

Rambling and Overdescribing

Rambling

This is a problem I notice often among authors whom I edit, and I've seen it in dozens of books. It's one of the reasons I became an editor. Because I like writers and helping them do their best work. In fact, authors are my favorite people, so I love teaching them.

Admittedly, I made this example from the introductory paragraph in lesson one rather egregious, but I think it makes its point rather well. Overwriting can also take the form of rambling. In this case, I've given you some reasons I wanted to teach this class—and two repeated concepts in the last two sentences at that.

While my motives for teaching this class may be interesting—and this is a *big* “may,” mind you!—they don't really pertain to the subject of this lesson. We can delete the entire section with no effect on the introduction.

In fiction, rambling can take several forms. For example, I've seen authors interrupt action sequences, such as swordfights or car chases, with lengthy, weighty asides about a character's appearance or a deep dive into their thoughts that, while interesting, pulls a reader right out of the action.

Sometimes, however, what may be rambling in one place in the story can be essential in another. Backstory can be a good example. When I encounter details about a character's past that are crucial to understanding their thoughts, actions, and personality that break up dialogue, interrupt action, or just bog down the flow of a story, I usually suggest moving it to a less active story beat either before or after the scene it interrupts. Often, rambling isn't about the details you provide but where you provide them and how you present them. Always ask yourself what any lengthy aside will accomplish in your story at the specific place you put it. If you aren't sure, ask if it could go elsewhere, or if you even need it.

Overdescribing

Avoiding rambling is not just about where you include details but what details you include. Despite what your high-school or college writing instructor may have told you, you can include too many details in a story, which can slow its pace, bore your reader, or drive them away.

This can be a difficult form of overwriting to avoid particularly for visual authors—those who “see” the characters, locations, objects, and milieu of their stories in such vivid detail that they hunger to make the reader see exactly what they do.

Sometimes, we see our characters so clearly that we are tempted to describe them right down to their shoe sizes. Let's take a look at this sample passage:

Xenia was a short woman in her late thirties with short black hair that framed her oval face and fell into her eyes. Her skin was a shade somewhere between eggshell and ecru and contrasted perfectly with her dark brown eyes, which except for deeply entrenched crow's feet did not give away her age. Her skin was unwrinkled and scarcely blemished thanks to years of judicious application of sunblock, plentiful sleep, and a slight amount of pudge that kept wrinkles from gaining a purchase on any limb or plane. She was thick-waisted, thick-legged, and thick-ankled—a contrast to her long, tapered fingers and doll-slim

wrists. A smatter of freckles across her nose, cheeks, neck, and shoulders gave her a slightly girlish look, one accentuated by her choice of a lime-green adult romper and pigtails tied with matching bows. The laces of her size-seven, fluorescent pink shoes were just a shade lighter, approaching neon green. When she smiled, she showed off a gap between her four front teeth that even braces could not correct.

While this describes Xenia exactly as I saw her when writing the previous lesson, I suspect it put you to sleep somewhere after the fourth plot-choking sentence. Though this may seem counterintuitive, overdescription actually does not help most readers see your characters better. It either makes them skim the passage, skip it entirely, or crawl through it as they struggle to imagine each detail, perhaps becoming frustrated along the way if they either can't simultaneously hold all this information about the character in their mind or the mental picture they had of the character before this text wall doesn't match up.

Even when the description can be helpful in describing setting, atmosphere, or mood, it may sometimes be too much for your readers. Recently I took an editing test in which the author spent several paragraphs describing the protagonist wandering through five rooms in an office building. While their descriptions helped me visualize the building, it slowed the story and I had an impulse to skip ahead to see when the plot picked up. If I'd had the whole novel in front of me—rather than a test the publisher had created—I suspect the color of the break room's walls and the fact the floor had two women's restrooms had no bearing on the plot.

Remember, while prose can borrow some techniques from visual or performing arts, it is a literary art, not a visual art. The realization of the story for the viewer thus takes place not in front of them, as it would with a film, a painting, or a staged play, but in their mind. They need to be able to take the details you provide about a character, a location, an object, or anything else in a story and flesh them out in the theater of their imagination to create their own interpretation of this part of the story. That is why they chose to read rather than, say, turn on the TV or go to a movie. They want to cooperate with you, the author, to picture the story in their heads rather than having you dictate to them.

To help your reader engage with your story, give them fewer details than I did in the example paragraph. To do this, you'll need to pick which ones are most important to you and which ones most effectively convey your character's appearance, clothing tastes, personality, or whatever else you want to impart about them. A good guideline to use when doing so is to ask which of these details are essential in describing your character and which are changeable, irrelevant, or can easily be filled in by your reader.

In cutting down my description of Xenia, I decided I wanted to stress a few things about her appearance, her wild, youthful fashion sense, and her gap-toothed smile. In some cases, more judicious wording enabled me to keep a raft of detail. In others, I cut description completely.

Xenia's short black hair framed her oval, light brown face and fell into her dark eyes. Two things about her belied the fact she was nearing forty: her unlined face and her youthful, lime green adult romper, which clashed with her fluorescent pink shoes but complimented her stocky frame. When she smiled at Sally, she revealed gaps between her four front teeth that even braces could not correct.

Admittedly, some readers and writers would still find this revision too wordy. My style tends toward slightly more ornate and descriptive than many writers because I am also a visual artist and a visual

person. You could easily jettison even more of it if your style is more spartan—for example, most of how Xenia is dressed if her clothing choices aren't relevant to the plot or to her character. (We will cover more about overwriting and style in a future lesson.)

You may even want to cut out almost all specific details for a number of reasons: to keep the plot moving or to let the reader imagine most of the details about your character's appearance like hair color and race, for example.

Xenia's short hair framed her face and fell into her dark eyes. She was stocky and in her midthirties.

This is a delicate balancing act that has no magic formula. Instead, keep in mind the cardinal rule of storytelling: to be clear and to avoid boring your reader. The rest is up to your own judgment and your individual style.

Homework

Rewrite these overwrought paragraphs, or tell me what you'd do with the details if you think they're important and should remain, but perhaps not in the place our hypothetical author has put them.

1. Xenia met Sally's eyes, trying not to let her fear show on her face. "What do you think I should do?"

This wasn't the first time Xenia had found herself in a dangerous situation. As a specialist in chemical weapons with the highest of government security clearances, she was no stranger to threats against her life. Getting that clearance had been one of the most difficult things she'd ever done. The accidental explosion she'd caused in the chemistry lab during her senior year of university had nearly gotten her arrested and expelled. Had Dr. Ruiz not come to her rescue and argued in her favor before the dean and the president, the trajectory of her career—and perhaps even her life—might have been very different.

Last year, she had narrowly avoided being poisoned, and then being stabbed in the parking lot by a scientist working for a hostile foreign government. How Dr. Amelia Blake had managed to fool so many people, Xenia would never know. But the ordeal had made her wary of her colleagues. Who knew, perhaps a similar foreign agent was behind Dr. Chang's mysterious firing and disappearance.

Sally looked at her carefully. "I think it's time you enlisted my help," she said.

2. Sally's foyer was like something out of a Victorian novel. The mix of flowers on the floral wallpaper included hydrangeas, roses, lilies of the valley, and columbines. The light pastels complimented perfectly the thick, rose carpet, which showed the imprints of several pairs of shoes, letting Xenia know—if the volume from the rooms beyond had not—that this was one of Sally's usually well-attended soirees.

When Sally emerged from the oak door leading to the study on the left, Xenia's breath caught in her throat. The style of her red, long-sleeved, ankle-length dress was conservative

all the way up to its collarbone neckline, but it brought out her pale skin, cornsilk hair, and ruby-red lips perfectly.

Her blue eyes sparkled with mischief as she stepped forward and offered Xenia her slim, muscular arm.

“I thought you weren’t coming,” she said with a smile.