Mistakes Writers Make

from real editor Stephi Cham via Twitter

As an editor, here are some mistakes I often see writers make in their manuscripts.

Problem: overusing tags. Example: "How are you today?" asked Simon. "I'm okay," muttered Mark. "Just okay?" questioned Simon. "Yeah," replied Mark.

Tags don't have to go with every phrase, especially in dialogue between two characters. "I was thinking of you," John whispered to Elle. "Why?" "It just seemed like something you'd like." Even without tags for the last two, it's clear who's speaking.

On a similar note, people often under-use beats. Most communication happens nonverbally, and you should show that in conversations.

Check out the difference between these two examples: E1: "I'm not scared," she said. E2: She raised her chin and looked him in the eye. "I'm not scared." One tells you what's being said; one gives you insight into the scene and the character's attitude.

Writers often struggle with where to begin their novel. Here's a tip: start where things begin to change. Establish why the story really takes off at this point in the character's life, and give your reader a reason to be invested from the first scene.

I often see writers get too caught up in the mundane parts of a character's story. If it's a transition, write it concisely or create a scene break. We don't need to know every time a character holds an unimportant conversation or walks to a different location.

Writers tend NOT to spend enough time world-building, especially in fantasy. Worlds never exist to serve one character; don't write them that way. Also, even fictional worlds have some structure to them, so elements shouldn't pop up only when the character needs them.

Another common problem: relying on adverbs. Ex: "I'm not a child," she said angrily. Rather than depending on the narrator, try letting the character show

emotions herself. "I'm not a child." Resisting the urge to stomp her foot, she let out her breath in a huff and turned away.

Writers tend to fall back on the same few sentence structures over and over (and overuse commas)! Vary your sentence lengths. Watch the way you write and see how/if it flows. Even with a great story, your words and the way you place them must be engaging.

Another common mistake: forgetting what your narrator does NOT know. Example: "My sister scrunched up her face, trying not to say what she's thinking." If your book is in first-person POV, your narrator doesn't necessarily know what other characters think.

This often manifests in overusing the word "because." Ex: "He said nothing to me because he was too sad." Instead, show the sadness nonverbally and let your readers see it for themselves. OR omit the "because" and split the sentence, so you're not explaining away others' actions.

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