# Write Better Right Now!

## Fixing A Dozen Mistakes Most Often Made by Good Writers

By Gary Corbin

**Introduction**

In preparing this document, I made several assumptions about you, my reader:

- You have written a good story with strong characters and an interesting story arc.
- You want to get this story published, either by a traditional publishing house or though a self-publishing channel – and so far, your principal editor is ***you***.
- You write in an active voice as much as possible.
- You do not have serious problems with grammar, spelling, syntax, sentence and paragraph construction, and noun/verb agreement.
- You SHOW rather than TELL.
- You avoid clichés and find fresh ways to tell your story.

In short, you write well. But…

- Your manuscripts aren't being snapped up by agents and editors.
- Your self-published book with its fascinating characters, great plot twists and gorgeous layout … isn't selling.
- Reviewers, agents, and publishers say things like, "Nice idea, but it's not a project I can bring to the market at this time."

Why not? Is your work good – but not "standout"? Is your text strong overall, but dotted here and there with minor writing "tics" that weigh down and deaden the narrative?

In today's tough publishing world, where book sales drop every year, good isn't good enough. It has to be *great.*

***Maybe it's time to liven up your writing.***

Here's the good news – you can do it yourself, with the right tools. Here are twelve tips to help good writers become great writers – and sell books.

## 1. The Watching Syndrome

Many writers narrate a scene by telling us what the point of view character sees, hears, smells, or tastes in a scene. For example:

**Example 1.a**

He noticed her lacy bra strap showing through the thin fabric of her white blouse and imagined it uncovered, slipping off of her shoulder…

The usual intention of such devices is to share with the reader the main character's experience from the character's senses. It is assumed that if we readers can feel what the main character is feeling, we'll be that much more immersed into the scene and identify more closely with the character.

In reality, in most cases it does the opposite. In fact, such devices create two subtle problems with the narrative: it forces us to use weak verbs, and it distances the reader from the scene, and thus makes it more difficult to engage in the action. That actually makes it harder, rather than easier, to engage and sympathize with the main character.

Let's take each problem in turn:

- **Weak verbs**. "Watching syndrome" verbs like "looking," "watching," "noticing,", "hearing," "seeing," etc. are weak and passive, and usually distract the reader from the more powerful active verbs in the sentence.
- **Distancing**. Rather than immersing the reader into the narrator's world – as intended – verbs like "watching" and "hearing" actually distance readers from the scene. They remove us one step from the action and environment and therefore make it harder to visualize.

While it's great to get inside the mind of the main character, it's better to get into the scene's action and let the reader experience it directly, using the action verbs that show what the main character would see. That lets the reader see (or hear, etc.) the action directly – *along with* the main character, rather than second-hand, through the character's senses.

In Example 1.a above, the key idea the writer would like us to focus on is the fact that her lacy bra strap showed through the thin fabric. But what is the key verb in that sentence? "He noticed." How active is that verb? How powerful? Nine times out of ten, not very.

Now compare that to the same text, rewritten without the "watching syndrome" verb:

**Example 1.b**

Her lacy bra strap showed through the thin fabric of her white blouse. He imagined it uncovered, slipping off of her shoulder…

Where is the action focused now? The second version is stronger and more compelling because it is more active, more direct and more vivid.

## 2. The Wanting Syndrome

This is a variant of the watching syndrome. Wishing, feeling, and wanting are TELLING rather than SHOWING verbs. They TELL us that a character feels a certain way – but that's not very compelling. Again we experience the scene through the character's mental filter, one step removed from the scene.

Your text could be stronger if you could SHOW us your narrator's wishes, feelings, and desires. For example:

**Example 2.c**

He felt so angry, he just wanted to kill someone. Anyone. Just hit them right now, with his car, no matter who they were. He didn't care.

In addition to being weak and cliché, it's vague and shows us nothing interesting about this character. But we could make it more interesting by SHOWING some specifics:

**Example 2.d**

His jaw locked and his lips curled. Spittle leaked onto his chin and his hands clutched the wheel in a death grip. Just let some jerk walk in front of his car right now. Policemen, Boy Scouts, grandmothers, anyone. Anyone at all.

## 3. Starting Syndrome

Another common device used by good writers is to introduce ongoing action by stating that the character "started to" or "began to" do something. For example:

**Example 3.a**

He started to hike up the mountain.

Compare that to:

| **Example 3.b** |
| --- |
| He hiked up the mountain. |

The "starting syndrome" device weakens your writing in two ways:

- **Weak and vague.** "Starting" and "beginning" are weak, vague verbs. They imply no action on their own. In Example 2.a, what is the verb in that sentence? Hike? No! It's "start." Boil that sentence down to its noun/verb root and you get: "He started." What does that tell us? Not much. In short, "beginning" and "starting" are forms of literary hesitancy that create weakness in the narrative.
- **Implied failure.** What's the difference between "He hiked" and "he started to hike?" Starting implies an ending, coming soon – i.e., failure or interruption. In other words, you only "begin" or "start" something if the action is going to be interrupted. Otherwise it just happens. You don't write, "Tell them to get out of here," he started to say. You just say "he said." Right?

There are times, of course, when a character *does* get interrupted in their attempted activity. Is it appropriate to use "start" or "begin" in those cases? Perhaps, but that's pretty clumsy foreshadowing. It gives away the fact that the character's about to fail, and that spoils the reader's fun by taking away the surprise element when that interruption happens.

How does a writer distinguish between ongoing activity and completed activity without using such weakening verbs? The answer is both simple and difficult: show it in the context of the scene. Simple to say, difficult to do well. But critical for the success of your work.

## 4. Trying Syndrome

Similar and related to the "Starting Syndrome" is the "Trying Syndrome." This is when your character "tries to" act in some way rather than completing the action. For example:

| **Example 4.a** |
| --- |
| He tried to coil the rope around the hot metal frame, ever cognizant of the ticking clock. |

Trying is like starting: it implies the action was not successful, it TELLS rather than shows, and it's weak and vague. "He tried" gives almost no information about the action in the scene, and still requires that you add a verb to the sentence to convey the action you wanted to describe in the first place.

If the action WASN'T successful, however, it makes sense to say "he tried" – except that now you've given away the punch line, i.e., he failed. He tried, but… So now the reader expects him

to fail, and you now have two choices: he fails or he doesn't. If he does, the reader isn't surprised at all, nor as entertained as much. If he doesn't, you've broken your promise to the reader and the reader is disappointed. You, the writer, have tried to build suspense – but you've failed.

This is why – borrowing shamelessly from the "Star Wars" movie "The Empire Strikes Back" – I employ the following rule in my writing:

> **Yoda's Rule of Writing:** "There is no try – only do."

In plainer terms, eliminate "try to" from your writing. And don't just "try to" do it.

## 5. Simultaneity Syndrome

Often writers, struggling to pack action into a scene, toss as much action into a single sentence as possible by telling us that, essentially, two things happened at once: "as this happened, that happened." I call this the "X as Y" problem or, to be consistent in my nomenclature, the "Simultaneity Syndrome." For example:

> **Example 5.a**
>
> Gravel clattered the underside of the Impala as Peter, too stunned to react, continued to press the accelerator.

Again, two problems:

- The "X as Y" form makes the reader work too hard to manage the sequence of events in his head. The reader has to hold two simultaneous, often unrelated actions in his head and, at the same time, figure out the main thrust of the action. Remember the rules of basic writing: one sentence for one idea. In Example 5.a, what's the most important thing that's happening – the glass clattering under the Impala, or Peter stomping on the accelerator?
- It also implies a simultaneity that is often unnecessary or impossible to achieve. Wouldn't Peter's reaction *follow* the stimulus – glass clattering under the Impala? For example:

> **Example 5.b**
>
> Gravel clattered the underside of the Impala. Peter, too stunned to react, continued to press the accelerator.

Even when the simultaneity is believable, it is often implied already in context, and it's simpler, easier reading without. Often the "X as Y" construct forces the writer to add unnecessary text such as dialog tags or transitions that just slow down the reader. For example, compare:

**Example 5.c**

"You don't want to know," Betsy said as she spooned potatoes onto their plates. "It's too disgusting a topic for the dinner table."

**Example 5.d**

"You don't want to know." Betsy spooned potatoes onto their plates. "It's too disgusting a topic for the dinner table."

Do we need to be told that Betsy is talking and spooning potatoes at the same time? Does anyone not understand that from the simpler, cleaner example in 5.d?

There are times when this construct works. Sometimes you really do want to convey simultaneous actions, and that simultaneity is important. But use it sparingly. Overuse kills the power it can have with occasional use.

## 6. Continuity Syndrome

This is a fancy way to describe the practice of overusing the present participle – "-ing" verbs, as one of my writer friends likes to say. For example:

**Example 6.a**

Alex appeared from the kitchen, holding his hands out, twirling, and modeling the flower-print apron he wore.

This just clutters up an unnecessarily long sentence and makes the verbs more passive. It also forces the sentence to end with "he wore" - a weak phrase because it adds no new information. All of that weakens the impact of these otherwise strong verbs. Strive to use the past or present simple forms (hold/held, twirl/twirled, go/went) rather than past or present continuous for cleaner, more readable text. Usually it forces clearer, stronger verbs and images. Example 5.a could be revised to read:

**Example 6.b**

Alex appeared from the kitchen dressed in a flower-print apron. He held out his hands and twirled like a runway model.

Which image is clearer? Which is more active and more interesting?

Similarly, the overuse of the past continuous case, which combines the “to be” or “to have” helper verb with the main active verb (e.g., “was doing”), also creates a more passive voice in the text.

**Example 6.c**

Alex was looking for his galoshes all week. He was hoping to find them before the rest of the troops arrived.

The intention, of course, is to establish a mood of ongoing difficulty. But usually the writer can accomplish the same thing using the stronger, simpler past simple form:

**Example 6.d**

Alex looked for his galoshes all week. He hoped to find them before the rest of the troops arrived.

## 7. Ending with a thud.

Often writers produce beautiful prose with strong, compelling ideas – and bury them in the bowels of their text. For example:

**Example 7.a**

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the prosecutor said, “you have been asked to consider the evidence of a man’s guilt or innocence of the highest crime in our judicial system: murder in the first degree. The intentional and premeditated killing of a fellow human being.”

The strongest, most emotion-packed word in this paragraph is “murder” – yet it’s buried in the middle of a long sentence in and even longer paragraph. By the time the reader finishes the paragraph, its impact is muted, if not lost. It would be much stronger rewritten with this high-impact word (and idea) saved for last:

**Example 7.b**

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the prosecutor said, “you have been asked to consider the evidence of a man’s guilt or innocence of the highest crime in our judicial system: the intentional and premeditated killing of a fellow human being. The crime of first-degree murder.”

Always save the strongest idea for the last. End big. This goes all levels of your writing. The strongest word ends the sentence, the strongest tension-building element ends the scenes, and the cliff-hanger ends the chapter.

Beginnings and middles are important too. As one author put it, "Your beginnings must grab. Your middles must hold. Your ends must satisfy."[i] But most good writers know they should start strong – that draws the reader in. The job of the middle – "holding" – doesn't exactly raise the bar very high. But strong ends make readers turn pages.

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**8. Giving away the punch line.**

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Building on tip #7, it's important to build suspense all the way through a scene. This requires maintaining a delicate balance between revealing enough information to intrigue the reader – and withholding enough to keep the reader guessing.

But some writers make the mistake of "giving away the punch line." That is, they resolve the problem too early in the scene. Consider the following example, a passage that ends an important scene:

**Example 8.a**

John woke and squinted to help his eyes adjust to the blinding daylight. He searched the playground for Ella, his little yellow rose, but did not see her. No moms, no little children. The swings hung as if he had never pushed his little Ella. But no men in dark suits, either – and no more cars jammed the parking lot.

He scanned all around, the sun scorching his black hair. Swing sets, a jungle gym, and picnic tables spun around him and he could not make it stop. He whirled back to face the picnic table. On the bench a small girl slept - a pretty yellow rose dressed in pink, with curly blonde hair cascading over the thin stems of her shoulders. John ran over to get a better look.

In the third paragraph, John runs over to her to identify the girl, but the writer has already informed the reader that it's his "yellow rose." Our suspense is already on the downswing. Moving it to the end of the segment helps maintain the suspense:

**Example 8.b**

John woke and squinted to help his eyes adjust to the blinding daylight. He searched the playground for Ella, his little yellow rose, but did not see her. No moms, no little children. The swings hung as if he had never pushed his little Ella. But no men in dark suits, either – and no more cars jammed the parking lot.

He scanned all around, the sun scorching his black hair. Swing sets, a jungle gym, and picnic tables spun around him and he could not make it stop. He whirled around again and this time, on the bench of the picnic table where he'd been napping, something moved. He ran over to get a better look.

## 9. Who's talking? Character voice vs. author's voice.

It's easy to tell who's speaking in your dialog scenes, right? It's right there in the attribution, otherwise known as the "dialog tag." For example:

**Example 9.a**

"Hello, Mister," Rose said. "How can I help you?"

Frederik set down his duffel bag on the dusty porch. "I have thirsty," he said in a thick Slavic accent. "May I please have a drink of water?"

Rose chuckled. "If you're needin' a drink, the saloon opens at noon." She resumed her sweeping.

"May I speak to Mr. Soboleski?" Frederik said. "He's a friend of my mother."

There's nothing technically wrong with the text in Example 8.a. It's clear, simple dialog, it reveals information about the characters, and the attributions (dialog tags) make it very clear who's speaking at all times.

The problem is, the characters lack VOICE. Nothing distinguishes one character – a Polish immigrant at the turn of the century – from the other, a small-town Oregon girl. A couple of pages of this sort of dialog and our readers will be asleep or watching TV.

Ideally, we should be able to tell who's talking in a dialog scene from the context – their word choice, cadence, implied accents, and when all else fails, their actions. In fact, after a couple of lines, we should be able to eliminate dialog tags from the scene. For example:

**Example 9.b**

"Well, hello there, handsome," Rose said. "How can I help you?"

Frederik set down his duffel bag on the dusty porch. "I have thirsty. Could you please make water for me?"

Silly Polish men. "If you're needin' a drink, the saloon opens at noon." She resumed her sweeping.

"I speak to Mr. Soboleski?"

In 8.b, our dialog is just as clear as before, but now our characters can speak for themselves. By giving Rose a more whimsical speaking style and Frederik a stilted cadence and occasional grammatical errors, we can easily distinguish between them not only in this scene, but probably for the rest of the story. This allows us to minimize dialog tags and maximize the amount of text devoted to action, setting, and dialog.

## 10. Thinking syndrome.

In years past, writing vogue dictated that writers explicitly inform readers as to their narrative character's thoughts or feelings, and distinguish them from the rest of the text in some way. Usually that meant enclosing the thought in single quotes (in the US; double in Great Britain) or placing them in italics, and then adding the "he thought" type of attribution, like so:

**Example 10.a**

The Mustang swerved through the intersection, horn blaring. The driver gave me the finger and disappeared under the red traffic signal into the tunnel.

What a jerk, I thought, and slammed on my brakes. First the idiot runs a red light, then he curses at me.

This style has fallen out of vogue in recent years. Such "thought tags," first of all, are superfluous. Stories told in the first person, or in third person close, imply to the reader that all of the narrative comes from the narrating character's point of view. Because of this, the narrator – and thus the reader – can't know, or feel, or see anything other than what that character can know, feel, or see.

Moreover, the "I thought" dialog tag is simply extra text that we should eliminate if we can. It interrupts the flow and adds no information. Overall the text is weaker because it requires more words to deliver the same information. Also, the "I thought" tag only distances the reader from the story, reminding us that it's someone else experiencing the scene, rather than allowing us to live in the scene ourselves with direct description.

Second, the italics or single quotes are distracting. Italics, in particular, make the text stand out on the page and signal to the reader: *This is more special than the rest of the text. Pay attention.*

But is that true? Are thoughts always more interesting than actions? Possibly in some rare cases, but most would argue that in the example above, the *actions* of the two drivers are more interesting than the one driver's thoughts.

Compare the above to:

**Example 10.b**

The Mustang swerved through the intersection, horn blaring. The driver gave me the finger and disappeared under the red traffic signal into the tunnel.

I slammed on the brakes. Jerk! First the idiot runs a red light, then he curses at me.

Is there any misunderstanding about who is calling the Mustang driver a jerk, or who considers whom an idiot? Moreover, the narrator's point of view is just as strong, if not stronger – and most readers will feel closer to the action with the distancing "I thought" tag removed. Not only does the character think it – chances are, so do we.

## 11. Basting stitch.

Some writers feel compelled to insert transitions between strong actions or pieces of dialog in a scene, arguing that the added "beat" improves the scene's pacing. For example:

**Example 11.a**

"No talking until we've said Grace," Joe said. He passed a plate of steamed beans to Anna and glared at her older sister. "Sallie, sit down."

Plates filled, Sallie couldn't talk fast enough about her day. "I had so much fun with my new friends today!" she said. "We ran, we skipped, and oh! I learned to jump rope! Then we swam in the lake, and I caught a frog, only it turns out it was a toad because –"

"Slow down!" Joe laughed and shook his head.

Here the writer opted to skip over the mundane recital of prayers, but felt the need to fill the gap with a transitional sentence: "Plates filled…". The trouble is, this phrase TOLD us very little – and SHOWED us even less. Moreover, the author is first TELLING us what she is just about to SHOW us anyway – Sallie's enthusiastic rambling about her day. This is a "basting stitch" – an unnecessary, uninformative transition that TELLS instead of SHOWS, inserted to insert a beat – i.e., slow the story down – rather than to move the story along.

The writer is right to follow her instinct to insert a “beat” there, but far better to show us some actions instead that illustrate important character traits or conflicts.

**Example 11.b**

“No talking until we’ve said Grace,” Joe said. He passed a plate of steamed beans to Anna and glared at her older sister. “Sallie, sit down.”

Heads bowed. “Through Christ our Lord, amen,” they concluded in unison.

Sallie bounced in her seat. “I had so much fun with my new friends today!” she said. “We ran, we skipped, and oh! I learned to jump rope! Then we swam in the lake, and I caught a frog, only it turns out it was a toad because –”

“Slow down!” Joe laughed and shook his head.

The new transition (a) inserts action, (b) SHOWS us that they family prays together often enough that they speak in unison, and (c) avoids TELLING us what we’re about to SEE: Sallie’s excitement.

## 12. Rhetorical questions

What’s an effective way to convey a narrative character’s uncertainty about something? Is it better to show her ambivalent ruminations about the topic at hand, first leaning this way, then that? Or is it better to pose it as a question for the reader?

What just happened as you read that last paragraph? Did you start to drift off, thinking about how you’d answer the question? Or did you read ahead, hoping to find even more questions?

The use of rhetorical questions is a weak and over-used narrative device. (Which may be redundant – the use of any weak narrative device is, arguably, over-use.) There are two principal problems:

- Rhetorical questions do not add information (other than the fact that the narrator is uncertain). Thus they deaden the text, taking up space with words without moving the story forward.
- Rhetorical questions distract readers, sending them off on mental tangents – i.e. answering the questions – rather than encouraging them to keep reading.

**Example 12.a**

She knelt in the deep brush, hiding from view some hundred yards distant. The bush burned behind the dark, skinny man, illuminating the mountainside. Did he smell the fire's smoke? Was it strong, burning his nostrils, or soothing like the faint streams of candle smoke in Yorkfield's tiny chapel?

These questions convey the woman's uncertainty about the situation, but also make me wonder:  would I smell that smoke? What might that burning bush smell like? What DO those candles in the chapel smell like, anyway? And while I'm at it, what was the denomination of that church again? Which reminds me, I need to call Mom about Sunday's service…

And by now I've set down the book, picked up the phone and left the story behind. So how about, instead:

**Example 12.b**

She knelt in the deep brush, hiding from view some hundred yards distant. The bush burned behind the dark, skinny man, illuminating the mountainside. Surely he smelled the fire's smoke – it was close enough to burn his nostrils. But perhaps it soothed him, like the faint streams of candle smoke in Yorkfield's tiny chapel comforted her.

In this version, we remain immersed in the story, and we also learn more about the scene and characters. The man is close to the fire but undisturbed by it, and the point-of-view character finds church candles comforting.

### *13. Avoid Rhetorical Questions*

Sometimes writers want their reader to know that their point of view character is unsure or undecided about something. In an attempt to avoid simply TELLING that to the reader, they try to SHOW it by stating the question directly to the reader—in effect, asking the reader a rhetorical question. Such as:

**Example 13.a**

"What did you have for dinner?" Ellen asked.

Sweat crawled down the back of John's neck. Did she suspect him? Could she smell the liquor on his breath over his breath mints?

Unfortunately, this strategy solves the initial problem by creating a different one. The reader's natural reaction when confronted with a question is to answer it. That takes the reader out of the story and gives the reader something else to think about. A strong enough

question could even distract the reader to the point of not reading, at least for a while—something no writer wants. A weak question, by contrast, is simply that—weak. That's even worse.

A better strategy is to SHOW the reader the character's ambivalence using declarative statements that reveal the character's attitude—fear, indecision, confusion, etc. For example:

**Example 13.b**

"What did you have for dinner?" Ellen asked.

Sweat crawled down the back of John's neck. Damn, she must suspect something. He turned away and cupped his hand over his mouth, forcing a cough. Sweet minty aromas invaded his nose. He couldn't smell alcohol, but one can never detect one's own.

## Create your own tic list

Suppose you've read through this list and didn't recognize very many of these errors from your own work. Does that mean your work is perfect and that all of those nay-saying agents, editors, and book-buyers are wrong?

Even good writers have blind spots and bad habits. Most of us write quick first drafts, slamming words on the page to get the story onto the page before we forget it. Sure, we make mistakes and have some writing habits we'd like to break. But look at the junk that's out there on the market… and besides, it's our first draft. The last thing we want to worry about at that point is fine-tuning.

But the fine-tuning must come, sooner or later. When it does, most writers will spend long hours poring over their text, tweaking and fixing and rewording, breathing new life into old text. For many writers, when the process is complete, the finished copy will then be… good, but not great. Just like the last novel, it will remain replete with the "tics" that invade all of our writing.

Not to worry. You can fix it. If these aren't your errors, do yourself a favor: review your work with a critical eye (or get some writer friends to help you) and make up your own "tic" list – your list of habits that weaken your writing. Keep them handy, along with this document, your dictionary and thesaurus, and go through the document page by page, identifying and fixing those errors one by one. It's hard work, but essential. You need to discard these errors, this dead weight that draws your document to the bottom of the slush pile.

When you're done, your story will be that much stronger. It may not knock John Grisham off the top of the New York Times bestseller list next week, but the chances that your manuscript will float to the top of the slush pile will be greatly improved.

[i] James Scott Bell, *Revision and Self-Editing* (2008, Writer's Digest Books), p. 124. A highly recommended book for any writer.