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EDITING AND PROOFREADING



How to Write with Precision

Although there are no 'rules' in writing, there are a few things you can do to improve the precision, clarity and originality of your work.

1. **Keep your descriptions specific.** When using descriptive language, imagine that you are painting a picture in your reader's mind. Words like 'beautiful' and 'wonderful' don't help the reader form a clear picture of whatever it is being described. 'A polished oak bannister', for example, is a better description than 'a beautiful wooden bannister'.
2. **Show don't tell.** Use your descriptions to tell the story. For example, for a character returning from a long journey, you could write 'the door opened and in trudged a large man with a hollow face and untidy beard'. This paints a picture in your reader's mind and is far more evocative than just writing 'David returned from a long journey'.
3. **Avoid clichés**, as far as is possible. The worst offenders, at least. When you catch yourself grasping at clichés to describe something, try to find more interesting, more original ways you could do so.
4. **Intensifiers**, such as 'very' and 'quite' often do not add anything to the writing. The word 'just' needs to be used sparingly and only where necessary to the sense. Another word that may be over-used is 'that'. Taking these out makes a real difference to the flow of the narrative.
5. **Adverbs** ending in -ly should be used sparingly. It is often better to use strong verbs. These are verbs which are precise, engage your senses and help visualise actions. Sensory verbs, for example, like 'dazzle', 'tremble' and 'burst' work well.
6. **Repetition** of common words may not be a problem, but repetition of less common words usually is. Keep your writing original by finding different ways of expressing something.
7. **When writing dialogue**, avoiding speech tags allows the exchange to flow much more freely. If a speech tag is used, it is often better to use frequently used words such as 'said' or 'replied'. The reader is so used to these words, they will skim over them when they are reading and so the flow is not interrupted.

8. **Avoid overuse of 'looked' or 'seemed'**. These words are often unnecessary and makes the prose less immediate.

9. Sometimes it's good to **avoid the passive voice**. So, here:

“The walls were decorated with tapestries and purple velvet hangings, the whole effect like a tableau of a medieval castle.”

“Tapestries and purple velvet hangings decorated the walls, like a tableau of a medieval castle.”

Using the active voice will make your writing clearer and more immediate.