

Magic 25

Words and phrases that should be eliminated from a manuscript as much as possible.

ly (ly words are usually adverbs. I love what Stephen King said: “I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs.” Words such as family are fine. But to say I was really hungry, that should be rewritten.)

! (Most traditional publishers allow one exclamation point in a 100,000-word manuscript.)

that (In most cases, “that” is a useless word. To see if “that” is useless, read the sentence aloud without it. If the sentence makes sense without the word, delete it.)

was

were

are

to be (These four are “to be” verbs and should be eliminated because they are: 1. passive 2. often indicate telling instead of showing. However, each can be a “state of being” verb. For instance, it’s okay to say, “The grass was green before the drought.”)

ing (An “ing” verb with a “to be” usually indicates progressive tense, action which is happening [see what I did there] 24 / 7. In most cases, the simple past is best. For example, you don’t want to write, I was going to the store. Instead, you should write, I went to the store.)

would (Most people don’t know how to use this verb. They write, I would do this when they should write, I will do this. Take a look to see if you have properly used this verb.)

so

very

just

some

quite (These five most often are useless qualifiers—unnecessary modifiers. For instance, She was so pretty. Why not say She was gorgeous. Or I’m very hungry. Either say, I’m hungry or I’m ravished. See what’s going on here? These are usually useless and often are an indication that there’s a better way to say it.)

once (Useless word often seen as “once again.” The only time you should use the word is when you want to indicate that something happened one time.)

began

start (With both these words, if you show the beginning of the action, you must either interrupt it or show the completion. For instance, if you write, I began to walk around the room, you need to show someone trip you or that you stopped walking around the room. Otherwise, write I walked around the room.)

always

never (These two are absolutes. You can't write I'm always on time because if you have been late once in your life, you've not always been on time. Perfect is another absolute to check.)

who (I look for this to make sure the writer has properly used "who" and "whom".)

as (Often used to show one action while another is taking place. Because we typically write in a linear fashion in fiction, "as" can be eliminated most of the time to create two sentences or insert "and" in place of the word "as".)

down

up (These directions can be useless words at times. For instance, I kneeled down. You can't kneel any other way. Or I sat down next to my wife. It's better to write I sat next to my wife.)

and

but (These two words are conjunctions and I look for them to check for run-on sentences. Check your sentences to see if you can split them into two. Also, "and" often is used in a series, such as I bought a chai latte, a muffin, and a hot tea at Starbucks. Make sure you insert the comma before "and" in a book. Periodicals and blogs, however, do not require what is called the serial, or Oxford, comma.)

BONUS

OK (Should be okay in a manuscript.)

Now that I've hit you with a fire hose. Take a deep breath. Don't blindly delete all these words. In all cases, check to see if you have properly used the word, or see if there is a better way to write it.