

Modern Genre Writing

- Please find below a bunch of modern genre writing standards that today's writing community seems to recommend. These are a guideline, but will help with self-editing. Probably not comprehensive, but a good start.

These are not 'rules', but they are the standards expected if you are submitting to non-literary anthologies. We don't mind if you break these norms, as long as it improves the story because you are going for a specific effect. ie: you know the 'rule' and are doing something else for a VERY good reason.

Feel free to copy this and save it for your own use and reference. It is by no means comprehensive, so please go and do additional research to learn more if you're not sure you understand how to use the idea effectively.

POINT OF VIEW – choose your point of view character/s carefully. In a short story, there's usually not time for more than one POV. Your POV character should be the one with the strongest internal conflict/most to lose if they don't achieve their goal.

Think about **which POV style** suits your story best. These are the most common three in modern genre writing.

- Close First person, present tense eg: *I shove open the door and enter the dim-lit bar. The stench of old rum and vomit hits me and I gag.*
- Close First person, past tense. Eg: *I shoved open the door and entered the dim-lit bar. The stench of old rum and vomit hit me and I gagged.*
- Close Third person – usually past tense. Eg: *She shoved open the door and entered the dim-lit bar. The stench of old rum and vomit hit her and she gagged.*

There are other options, for example Omniscient (where the story is told as though the narrator is a disembodied voice watching all characters and inside everyone's head) but that's hard to pull off and less common these days.

Common POV errors. Be careful not to 'head-hop' by writing what your non-pov characters are thinking. This can be subtle. eg: *I watched Michael open the fridge and stare into it. Then he closed the door and wandered in to the lounge **to play** on his computer.* In this case, you're in one person's head, but you're stating what MICHAEL intends to do, before he does it. '*to play*'. Until Michael actually switches on his computer, the POV character does not know what he's going to do for certain.

OR:

She reached out to pluck the hat from my head. But 'she' might actually be reaching out to pick a piece of lint off your hair, or stick her finger up your nose. Until it's actually done, the POV character can't know what 'she' is going to do.

Other words to watch for that indicate out of POV thinking:

- Don't tell the reader what a non POV thought or saw. Eg: *'John thought about that for a moment'*. If John isn't the POV character then the reader and the POV character can't KNOW what he was thinking about.
- Look for : thought, noticed, wondered, realised, believed, knew, remembered, recalled, reviewed, understood, considered

(NOTE: these can also be removed from the POV character as they are Telling, not showing)

- Don't include things the POV couldn't have seen . eg: *'I turned away, not noticing when John slipped the card into his pocket'*
- Look for : didn't notice, unknowingly, not realised, unconsciously, unaware
- Don't tell the reader what the POV character looks like eg: *'a smirk crossed Melissa's face'*. If Melissa is the POV, she won't see the smirk on her face.
- Replace with 'Melissa smirked'.

SHOW DON'T TELL

Don't tell the reader what a character is thinking, feeling, or doing if you can show it better through their actions, body-sensations/body-language, or dialogue. Let the reader work it out, don't shove the information down their throat.

eg Telling: *It was only a kiss but I realised (writer is telling what the character thinks) we were made for each other. With that one kiss, the truth emerged from the shadows and everything became clear (showing).*

better Showing: *It was only a kiss. But with that one kiss, the truth emerged from the shadows and everything became clear. We were made for each other.*

Watch for showing & telling in the same sentence. Let the dialogue do the work and use stronger verbs, rather than adverbs in the dialogue tags.

eg: *'I hate you!' she said angrily, throwing a vase and running from the room.*

(NOTE: many editors would also prefer you don't use the 'ing' verb too often as it slows down the action.)

better: *'I hate you!' she screamed. She hurled a vase at his head, stormed from the room and slammed the door.*

(NOTE: this could also still be considered overwriting/forced imagery with the excess of exclamation, dialogue tag, action, and violent emotion all in two short sentences. Unless the vase is integral to the plot, it might be better left as *'I hate you!' She stormed out and slammed the door.*)

DISTANCING/FILTERING LANGUAGE

Modern readers love 'immersion' and close POV is best at that. But to achieve really close POV, you need to remove all the language that distances the reader from living inside the character's head.

eg: Distant: *He kisses me. I feel as if I've come home after a long journey and now I feel safe and familiar.*

Rewrite by removing the 'feel' references.

eg: *He kisses me. I've come home after a long journey to somewhere safe and familiar.*

Tricks to finding Distancing language. Use the Word "find" feature to look for:

- Feel/felt, thought/think, wondered, hoped/ believed/ imagined/ heard/hear/ think/ Realised/ Sensed/ wonder/ knew/ knowing/ aware/wishing/hoping/understood/felt/feel/ see/saw/watched/noticed, believed, remembered, recalled, reviewed, considered/seemed/touch/decide/sound/note/notice/be able to/experienced
- Anything that's '.... To' (tried to, wanted to, hoped to)

You can't always get rid of everything. AND there might be a reason to use more distance at some points in your story than others. Just do it deliberately, not accidentally.

Use distancing/filtering to manipulate how immersed your reader is and therefore how intimately they feel what your character feels.

PASSIVE WRITING

Strictly speaking, passive writing is about which noun is acting and which is being acted upon. It is, normally, the stronger construction.

eg: The bone was being eaten by the dog - this is passive and places emphasis and focus on the bone.

But: The dog was eating the bone - this is active and places the focus on the noun doing the actual action.

Choose carefully and direct the reader focus.

For example: The cursed sword was passed from mother to daughter for ten generations. (the important thing is the sword, not the action of passing it on). This is passive, but deliberately.

Other exceptions might be when you are actually trying to hide who performed the action, or simply don't know.

eg:

The woman was murdered. (we don't know who did it, so the passive construction is essential)

or:

The decision was made to dissolve parliament and destroy Aldaran. (the emphasis is on the decision, not who made it. Politicians and liars do this a lot to avoid being blamed for things)

SLOWER VERBS

The first example (The dog was eating the bone) can be made stronger and more immediate, still, by writing it as:

The dog eats the bone (present tense)

The dog ate the bone (past tense)

The construction "was eating/is eating" is not strictly 'passive', but is slower and many editors will ask you to strengthen it by removing 'was/is'.

eg: *I was running away but he was catching up. His breath was hot on my neck.*

Better: *I ran but he followed, right on my heels; his breath hot on my neck.* (more immediate/tense/action)

You can easily (but tediously) find the most obvious passives by doing a 'find' on 'was' and 'were' then reading each sentence carefully to see if the verb is active or slow.

eg: *I couldn't help but remember his arms around me, and my heart was warmed by the memory.*

Better: Even after he left, his touch lingered on my skin and my heart warmed. (not brilliant, but more immediate and immersive)

UNNECESSARY WORDS/PUNCTUATION

Exclamation marks – remove them entirely from text, with the exception of a few in dialogue. Use those only sparsely. Let stronger dialogue do the work of exclamation marks where possible. And always let stronger verbs/adjectives do the work of exclamation marks within non-dialogue text.

Words you can safely remove most of, leaving only a few that have more impact

Extra Adverbs (*don't remove entirely, but use only a few where they will have the greatest impact*) Eg: In dialogue tags, delete the adverbs unless they change the meaning of the dialogue or the way the verb behaves. Eg: *'I love you, too,' he said sarcastically.* Or *'Hurry up,' he whispered harshly.* But *whispered softly* is doubling up on the meaning of whispered.

Adjectives (use fewer and stronger ones). If you find yourself writing three adjectives in a row, cut out two and keep the strongest one.

Past tense eg: 'had been/would have been/could have been/would have/might have/It was/should have

NOTE: see 'writing flashbacks' for clarification on when to use these effectively

Metaphors & similes – use them sparingly and well

- **That & which** – most of the time the sentence makes sense without these.
- **Unnecessary modifiers** eg:
Very/extremely/totally/completely/utterly/absolutely/quite/almost/nearly/
Slightly/exactly/somewhat/most/about/close to/quite/kind
of/possibly/simply/practically/probably/supposedly/seriously/just
- **Action-slowing words:** Sudden/ly / Abruptly/at that moment / Started/began/begun/begin
- **Boring verbs:** *get, give, sat, say, see, stood, use, want, walk* - replace with words and phrases that have energy and say something about how the character is feeling/behaving. *She stormed out.* Is better than *She walked out in a huff.*
- **Replace boring adjectives** with better word picture and metaphors. e.g. *easy, nice, interesting, wonderful, big, fine, bad, exciting, good, little, strange.* *Unnecessary words:* eg: *sat down, stood up, reached out her hand, nodded her head (what else can you nod?), shrugged her shoulders.*
- **Watch for your own personal crutch words.** Common ones are:
sigh/blink/look/glance/gasp/heart/shook her head/nodded/grin/smile/breath/shrug

DIALOGUE : understand the difference between an action beat and a dialogue tag and don't mix them up.

- *'I love you,' he said.* (ok – dialogue tag)
- *'I love you,' he sighed/groaned/laughed.* These are action beats, not dialogue tags, so it would be written: *'I love you.'* *He groaned.*

Dialogue – make it natural. Use contractions. Read aloud to test how it sounds. Use dialogue tics (words that are unique to a character) to help distinguish one character from another.

SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION:

Watch for micro-timing issues and make sure the Action always comes before the Reaction.

- *She flinched when the apple flew at her face* (the reaction is first, which confuses the reader & slows things down)
- *The apple flew at her face and she flinched.* (puts them in the right order)
- *He rushed out the door, after brushing his teeth and getting dressed.* (is going to cause your reader to stop and rearrange the images in their head)

Watch for unclear modifiers.

- *The door flew open and she marched in, smacking the wall.* (Does this refer to the door or to her smacking the wall?)

Watch for overwriting. This is usually something like repetition of emotions or information or reactions. Trust your reader to get your character's emotional reaction in one sentence, or maybe two. If you're afraid they'll miss it, add stronger verbs and adjectives, rather than reiterating the same emotion in a different sentence.

- *'I hate you!' she screamed, angry. Her face was red, her hands clenched into fists.* (This is overdoing it, as you can probably tell)

Watch for unnecessary action. You don't have to relate every movement of every character in a scene.

- Use actions to indicate where characters are in relation to each other for reader orientation (*he rose and crossed to the window*).
- Use actions to indicate character emotions to heighten immersion (eg: give your character a stress-tell, but don't over-use it. Eg: hand wringing, nail biting, hair twiddling, throat-clearing etc).

- Use actions to show characterisation. (eg: a pretty girl who flips her hair and bats her eyelashes - we know she's flirting without having to be told. A person who consistently straightens every cushion and lines up the pens on the desk is either nervous or OC. A person who strides is different to someone who shuffles or sidles.)

Pronouns – watch your clarity with pronouns and watch the number of pronouns in a sentence or paragraph.

- *Nora waved to Helen as she crossed the street.* (does this mean as Helen crossed the street, or as Nora crossed the street?)
- Better: *Nora crossed the street and waved to Helen.*
- *Her phone ran out of battery and so did the car. It just wouldn't start.* (What does the 'it' refer to?)
- *He placed his hands on her arms and he looked deep into her eyes.* (So many pronouns!)
- Better: *Michael gripped Sarah's arms and looked deep into her eyes.*

WRITING FLASHBACKS

These can be tricky and are best avoided if possible as they can slow the pace of a story. However if the flashback is absolutely necessary then here's how to avoid getting bogged down in complicated past tense writing.

If you're writing in Simple past tense (eg: she ate, she kept, she said) Then, when you begin the flashback, signal it by using Past Perfect (eg: she had eaten, she had kept, she had said) for approx. two sentences. Then return to Simple past for the bulk of the flashback. Then bring the last sentence or two back to Past Perfect to signal the end of the flashback before returning to your normal story in Simple Past.

Eg:

'Mum, I know you're upset because Dad left,' Alice said, 'but you have to get out of the house. Here. Put some perfume on, get pretty and we'll go to a movie.'

*I sprayed the floral scent onto my wrist and almost burst into tears. My mother once again hovered over me. She **had worn** the same scent the day my father left. I **had huddled** in her arms, confused and frightened, breathing in the flowers. We stayed that way for what seemed like hours to a child.*

She cried into my hair, then sniffed and scrubbed her face. She put on a bright smile and brushed a stray hair from my face.

'Never mind,' she said. 'We don't need him. We don't need any man. From now on, it's just the two of us.'

*And I **had smiled and nodded, but I'd** never stopped wanting my father to come home. And now, here I was again, smelling just like her, waiting for another man who would never return.*

General story hints

- Make sure your story has a Character Internal Arc, a Theme, and a Plot (external conflict)

- A theme is a single line question that underpins the whole story, weaves through it, and is answered at the end. Eg: *To Kill a Mockingbird*: *Are those who are 'different' still worthy of respect?* If you can nail your theme, it will enrich your whole story, whether short or novel.
- Start in the middle of the action (NOT the middle of a fight scene, the middle of when things start to get exciting and tense) and as close as you can to the end of the story (not too much time with backstory & 'establishing the norm'.)
- Make sure the reader knows what the main conflict is by at least 10% of the way into the story.
- Make sure the first few sentences include your POV character's name, and references that orientate the reader in place and time.
- The opening scene should give your reader a sense of who your protagonist is as a person and how they react to conflict.
- Embed solution to ending in the beginning scene (this is an awesome piece of advice if you can work it in. Movies do it all the time. It gives power and meaning to the opening 'establishing the norm' scene)
- Avoid info-dump. Intersperse information in bits and pieces throughout the story in small, individual sentences if possible, gradually building up the backstory info the reader may need.
- Make the character make decisions that CAUSE the next challenge to happen – so events are not happening 'to' characters, they are happening 'because' of decisions the protagonist has made.
- Use symbols/symbolism to reinforce ideas/themes
- Use foreshadowing
- Use all five senses when describing places/people/events – immersive for the reader.
- Make sure each of your characters has physical stress-tells (hair twirling, throat clearing, hand-washing) and verbal ticks/a distinctive 'voice'/way of speaking that helps the reader distinguish between characters.
- Use specifics eg: *eucalypt*, rather than just *tree*; or *cobalt*, rather than *blue*.