

DEAR WRITER: LETTER TWO

‘A’ for Alive; ‘D’ for Dead

The use of Adverbs and Adjectives

When it comes to words, it’s a matter of who’s to be master, that’s all—
Humpty Dumpty

Dear Writer,

I want to examine with you the first sentence of your story, ‘The Scream at Midnight’.

Silvery moonlight pierced the thick green canopy formed by the branching limbs of the ancient oak trees and gently dappled the century-old marble monument that stood, forlorn and abandoned in the remotest corner of the silent graveyard.

You have written that sentence because you want to set the scene and create the atmosphere for the story you are going to tell. You are trying to do what music does during the introduction to a film. But your sentence lacks vitality; something is holding it back from life. The life of the whole story in fact is being threatened by the adjectives (silvery, thick, green, branching, ancient, century-old, forlorn, abandoned, remotest, silent). The story is in jeopardy from the beginning because the adjectives have taken control of the writing, have obscured your vision of what you are describing.

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Adjectives are like fire, good servants but bad masters. Study writers such as Vladimir Nabokov and Iris Murdoch who both have superb command of adjectives.

*As he reached the window a long lavender-tipped flame danced up to stop him with a graceful gesture of its gloved hand.—Nabokov *Transparent Things**

*Up above, the neat silhouettes of roofs and the bunchy silhouettes of trees were outlined against a dark bluish sky through which the faint globe, its tail now entirely invisible, floated onward.—Murdoch *The Black Prince**

Where did the adjectives at the beginning of your story come from? You borrowed them. You took them from some forgotten place and stuck them into your graveyard to try to trick the reader into thinking that you were describing something you remembered, something you knew. Readers are quite sharp and they read your adjectives as signals of the fact that you are only pretending to have seen such a scene, in fact only pretending to have even *imagined* such a scene. In other words, the adjectives in your first sentence alert the reader to the fact that you cannot be trusted as a storyteller.

If you wish to begin the story in the graveyard (and later on we will examine the wisdom of beginning in this way, in this place) you would do well, since you are not very good at imagining it, to go at night to a graveyard and then write about what you saw and heard and felt. For the time being, look at the sentence without the adjectives; already it is stronger:

Moonlight pierced the canopy formed by the limbs of the oak trees and dappled the marble monument that stood in the corner of the graveyard.

You will see that the adverb ‘gently’ has also been removed. Adverbs are sometimes even more dangerous than adjectives. The remaining words are the essential words, the ones which will convey your intention. These words, most of which are nouns and verbs, work together and let the reader imagine the details contained in ‘silvery, ancient’ etc.

Perhaps you thought that you, as the writer, were the one who had to do all the imagining, and that the reader was to get every detail of the picture from your words. The reader of fiction takes pleasure in doing some of the work, and will more readily believe you and trust you if there is work to do. Strangely enough, the strength of fiction seems to lie as much in what is left

out as in what is included; as much in the spaces between the words as in the words.

When I read a story with the aim of assessing or grading it, I think of placing it on a scale from A to D. This scale is readily understood by students. However, when these letters are applied to works of fiction, I think of them as standing for Alive and Dead. (B is nearly alive and C is nearly dead.) Dead prose is boring prose. It is unconvincing and uninteresting and more often than not it contains lots of adjectives and adverbs which are clinging like parasites and drinking its blood.

I sometimes think of strong, simple prose as ‘plain vanilla’ writing, whereas over-written prose, with its burden of modifying adverbs and adjectives, is ‘chocolate and pistachio’.

Take this example of plain vanilla writing by Sherwood Anderson, and re-write it inserting some adjectives and adverbs.

Pushing her way among the weeds, many of which were covered with blossoms, Mary found herself a seat on a rock that had been rolled against the trunk of an old apple tree. The weeds half concealed here and from the road only her head was visible. A hedge separated the orchard from the fields on the hillside. Mary intended to sit by the tree until darkness came creeping over the land and to try to think out some plan regarding her future.

What effect have your additions had on the piece of prose? Worth noticing here is the fact that we are interested in this landscape and atmosphere because they are affecting the character Mary. Furthermore, this sliver of prose makes us long to know why Mary is pushing her way among the weeds, and what her future holds.

Here is a piece of over-written prose for you to pare down by removing the unnecessary words.

The summer-idle water mirrored the towering cliff in a tea-brown pool, and in a small low cave at the crumbling base of the cliff, the soft grey birds were huddled tightly together.

Some of the adjectives in the above sentence could be retained. Decide which ones are really useful. When an adjective or adverb is well chosen and well placed it can have a wonderful effect—as in the pieces I quoted from Nabokov and Murdoch. The writer’s task is to gain control of the words, to make choices and decisions about which words will work to strengthen the writing and which will only weaken it. Another interesting thing to do with

the sentence above about the birds is to re-write it using different adjectives from those used originally.

When you are writing fiction one of your aims is to give the reader a fresh view, a new impression of things. Many nouns in English commonly attract certain adjectives. We hear of ‘crumbling ruins, dire necessities, earnest wishes, driving rain, and sparkling eyes’, If you find yourself using one of these clumps of words, examine your work carefully before you allow the adjective to stay where it is. Adverbs present the same problem. Think of ‘driving recklessly, sleeping soundly, and stumbling blindly’.

Now read through your story and mark all the adverbs and adjectives with a pencil. Do not use anything at this stage except a lead pencil. Challenge each word you have marked. Does it have a right to be where it is? If not, cross it out.

You have begun the process of editing and re-writing your story. This is not a sad time; it is exciting. The story will come to life as you work.

Rebecca West once re-wrote a chapter twenty-six times. And so did Turgenev.

With best wishes,
Virginia