The Standard Deviations of Writing

by

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Introduction

Quite some years ago, I had a chat with a man who repaired high-end fax machines for a living, back when fax machines were the pinnacle of high technology. He reported the appalling statistic that fully 95 percent of the service calls he made were unneeded, because the consumers *could* have fixed their problems with no help from him. Nineteen out of twenty calls involved such technical challenges as machines out of paper, machines not plugged in, machines not hooked up to a phone line, and machines not turned on. I'm sure that anyone working anywhere in tech support would be able to offer similar statistics.

In the above case, the *legitimate* service calls only received five percent of the available time and attention of the repair technicians. If people used their plain common sense and read and followed instructions, they would hardly ever need to call for repairs. The bad news, of course, is that people who need the help with real and complex problems are denied it thanks to the people who could have fixed things for themselves if they had only bothered.

It is in the spirit of preventing such needless service calls that I offer this list of common mistakes made in writing. To the degree that you can avoid these standard deviations, you -- and your editors and workshop partners -- will be able spend more time on other issues of greater substance.

Read over this list. Understand what these errors are, and try and see how they can get you into trouble. Learn to avoid them. For many people, developing the basics the writer's craft

consists in large part of learning how *not* to do these things.

I have schlepped through a lot of student manuscripts in a lot of venues. I would estimate that the errors listed below comprise *at least* 90 percent of the problems I encounter. Most are fairly simple to avoid if you are aware of them, and can be easily fixed, once you know how to spot them.

Errors Of Style

The first errors I will discuss are in the area of how a story is written, rather than in what the story is about. You might also call these errors of structure: These are errors involving the how the story is put together, and the parts used to put it together.

1. Passive voice

This is the single most common error. More people make this mistake, and make it more often, than any other error in the writing of fiction. Let me rephrase that sentence, so as to illustrate the problem: This is the mistake most commonly made in all fiction. Note that in my second rendition, no one makes the mistake. It is simply "made." It is not clear that it is a mistake in *writing*. You could interpret the second rendition to mean that *readers* make the mistake. In passive voice, nothing is ever anyone's fault, because people do not do things. Things happen to people -- or just happen, with no people needed or present. "Irving ate the food" is active. "The food was eaten" is passive. Note that Irving has vanished completely. The food and the action of eating are made more important than the person who does them.

Writers most often drop into passive voice when they are unsure of themselves, when they don't want anything bad to happen to one of their characters, when they don't want their characters to do anything bad.

Remember that your story is all happening on paper. You can change everything later with a stroke of a pen. Don't be afraid. Be bold and adventurous. If you make a mistake, you can fix it later. If you kill a character, you can bring her back to life in the next draft. If your character commits a murder, you can give him a really good lawyer. Let your characters do bad things.

Note that passive voice cannot -- and need not -- be completely eliminated. See previous sentence (and the first sentence of this section) for examples. There are times when it works.

2. Inappropriate use of summary narration

This is closely related to passive voice -- the two errors frequently overlap each other. Summary, or indirect, narrative is the flip side of the coin from direct narration. You sum up events, tell about them, rather than show them. As anyone who has ever stayed awake in a writing class knows, you should strive to show as much as possible, and tell as little.

Direct narrative:
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    Henry walked toward downtown.  He turned
left on Smith Street.  He stopped into Joe's
Diner and he sat at his favorite stool.  He
ordered a ham sandwich for lunch, and made
sure to smile at the waitress... (etc.)
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Summary narrative:
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        Henry went out to lunch.  Then he went
    back to work.
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The first version is appropriate when you want to report on all of Henry's actions and his going to Joe's will have some impact on the story. The second is appropriate when the walk and the meal -- and perhaps the character -- are of secondary importance. Perhaps you, the writer, merely want to get Henry out of the way so Bob can be alone in the office to rifle through Henry's files. You normally would not want to use summary narration for the key events of your story.

3. Point of view errors & poor (or random) POV selection

A good, solid rule of thumb: One scene, one point of view (POV) character. Jumping from one POV to another is downright confusing. If we readers have been inside Ned's head for the whole scene, then we are going to be really thrown if we are suddenly in Ted's head, hearing his thoughts and seeing Ned from *Ted's* point of view. If the point of view has shifted, and then the POV character turns and speaks to Ed, the reader will have no way of knowing if it is Ted or Ned speaking.

Allied with this mistake is the failure to chose an appropriate POV character for a given scene. Don't launch into a scene -- or a story or a book -- without due and careful consideration of the POV character. Who is the appropriate character? Who will have the most illuminating reaction, the most useful things to say, in a given scene? Whose thought would be most worth listening to for the scene in question? (*See: Bad Planning*)

Bear in mind that the narrator, the point of view character, and the protagonist can often be three different people.

4. Poor choice of tense and person

You have three basic choices in tense: past, present, and future. Three more in person: First, second, or third. Eighty or ninety percent of all fiction is written in the past tense, third person, with most of the remainder written in past tense, first person. However, there are times when it makes sense to write in the second-person, present tense, or first-person, present tense (I once did a story in first present myself.) Each tense and person has its strengths and weaknesses, a subject beyond the scope of this list of mistakes. Suffice to say that a wise writer will consider the options carefully before choosing which to use. The foolish writer will launch into a story in whatever tense and voice pops into his or her head (*See: Bad Planning*), or will write in plural second person future tense just to prove it can be done (*See: Show-Off Experiments*).

5. Time-control errors

The most common variant of this is the needless flashback. I have seen stories that started with a flashback, then jumped forwards in time 30 seconds. What's the point? I am convinced that a great many flashbacks happen because the writer has read lots of books that had flashbacks and felt the need to conform to a literary convention. Yes, flashbacks can be cool, and dramatic, and exciting. But bear in mind that part of the reason they induce a sense of drama is that they cause confusion and uncertainty. They are intended to make the reader wonder "What the hell is going on?" and read further. But drama based on bafflement and doubt is a tricky thing. Far too often, flashbacks merely make the reader wonder "What the hell?" and give up in befuddlement.

Straight flashbacks are only the start of it, of course. I have seen many manuscripts that included flashforwards, a quick "meanwhile" to another locale, a jump back to *before* the flashback, maybe a dream sequence, and then back into real time. I have seen stories that were little more than nested flashbacks, one inside another, like a Russian doll.

Bear in mind that you, the writer, know more than the reader does about your story. (At least you damn well *better* know more.) You will be clearer on the state of play than the reader. But just because you know what is going on doesn't mean anyone else will.

Good rule of thumb: The reader will get unstuck in time before the writer does. (***See: Information Not on the Page***) An even better rule of thumb: *Do not violate straight chronology without a good reason.* Ask yourself: What purpose is served in the story by violating chronology? Does it make things more exciting? Does it clarify something? Or does it just confuse the hell out of everyone?

6. Unnamed characters

Of all the errors, this one puzzles me most. I cannot understand why people commit it so often. I suppose that it is out of a desire to induce a sense of drama by concealing information, but it rarely works.

The classic example would be a twenty-page story, wherein we follow around a nameless protagonist for 15 of those pages. At long last, it is revealed, with high drama, that her name is -- "Jane." Wow. Or it could be any other name to which neither real life nor the story has attached any special significance. There is nothing surprising in a person's name. Everyone has a name. Revealing that your lead character has one too, and even revealing what that name *is*, will not likely shock anyone. The *only* reason to avoid revealing a character's name is if you are doing one of those tired old things where there is a misfit little Austrian boy nearly hit by a horsecart. His life is saved by a kindly Jew and we find out the kid's name is -- (what a shock!) Adolf. Even this is a rather tired old gimmick. (I have lost track of the number of stories I have read wherein a character later turns out to be A.H.)

The nameless character would be a harmless trifle were it not for the fact that this conceit requires the writer to perform all sorts of elaborate literary gymnastics to avoid revealing the name. I once read what was otherwise a fine piece of work wherein the lead character's name (and gender!) were hidden through the first 57 pages, including a fairly graphic scene of the character having sex. Neat trick, no? (Neat trick, no. ***See: Show-Off Experiments***) This bit of legerdemain was accomplished by arranging that every person in the book just happened to talk to and about this person without using a name, and by the writer referring to the protagonist as The Ranger, the Leader, the captain of the band, etc., etc., etc.

It did not take long for it to turn stilted and awkward. Nor did the eventual revelation of the character's name and gender have any particular effect on the story, or have any dramatic purpose. The sex scene was especially baffling, as the writer, of necessity, could not reveal the sex of the character's partner in bed. While the writer made it clear *what* was being done, the writer, trapped by her own cleverness, was unable to make it clear *who* was doing *what* to *whom*. Oy. If your character has no name, or if you keep his or her name hidden with a series of allegedly clever artifices, you will spend 23 pages stuck with damn fool locutions such as "the boy in the shirt." Knock it off. If his name is Fred, say so.

Errors of Substance

Here, I am talking about "substance" in the sense of what the story is about: the ideas, rather than as opposed to the execution of those ideas.

7. *The weird opener & the unintegrated opener*

> "Sarah walked down the aisle, still
> unclear why she had agreed to marry a
> giraffe. The groom, waiting patiently at the
> altar, resplendent in black tie, spats and
> spots, swung his long neck around to watch
> her approach, all the time placidly chewing
> his cud."

Pretty wild, huh? The whole intention of that opener is to make you, the reader, wonder how such a thing could have come to pass. Well, I wrote it, and I haven't the faintest idea. Don't let this happen to you.

I have sat in on (but not taught, thank God) workshops devoted *entirely* to the opener, and there is even some reason to focus on the opener that intently. Those few words do have to draw the readers in, get them interested in the story, and all that. However, many writers pay so much attention to the opener they forget all about the rest of the story, with the result that the opener has little or nothing to do with the story. The reader keeps going, eager to find out about that giraffe, and does not discover for 10 pages that (God forbid) it was all a dream, or that the writer has some other equally lame excuse for an explanation.

I have come across an equally unfortunate problem -- the writer who launches in with a wild, randomly selected killer of an opening, having *no idea whatsoever* where the story is going. (*See: Bad Planning*) In fact, this error could have gone under the head **Planning Errors.**) Yes, the opener should be interesting, intriguing, and should draw the reader in. But it should also have something to do with the story, or better still be integral to it. The story itself should be interesting enough that *some* element of it should make for a good opener. If not, a socko opener ain't gonna help.

8. *Retread of the same old same old*

There are lots of stories that have been done before, and need not be done again. In science fiction, these include the nuclear-war-wipes-out-everything-and-it-just-happens -the-last-two-people-left-are-named-Adam-and-Eve story. In mysteries, you have the detective who turns out to be the killer. In *The New Yorker*, you have stories about people on Long Island who have no problems, whining to each other about their problems. With the exception of the final example, these stories are unpublishable because they have been done to death. (For some reason, *The New Yorker* just can't get enough of whiny Long Islanders.) Even the surprise twists on these old chestnuts have been done. It has been said, with a great degree of justice, that there is no such thing as a new idea. I have more than once written a whole novel based on something I thought was dazzlingly new and original, only to discover I could fill whole bookshelves with books on similar themes. I at least like to think that my take on each of those ideas was different enough, fresh enough, that I could get away with it. There is no clear line between a fresh take

on an old idea and a hack rewrite of a theme that has been beaten to death. But you should at least try to avoid writing stories about writers writing stories about writers writing stories about writers having midlife crises. At some point, even *The New Yorker* will say enough, already. God willing.

Errors of Motive and Results

In short, these errors involve the art and science of screwing up on the question of why people do things, or why things happen, and on the question of what happens as a result of whatever the author has dreamed up.

9. Confusing the author's motives with the character's

Your character wants to get home and sleep in his own bed. You, the writer, want him to be there when all hell breaks loose. You have a good plot reason for sending him to the edge of the volcano's crater. But does *he* have a reason? Your plot may require your heroine to fall in love with the sleazy thug -- but doesn't she have more sense than that? Is it in character for her to find such a scuz-bucket attractive? Or think of it another way. You are a lab scientist who puts rats in a maze. You plan to kill them and dissect them to see how learning changes their brain chemistry. This is *not* the rat's reason for going through the maze. The poor little bastard is just looking for a piece of cheese. Both writer and character must have a motivation for each action in the story. Much or most of the time, their motivations will not coincide. For each and every thing each character does, make sure she or he has a motivation that is plausible, sufficient, and something that would drive that particular character to take that particular action.

10. Failure To Deal With Consequences

Let me give a prime and recent example. One of my students wrote a story set in a post-collapse world where the U.S. government had ceased to exist, manufacturing and transport had essentially stopped, and the only source of order was local fiefdoms. She still had the characters using paper money. This just would not happen. Paper money, fiat money, is based on faith -- in the government's ability to pay, among many other things. If the government no longer exists, the fiat money issued by that government becomes worthless.

Failing to deal with consequences pops up everywhere. If you write a story about someone who grew up in an orphanage, and that person goes to a big family dinner at a friend's house, the orphan's background will affect his reactions to a roomful of grandparents. It will seem damned odd if he doesn't have some massive emotional response to seeing the family relationship that he had never had.

It can be something subtle, like a city person using language and imagery that only make sense if you are from a rural area. Of course, science fiction and fantasy are especially prone to this law of unintended consequences. Some other examples, which have, sadly, seen print: knights in armor climbing aboard a starship. A high-tech civilization based on machines operated by uneducated slave labor. A world of cybernetic connection where anyone can assume any guise or appearance at any time -- and yet people are discriminated against for being what no can know they are. If you write a story where they finally *do* shoot all the lawyers, who'll try the cases when the guilty are brought to justice? Don't just ask yourself *what if* once. After you get your answer, ask yourself *what if* about the answer, and then ask it about the answer to your answer.

Development Errors

These are mistakes made in the process of planning a story. Suffice to say they are very tough to fix on page 432 of your manuscript. The closer you are to the initial blank page when you deal with issues of planning, the better off you will be.

11. Bad planning

After waltzing through hundreds of partial manuscripts, and talking with hundreds of students who have gotten stuck, I have concluded that bad planning, the failure to work things out ahead of time, is the prime cause of stories not getting done.

This happens, in part, because inspiration is overrated. We have all seen the plays and the movies, read the books, where the lightbulb goes off over the writer's head and she suddenly starts cranking out brilliant copy non-stop. This is nonsense. It takes me something like six months to a year to write a book. If I had to be that inspired in order to write, I would have had a heart attack by now. The wise writer takes notes, jots things down, makes a mental note, mutters into a bedside tape recorder those things that seem inspired at two a.m. and are merely incoherent in the morning. Those jottings and mutterings and scribbles are inspiration preserved.

This essay is based on just such written, taped, and mental notes made over a long time. Those notes allowed me to crank this piece out in one day -- once I had the time and the notes and knew what I wanted to do. (However, just for the record, I have gone back and *revised* this article at least a half-dozen times as I have learned more, and as I have prepared it for different audiences. Don't be afraid to revise.)

Do a plot summary. Do character sketches. Work out the geography and the history of your story. Most importantly, *know what the ending is going to be before you start*. Know your ending, and you'll be able to get to it. But do not let yourself be locked in by your planning documents. *(See: Not letting the story evolve)* A plot synopsis is not a blueprint, where everything is rigidly and precisely positioned, and if you move this pillar from *here* to *there* the whole damn thing will collapse. Your plot synopsis is a roadmap, showing where you are and where you want to go, sketching out one of many possible routes that could get you there. You could change direction, or pick a new destination -- or even a new starting point. But you cannot do any of that without first knowing the lay of the land. There is not much point in changing direction if you don't know where you are going.

12. Not letting the story evolve

In one of my short stories, the scene that inspired the story in the first place never appeared in the actual text. In one book, a scene intended for chapter one ended up as the start of chapter seven. In another book, a character I intended as a one-shot walk-on ended up as a central figure in the story. Planning is important, but it should not lock you in. If you knew the whole story in immutable detail before you began, writing it would be damned dull. Be prepared to explore the new paths that open on your story as you write. But don't overdo it. *(See: Self-indulgent digression)*

Presentation Errors

In short, the question of leaving in what should be cut, and leaving out what belongs.

13. Failed Exposition

This typically -- but not always -- happens at the beginning of a story. Instead of getting action, or the story, we get background, told from no particular point of view. Sort of an encyclopedia entry on the subject in question. For some reason, fantasies are particularly prone to this flaw. The story will open with a long explanation of how the castle (or fortress, or bus station) came to be there, and who all the ancestors of the current duke (or king, or wizard, or head chef) were, and how the magic jewel (or ring, or crown, or polo mallet) came to be imbued with its powers and then stolen (or lost, or locked in a spell, or pawned). We then spend the rest of the book in search of the map (or book of spells, or claim ticket).

As in the rather interchangeable example above, most of what goes into such expository lumps is pretty generic. All castles were built, all rulers had some sort of ancestors or predecessors, all macgufffins (that being Alfred Hitchcock's term for the magic jewel or secret formula or other gimmick around which the plot revolves) are important, and if they weren't out of the hero's possession, there would be no story. Much of such material can be assumed, or else you can work it into the story here and there, rather than spewing it all out at once. Rule of Thumb: The only things that should be in your story are those that get a yes to these two questions:

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    (1) Will this be of interest to the
reader?
    (2) Does it have something important to
do with the story the reader is reading? (It
doesn't matter if it is vital to some other
story that happened 300 years before your
story opens.)
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> **Sidebar: Do Violence to Your Manuscript**
>
> Here's my advice on excessive cutting and pasting and inserting and changing text in this modern computer age: Go for it. Don't be afraid to hack away ferociously. Hit the save key first, and keep a back-up of your original, but chop the working copy to ribbons. If the original is backed up, you have the liberating knowledge that you can do anything you like to the working copy without doing any damage to your first version of your deathless prose. If you don't like the changes you have made, you can always print out a fresh copy of the first draft.

At times, I have caught myself injecting whacking dull history lesson into my books. When I do catch such things, I find that putting all the exposition in a character's head, and letting that person think about the data in question, often makes it more interesting and allows that character to offer his or her opinion on the subject. (Truth be told, I have found this variant to be increasingly annoying over the years, and I tend to shy away from it myself now.) Other times I find an expository lump is just plain whacking dull no matter what and I cut it completely.

The main problem is that exposition stops the story dead. Nothing ruins an exciting scene of pursuing Zulu warriors in full regalia through the streets of London quite so much as a five-

page explanation of what the Zulu warriors are doing there in the first place.

13a: As You Know, Bob

This error is common enough to rate at least a sub-entry of its own. *"As you know, Bob,"* is my shorthand (and the shorthand of many an editor) for one of the clumsiest devices in narrative fiction. In a case where the writer needs to tell the reader something, he or she has character A tell character B (aka Bob) something both A and B already know. I read a rather woodenly written Civil War novel that came within shouting distance of Lincoln saying "As you know, Mr. Secretary of War Stanton, I'm President of the United States." It wasn't quite that bad, but it was close. A close relation of this malady is called "duster dialogue," because in old, bad plays (and new, bad soap operas) the maid and the butler would come out on stage, dusting the knicknacks and plumping the sofa cushions, all the while gossiping about the background of the Master's dread family secrets, which will Just Happen to be what the play is about.

The deadly truth is that planting exposition is a bear. There are going to be facts the reader needs to know about wherein there is no plausible or graceful way to inject those facts into the narrative flow. There is no tried-and-true solution to this problem. I can offer a few bits of advice to help you manage the issue. Do as little exposition as possible. After you write exposition, read it over and cut what you don't need. Don't use one technique for injecting exposition to the exclusion of all others. Mix things up a little. Be aware that exposition is an inherently clumsy thing, and avoid it when you can. And most importantly, never, never, never let me catch you typing the phrase "As you know, Bob."

14. Information that does not get on the page

This is pretty basic, but awfully common. In short, you, the writer, have imagined every element of your story so completely that you assume the reader knows it all too. You might neglect to give a physical description of a place or a person that you can see perfectly in your mind's eye. The only real check against this is to put the story to one side after you finish it, then come back to it a week or a month later, so as to achieve some perspective on it. It's easy to fix: just put in what you've left out.

Ego-Driven Errors

These have much less to do with the story, and much more to do with the writer. These are the mistakes made by a writer in love with every single one of his or her words, who secretly feels that the only possible reaction to his or her work is unalloyed reverence. To such writers, I can only say: Get a life.

15. Self-indulgent digression

Just because you are interested in something, that does not mean it belongs in the story. One of my students brought every one of his stories to a screeching halt with an off-the-point diatribe railing against the government for forcing psychotics to take mood-altering drugs. I told him if he was that interested in that subject, he should write a story about it, and get it out of his system, rather than injecting it into his otherwise good stories on wholly different topics. And maybe adjust his own medications while he was at it.

Just because you have done six months research on bonsai, that does not mean you should put five pages on tree-shrinking into your Japanese saga. Don't wander off on 23 pages of some off- the-point concept that you happen to find fascinating. If it does not belong in the story, nuke

it. *(See: Failed Exposition)*

16. The error that is not an error

I have lost count of the times a student has explained why something that does not make sense really does make sense, if only I would read the 74 pages of information he has on the subject, or if only I were (like the author) an expert on renooberated gravistrans. Whether or not the writer has his or her information right does not matter. The question is whether information *feels* right -- or wrong. It is whether it is implausible. A seeming error is an error because it has exactly the same effect on the reader as a "real" error.

It makes the reader lose confidence in the story, distracts the reader from the story and makes him or her worry about the error, and damages the reader's willing suspension of disbelief. Getting it wrong or *seeming* to get it wrong will have exactly the same undesired effects on the reader.

One great source of the implausible but accurate is real life. The difference between fiction and real life is that we expect fiction to make sense. If something totally bizarre has happened to you, simply reporting it precisely and in detail will not make it plausible on the page. You won't be there next to every reader to promise that it really did happen just that way.

Overdone research and over-reliance on personal real-life weird experience can get you into trouble, but it is far worse to get your research wrong -- or not do it in the first place. Assume that your readers are knowledgeable, and that some of them, at least, will spot what you got wrong.

An example from personal experience: Science fiction and fantasy writers seem to do a lot of stories that concern caves. These really bug me, as I like to go in caves, and most of these stories get every damned detail wrong. Caves in fantasy all seem to be airy, well-lit places full of perfect marble staircases and veins of pure gold -- which generally are not found in the limestone formations that produce caves. When a story takes me into a cave like that, I ask myself -- Where is the mud? Where is the darkness? Where is cool, slightly clammy air? Where are the loose rocks on the floor, and the smell, and the bats? Once I am in that state of mind, it will do no good at all for the writer to have five thousand pages of documentation on the principles of natural cave formation in igneous, ore-bearing, and metamorphic rock.

Sidebar: Don't Be Too Polite.
In other words, don't sanitize your words for fear of offending the politically correct among us. Say what you mean, not what you think someone would say you ought to have meant. After all, there are times you (or one of the characters in your story) will *want* to offend people. While there is little to be said in favor of insulting people needlessly, such idiocy has gotten completely out of hand. My favorite example is the term "temporarily able-bodied," denoting all those persons who, unfairly, do *not* have a handicap at the moment. This term is used in deadly seriousness.

On the other hand, be ready to make fix if you offend unintentionally -- so long as if it won't hurt the story. One editor I worked with was very good at her job -- and also close to morbidly obese. She asked in the politest terms possible if I could remove a snide comment about fat people from the manuscript of a book. The comment wasn't in any way essential, or even that useful, to the story, and out it went. If it had been an integral part of the story, I would have stuck to my guns. Since it was just me being a bit of jerk by accident, I cut it.

I always try to assume that someone who knows more than me is going to read my stories. If some detail conflicts with generally held knowledge, I will try and work in a sentence or two that explains my variant idea, or that at least acknowledges the existence of the generally received knowledge. Doing this lets the reader know I have at least taken common knowledge into account. It reassures the reader, keeps the reader from being irritated by what I got wrong, and thus prevents the reader from becoming distracted from the story. In short, I do a little research, and don't just try to avoid real errors. I try to dodge *seeming* errors.

17. Writing to impress rather than communicate

I am convinced that this is in large part a product of what passes for writing in school, government, and business. We are taught, over and over again, to impress the boss or the teacher with how much we know, how many big words we can use, how important we can make our subject seem. If the meaning itself is lost in a blizzard of jargon, all the better. Few people have the nerve to admit they don't know what you meant, and if you yourself are unsure, a little bureaucratic vagueness can often serve to hide what you don't know.

Inevitably, something is lost when things are made pompous. "Never enumerate your feathered progeny until the incubation process is thoroughly realized" just doesn't have the same punch as "Don't count your chickens before they're hatched." Do not, under any circumstances, dumb down your work, but why be deliberately obscure? A good rule of thumb: Use the shortest words and simplest sentence structure that will convey the meaning, mood, and tone you intend.

18. Show-off experiments

Someone reading this is going to think something like this: *Ha! So Mr. Know-it-all says to follow all these rules. I'll write a story in future tense plural second person with all the characters nameless and of undetermined species. The plot will consist entirely of nested flashbacks, I'll make the whole thing up as I go along, and I'll put in anything I want, whether or not it is related to the story.*

I once tossed out the concept of flying pigs in a class exercise wherein I was deliberately dealing with absurd plot elements. Just to show me it could be done, half the students came back with flying-pig stories. Some of them not bad. With one possible exception, every single story could have been improved by removing the pig. "Just to show them" is a lousy reason to write a story, and usually results in a failed story. We readers don't want to see how smart you are. We want a good story. *(See: Writing to impress rather than communicate)* A while back, I came out of the theater with a friend of mine and said to her "That wasn't experimental theater -- it was too good, and it worked." In theater, and in fiction, we have developed the myth of the Noble Failure. The artiste struggles endlessly and produces a work so dense, so sophisticated, so brilliant that no one can understand it, and thus it is shunned by the critics and the public alike. The artiste, however, knows it is brilliant and they are all fools.

Very rarely, this myth is true. It is, however, far more common for someone to crank out a mass of technically inadequate, self-indulgent, incoherent drivel, and then hide behind the myth, rather than accepting the failure of his or her own work. It's a tempting option. Writing crap makes you look stupid, whereas being a misunderstood artist makes you look cool, sort of the way wearing a beret does. Which brings me to a summing-up, in the form of a diatribe.

A Closing Screed on the Importance of Skill, Craft and Talent

Once, when visiting the Museum of Modern Art in New York, I wandered through room after room wherein the only things displayed were large paintings, each consisting of nothing but one or two stripes on a plain background. There are few who would argue that being able to put a single solid-colored straight line on a canvas requires as much skill as, say, producing a realistic representation of a human figure. But MOMA decided that straight lines were an important visual statement, or something, and choose those works, over all others, to display in that space. What bothered me the most about those works was that the artist hadn't even done a good job. Looking closely, you could see he had made the stripes by painting the canvas one color, laying down strips of masking tape, painting the canvas a second color, and then peeling up the tape. Except he hadn't used good-quality masking tape, and the color bled through a little.

The Hirshhorn Museum in Washington once put on an exhibit of works by a woman who presented three distinct styles of "art." For the first, she took photographs of other peoples' famous photographs. (You could buy a book of her photos of other peoples' photos in the giftshop.) Another series of her works were made as follows: she went to lumber yards and had pieces of plywood cut for her (she didn't cut it for herself). She then painted the knots in the bits of wood with gold paint and put these works in frames. A last series of works consisted of slabs of lead onto which she painted, rather imprecisely, patterns of squares that formed checkerboards. The slabs of lead and bits of plywood were of different sizes, and some of the bits of wood had more or fewer knotholes. Aside from that, they all looked pretty much the same.

I cannot say for certain that the "artists" who created these works had no technical skill. I can't flatly state they were unable to paint or draw or sculpt. I can say that the works they presented *required* no artistic skill. As the saying goes, my eleven-year-old son could have produced any of them -- but he wouldn't do so. He'd think they were all boring and stupid, and wouldn't bother. And he'd have a point.

I find it impossible to believe that the "artists" in question were entirely sincere about their work. They didn't really think that a badly drawn straight line had something vital to say about the human condition, or that a painted knothole would call forth deep emotional reactions. At some point, at some level, they *had* to know they were diligently trying to put one over on us, to produce uninteresting works that required a minimum of skill, talent, vision and effort, and to get the rest of us to buy into the idea that these works were Art, worthy of display next to Leonardo, Donatello, and the rest of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

Oops. Did I just elide a few steps and equate the work of the empty poseur who has nothing to say, but insists that we all listen, with the world of crass, cynical commercialism?

My guess is that the level on which the above "artists" knew they were scamming us was buried pretty deeply. My hunch is they that put at least as much time, effort, and emotional energy into kidding themselves as they did into fooling the world. And I am certain the effort that went into all those charades was a lot greater than the effort that went into the work itself.

Writing is different, at least in some ways. You can't write *"A man drew a straight line on a canvas. The End"* and hope to have anyone think you have created the Great American Novel. But it is entirely possible to crank out ten or a hundred or a thousand pages of derivative drivel full of bad grammar, bad punctuation, holes in the plot logic, characters whose actions have no clear motivation and whose dialogue is as wooden as the aforementioned plywood with gold-painted knot holes. Having accomplished all that, it is equally possible to insist that all the

problems, mistakes, and flaws are the results of deliberate Artistic Choices, and that the Great Work is not to be judged by the rules of ordinary narrative prose.

Maybe, once in a very great while (with odds comparable to those for being struck by lightning) all that is true. But in 99.99% or more of cases, the writer is kidding himself or herself.

The problem for the Great Writer of the Unpublishable is that, unlike the world of gallery art, hardly anyone else (aside from polite friends and relations) is willing to go along with the gag. For whatever reasons (and I could crank out an essay as long as this one on what they might be) most people won't argue when told that a bad painting is Great Art. But tell those same people that bad *writing* is Great Art, and they will refuse to buy it -- metaphorically or literally. (There's the whole issue of extremely popular bad writing that no one even *pretends* is any good -- I do not mention *The Da Vinci Code* -- but that's a whole other story.)

Conclusion

None of the rules, ideas, theories and so on that I offer in this essay are arbitrary. There are good reasons for all of them. They are based on my personal experience of far too many unpublishable manuscripts. On the other hand, none of these rules are ironclad, and I have broken most of them myself. Back on the first hand, more often than not, I have then gone back and patched things up so as to follow the rules. In short, don't go off into experimental forms and styles until you have mastered the basics. A final rule of thumb: *Understand the rules, and know how and why to follow the rules, before you attempt to break them.*

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September, 2010
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