

Terrible 30

Words / phrases that should be eliminated as much as possible. These are not listed in order of importance, but each should be reviewed in your manuscript.

ly

(Words that end with LY are usually adverbs. Words such as family are not. I love what Stephen King said: “I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs.” Instead of writing I was really hungry, rewrite to show instead of telling. Examples: I was ravished. Or better yet, I ran a hand over my abdomen and doubled over, the pain more than I could bear.)

had

(Almost as bad as the “to be” verbs mentioned later. Usually an indication of telling. Example: He had an omelet, home fries, and toast for breakfast. That’s telling. Show us. He ate ... is better. He devoured ... shows better action.)

it was

(Be mindful of starting sentences with this construction. “It” is a generic pronoun and “was” is typically a passive verb. Together they indicate telling instead of showing. Also, when starting a sentence with “it,” make sure the word has referred to the last thing in the previous sentence. When “it” refers to something later in the same sentence, the reader has no clue what the word is referring to.)

that

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

they

(I often see this pronoun used to refer to people or a person, but without regard to reference. Be clear of your reference when using this word.)

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. Example: The grass was green before the drought.)

OK

(Should be written “okay” in a manuscript.)

ing

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

OK

(Should be written “okay” in a manuscript.)

so**very****just****some****quite****really**

(These are often useless qualifiers—unnecessary modifiers. Example: She was so pretty. Why not write She was gorgeous. Another example—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 there’s a better way to say it.)

once

(Useless word often seen in the phrase “once again.” Only use “once” when writing about something that 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****perfect****never**

(These 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.)

who

(When I edit or coach, I look for this word to make sure the writer has correctly used “who” and “whom.” Here is a trick to determine if you should use who or whom: Ask if the answer to the question would be “he” or “him.” Examples: If you ask, “Who (or whom) do you love?” The answer is “I love him.” Him ends with an “m,” so use whom. If you ask, “Who (or whom) stepped on my toes?” The answer is “He stepped on my toes.” There’s no “m,” so use who. Also, in regard to

using “who,” when referring to a person, use “who” not “that.” Example: Wendy is the one who makes coffee at our house each morning.)

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.” The correct way to show simultaneous action: “We forgot in the excitement.” I said, smacking my forehead or Smacking my forehead, I said, “We forgot in the excitement.”)

down

up

(These directions can be useless words at times. Example: 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. Any time you use a directional word, check each usage to determine if you need to word.)

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, when “and” is used in a series, insert the comma before “and” in a manuscript. Example: I bought a chai latte, muffin, and gift card at Starbucks. Periodicals and blogs do not require what is called the serial, or Oxford, comma.)

BONUS

!

(Most traditional publishers I have worked with allow one exclamation point in a 100,000-word manuscript.)

Filtering words

(heard, saw, felt, looked—are the ones I see the most often. Filtering means you have come out of a person’s POV to tell the reader something. Example: Lydia saw the man walk across the street. Just write: The man walked across the street. Also, filter words that hinder the deep POV are “thought,” “remembered,” “wondered,” and “realized.” Last, but not least, don’t use “felt” or “feel” to describe a feeling.)

Dialogue tags

(Two things about dialogue tags. 1. Avoid using wheezed, gasped, laughed, sighed, hissed, chortled, frowned, giggled, choked, snorted, sneered, smiled in this manner: “Dialogue,” he frowned. Some of these are an action so you write them as an action. Example: “Dialogue.” He frowned. 2. Put using tone in a dialogue tag, place the tag before the dialogue so we can read it in the proper tone. Example: Her voice rose to a shriek with each word. “I. Hate. You.”)

More unnecessary words

(Shrugged his shoulders. Can't shrug anything else. 😊 Likewise, nodded his head or tears flowed from his eyes are two common phrases I often see. Delete his head and from his eyes, respectively.)

Now that I've hit you with a fire hose. Take a deep breath. Don't blindly delete or change 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 the sentence. And, yes, we do see these words in print used the way I have stated that they shouldn't be. To me, these words appear because of lazy writing and / or poor editing. Or maybe the writer and editor didn't know. But now you do!