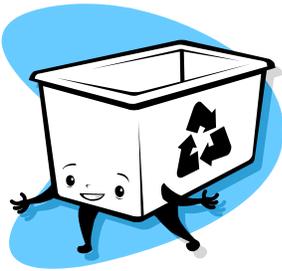
Did that answer your question, or should I elaborate further on the Rule of Three with scenes? I'll bet you can come up with some other major functions a scene might perform for you—feel free to post them here for everyone!

Big Baddies Checklist



Big Baddie #1-Throwaways- Any agent or situation that can be effectively cut without changing the overlying story.

1. Prologues-
2. CNN or Character with No Name



Big Baddie #2- Cast of Thousands

1. Spotlight hogs
2. Two-in Ones
3. Naming Game



Big Baddies #3- Lazy Writing/Clunky Pacing

1. Clichés- resorting to commonly used phrases or concepts

2. Redundancies-clutter your writing (i.e. “circle around”, “young child”, “gather together”...)

3. Adverb use



Big Baddie #4- Passivity, Repetition and Grammar Errors

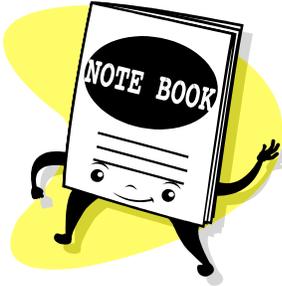
1. Passive voice- when action is not attributed to a subject
 - a. Gerunds vs. Helping Verbs

 - b. Participial forms of verbs or participial phrases

2. Repetition- trigger phrases or words

3. Grammar
 - a. Contractions, possessives and plurals

 - b. Ellipses and dashes



Big Baddie #5- Talking the Talk

1. Dialogue
 - a. Gender
 - b. Brevity of conversation
 - c. Nonverbal tags to convey meaning
2. Dialogue tags-
3. Talking Blue
4. Dialects/ Foreign

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