

Delete Unnecessary Words

An important editing step that often is overlooked or carelessly done is the deletion of unnecessary words.

Make your words count. Each word should add vitality to its sentence.

Let's rewrite that sentence: Deletion of unnecessary words is often carelessly overlooked.

Has the meaning changed? No, but the writer has pared nine useless words, allowing a more concise delivery of the same idea. So what? you might ask. Doesn't a fatter book command a greater price? Yes, it does in some cases, but do you want the "fat" to be what adds pages to your book? Won't readers be better served and more appreciative when a book contains concise, well-crafted writing? I know editors will be.

Understand, this doesn't mean to aim at short, barely expressive writing. Perhaps your style produces long, involved sentences and extended, descriptive passages. By all means, stick to whatever style works best for you. But make your words count. Each word should add vitality to its sentence; each sentence should support some phase of your story, whether it be plot, character development, locale, etc.

Look at your scene as though you are painting a room. A painter (author) considers what color to use in reference not only to the room itself (story structure), but also to the home's overall color scheme (plot). Properly chosen implements (characters) determine the application (texture) of the paint. A touch of other colors planned for trim or furnishings can add contrast and highlights (conflict).

After the painter has applied a first coat of paint (draft), the second and third coats (story revisions and editing) cover blemishes and increase the beauty and strength of the finished product. Touchups (bridge sentences or scenes) correct spots where the paint hasn't blended well. Then what happens? Cleanup (final editing). Drips, spatters, and errant brush strokes (excess words!) need sanded, scraped, and wiped with paint remover (deleted). The painter has produced a clean, polished, beautiful job—one in which to take pride.

Authors have an advantage over painters: extraneous words can be removed at any point. For some, it's easiest to do as they write; others do it in sections or at story completion. Whichever method works for you, here are some areas to consider for change or deletion.

Words. Many words we use through habit can be deleted without changing the sentence's intended meaning. Here's a short list with corresponding examples.

Once you get the idea, you can search for other overused words peppered throughout your own writing.

1. "the" – can often be deleted

Example: The best way to capture the ideas that come to you throughout the day is to jot them down in the notebook you keep in your pocket. (Four "the"s indicate a dire need for editing. Every time you see "the," it should be scrutinized for possible deletion.)

Edited: Capture new ideas by jotting them down in your pocket notebook. ("throughout the day" is usually superfluous and can nearly always be deleted.)

2. "that" – can often be deleted

Example: Remember that you can use dialogue to show that the character has developed.

Edited: Remember, dialogue can show character development.

3. "now," "well," "so," "also" – These tend to be introductory words. You can use them in dialogue, if you wish, but sparingly; and use them rarely in narrative or exposition.

Example: Now he knew what to do, because he had also figured out their motives.

Edited: He knew what to do, because he had figured out their motives.

4. "seem" – In most instances, write what really happens, not what "seems" to.

Example: Her breath seemed to catch in her throat.

Edited: Her breath caught in her throat.

5. "still" – can often be deleted

Example: No matter what happened, he still wanted to go home.

Edited: No matter what happened, he wanted to go home.

6. "located" – can often be deleted

Example: The library was located at the corner of Johnson and Main Streets.

Edited: The library was at the corner of Johnson and Main Streets.

The list goes on and on with "of," "to," and "and" making an appearance, too. When you discover you are overusing extraneous words, make your own list. When your manuscript is complete, use the Search feature with each word on your list and decide which actions will improve your story.

In a lighter vein, check out these oxymorons (phrases of two contradictory words):

Death benefits
Freezer burn
Genuine imitation
Light heavyweight
Natural additives
Original copy
Plastic glasses
Pretty ugly

And two of my favorites:
Nonworking mother
Tax return

Good luck with your story!

The above segment is an excerpt from *Dunne With Editing: A Last Look At Your Manuscript* by Nann Dunne. Learn additional helpful suggestions to improve your writing. Available at <http://www.nanndunnebooks.com>.