

How to Avoid Amateur Mistakes



Writer's Digest



How to Avoid Amateur Mistakes

By James V Smith Jr.

First and foremost: STAY OUT OF THE STORY.

Don't stick your nose into the fictional world with expressions like: If she only knew what was waiting for her on the other side of that door; and he was wrong; or little did she know.

But you probably consider these examples so elementary that it's an insult to your intelligence for me to list them.

Odds are, there's really no room for you in the story. So let me give you some of the less obvious ways an author can intrude, ways you should avoid.

INTRUSION MISTAKES TO AVOID

• TIRED EXPRESSIONS.

Like right out of sitcoms, movies, or even the day's news. Using them is like putting a stick-on note in the margin of your manuscript: Hi, I'm the author, and I watch too much TV. Hell-OH-o, don't go there, I don't think so as in any sitcom or teen conversation.

• GOOFY GIMMICKS AND GRAMMATICAL GADGETS!!!

This includes alliteration—writing with words that begin with the same letter—and odd punctuation like multiple exclamation points.

• CUTE QUOTE MARKS.

She had never met an author so tall—seven feet, an authentic “literary giant.” Do you see the quotes? That's the author. He's winking at you from behind the narrative, telling you he's made a funny, wanting you to notice it. Take off the quotes, and the irony works just as well.

• PREACHING FROM THE MOUTH OF A CHARACTER.

When I hear a novel's heroine use a tired expression like, “male chauvinist pig,” whether the language comes in quotes or not, I know the writer couldn't find a more artful, less preachy way to say the same thing.

- **BRAND NAME REVELATIONS.**

I like concrete detail, research, and accuracy in the things I read as well as the next reader. But after the tenth new vintage wine is described, dated, and delivered, it's clear to me that the author is showing off his inner oenophile.

- **POLITICALLY CORRECT ASSUMPTIONS AND OBSERVATIONS.**

Not that some characters shouldn't be written as PC. But the author shouldn't take liberties outside of character to push a theme.

- **WINK-AND-NOD.**

This often involves phrases such as of course and naturally. As in this example:

Of course, he didn't say a word to influence her decision to get an abortion.

Except for the writer herself, this is a tricky situation to judge. Sometimes it's a character narrator who uses the word or phrase in the sense of "he knew better than to try." But it's also possible the author was speaking out.

- **OUT-OF-CHARACTER NARRATION AND DESCRIPTIONS.**

Sometimes you read words coming from a character's mouth that just don't sound familiar, a change of voice or attitude with no apparent reason for the change. That's the author showing off his big vocabulary or big-whoop opinions. I'd like to have a dime for every time I've committed this sin.

- **NAKED CLICHÉS.**

When a writer uses them stale out of the box, he's annoying his reader just as surely as chewing gum with his mouth open. The reader is thinking: Can't this guy come up with language a bit more inventive? Thus, the author intrusion.

- **AWKWARD CONSTRUCTIONS.**

Anytime a reader stumbles over your words, you have broken through the façade of fiction to announce your presence behind the page.

- **STATIC SITUATIONS AND LENGTHY DESCRIPTIONS.**

What Elmore Leonard calls "the stuff readers skip." When readers skip, the writer has allowed his presence to be felt. Unpleasantly so.

- **PONTIFICATING.**

This includes philosophizing, musing, wondering, and other subtle forms of pontificating.

- **REPETITION.**

When you repeat a pet phrase or even an odd word in a story, it calls attention to itself. When you use it more often, it calls attention to the author. As in: Don't you own a thesaurus? My wife hates it when I use the phrase state of the art, even once.

- **ANYTHING TOO, TOO QUIRKY.**

I like quirky writing, other writers' quirks and my own. But sometimes they can destroy the ambiance of a piece of writing. I hate to confess it, but I lose a lot in the reading of Chaucer when it's written in the original Middle English:

Thing that is seyde is seyde; and forth it gooth.

You can forgive Chaucer those quirks because it was his English before we made it ours. But there's a line in Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*:

Heh-heggggggggggggggggghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

... which is an odd cackling laugh set in type. That kind of quirk could get old fast. Like the handheld camera technique in some films, especially when the camera circles an actor half a dozen times at high speed.

When should an author's voice be heard? Never. Keep yourself out of the story altogether unless you're writing one of those fictional first-person memoirs or whatever they call them.



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