

How to Avoid Overwriting: 4 Ways Too Much Fluff Can Sink Your Story

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July 12, 2018

We've talked in the past about two writing techniques that publishers and literary agents hate: head-hopping and the cinematic viewpoint.

Head-hopping is jarring and confusing, while cinematic perspective creates too much emotional distance between your characters and your readers. Each can easily torpedo your chances of getting published, but they're both fairly easy to correct in your fiction if you catch them early enough.

But while the classifications of these troublesome perspectives are quite cut and dry—making them easy to spot in your writing—this next technique is a lot more difficult to pin down.

So, let's ask a difficult question: *How much detail is too much detail?*

Be Descriptive but Concise

Description is a vital building block of any story you write. Every single character, location, object, and event in your writing needs to be introduced well and rendered accurately and evocatively in the minds of your readers, to immerse them in the sensations and raw experience of your fiction.

But description *isn't* just for sights and sounds.

Description can be the gleam of a pistol in a dark alley, the smell of campfire embers, the pain of a grisly wound...but it can also be stinging heartbreak, crushing remorse, or blinding joy! These aren't mere details; they're the soul of your story, the beating heart that forces your readers to empathize with your characters and their plights.

The lovely, terrible, intricate details you weave into your stories are *what make your fictional world feel real*—and they can often be what your readers engage with the most.

How to Avoid Overwriting in Your Descriptions

But too much of a good thing is, well, *too much*.

We get it: *descriptions are fun*. They can be graphic, sensual, sinister, and impossibly beautiful. Descriptions are a chance for talented writers to show off, to prove just how much they can make a reader see and hear and *feel* with mere printed words.

But one big mistake some rookie writers—and even some veteran storytellers—make is *overindulging* in this regard, gorging on gorgeous detail when they should have been focusing on their plots. No matter how lovely or compelling or horrifying your descriptions are, eventually you've got to leave off describing things and actually *tell a story*.

Overly detailed descriptions—or descriptions that go on for far too long—are another major turn-off for literary agents and acquisitions editors. **These passages signal an author who's in love with their own writing voice** and may not respond well to constructive criticism.

Manuscripts that suffer from overwriting may be discarded without a second glance, so it's important to be able to spot and remove them in your stories before you send them out.

But like a shapeshifter, over-description takes many forms. So to help you spot overdetailed passages in your own writing, here are the top 4 unique types of overwriting to avoid:

1. Purple Prose

Perhaps the most famous and florid of all the species of over-description, **purple prose is any passage of a text so ornate and flowery and extravagant that it breaks the flow of the writing and calls excessive attention to itself.**

Purple prose—or purple patches or purple passages, as it's sometimes called—is characterized by excessive use of adjectives, adverbs, specific detail, and figurative language.

Consider the famous example from Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1830 novel, *Paul Clifford*:

"It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents—except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up in the streets (for it is in London that our scene lies), rattling along the housetops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness."

Lovely? Yes. Florid? *Absolutely*.

Necessary? Not even a little bit.

Paul Clifford is written almost entirely in this overwrought, overwritten style—and while almost nobody remembers what the book was actually about, they sure as shootin' remember that opening line.

That's the principal issue purple prose presents: *it distracts from your plot*. Readers are far more likely to focus on the intricacy of your writing than on the story you're trying to tell, failing to see the forest for the trees.

Remember to **keep your priorities in order**: lovely language can be a selling point for any story, but your narrative and characters should always come first. Your descriptions should serve them *uber alles*—not distract from them.

2. Losing the Plot

We get it: world-building is just a peck of fun.

Whether you're describing the inner textures of your protagonist's emotional landscape or detailing the history of a sprawling fictional civilization—or even simply rendering the minute, intricate details of a single beautiful freeze-frame image—this kind of description can make you feel like a true artist, a writer at the height of your powers, creating beauty and life from nothing like some kind of literary deity.

It's always a good idea to create a "library" for your stories, to keep the facts about your characters and world consistent—but once you've written these background elements, the urge to include them in your story proper can be nigh overwhelming!

Long passages of description and nothing else can be beautiful and interesting, but after a certain length of time they can ruin the pacing of your story. If you spend three pages describing the exact textures of all the sweaters in one character's closet, your readers will forget what came before—and when the plot kicks in again, they'll be lost.

Even geniuses like the matchless J.R.R. Tolkien succumbed to this temptation. Tolkien was so in love with Middle-Earth that he devoted huge passages of his books to describing small details in the landscape, down to the very grass in his fictional fields.

Remember to **apply context to everything you write**. Description works best in the midst of scenes. Assign concrete reasons to each detail you choose to include in your story to justify their inclusion—and if you can't justify them, remove them. Culling bits of description you enjoy can be painful, but the pacing of your story will suffer if you overindulge.

3. Over-Describing Specific Elements

As an author, you've probably been advised to "write what you know"—but as readers as well as writers, more often than not we end up writing what we *like*.

We write books because we *love* books, after all, and it stands to reason that we would write stories we would want to read ourselves...with all the genre quirks and details and tropes that come with them. Our interests inevitably color the content of our writing, and that's no terrible thing. Enthusiasm for your subject matter lends passion to your story, and keeps you from every getting bored while you write.

Remember, however, that your audience might not share your...*fervor* for some subjects. Tastes vary, and you can easily alienate readers by going on and on about the minutiae of a topic they have little interest in. For instance, even if *you're* really into amusement parks, a detailed history of the roller coaster might not impress non-thrill-seekers.

Or say you're writing a thriller and happen to be really into guns—naming a specific model of firearm shows accuracy and attention to detail, but your readers don't need to know everything about its adjustments, windage, caliber, and ammunition unless it's absolutely essential to the plot.

Another form this might take is if you've done extensive research for a particular story. After doing all that work, you might be tempted to “show your work”—to include more information from your research than your story really requires and turn the book from a gripping fictional thrill ride into a Wikipedia entry on an arcane detail.

Look at it this way: **too much detailed information on any certain subject can make your book read more like a research paper**—or a gushing fan blog—than an actual story. Give your readers just enough information to understand what's happening: this keeps them engaged, allowing them to participate in your story by supplying details from their own experience to fill in whatever gaps you've left.

4. Pointless Repetition

Sometimes in the course of the writing process, you'll reach a dilemma like this: you've got to describe a certain object or bit of scenery or action a character takes, but you don't know quite how to word things.

This isn't writer's block—far from it. You've got options to choose from, but you just can't commit to one or the other...*so you don't*. You use every wording available to you, throwing language at the wall to see what sticks.

And so you end up repeating yourself. You rephrase and reiterate and re-explain the same idea over and over again, rehashing and restating *ad nauseam*. You change the wording or word choice ever-so-slightly with each new sentence, but you never do more than repeat the same point without adding anything new. You engage in redundancy. You *resay* and *rearticulate* and *retell* and...

You get the picture, right? Can I stop now?

My point is Thoreau's: “**Simplify, simplify.**” Never use 10 words when two would do, and never use five sentences when *one* will do. When revising, scour your prose for similar-sounding sentences, and edit out any redundancies you find, if only to avoid wasting your readers' time with needless repetition.

And now, I think I've said enough.

BONUS ROUND: Get a Good Editor

We know it can be difficult to spot areas of over-description in your prose—especially because it means being especially critical of your own writing. That's why it's important to get a second pair of eyes on your story, preferably someone who can be objective about your work and critique you where necessary.

This can be a friend, family member, or peer writer, but if you want a professional eye on your writing, be sure to check out our guide to professional editing services: [How to Find an Editor for Your Book with Step-by-Step Instructions](#). This super-handy walkthrough will teach you everything you need to know about finding the right editor—at the right price—for your project.