

Style and Grammar Tips for Fiction Writers

When writing fiction, traditional style and grammar rules may not apply. For example, a character's background or personality will influence the way he or she talks, even requiring grammar that is incorrect yet appropriate for that character. Still, there are some basic rules to improve your prose.

Use active voice rather than passive voice. In active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action of the verb on an object. In passive voice, the object appears as the subject of the sentence.

Passive: The wall was hit by my car.

Active: My car hit the wall.

The passive voice is unavoidable when you don't know who did the action.

Passive: My bike was stolen.

Avoid overusing "there is...," "it is...," etc.

Example: There was a man sneaking through the bushes.

Revision: A man sneaked through the bushes.

Use words like "said" or "asked" for speaker tags. Speaker tags are the words used to describe speech.

Remember that characters can't "sigh" or "smile" their dialogue.

Example: "I can't come with you," she sighed.

Revision: "I can't come with you," she said. OR "I can't come with you," she said with a sigh. OR "I can't come with you." She sighed.

Use adverbs sparingly. Instead, rely on strong verbs to carry the action.

Example: "Stop that," he said angrily.

Revision: "Stop that." He glared at her.

Use specific language rather than vague language.

Example: The man was somewhat taller than any other she had seen.

Revision: At seven feet, Frankie towered over her.

Clarify consecutive and simultaneous actions. Consecutive actions occur one after another, while simultaneous events occur at the same time.

Example: Unlocking the car door, she started the engine. (She cannot unlock the car door at the same time as she starts the engine.)

Revision: She unlocked the car door and then started the engine.

Avoid dangling modifiers. When a clause introduces a sentence, it needs to have the same subject as the sentence itself.

Example: Walking down the street, the houses were all run down. (This implies that the houses were walking down the street.)

Revision: Walking down the street, I noticed that the houses were all run down.

Some Grammar Websites

- *Grammar Girl:* A friendly guide to grammar (www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl).
- *Purdue Online Writing Lab:* A site to learn rules of grammar and usage (owl.english.psu.edu).
- *Grammarist:* Tips to correct your grammar (<http://grammarist.com>).