

## Lesson Six

### Layer 6: Peace Out, Filter Words

This topic is my favorite; the editing geek in me loves slashing filter words from manuscripts left and right.

Writers often wonder why—after adding in character voice, deepening the POV, and enhancing their “showing” elements—why in the world they are still getting feedback that the reader is struggling to connect?

**Often, the culprit is filter words, or filtering language.**

Filter words are words that put a filter, and in result a distance, between the character and the reader. In Deep POV, the story is told through one character’s eyes at a time—the story is filtered through them. While this sounds like filter words would be a good thing, the opposite is true.

Filter words *remind* readers they are reading. Instead of allowing the readers to experience everything through the character’s POV, filter words continue to insert the author into the story, essentially calling out to readers, “You know I wrote this, right? I created this world! Don’t forget!”

Please, *please*, allow your readers to forget. They will enjoy the story so much more.

To give you an example of what filter words look like in writing, consider this paragraph:

Jenny sat silently and looked over at Mike who sat across from her in the dimly lit restaurant. Mike looked sad; his eyes were cast down and puffy skin bagged under his eyes. She noticed Mike’s hair was sticking up in every direction. She wondered when he last slept.

She remembered her conversation with Fred last night. She wanted to tell Mike about it, but she knew he wouldn’t like what Fred told her.

It doesn’t feel very *deep* in the POV, does it? It’s through Jenny’s POV, but it certainly doesn’t feel ... like much of anything. Do you struggle to connect to Jenny? To Mike? To the tension?

Now consider this example, which reduces the filter words:

Jenny sat silently across from Mike in the dimly lit restaurant. Mike’s eyes were cast down; puffy skin bagged under them. His hair stuck up in every direction. When had he last slept?

She yearned to tell him about her conversation with Fred last night. She cringed. He wouldn’t like what she had learned.

For reference, here's the first example with filter words highlighted:

Jenny sat silently and **looked over** at Mike who sat across from her in the dimly lit restaurant. Mike **looked sad**; his eyes were cast down and puffy skin bagged under his eyes. **She noticed** Mike's hair was sticking up in every direction. **She wondered** when he last slept.

**She remembered** her conversation with Fred last night. She wanted to tell Mike about it, but **she knew** he wouldn't like what Fred told her.

When we cut out filter words, we have more active passages that allow the reader to become completely inserted in the scene. In third or first person POV, everything the character experiences, the reader experiences. I'm repeating this from the last lesson, but for example, using "Jenny saw..." or "Jenny noticed..." is distancing because if our Deep POV character Jenny is describing or mentioning something, since we are in her POV, we know she sees it. She cannot describe what she cannot see/experience.

**Common filter phrases and words to look out for:** continued to, noticed, thought, wondered, saw, felt, looked, remembered, considered, heard, knew, watched, decided, realized, could tell.

Eliminating filter words from your manuscript will do your narration a huge service. Your readers will naturally dive deep into the story without questioning how or why. Your character's voice will scream from the page, because now we experience everything exactly as they do—raw, unfiltered.

### **Should all filter words be eliminated?**

Not necessarily. Sometimes filter words can do a scene a service, as there are times when being straightforward can actually add to the tone of the scene. But if you are unsure, write the scene without the filter words. It's a good exercise, and you can change lines back later if you find it needs that "telling" punch.

### **How do we address filter words in dialogue?**

Filter words are fine to use in dialogue. This is a time when it makes sense, because that's how we'd talk to someone in real life...right? We'd reflect, make it quick and to the point, and we wouldn't spell things out.

But even with that being said, sometimes filter words can be outright removed. "I feel fine," to "I'm fine, thanks." At times, filter words can still be a crutch that cuts out how someone talks about their own feelings/thoughts/etc. If you find that certain words are used often in dialogue, it's worth looking at further. Repetition in general is something to be aware of.

Some words that seem to be common crutches: look, feel, know, think. Can we *show* a character saying they "know" something...maybe they roll their eyes or nod their head? For "think," you can have a character quirk a brow or give a physical nudge, or even a dialogue nudge: "Well?"

As for using filter words to connect dialogue, I recommend removing it. Case in point:

“...But that’s for him to decide.” She stood, pointed a finger at me and **continued** her lecture.  
“I agree...”

Inserted action alone shows a speaker continues speaking:

“...But that’s for him to decide.” She stood, pointing a finger at me. “I agree...”

All I did was cut the filter word out, and we still know who is speaking. We don't need to be reminded because we see it. Now, I might suggest making that action moment a little more detailed to portray the vibe from that pointed finger or from context of the scene, but overall, a simple deletion is all we need here.

Just a note, if you were to put action inside of active dialogue, as if that was one continuous line, it would look like this:

“...But that’s for him to decide what”—she stood, pointing a finger at me—“to do. I agree...”

I hope this helps! If you find some of your filter words are crutches in your dialogue, I recommend looking into it. They may not need to be deleted or changed, but you might find a pattern here that needs more TLC. Can you *show* more body language and emotion in your dialogue than you currently do in order to cut down on filters? Are the filters *telling* us too much too often?

The thing is, readers love to forget they are reading. The more they *become* the story, the less they are reminded they are reading, and thus the deeper they fall into the world and character you’ve created.



## Homework

For your homework, I want you to pull up your WIP in a Microsoft Word Document (if you can).

### PART ONE

I’m going to have you do a search for common filter words (list is below). Next to each filter word, write the number of times that word appears in your MS.

### Tips:

1. Be sure to do the search for all versions of the word; i.e. continue, continued, continuing, continues.
2. I hope this is similar in most versions of Word, but to begin a search, go to the “Edit” dropdown. Next, “Find,” then “Replace.”
  - a. On the left, a panel should appear that says FIND AND REPLACE at the top. The first empty bar is the word you’ll enter that you are searching for. We are NOT replacing anything, so leave the second bar blank.
  - b. To test this, enter the word “Feel” in the bar. In the panel below, MATCHES appears and it will tell you how many times that word appears in the text.
3. You may need to add a space after the word. For example, if you type in “Hear” without a space after it, you’ll get all versions of a word that has “hear” within it.
  - a. The caveat to this is that if your filter word is at the end of a sentence, you’ll miss those because you’ll need to search for the word with punctuation after (i.e. period, quotation mark, comma, etc.)
  - b. An issue with this search function is that we might have a lot of overlap if you did a search for *feel* AND *feeling*, because a lot of instances of feel (without a space after) will appear when searching for feeling.
    - i. For example, in this lesson when I do a search for FEEL (with no space after), it comes up 12 times. When I search FEELING (no space) it comes up 3 times. Feel with a space comes up 7 times. See what I mean?
4. Overall, don’t let the overlap of words overwhelm you if you find it is holding you back from completing the lesson. The point of this homework is to get a feel for how often filter words appear in your MS. A general number will give you a general idea of areas you’ll want to review in revisions.

Search for these words (in all tenses) in your WIP and write the number of times they appear:

Continue  
Notice  
Think  
Wonder  
See  
Feel  
Look  
Remember  
Consider  
Know  
Decide  
Realize  
Hear  
Smell  
Touch  
Seem

What are your crutch filter words?

## PART TWO

Give me 3-5 examples of a time when a filter word was used in your WIP (share the current sentence) and how you would revise the line to eliminate the filter(s).

\*Pick a different filter word for each example.