Writing to the Right Brain

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Stop 'Writing'!

In a former life, I directed local theater. Most of our actors were seasoned, but occasionally I would work with someone less experienced. I often got to give them the two best words of advice you can give an actor: "**Stop 'Acting**'!"

This doesn't mean, "Give up the theater, and go flip burgers!" What it means is, "I can see your craft, and it's distracting from the reality." The performer is doing things that call attention to himself, instead of the work.

In the same way, when I read narrative prose, I often want to say to the writer: "**Stop 'Writing'**!"

In literature, as in theater, 'honesty' has replaced 'style.'

Someone is reading your words. Your story has captured their attention. Now it must hold that focus. What you're trying to do is engross the reader in your work, to quietly talk into their mental ear and wrap them in your spell.

A thousand things may compete with this: the phone, the doorbell, the cat, just 'life' in general. 'You' should not be one of them.

'Writing' breaks this spell.

'Writing' is usually the interjection of the author's ego. The writer becomes more important than the story.

Long, convoluted, run-on sentences may demonstrate your ability with logic and analytical thought, but if the reader has to stop to parse them, the spell is broken:

"Swoozie, who had been a hairdresser since those dark days in Pre-WW II Berlin, when the Nazis had strutted around carrying their dark Swastika banners, infiltrating into Poland where they incited looting and the burning of Jewish Synagogues that had stood proudly since the Middle Ages, when enlightenment had encouraged tolerance for the long-persecuted Jews of Europe, and shattering beautiful stained glass works of art, and store windows, leaving such a quantity of broken glass in the cobblestone streets that it had been termed, 'Kristalnacht,' the 'Night Of Broken Glass,' stood waiting for the bus."

WHAT?!

Well, yeah. We now know that the writer knows some basic European history, is sympathetic to the plight of the Jews during WW II, and has a fondness for stained glass. What a guy!

But so WHAT?! That's all about the *writer!*

Basically, in the story, some gal is waiting for a bus!

Even if all that background is important (and we can't be sure it is…) doesn't it deserve its own little existence?

"In the dark days before WW II… [LOTS of nice simple declarative sentences here] … Swoozie had become a hairdresser. Now she stood waiting for a bus."

Long, complex sentences and gratuitous detail may seem erudite, but they can frustrate your reader, and they certainly pull him out of the narrative.

I'm sure you have a massive vocabulary. But a vocabulary is not a collection of butterflies — lifeless, on pins, in a glass case. It is more like a collection of socket wrenches and Allen keys. It's not meant to be *displayed*; it's meant to be *used*.

Yes. Repetition can be distracting (That's why Edison invented the pronoun), but there are ways to handle this that don't send your reader screaming to find a dictionary.

Repetition, in itself, is not a bad thing; it can often be a powerful tool:

> "In his rage, he slammed his fist into his assailant over and over and over and over and over — until he realized there were no longer any moans."

Or try this passage from Poe's, *The Bells*:

> To the tintinnabulation that so musically wells
> From the bells, bells, bells, bells,
> Bells, bells, bells—
> From the jingling and the tinkling of the bells.

It is *unintended* repetition that is distracting. It can set off a kind of 'echo' in the reader's mental ear. The reader stops to ask himself, "Gee. Have I heard that before?" He may even physically go back through the work to see if his perception is correct.

It can also create the impression that the writer's vocabulary is limited, and thereby impeach him.

The solution lies in that word, *unintended*. In most cases, all the writer need do is acknowledge that he's aware that (for whatever unexplained reason) he is repeating himself.

You've told the reader, "The wake had a 'solemnity' about it." A little later, you want to allude to this quality again.

Now, 'lugubrious' is a wonderful synonym, and I might use it: "Its very lugubriousness gave it an air of orthodoxy." (In many cases, even if the reader isn't familiar with the word, context will explain it.) But it is perfectly acceptable for you to say, "*That same solemnity* gave it an air of orthodoxy." The reader now knows that you're choosing to repeat yourself.

[As I said,] it is *unintended* repetition that is distracting.

Read the previous sentence with — and without — the part in brackets, and you'll get the point.

As I said (see?), it is *unintended* repetition that is distracting. Avoid it if you can — but not at the expense of breaking your reader's concentration.

Probably the worst offense is the 'Author's Wink.'

This is that utterly reprehensible moment when the writer communicates to the reader, "Of course, you and I know this is all bullshit," or, "Look at how clever I am!" It happens most often with novice writers of 'children's stories.' It's usually an attempt by the writer to bond with some imagined parent who is reading to the child: "You and me, Babe. We don't believe this infantile crap."

This is deadly! You have seduced your reader into believing you — and then betrayed him.

Please, don't misunderstand. Some of the most effective moments in narrative writing have been when the writer shows the reader that the reader has mis-perceived the story. Examples include John Fowles' *The Collector*, and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. The results are devastating. But in these works, it is the *reader* who assumes the responability, and it is the reader who eventually redeems himself by recognizing the true reality.

The repulsiveness of the 'Author's Wink' lies in the *betrayal*, and the smug superiority it evinces. I can assure you a reader treated this way will think a *long* time before reading another word you write.

When a reader honors you by devoting time to your words, honor his time. Tell your story as simply and honestly as possible. Cast your spell, and then protect it. Always remember: it's the story that's important — not the storyteller.

Stop 'Writing'!-=rm=-