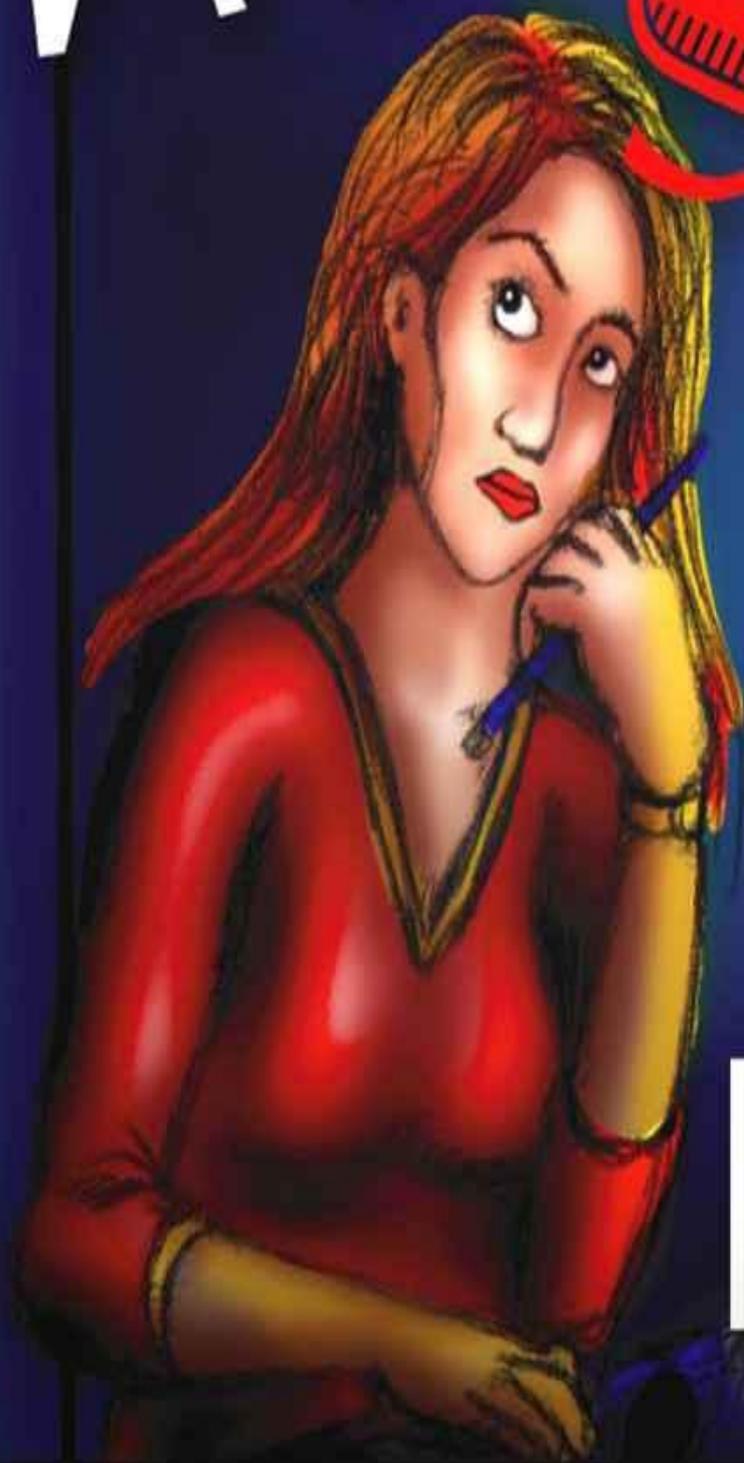


# THE WRITING SHOW



WITH  
PAULA B

# **42 Common Mistakes Novelists Make**

**By Paula Berinstein**

# **The Writing Show**

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You know your story isn't working, but you can't figure out why. And now you're stuck.

This list can help. As a story consultant, I see the same problems in manuscripts over and over. If your novel doesn't seem to be coming together, chances are it's suffering from one or more of these common maladies. Eliminating them should improve your work dramatically.

I've divided the list into seven categories for easy reference:

Protagonist

Other characters

Structure

Reader engagement

The Market

Mechanics

Other.

## Protagonist problems

**1. The Tease. You get us all excited but don't follow through.** There are two ways this problem can manifest itself. Either you promise a payoff and then disappoint, or you gloss over the good stuff rather than taking your time with it. Some people do both.

Many writers put their heroes in jeopardy only to resolve the crisis before it's begun. Don't just show the threat. Ratchet up the tension and turn the threat into action.

For example, let's say your protagonist is relaxing on a lonely beach and decides to go body surfing. She gets caught in the undertow and nearly drowns, but a passerby dives into the water and saves her. He wraps her up in a towel and drives her home, and she never sees him again.

What is the purpose of that incident? Unless your protagonist contracts some deadly disease or develops a mortal fear of the ocean, there's none at all. The passerby doesn't complicate her life. The near drowning doesn't harm her. The whole incident comes to nothing. But what if this incident were just an introduction to the rescuer, who then

became an important character in the story? Or if the experience gave the protagonist a phobia to conquer or brought in an unseen witness who went on to make trouble? By letting the scene go to waste, you're missing opportunities to advance the story.

Another thing writers do is quickly tell us how the protagonist solved a problem rather than taking the time to show the struggle. Rather than saying, "While he was on the lam, he encountered a few cops but managed to evade each of them," show us your character noticing the cop and tracking his every move, then attempting to sneak around so as not to be noticed, only to come face to face with the cop and have to think fast to evade him, then to see the cop realize his mistake two minutes later and come after him. That kind of moment-by-moment action should go on for pages while your readers bite their nails wondering whether your hero will be captured or killed.

**2. The Ego Trip. Your protagonist is too much like you.** Yes, you're supposed to write what you know. But you can overdo it. Your character may have traits in common with you, but he isn't you. Do not put your words in his mouth. Instead, make him larger than life. Give him experiences you've never had, actions you'd never have the guts to take. Make his dialogue more to the point, more purposeful, more clever and commanding of people's attention. Use your experiences and feelings as a jumping off point, then build on them to make the character more so. Throw in some traits that aren't you at all.

How can Meryl Streep successfully play Margaret Thatcher, Sophie Zawistowski, Karen Silkwood, and Julia Child? She can't be like all of them. Maybe she isn't like any of them. She becomes them the way Method actors do: by digging down inside herself and finding a way to feel the emotions her characters would feel. This is what you must do too. (I say that as if it's so simple. Of course it isn't. Novel writing is hard work!)

**3. The Cartoon. You don't give your protagonist an internal problem.**

By "internal problem," I don't mean character flaw. There's a difference. An internal problem is a personal demon. A character flaw is a failing. You can be haunted by the fact that your parents didn't really love you. That's a demon. But if you act out that problem by becoming a pathological liar, that's a character flaw.

If your protagonist does not have an internal problem, something that's making her life untenable, she will come off as a one-dimensional character. Protagonists without demons just aren't that interesting--at least not in this day and age. Maybe Miss Marple doesn't have any internal problems, but if Agatha Christie were writing today, she'd have to make Miss Marple a closet drug addict or a kleptomaniac or something that would threaten to derail her while she's fighting her external problems, i.e., criminals.

Internal problems not only make your protagonist more interesting, but they also help us identify with the character because like us, they're vulnerable. In addition, an internal problem gives you plot possibilities beyond just racing against time to stop the bad guys. If there's a chance your protagonist can sabotage herself, she's all the more interesting to watch. And the satisfaction we get at the end of the story is intensified because she triumphs not only over her enemies, but also herself.

**4. The Drip. Your protagonist isn't likeable or sympathetic.** Most of us want to read about someone we can cheer on. But even if your protagonist isn't the most admirable person in the world, we need to see something about her that makes us care. That means she has to do something generous or show some vulnerability.

The key is to present little moments that highlight your character's vulnerability and/or generosity. The late story guru Blake Snyder, author of the *Save the Cat!* screenwriting books, recommended creating "save the cat" incidents. He felt that you can make your protagonist sympathetic by showing him or her doing something generous early in the story, like saving a cat. Of course, your characters don't have to run around literally saving animals from oncoming cars. All they have to do is *something* that shows they have a shred of nobility or at least demonstrate the possibility for redemption. Even a mafioso can be nice to children, for example. In this way, you'll get readers and viewers on the character's side. Then, no matter how badly they behave from that point on, we'll know that they could turn out better than they started. We engage early and stay connected because we want to know whether the character will live up to his or her potential.

If you don't want to show the noble side of your character, give us a glimpse of her vulnerability: a moment of self-doubt, a history of abuse, personal tragedy. If we see that she is able to feel pain, we will soften toward her. We may not want to be pals, but we'll begin to understand where she's coming from, and we'll follow her.

**5. The Loser. Your protagonist has too many problems.** Give your protagonist one or two internal problems from the get-go, but don't get carried away and give him so many that he comes across as pathetic. A little bit of trouble will get you a long way by multiplying and taking different forms throughout the story. If J.K. Rowling had made Harry Potter not only an orphan living with hideous relatives but also crippled and poor and repulsive, she wouldn't have created a viable hero. That fact that Harry is an orphan carries him through seven books, but he's never pitiable. That's why we not only stick with him, but also love him.

**6. The Stick-in-the-Mud. You don't send your protagonist on a journey.** If your protagonist doesn't go on a quest of some kind, you won't have a story. The journey is the story. The quest doesn't have to involve a physical journey, but there must be seeking, and there must be obstacles that arise to prevent the protagonist from finding or gaining what he's seeking. Trying to get a new job is a quest; attempting to make a

sale is a quest; pursuing a love interest is a quest; attempting to exact revenge on an enemy is a quest; attempting to save your family's money is a quest; trying to get a criminal incarcerated or an innocent man out of jail is a quest. Making idle chitchat with other characters isn't a quest. Sitting and waiting to be rescued isn't a quest. Lying in bed dreaming isn't a quest. Story is all about purpose and striving.

**7. The All Talk and No Action. You don't demonstrate the protagonist's internal problem and flaws by what he or she thinks, does, and says.** In other words, you don't follow through.

It's all well and good to say that your protagonist is vain or afraid of not being liked or worried about becoming violent, but if you don't demonstrate that issue throughout the story, there's no point in mentioning it in the first place. We need to see the character *being* less than perfect. Showing us the flaw in action not only makes your character believable, but also makes us feel his pain. When we see the trouble he's causing for himself, we engage with him and care what happens to him. Then when the character resolves his problem, we'll see the difference between the "before" and the "after."

**8. The 50-year-old High School Football Hero. Your protagonist isn't transformed at the end of the story.** With the possible exception of detectives in mysteries, by the end of the story, your protagonist should have confronted and resolved the internal problem that was presented at the beginning. This principle holds true whether your story is comedy, tragedy, or something in between. Even if your character dies at the end, or seems to lose his battles, he must be transformed and his problem resolved, as happens with Michael Henchard, the mayor of Casterbridge in Hardy's eponymous tale and Nate Fisher, Jr., the undertaker's son in "Six Feet Under," who loses his battle with a serious brain condition. Both of these characters die, but when they do, they're vastly different people from their earlier selves. Their struggle has changed them. The mayor has gained a kind of redemption after realizing that he's led a selfish life, and Nate has at last decided to extricate himself from his destructive relationship with his wife, Brenda.

Another word about Harry Potter here. Characters have one-story arcs and series arcs. Harry doesn't truly resolve his internal problem until the last book in the series. However, within each book that makes up the series, he does come to some kind of preliminary terms with it. For example, in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, he stops expecting his dead father to swoop in and save him from the dementors when he realizes that he himself has fought them off. That realization is a step in his personal journey and enough of a resolution for that particular book.

## Other character problems

**9. The Piece of Cake. You don't have an antagonist.** If your protagonist goes through life winning some and losing some but doesn't struggle against a consistent "enemy," you don't have an antagonist. You should.

An antagonist doesn't have to be a person--it can be an internal demon, nature, society, a great white whale, but your story will probably be more effective if it is. I recommend that you select a person as your antagonist so readers have someone to hate, fear, or pity. You can be angry with nature or an unfair society or a cracked sidewalk, but a human antagonist is more vulnerable and possesses the potential to be conquered. A human antagonist can also speak and reason and interact with the protagonist on an intellectual level.

**10. The Pass the Buck. Someone other than your protagonist defeats the enemy.** It's okay for your protagonist to get help from his friends and allies, and it's fine for the other team members to be instrumental in winning important battles. But in the end, if all the work is done *for* the protagonist, he won't be a satisfying character. In other words, in *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf may fight the Balrog, but Frodo is the one who must throw the magic ring into the fire and save Middle Earth.

**11. The Fast Cut. You head hop.** This problem has to do with point of view. Remember, every story is told by a narrator, who may or may not be the same person as a viewpoint character. The narrator tells the story, but we see events through the eyes of the viewpoint character.

If you're writing in third person limited point of view, be consistent about who your viewpoint character is within a scene. Do not "head hop," that is, switch from one character's point of view to another's. It's okay to vary your viewpoint character from scene to scene and chapter to chapter, but if you jump around within a section, the effect will be jarring. If you want to show some action from two characters' viewpoints, create a scene for each one.

For more detailed information about point of view, see my Kindle article "Point of View in Fiction."

**12. The Desert Island. You have too few characters.** It's almost impossible to sustain an entire book with only a couple of characters. Your cast acts as foils for each other. They cause other characters to behave in ways we might not see if they didn't exist. They also express opinions about each other that give us insight. A mix of personalities creates variety and conflict and helps propel the story forward. Make sure you have enough characters to perform those functions.

**13. The Mob. You have too many characters.** It's okay to have a lot of characters in your story as long as each serves an important function and your readers can keep

them straight.

There's no rule of thumb about how many characters is too many. Charles Dickens tended to overpopulate his stories without ill effects. J.K. Rowling does the same. If you want to use lots of characters, just make sure they're distinct and identifiable enough that we don't get lost, and be sure they serve the story. (Remember the guy who rescued the body surfer I referred to previously? He doesn't belong in the story.) If they don't, lose them. If you really like them, you can always use them somewhere else.

If you think your cast is growing too fast, try introducing the characters over time. That way we can get used to one group before going on to the next.

**14. The Passing Acquaintance. You don't know enough about your characters to make them interesting or believable.** The secret to building a rounded character is knowing him so well that you can hear his self-talk. You know what he thinks and the words he uses inside his own head; what he wants and needs; how he reacts to what's going on around him; what bothers him and why; what he would do in almost any situation because that's *always* how he behaves; the seminal and trivial events of his life; what his daughter said to him this morning and his boss did to him last week. You need all this information to create an effective first-person narrator or third person limited viewpoint character so they can reveal their thoughts to us throughout the story. If you do not know enough about your characters, you run the risk of making them vague and potentially inconsistent.

**15. The Milquetoast. Your antagonist is weak.** If your protagonist wins his battles too easily, you won't build the tension necessary to keep readers engaged. Make sure your antagonist is a worthy adversary. He must be capable of defeating your hero. Sherlock Holmes needs a Moriarty. If he were to match wits with Inspector Lestrade or Dr. Watson, the stories in which he appears would lack tension. The antagonist needs to be strong enough to have a realistic chance of winning. Then we'll wonder whether and how the protagonist will prevail.

**16. The Mustache Twirler. Your antagonist is one-dimensional.** Your antagonist needs to be just as deep and capable of stirring our sympathy as your protagonist. It's one thing to hate a cartoon villain. It's quite another to feel moments of sympathy for the devil.

The character of Londo Mollari in the television show "Babylon 5" is one of my favorite examples of the complex villain. At first, Londo is selfish, arrogant, and vain. But later he develops sympathy for his enemy, the Narn G'Kar, and against the wishes of his imperialist government, helps G'Kar escape from captivity. When Londo shows a moment of compassion, we see that he *can* be generous, even if immediately afterwards he reverts to his old self. And in fact, as we keep watching, we are

rewarded with more moments of generosity from Londo, who by the end of the series becomes a pitiful slave. At that point, his transformation is complete, and we were riveted the whole time, just waiting to see that happen.

If Londo were simply bad--always thwarting our good guys--the story would have devolved into an us and them situation. But as we begin to root for and even identify with him, we become highly engaged and care about what happens to both the good guys *and* the bad guys. The irony is that when the bad guys get the comeuppance we've been hoping for, we no longer want that for them.

After previewing this article, a friend of mine said that with a tweak here and there, a great antagonist could easily become a protagonist. He's right!

**17. The Butterfly. Your characters are inconsistent.** Be sure your characters' actions make sense in the context of what we know about them. Don't show us a character who is paralyzed with grief one moment and gaily planning a bridal shower the next. It's true that a person who is bipolar *might* act that way, but if you must show a character acting inconsistently, make sure we know, or at least suspect, that there's pathology involved.

## Structural problems

**18. The Quitter. Your story doesn't have a beginning, middle, and end.** Your novel should include these elements in this order:

### ***Beginning***

Protagonist in his untenable "before" state

Catalyst shakes him up

Question what to do

### ***Middle***

Start the quest

Face a series of obstacles

### ***End***

Come up with a new approach

Final struggle with the antagonist

Resolution.

Middles are said to be difficult to write. I think a lot of writers find middles difficult because they don't understand structure well enough. If you are having trouble with the middles of your stories, pick up a copy of any of Blake Snyder's *Save the Cat!* screenwriting books, which work just as beautifully for novelists. Read them voraciously and heed what Blake has to say.

The middle of the story is the time to present your protagonist with obstacles of increasing difficulty, force him to fail, and then get him to realize what he needs to do to resolve the problem. This part should be the most fun because it's just one action scene after another. Once you realize that, the job becomes a lot easier.

**19. The Dog Ate My Homework. You omit the catalyst.** The catalyst is an incident that changes the protagonist's life and causes him to undertake a journey. Sometimes the catalyst occurs before the story opens, but usually it's found in Chapter 1. In any case, it's considered part of your set-up.

The catalyst must pressure your protagonist to change. Usually it is external, meaning that it comes from outside the protagonist. Maybe he loses his girlfriend, or someone dies, or he gets a disturbing phone call, or he witnesses a murder. Dreams and random thoughts, no matter how disturbing, don't usually make satisfying catalysts, although they can shed light on character. Because they occur inside the character, they're too easy to ignore.

**20. The Tortoise. You don't introduce a sense of urgency and quicken the pace.** The midpoint of your story should change everything in the same way your catalyst should change everything. By the time you're halfway through your story, your protagonist can't be fooling around and avoiding his problems. The danger should be bearing down on him, and he must confront it or something bad will happen--soon. The action should move faster and faster as the danger increases and reach its peak when the hero fights the antagonist at the climax of the story.

**21. The Preemie. You start with a prologue.** I've addressed this issue many times in our Writing Show slush pile workshops. Despite the fact that many bestselling authors start their novels with prologues, agents insist that they don't like them. They want you to get right into the story. I don't personally have a problem with prologues, but because so many agents and publishers seem to be antagonistic to them these days, don't use one. Work that backstory in organically.

## Reader engagement problems

**22. The Blabbermouth. You tell too much and show too little.** When you show an event moment by moment instead of telling the reader about it from a distance, you engage us. That way we get involved in the action as it happens.

You do need to tell *sometimes*. If you showed everything, your story would get verrrrrrry loooooong because *showing* time moves much more slowly than *telling* time. Strive for a balance with the emphasis on showing.

**23. The Bore. You throw in too much backstory early on.** If you start with a lot of backstory, you're probably doing a lot more telling than showing. Instead, get us involved in the protagonist's life in the here and now. Show us a situation that's causing problems for him today. Then you can release the backstory gradually and show us its effects on your character's life now. The more pipe you need to lay (that is, the more you need to explain before you start), the harder the story will be to follow, and the less likely we'll be to stick with it.

**24. The Marshmallow. Your story lacks conflict and suspense.** Even comedies with happy endings contain conflict. A character who meets his soulmate and goes off to do good works with her might be inspiring, but if that's all there is to the story, readers are going to feel let down. A character who meets his soulmate and can't get together with her so he goes off to do good works and gets taken captive by terrorists--now *that's* a story. A novel can be uplifting without foregoing conflict. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that it can't be uplifting *without* it.

Suspense is also critical to reader engagement. When you withhold information that could relieve tension, you build suspense. What's that noise coming from the closet? Who was that on the phone? When will we know who won the battle? The longer you make us wonder, the more suspense you build. Try to delight in keeping your secrets rather than feeling the need to spill them, as many writers do.

**25. The Snooze. Your story has low stakes.** Ask yourself what would happen if your protagonist failed to achieve her goal. If the answer is "Not much," then your story suffers from low stakes and we won't care whether she succeeds or fails. If the fate of the world rests on her, we'll care a lot more than if the looming catastrophe is a potential head cold.

In short stories, you can get away with low stakes, as you can in many children's stories. But even in those forms, be careful. Your audience must care enough about the consequences of the protagonist's actions to keep reading, or they'll quit. High stakes help keep them turning pages.

**26. Captain Hookless. Your hook doesn't work.** Your very first sentence must intrigue readers by raising questions in their minds. Unanswered questions make them want to hang in there and learn the answers. All through your first page and even beyond, every sentence should spark questions in readers' minds.

When I say that you want to raise questions, I don't mean that you should ask questions ending with a question mark. That's lazy writing. What I mean is that in your action, dialogue, and description, you refer to events, people, and phenomena that are interesting in a way that doesn't reveal too much too quickly.

This kind of writing is an art, to be sure. There's a fine line between being vague and whetting our appetites. I've seen manuscripts that were so short on context that I was confused and disoriented. If you try to be too clever, you will lose your readers, who will be convinced that you can't write coherently.

Here's an example of an extended hook from *The Subtle Knife* by Philip Pullman.

Will tugged at his mother's hand and said, "Come *on*, come on . . ."

But his mother hung back. She was still afraid. Will looked up and down the narrow street in the evening light, along the little terrace of houses, each behind its tiny garden and its box hedge, with the sun glaring off the windows of one side and leaving the other in shadow. There wasn't much time. People would be having their meal about now, and soon there would be other children around, to stare and comment and notice. It was dangerous to wait, but all he could do was persuade her, as usual.

From the very first sentence, there seems to be some urgency, as Will, whoever he is, tries to hurry his mother along. Is he an antsy young child, or is there truly some time pressure? Next we discover that Will's mother hangs back. This doesn't sound like a mother refusing to give in to the whims of her child. The mother almost sounds fearful. Why? Then we discover that not only is she afraid of something (what?), but she's *still* afraid. What's been going on so long that's caused her to feel prolonged fear? Then we find out that Will and his mother are in a residential area somewhere. Where, and why would there be danger in such a benign place? Then we find out that they're in immediate danger: "There wasn't much time." Yikes! Why not? Then we discover that they're afraid of *children*, of all things. Whatever for? Then we find out that it's dangerous to dally, but Will's only choice is to persuade his mother rather than, we assume, getting her to move by force.

Pullman does a wonderful job leading us from question to question in this opening passage, all without the use of a question mark. He gives us just enough information to

spark our curiosity, reeling out facts little by little to satisfy us, while at the same time dangling new questions in front of us. Wow.

**27. The Nerd. You overwhelm readers with intricate world-building.** If you introduce a complicated world too quickly, you'll lose your audience. Readers need something to hang onto. If you start your story in a setting we recognize, such as Earth, we'll be able to focus on the characters and the action because we won't be constantly trying to figure out how your world works. (Harry Potter works this way. The story starts in present-day London.) Likewise, if your characters or setting have Earthlike qualities, we'll have a relatively easy time of it. (The Hobbit starts with many Earth-like references that we can follow. The Shire is a lot like England.) If your story is entirely set in an unfamiliar world, you'll do well to keep us focused on the action and the characters and release details about the world slowly, in context.

**28. The Chatter. Your dialogue is bland.** When you go on a date you look for common ground with the other person, so you discuss the movies and music you like. But in a book, unless that conversation leads to some momentous discovery or change in the characters' situation, it's boring. I hate to be harsh about this because I know how passionate writers are about their interests, but trust me--even if your readers love the same bands you do, they don't want to hear your characters chat about them unless the conversation advances the story.

You do not have to include everything people say when they meet, or hang up a phone, or buy something. You might need a little of that to smooth the transition from one event to another, but be brief. Most of what we say in real life isn't that interesting. Your dialogue must be believable but heavily edited, punchy, and purposeful. Above all, it must demonstrate (often as subtext) your characters' agendas.

For more detailed information on writing great dialogue, see my Kindle article collection, *Writing Dialogue #1-5: A Collection of Articles for Fiction Writers*.

**29. The Blur. Your writing is vague.** Specificity is the key to style. The choices you make about what to describe, which words to use, and what to say about it determine your voice and make or break your effectiveness as a writer.

What's a more effective sentence: "His jacket was torn" or "The expensive black North Face parka his grandmother had given him for Christmas was torn just under the armhole"? The second variation tells us a lot more about the character and situation than the first. It's also more fun to read and easier to imagine.

There is a time for brevity, of course. You don't want to embellish every sentence. But you always should be able to visualize your scenes in detail, like in a movie. Vague prose doesn't allow you or your readers to do that. In a movie, the production designer,

costumer, prop master, cinematographer, director, etc. collaborate to produce a scene containing specific items, actors, and action. You need to be all of those people rolled into one.

**30. The Mad Dash. You rush through the story.** When you rush, you shortchange your readers.

One of the reasons writers end up rushing is that they don't realize they're leaving out information readers need. Another cause of rushed manuscripts is a lack of obstacles and complications. Sometimes writers don't realize that the stories they like to read are as dense with complications as they are, so they fail to do what's needed in their own work. You need many twists and turns to transform a protagonist and keep readers interested.

The climax presents its own special problems. It's the most exciting part of your story. Savor it. Divide it into several separate incidents. Blake Snyder describes how to do this in the five-step ending he calls "storming the stronghold:"

Step 1: The hero and his team come up with a plan to "storm the stronghold" and beat the Antagonist who is "hiding there."

Step 2: The plan begins. The stronghold is breached. The heroes enter the Bad Guys' realm. All is going according to plan.

Step 3: Finally reaching the stronghold where the Antagonist is hiding, the hero finds... he's not there! And not only that, it's a trap! It looks like the Bad Guy has won.

Step 4: The hero now has to come up with a new plan. And it's all part and parcel of the overall transformation of the hero and his need to "dig deep down" to find that last ounce of strength (i.e., faith in an unseen power) to win the day.

Step 5: Thinking on the fly, and discovering his best self, the hero executes the new plan, and wins! The Antagonist is vanquished, friends avenged, and our hero has triumphed.

(Source: Blake's blog, <http://www.blakesnyder.com/2007/12/17/the-five-step-finale/>)

Note that the hero doesn't just barge in, defeat the antagonist, and call it a day. Resolution is much more difficult and time-consuming than that, and the suspense keeps audiences enthralled.

**31. The Edith Bunker. You write scenes that don't advance the story.** In the old TV show "All in the Family," Edith Bunker, Archie's wife, would go on and on and on rather than getting to the point, which would drive Archie crazy. If you have a tendency to do that, exorcise it. Make sure every one of your scenes offers vital information and propels your characters forward. Each one should push your characters into doing something new as they struggle with the obstacles they encounter.

In his excellent book *Horror Screenwriting: The Nature of Fear*, Devin Watson suggests a technique for evaluating how "straight" your storyline is, meaning whether it's staying on course.

In the margin to the left or right of your slugline, write down one of the following: +1, -1, or 0. If the particular scene has important merits that contribute to the overall story, write +1. If it is going off on a tangent from the story, write -1. If it does neither, write 0.

Repeat this for an entire sequence of scenes. When you're done, add up the total. If the number is very low relative to the number of scenes in the sequence, then there's likely something wrong in there that needs to be fixed. If it is in the negative, you should seriously consider going back and rewriting or removing scenes. If you have a high positive number relative to the number of scenes in the sequence, then you're on track and your through line is straight.

What I really like about this approach is that you can tell immediately that a scene needs work or deletion just by the score you give it. See if it works for you.

## Market problems

**32. The Clam and the Windbag. Your stories are too short or too long.** If you are unpublished, don't exceed 100,000 words. Publishers rarely want to take a chance on an unknown writer, and putting out a long book makes doing so especially risky. Keep your word counts realistic.

Some writers go too short rather than too long. Seventy thousand words for a novel is fine. Sixty thousand is marginal, and unless you're writing YA (young adult) or middle grade, fifty thousand and under is too short.

Some first-time and previously published novelists get away with flouting these conventions, but don't expect to be one of them. Respect agents' and editors' time and

follow their guidelines. The more you do so, the happier they'll be, and the more open to taking a chance on you.

**33. The Missing Fine Print. You don't hint at your genre in Chapter 1.** Readers want to know what to expect from your story, so it's a good idea to offer at least a hint of genre in your first chapter. People who read a lot of science fiction, fantasy, mystery, romance, and other genre fiction expect your book to conform to certain conventions. If it doesn't, they may lose interest.

Some readers enjoy cross-genre stories, but agents and publishers are skeptical of anything that breaks the rules too much. If your story includes magic, let's see some in the first chapter. If you're writing a thriller, show us that some sort of crime or political intrigue is on the way.

The same reviewer who pointed out that a great antagonist is just a variation on a complex protagonist reminded me that publishers like being able to fit your story into a specific bookstore section. If your genre isn't clear, you may have trouble selling to them.

**34. The Blurter. Your story is wrong for your target audience.** Agents and publishers expect YA (young adult), middle grade, children's, and adult stories to conform to certain conventions, although there is wiggle room. YA tends to be about your protagonist finding him- or herself as an individual and is usually aimed at ages 15 or 16 through 18 or 20. These stories show a complex inner life and often demonstrate a dawning realization that the world is a complicated place. Middle grade stories tend to be shorter than YA and outwardly focused, and deal with finding one's place in the more limited world of the tween, be it school, family, or friends. They're usually aimed at kids between 8 and 14 or so and feature a protagonist who is slightly older than the target reader. Seduction has no place in middle grade stories, but it's okay in YA on up. Likewise, a story told from the point of view of a nine-year-old probably won't work in the adult market, although there are exceptions.

If you find yourself writing a novel that isn't right for your audience, you're not dead in the water. Try modifying the story to work for that market, or aim for another one.

**35. The Starlet. You're too focused on your sequel.** Sometimes I'll advise a writer to add more twists and turns to their story and suggest a few ideas, only to hear, "Don't worry. That's coming in the next book."

Do not sacrifice this book for the sake of the next one. Pretend that this book stands on its own, because it might. If a publisher takes you on and your book doesn't do well, there probably won't be a sequel unless you publish it yourself. Put your energies into the here and now and give your readers the best value possible so there *will* be a next

time.

## Mechanical problems

**36. The Salad Bar. You use the wrong verb tenses.** I know that verb tenses can be confusing, but unfortunately, you've got to make sure they're right. Don't mix past and present in the same scene or sentence, for example. If you're going to switch between the two, be sure you're consistent within your chapter or section. (Obviously, excerpts from diaries and newspaper articles and that kind of thing embedded in a scene that's written in another tense are exceptions.)

For example, do not say:

"He kicked me in the shins, and then he punches me in the face."

That sentence mixes the past tense "He kicked" with the present tense "he punches."

Instead, either say

He kicked me in the shins, and then he punched me in the face (all past tense)

or

He kicks me in the shins, and then he punches me in the face (all present tense).

It's also tricky to use the past perfect correctly. The past perfect, i.e., "He had kicked," is used for action that was completed before the time of the scene. (The simple past form of that sentence would be "He kicked.")

For example, this passage from Charlaine Harris' Sookie Stackhouse novel *Dead Until Dark* is correct:

The walls were lined with framed pictures of every movie vampire who had shown fangs on the silver screen, from Bela Lugosi to George Hamilton to Gary Oldman, from famous to obscure.

Do not say this:

The walls were lined with framed pictures of every movie vampire who showed

fangs on the silver screen, from Bela Lugosi to George Hamilton to Gary Oldman, from famous to obscure.

The second sentence uses the simple perfect "showed" where the past perfect "had shown" belongs. The time of the scene is the point at which Sookie is looking at the walls. The time when the movie vampires showed their fangs took place before that, and is over and done with. Therefore, use the past perfect "had," in speaking about what the movie vampires did on the silver screen.

If you can't tell whether you've got your tenses right, try reading your sentences out loud. Sometimes you can hear what you can't see.

**37. The One-trick Pony. You use multiple occurrences of the same word, or variations of the word, close together.** It's easy to use the same word over and over again without realizing it, so try to eliminate close occurrences unless you're trying to create a particular effect. Varying your vocabulary keeps your writing fresh and flowing.

**38. The Edward Bulwer-Lytton. You force metaphors and description.** A clever or stunning metaphor will enhance your work, but an awkward one just sticks out. Sometimes it's hard to know the difference. When in doubt, test the metaphor on other people. The same goes for flowery prose and unusual words.

For example, here is the winner of the 2011 Edward Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest, which challenges entrants to compose the opening sentence to the worst of all possible novels:

Cheryl's mind turned like the vanes of a wind-powered turbine, chopping her sparrow-like thoughts into bloody pieces that fell onto a growing pile of forgotten memories.

Ouch!

**39. The Randomizer. You capitalize capriciously.** When I see words capitalized willy-nilly, I always wonder what possessed the writer to emphasize that particular word. Be sure there's a good reason. Unlike German, English-language punctuation rules call for very little capitalization. When in doubt, you'll probably want to use lower case, but check *The Chicago Manual of Style* to be sure.

**40. The Parrot. You use the same sentence structure over and over.** To make your prose flow well, vary not only your vocabulary, but also your sentence structure. Don't always use predicate/verb/object, for example. Don't always start with a preposition or

an adverb. Mix it up to sustain reader interest and avoid sounding sing-songy.

## Other problems

**41. The Eager Beaver. You expect to be done writing quickly and revise minimally.** Writing a great novel takes time and a lot more effort than most people realize. Don't expect to nail it fast. Only factory writers who get help from their teams can do that. You need time to think, get perspective, and see things you missed before.

**42. The Bleeding Heart. You don't kill your darlings.** Don't get so caught up in your ideas or words that you can't accept that they don't work. If they don't fit, get rid of them. You can always use them someplace else. Be ruthless, and your story will be lean and mean.