

Take Your Writing to the NEXT Level

By Jane McBride, Reprint from CBI 8 August, 2015

What is it that sets bestselling authors apart from the rest of us? Is it because they are great storytellers? It goes without saying. Is it because they have perfected the craft of writing? Of course. Is it because they know the rules of grammar and excel in following them? Well, maybe not so much, but grammar is important.

So what is it that makes their writing sing? What makes them hit the *New York Times* bestseller lists again and again? Have they learned a secret that you and I aren't privy to? (If there is any secret in writing, it's this: put your rear in chair and write. But that's a subject for another article.) I believe that what sets these writers apart is that they have taken their writing to a level that leaves us, the readers, breathless with the beauty and brilliance of it. Their prose makes us sit up and wonder just how they did it.

Can you and I employ some of these same tools? You bet. Let's take a look at them and see what we can learn. (Note: these are in no particular order.)

1. Refrain from front-loading backstory. Are you writing a chapter book where a nine-year-old girl gets lost from her parents on the beach? Don't tell the readers in the first paragraph that she had been lost once before and is terrified of the same thing happening again. Let her feelings about that experience unfold as the story develops. Let the readers learn about it bit by bit. The impact will be far greater.

2. Raise the stakes. Throw your character in hot water and keep him there. Does the 17-year-old boy in your YA book need to earn money to help support his single mother and siblings? Is he working two part-time jobs just to keep food on the table and the power turned on? What if, on top of all of that, his mother receives a foreclosure notice on the house? Though she tries to keep it from him, our young hero sees it and resolves to do everything he can to make up the missed payments, even if it means dropping out of school completely and working full time. His stakes have been raised considerably. Now his family is in danger of losing their home.

3. Use stereotypes imaginatively and resist the urge to rely on these clichés. Avoid characters that appear to have just walked out of "central casting". You know the ones I mean: the wicked step-mother, the rebellious teen, the trusted teacher. What if your 12-year-old's step-mother is loving and supportive even when the character spouts hurtful words to her because he resents his father for divorcing his mother? And what if that step-mother does everything in her power to mend the rift between father and son? You have turned the stereotype on its head.

4. Remove unnecessary words. Has your YA book's character just finished qualifying to make the cheerleading team? Good for her. Did she have to go through the hour long routine several times in order to qualify? Is she very, very tired? Show the reader the character's exhaustion but don't beat her (the reader) over the head with it. What if instead of saying, "Jenay was so tired that she couldn't move. She was exhausted," we say "Jenay tried to groan, but nothing came out. Every part of her body ached. Including her eyelashes. Who knew that eyelashes could hurt?" Not only have we removed tired and exhausted, which say the same thing, we've given a far more interesting description of just how tired Jenay really was. Not only have you eliminated several words, you've written a far more compelling passage.

5. Know what not to put in ... or to take out. Related to the above, knowing what to cut and what to leave out is a necessary skill. In my most recent book, I failed to realize that I had told the readers again and again that my hero was in deep pain over the death of his brother. Fortunately, a perceptive line editor caught those repetitions and we cut nearly 75% of them. Those cuts made the book read far more smoothly. The action flowed at a faster pace without all that unnecessary exposition.

6. Cut ten percent when editing. You may want to cut even more than that. Pay special attention to your “darlings”. Darlings are those words that you rely upon again and again. I love the word “struggle.” My characters struggle through all sorts of things, even things that don’t require struggling. Cut description that doesn’t move the story along. Cut dialogue that does nothing to advance the plot or reveal characterization. Even if that dialogue is the wittiest repartee ever written, if it doesn’t do at least one of the above, weed it out.

7. Don’t let you (the author) appear on the page. This story belongs to your characters. I have strong religious views. Though my values appear in my writing (at least I hope they do), I don’t preach those views on the page. I keep in character. So if the 10-year-old girl in my short story struggles (darn it, there’s that word again) about whether to participate in a shoplifting prank with her friends, I don’t have her go through a litany of why that is wrong. I give her her own set of values and allow her to reason through what she will and won’t do.

8. Trust your readers. You don’t have to clobber them over the head with a point. Credit them with enough intelligence to pick up on subtleties. It is not necessary to say “Five-year-old Jason was afraid to spend the night at his grandparents’ house.” Show Jason dragging his feet after his mother tells him to pack his clothes. What if we wrote, “Jason scuffed his way to his room, his toes digging in with every step?”

9. Critique groups are great, but be wary of letting them suck the life blood from your story. Have you ever taken a WIP (work in progress) to a critique group only to come home with your story shredded into pieces that you fear you’ll never be able to put back together? Critique groups can end up micro-editing a piece, with each person focusing on a different aspect of the work. While this can be helpful, it can also remove the heart of your story. Don’t lose sight of the big picture.

10. Have over-arching conflict. Don’t solve the main conflict of the story until the very end. Is the 11-year-old boy in your tween book trying to find the courage to tell his parents that his uncle sexually abused him over and over during a family vacation? Let the character build trust with his parents in other ways while he works to find the words to tell them his far greater secret. Maybe he tells them that he failed his math test. They accept that, and he gains courage to reveal other things, piece by piece, until the great big secret comes out.

11. Open in a unique way. Which opening grabs your interest more? “Molly stuck her feet in the too-big shoes, hand-me-downs from her cousin.” Or, “Why do I always have to wear other people’s things?” Molly muttered to herself. “Just once I’d like something of my own.” Though both openings are adequate, the one that opens with dialogue engages the reader on a more immediate level.

The above are only a sampling of ways to take your writing to the next level. Experiment with your own tricks of the trade. Your writing will start to sing.

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