

Sentence Pitfalls

A little rant by Julie Berry. www.julieberrybooks.com. Twitter @julieberrybooks.

Below are some common sentence structure sins that weaken writing and pull the reader out of the immediacy of the scene. They burst the bubble of the fictive dream. They don't necessarily break a grammar rule, but they violate the rules of style that point toward powerful writing.

AS statements.

As he something something, he something something.

Beware "as." Especially beware sentences that begin with it. The reader too often has to pause and comprehend two actions or thoughts, and the sometimes implausible idea of them being truly simultaneous.

GERUND BEGINNINGS (-ing)

Remembering the days when her mother was still alive and healthy, Muriel sighed and began washing the dishes.

I won't say never use these, but please use them only when there's no other good way. You can do better. This problem is related to the AS statement problem: you're demanding that the reader parse out the simultaneity of two experiences, thoughts, or sensations. Is it *important* to stress that they were simultaneous? Usually, not so much.

DANGLING MODIFIERS

Gerund beginnings run the risk of making you use a dangling modifier, and this is a grammar crime. We see it often.

Not knowing which way to flee the burning theater, chaos ensued.

Was it the chaos that didn't know how to flee the burning theater? The reader may be able to figure out your meaning, but at a cost of vague bewilderment, which disrupts their participation in your fictive dream.

Wondering what to say next, an awkward silence fell over the dinner table.

As written, this means that the awkward silence wondered what to say next. Clearly that's not the intent. If this seems tricky to spot and avoid, just train yourself to avoid gerund beginnings and you'll eliminate the lion's share of them.

ALWAYS, ALL, EVERY, NEVER statements.

These words are rarely your friends. You almost never need them. ☺ Instead of remaining gripped in the powerful illusion of the world you're creating, the reader stops and chews upon this challenge. *Really? Always? Every single time? Without exception? That seems unlikely.* That is not where you want your reader's attention to go.

TWO REASONS

So and so did something, not only because of this, but also because of that.

Snoozer! Demands a tedious thought process. It reflects the writer analyzing the character instead of being inside the character. Suggests that the character is constantly observing himself or herself and inwardly commenting on the reasons for his/her every action, reaction, and expression, which implies an off-putting fascination with the self.

THOUGHTS ABOUT THOUGHTS

It made her nervous, which made her wonder if she was a wimp. Maybe there was something wrong with her that she got nervous so easily. But how could she help it? How could someone not get nervous if they saw a zombie?

Please stop talking. Please just show me blood.

Writing that analyzes the character's thought processes, and has them analyzing their own, is dull. It drags us out of the moment, out of the body, and into the stuffy brain. It also implies that the character is so fascinated with himself that he thinks the rest of us care to hear the C-Span blow-by-blow of his mental gyrations. We usually don't.

REPORTING FACIAL EXPRESSIONS OF THE POV CHARACTER

He smirked. | Her eyebrows rose.

If you're talking about the POV character, this implies a puzzling level of physical self-awareness. It's as though they're carrying around a little mirror, commenting on their every grimace. Or as if they're not having authentic, organic reactions, but making each expression as a deliberate acting decision. It makes them seem narcissistic, but usually it only means the author has forgotten that we can't see our own faces, and nor do we usually comment on our appearance, except in simple ways such as, "I smiled."

DESCRIBING WHAT DIDN'T HAPPEN

But it wasn't her face that responded.

Then why even mention it? Just say, "Her hands shook." Or, "Her voice, when she answered, had an edge of steel to it." Or, if the absence of the thing is really important, at least use a more active verb. "Her face betrayed no emotion."

Instead of this happening, that happened.

The reader loses interest when they're asked to form mental pictures and then erase them. It repels rather than compels the reader.

RUN-ONS

Susan ran through the dark forest, clawing limbs scratched her face.

No! This does violate a grammar rule. It's a run-on and it disorients the reader. A first level fix would be:

Susan ran through the dark forest, clawing limbs scratching at her face.

This is, at least, legal. I used to do this a lot. But I've come to see this as a rather weak and sophomoric sentence structure, to be avoided in almost every case. The faster, more intense, more dramatic you want a moment to be, the shorter and more clipped the sentences should appear. So I would revise as follows:

Susan ran through the dark forest. Clawing limbs scratched her face.

SPEECH TAGS YOU CAN DO WITHOUT

"Do you think you can make it?" Travis asked, kicking at a tuft of grass.

More simultaneous stuff. I'd revise to:

"Do you think you can make it?" Travis kicked at a tuft of grass.

It's still obvious that Travis is the one speaking, but we've conveyed it with fewer slowing syllables and comma-pauses. We've also gotten rid of a gerund. We can't live completely without them, but they're usually not our friends if we want our writing to sizzle.

EXCLAMS

"No!" I shrieked. "Don't eat that cake! I worked all day to bake it! It's for my birthday party tonight! Stop, you pig!"

I hope he eats the cake. So many exclams makes me lose all sympathy for the speaker.

Use exclamation marks much more sparingly than you think you should. Reserve them for true instances of full-on shouting, as in, trying to make someone hear you from far away. Let your words and context invest the dialogue with the charge it needs. Oddly, exclamation marks have come to have the opposite of their desired effect. Instead of conveying intensity, they cheapen the line given. They've probably suffered from overuse.

ALL CAPS

Which is better? From Gandalf:

"RUN, YOU FOOL!"

"Run, you fool!"

This is pretty much a never statement. Never use all caps for a word in your manuscript. At least, I would never do it. One possible exception could be books for very young early readers, ie, chapter books and very early middle grade. But still, don't do it. Italics are more acceptable, but again, write in such a way that the inflection, volume, and intensity can be felt without all caps. Their actual effect is opposite to the one you intend when using them (as with exclams, above). They distance the reader and cheapen the statement.