Writing Tips

Don’t use intensifiers: Three commonly overused modifiers are *so, very* and *suddenly.*

**Wrong**

My slippers were so very thin: I could walk the matted floor as softly as a cat. Suddenly he glided up the gallery and up the stairs, and stopped in the very dark, low corridor of the fateful third story: I had followed and suddenly stood at his side.

**Right**

My slippers were thin: I could walk the matted floor as softly as a cat He glided up the gallery and up the stairs, and stopped in the dark, low corridor of the fateful their story: I had followed and stood at his side.

Tense: If your tense is off, the word-processing program will usually catch it. Pay attention. You’d have to have a brilliantly artistic reason for breaking tense.

**Not this way**

He opens his coat and takes out a knife, then smiled.

**This way**

He opened his coat and took out a knife, then smiled.

**Or**

He opens his coat and takes out a knife, then smiles.

Sentence structure and shape: Your sentence lengths should vary. If you write too many short, or too many long, sentences in a row, adjust for variation. Don’t be random. Read your work aloud and listen for the natural flow of your writing.

**Not as good**

He noticed the ladder wasn’t where he expected it to be. It was usually lying there. Now it was raised against one of the windows. It was a second-floor window. The window stood wide open. He passed the ladder. Looking back, he saw a man descend the ladder.

**Better**

He noticed that a ladder, which usually lay there, was raised against one of the windows, of the second floor, which was wide open. After passing he looked back and saw a man descend the ladder.

**Not as good**

And, of course, there were some more who were frankly jealous, and very few of them hated her, and only three of them were planning to murder her, but Butter cup, naturally, knew none of this.

**Better**

And of course, there were some more who were frankly jealous. Very few of them hated her

And only three of them were planning to murder her.

Buttercup, naturally, knew none of this.

Where to start: Some conversations and scenes can be trimmed at the front as well. When one character calls another up on the phone you don’t have to start with hello. Let’s assume they greeted each other.

**Don’t start here**

Jack was just about to leave for the pool hall when the phone rang. He caught it on the second ring.

“Yeah?”

“Is this Jack Knight?” came the voice on the other end.

“Yes.”

“This is detective Laurence.”

“What do you want?”

“I’m calling because we found your brother's body in Macy Park this morning.”

**Start here**

Before Jack could get out the door, the cop from Nick’s party called with a piece of news that stopped him dead.

“We found your brother’s body,” the detective said, “in Macy Park this morning.”

Another tip on where to start: When a character goes from one place to another you don’t have to start with the car pulling up or the door opening. We know how people enter office buildings. Start the conversation or scene where it becomes important to us.

**Don’t start here**

It was eight in the morning and raining hard. She pulled up to the curb, parking her car in the crosswalk. Maybe she would get a ticket, but she didn’t care. A handful of uppies filed in and out of the Contec Building. Olive rode up to the seventh floor in a mirrored elevator, standing between a middle-aged man in an Armani suit and a teenaged delivery boy carrying a pastry box.

Patrick’s office door was open and his receptionist was nowhere to be found. Olive strode in and slapped the newspaper down under her husband’s nose.

“What the heck is this?” she asked him.

**Start here**

“What the heck?” Olive slapped the newspaper onto Patrick’s desk.

Don’t be boring: It’s not the number of words that makes your story vivid, it’s the right words.

**Boring**

By the time John had got to the top of the stairs he was dead tired.

**Better**

By the time John had got to the top of the stairs his face was streaked in sweat and he was wheezing like a perished accordion.

**Boring**

The congregation grew restless.

**Better**

Fans crackled, feet shuffled, tobacco-chewers were in agony.

**Boring**

In New England summer comes on hard and fast.

**Better**

In New England spring really only comes for one priceless week and then the deejays drag out the Beach Boys golden oldies, the buzz of the cruising Honda is heard throughout the land, and summer comes down with a hot thud.

Word Choice: Tighten and improve your word choice by replacing a few ordinary words with one right word.

**Fine**

They built a bridge across the narrow opening between the hills.

**Concise and precise**

They built a bridge across the gorge**.**

**Fine**

For Eurodra, love was difficult to find.

**Concise and precise**

For Eurodra, love was elusive.

Rittenberg, Ann, and Laura Whitcomb. *Your First Novel*. Writer’s Digest, 2006.