

# The Seven Writerly Sins

Learn how to live the starving-artist  
writer experience... or in the alternative  
learn how to avoid it.

A bonus book by

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# **The Seven Writerly Sins**

## **Common Snags in Writing Narrative**

a Writing the World™ publication

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### **The Seven Writerly Sins: Common Snags in Writing Narrative**

Your primary purpose as a writer is to avoid interrupting your reader. After all, when she's completely absorbed in reading your novel, why would you want to do anything to interrupt her? The short answer is you wouldn't. But if you really want to live the whole "struggling, starving writer" experience, unable to find a market for your work even after you've received rave reviews from your mom, just commit one or more of these seven writerly sins.

**1. Unnecessary or Excessive Text**—Few problems will cause a reader to grind to a disgusted halt like unnecessary or excessive narrative. Here are some of the more prevalent problems:

**Unnecessary Tag Lines or Not Enough Tag Lines**—Tag lines are those little “he said” or “she said” bits that are “tagged” onto the beginning or end of lines of dialogue. Don’t inundate the reader. Avoid using a tag line after every bit of dialogue. Here's my rule of thumb: Use a tag line only when it's absolutely necessary to let the reader know which character is speaking. If you must err, use fewer tag lines rather than more. Eliminating tag lines will cause the reader to pay closer attention to the story.

**Convoluting Construction**—A convoluted construction is one that winds its way through several levels

or subjects before returning to the original topic, and in almost every case it will confuse the reader. Confusion causes interruptions, and any interruption is a bad thing. There's an example of convoluted construction below under "Narrative Passages That Have Nothing to Do With the Plot."

**Lengthy Look-At-Me Paragraphs**—Few things are more distracting and annoying than look-at-me passages of narrative. They seldom contribute to the story line and probably are the primary cause of novels being hurled through plate-glass windows. The look-at-me narrative passage is most often written in first person by the narrator, whether author or character, and usually contains a flood of unnecessary, boring information.

In one otherwise excellent novel manuscript, the narrator's personal "I" occurred 99 times in just over four pages, an average of 24 occurrences per page, and none were used in dialogue. In the rest of the manuscript, in narrative, dialogue, and song lyrics, the personal "I" occurred an average of 15 times per page.

**Narrative Passages That Have Nothing to Do With the Plot**—If your protagonist is in a covert aircraft over a Latin American country about to parachute under cover of darkness into the stronghold of a drug lord, don't stop the action to explain why he's qualified to be doing that.

In descending order, the flashbacks in that manuscript went from the present-day protagonist in the covert aircraft to when he'd first become interested in skydiving, then to his days as an ambulance driver, then to a really bad accident he worked as an ambulance driver, then to how the hospital administration set up the shifts at the hospital for which he worked as an ambulance driver, then to what had first sparked his desire to become an ambulance driver. You get the drift. And in two of those flashbacks he sidestepped into another part of the world and a whole new cast of characters (the chief antagonist's relatives and ancestors), to club me with what seemed like the endlessly convoluted circumstances that had led the antagonists to *their* current situation. I felt as if I were reading three novels simultaneously: a romance, a spy/thriller, and a family saga ala Michener's *Texas*. Please understand, specifically *because* the reader so willingly and graciously suspends his own sense of disbelief, it is among the chief traits of fiction that the writer doesn't *have* to explain whether his protagonist is qualified to *be* the protagonist. As part of their willing suspension of disbelief, readers simply assume all is well in the fictional world in which they're about to vacation. Please, don't run them off.

Here's a fictional example of a convoluted narrative passage that has nothing to do with the story line. A lawyer is addressing a juvenile court judge on behalf of his charge:

"This boy's mother and grandmother were both killed in the big flood, Your Honor." That was all the attorney had to say. The judge knew he was referring to the great flood of 1973, which was caused by Hurricane Gilbert and had killed 5,000 people. The lawyer knew Hurricane Gilbert had loitered in the Atlantic for several days, building in strength because his cousin worked for the weather service. He hadn't slept in all those days before the hurricane hit, but afterward he slept like a baby. "He's lived on the streets ever since, supporting himself in any way he could. He's not a criminal; he's just never had a break."

Since the lawyer referred to the event as "the big flood," won't the reader probably assume everyone present is familiar with that event? So explaining what the judge knew not only is redundant, irritating, and unnecessary, but that information has no direct bearing on the story line. The lawyer's contention is that boy was on the street because his mother and grandmother were killed; how they were killed doesn't matter in the slightest. "That was all the attorney had to say" also is unnecessary. And what possible relevance does the lawyer's cousin or his profession or his sleeping habits have to the proceedings? Just so you know, neither the cousin nor the weather service nor any of the lawyer's personal habits were mentioned ever again.

To clean up this passage, let simply remove all the narrative. In doing so, do we deprive the reader of anything?

"This boy's mother and grandmother were both killed in the big flood, Your Honor. He's lived on the streets ever since, supporting himself in any way he could. He's not a criminal, Your Honor; he's just never had a break."

If someone asked me how I came to write a book on dialogue and flash fiction, I wouldn't begin by telling them about the day I tripped over a curb and ripped the knee out of my new jeans, or the time I nearly electrocuted myself (my dad said) by trying to pry a bird's nest out of an electrical box with a stick while standing in a puddle of rainwater, or the evening I first noticed girls were not just soft boys. Those memories certainly are relevant to my own life, but none of them has anything to do with my being a writer now.

The less unnecessary or excessive text the reader has to wade through to get to the meat of your story,

the better will be his reading experience and the more likely he will be to recommend your books to his friends.

**2. Beating the Reader Over the Head**—One of the most difficult things for the writer to do is *trust the reader to get it*. Readers generally know pretty much everything we know about the world. In a manuscript for a crime drama, I found this:

The perp, short for perpetrator, which is what we call a suspected criminal, fled along the sidewalk. Casting a sidelong glance over his shoulder, he flipped over a fire hydrant, one of those red spark-plug-looking things scattered around the city for emergency use by the fire department when they need water, and landed squarely in the forty-five degree angle formed by a light pole and the curb. He lay moaning and holding his right thigh. He could easily have broken his leg when he hit the fire hydrant.

With any luck at all, by the time the manuscript is a book on the shelf, the passage will read something like this:

The perp fled along the sidewalk. Casting a sidelong glance over his shoulder, he flipped over a fire hydrant and landed squarely in the angle of a light pole and the curb. He lay moaning and holding his right thigh.

**Overusing a character's name**—Overuse of the characters' names in a narrative passage often indicates that the information in the narrative passage would be more economically delivered through dialogue:

Safely back inside the Silverado, Paul and John shivered with cold. Paul wrestled with the keys for a moment and finally found the ignition key. He started the truck and the engine roared to life. Paul reached to adjust the heater to its highest setting. John asked Paul what they were going to do next. Paul told John he wasn't sure, but that they surely couldn't stay there. John agreed. Paul clapped him on the shoulder and told him they'd be all right. John forced a smile and said he'd be glad when they saw the lights of the city again.

Some narrative is necessary here, but most of this information could have been related through dialogue between Paul and John:

Safely back inside the Silverado, the two men shivered with cold. Paul wrestled with the keys for a moment, then started the engine. He turned on the heater.

John looked at him. "So what now?"

"I don't know. We sure can't stay around here."

"Yeah. It's—"

"Hey." Paul clapped him on the shoulder. "Everything's gonna be fine."

"Yeah... well, I'll just be glad when we see the lights of Detroit."

"You and me both, Brother."

Is the second example more interesting than the first? You'll notice that in the second example, we initially refer to John and Paul as "the two men." This allows the reader to learn their names on his own, as if by accident rather than being told outright. Notice too that we use Paul's name only twice and John's only once, yet there's no confusion regarding which one is talking.

Remember, trust your reader to get it, and trust him to remember your characters' names from one paragraph to the next. If you read your work aloud, you will easily catch the overuse of the characters' names and a host of other narrative problems.

### 3. Misplaced Modifiers

**Misplaced modifiers are almost always humorous** and will bring a smile, if not a belly laugh, to your reader. The problem is, the reader is laughing for the wrong reason. Take a look at these examples. My comments immediately follow each example in parentheses:

Walking into the clubhouse, the cement floor was littered with helmets, mouth pieces, girdles, pads, and protection cups but no coffee container. (Why was the cement floor walking into the clubhouse?)

Looking at each other, Buck replied. (What?)

Crossing over the Harlem River and entering Manhattan Island, the buildings became taller.... With each passing block the wealth increased and I kept thinking, for what purpose. (Okay, the buildings crossed the Harlem river, entered Manhattan and became taller. That's bad enough, but you aren't sure why you kept thinking?)

After showering and while shaving my telephone rang.... (Bothersome gadgets, telephones, always using my shower and my razor.)

Ralph's head popped up from the menu, stating to everyone.... (This might be all right in a horror novel.)

My mother feeds chocolates to her friends with soft centers. (And now we know how her friends got the soft centers.)

Making the reader laugh is a wonderful thing, but not if she's reading your mystery or horror or suspense novel.

**4. Inanity**—These snippets usually occur as a result of the writer's mind wandering. These examples are from novels I've edited. Any minor repairs I made to them are enclosed in brackets. My comments follow each example:

**Example:** Suddenly, John couldn't help but think of DEA Agent Ernesto Carrera. 'Neto had been kidnapped and tortured to death by some dope smugglers in Mexico over the loss of few hundred-thousand dollars worth of marijuana. The Honduran drug lord they were about to challenge was capable of much harsher treatment. John's final question, spoken softly to himself was, *Where am I going to find a case of beer in Honduras?*

**Comment:** Okay, first, think about this: What treatment would be “much harsher” than being *tortured to death*? Second, and this is the inane part, the guy's in the center of a major drug dealer's home compound and he stops in the midst of the action to ask himself where he can find a case of beer? Really?

**Example:** The white, red and blue ambulance with its flashing strings of red, blue and white lights strung across its roof, down its sides, and crisscrossing the rear door, roared off carrying poor Fish's remains like a berserk Christmas tree fleeing the woodsman's ax.

**Comment:** There's almost too much wrong here to talk about. Y'think the writer read this aloud before submitting it? First, why “white, red and blue” and then “red, blue and white”? Then there's the lack of parallel structure, which could have been fixed with “and”: “lights strung across its roof [and] down its sides and crisscrossing the rear door.” And how'd they get the guy in the ambulance if it has lights crisscrossing the rear door? And then the best part, the simile—“like a berserk Christmas tree fleeing the

woodsman's ax." Really? Guess y'gotta be wary of those berserk Christmas trees.

**Example:** One peek into the huge dark room where multi-colored lights threw iridescent confetti across the dark spaces, and flashes of laser lightning criss-crossed a cavernous room filled with the ear deadening, soul frightening roar of hundreds of people screaming, bouncing and gyrating as a heavy metal band called "Vomit" yelling from amplifiers, "Baby we want it all... all... all," over and over again, took all the Pilgrims' Thanksgiving spirit out of the choir.

**Comment:** Okay. We have lights throwing confetti, etc. Yawn. And the heavy-metal band named "Vomit" is at least attention getting. I guess my biggest question here is What was the choir doing peeking into this particular room. And were they actual Pilgrims? And... oh, never mind.

**Example:** I was at rest on the couch in the peaceful time between our brisk late morning walks, our brunches of pancakes and eggs with hot coffee, and the late evening's dark quiet, punctuated only by the sound of the fire burping air from eating the log's sap, and the sound of the night wind saying 'hello,' as it passed by.

**Comment:** I nearly rolled off my chair laughing at this romantic interlude. The fire "burping air"? The night wind saying "hello"?

Again, making the reader laugh can be a good thing, but only if it's what you intend.

**5. Erroneous Facts**—Few problems irritate a reader as much as stumbling across an outright lie that indicates ignorance on the part of the writer. Most fictions contain at least some references to the real world in which we live, and that's where some writers run into problems.

Don't say about a Navy SEAL that "he was an expert at SNE—silent neutralization of the enemy"; there is no such acronym, and anyone who has much military experience knows it.

Don't have the characters in your novel harvesting sugar cane to make mescal; mescal is distilled from the agave plant, not from sugar cane.

Each of Louis L'Amour's western novels contained a statement all writers should live by: Paraphrased, the statement reads "When Louis L'Amour writes about a stream, the stream is there and the water is good to drink." Do your research.

**6. The Infamous *Gave***—In addition to being a poet, writer, and writing instructor, I'm also a freelance



editor. When I happen across the first couple of instances of inappropriate use of the verb "gave" in a manuscript, I immediately do a global search to find each instance all the way through so I can repair those sentences up front. I know that when I've found one such instance, I'll no doubt discover a lot more of them. Using "gave" inappropriately creates the same kind of diversion as someone who says "umm" a lot during the course of a speech. After a while, the audience members stop listening to the speech and start counting occurrences of "umm." Here's a verbatim transcript of a question/answer session between a writer and his editor (me):

**Question:** Which sentence is correct, or are they both correct?

"I gave a quick look at Nick Campbell, and he gave me a subtle nod for me to continue."

"I gave a quick look at Nick Campell, and he gave me a subtle nod to continue."

**Answer:** I don't care for either of them. In the first place, "give" is most often a transitive verb, meaning you actually give (or hand or grant) something to someone. Using "give" in this way is all right if it isn't overused. In this case, I suggest you write, "I glanced at Nick Campbell and he nodded, indicating that I should continue" or just "I glanced at Nick Campbell and he nodded."

Here are a few more tidbits for you:

Don't write, "I gave him a smile."

Write, "I smiled (at him)."

Don't write, "I gave him a wave" (unless you're working in a beauty parlor).

Write, "I waved (to him)."

Don't write, "I gave his hand a shake" (unless you're a soda jerk).

Write, "I shook his hand."

Don't write, "I gave her a kiss" (unless it's Hershey's and it's wrapped in foil).

Write, "I kissed her."

**However, please write,** "I gave him a dollar," not "I dollared him," and "I gave her a ring," not "I ringed her."

**7. State-of-Being Verbs**—You should avoid using the state-of-being verbs—am, is, are, was, were, be, being, and been—whenever you can.

State-of-being verbs are both useful and necessary, but *only* for describing a state of being. When you are able to describe something with action verbs instead, do so. Unlike action verbs, state-of-being verbs do not act on any other part of the sentence and they do nothing to advance the story line.

One big no-no—never describe the state of being of a character. If you read “John was angry” or “Mary is on the brink of a mental meltdown” or “Randy’s not doing too well in the hospital” or “Karen is beautiful,” how has your mental picture of any of those characters changed? Instead, narrate: describe a scene that lets the reader *see* that John is angry or that Mary is on the brink of a mental break or that Randy’s not doing well in the hospital or that Karen is beautiful. Anytime you let the reader see something for himself, he will become more deeply engaged in the story line.

When you use state-of-being verbs to describe a character, you’ve wasted a sentence. Consider the following:

John was angry.

The natural reaction to realizing something’s wrong with this sentence is to dress it up with adverbs:

John was very angry. John was extremely angry.

Does the addition of the adverbs help? Do you know any more now about the scene than you knew a moment ago? Is your mental image of John any clearer? No. And take my word for it, replacing the period with an exclamation point won't work either. Because we used the state-of-being verb *was* in the sentence, then attempted to strengthen it by adding adverbs, these sentences *tell* the reader *about* John rather than letting the reader *see* the scene for himself through the use of action verbs. How about this:

John kicked in the door, stormed up the stairs, slapped Maria, and hurled Joaquin through a window to the street below.

Now do you see what's going on in the scene? That's the difference action verbs can make in your

writing. Notice, too, that not one time did the word *angry* or *mad* or even *upset* appear, but is there any doubt as to John's state of mind? You might also have noticed that there are no adjectives or adverbs in the sentence. Did you miss them?

In addition to bringing life to your narrative by providing action, good action verbs also can help set the tone or mood of a scene.

That's it for this time! Thanks for purchasing this little ebook. If you've found it useful, I hope you'll consider purchasing my other nonfiction titles.

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### **About the Author**

Harvey Stanbrough was born in New Mexico, seasoned in Texas, and baked in Arizona. He spent most of his early life in the home of his heart, the Sonoran Desert of southern Arizona. After graduating from a 21-year civilian-appreciation course in the U.S. Marine Corps, he attended Eastern New Mexico University where he managed to sneak up on a bachelors degree. He works as a freelance editor, writer and writing instructor from his home in southeast Arizona. Harvey welcomes constructive comments at [h\\_stanbrough@yahoo.com](mailto:h_stanbrough@yahoo.com). Visit his fiction website at <http://cantinatales.com/>, his Writing the World website at <http://harveystanbrough.com> or visit him on [Facebook](#).