

Common Mistakes of New Writers

Here are some common mistakes new writers often make:

1. **Unrealistic expectations.** I love to sing, and my voice sounds delightful when I'm alone in my car with the radio blaring. But I wouldn't dream of asking someone to *pay* to hear me sing. I have never received any voice training, I've never worked with a professional, I've never had my voice critiqued by a pro. And yet new writers, with no professional training, are often perplexed when they receive rejection letters from publishing houses. If you expect a publisher (or a reader) to *buy* what you write, you need to take the time to learn how to do it right.

2. **Flowery writing.** Novice writers tend to use big words when smaller ones would be more easily understood. A simple word, or a familiar one with impact, is usually a better choice.

3. **Overuse of adjectives.** Many new writers sometimes use flamboyant (or too many) adjectives. Readers don't need to know that the sofa was a six-foot-long wing-backed-style love seat with a black-and-yellow-checked 1950s-pattern cut from coarse Kentucky linen. Conversely, other new writers create page after page of dialogue with no descriptions at all.

4. **Overuse of adverbs.** Search your manuscript for words ending in "-ly." You'll probably find a plethora of them, most of which can be deleted. A good, strong verb is always preferred over a weak verb with an adjective. Replacing verb phrases like "he walked slowly" with action verbs like "he crawled" or "he slithered" or "he strode" is more efficient and more descriptive.

5. **Long sentences and paragraphs.** Novice writers often pack too much into a single sentence, producing run-ons or long, confusing structures the reader can't follow. Readers (and publishers) like to see "white space" on a page, not one big paragraph taking up the whole page.

6. **Odd or missing attributions.** Some new writers tend to omit dialogue tags, leaving the reader to wonder who is speaking. Others fail to vary the "he said" format. While *said* is virtually invisible when used sparingly, alternatives may be used sparingly. Don't resort to tags that are flowery (like "he intoned") when "he said" will do. Beware of impossible attributions, such as a line of dialogue followed by a comma and "he choked" or some other action that cannot be performed while speaking. Narrative descriptions, such as "He took a bite of apple pie," are even better. These should be separated from dialogue by a period, not a comma.

7. **Transitions.** Novice writers sometimes omit details that allow readers to go from sentence to sentence and follow the action. Don't give your readers "literary whiplash" by jumping from one time, place, or point of view too often or too suddenly.

8. **Repetition.** Obscure words should not be used more than once or twice in an entire book. Even regular words should not be repeated several times on one page. Vary sentence beginnings.

9. **Point of View.** Novice fiction writers often switch point of view without a clearly understood purpose for doing so or a "scene break." When point-of-view switches are made, they

are often done without indication early on in the new scene of who the new POV character is or a description of the new setting.

10. **Mechanics.** New writers often neglect, or are unaware of, correct punctuation, usage, grammar, and spelling rules. Nothing brands a new writer as an “amateur” more quickly. Use the industry-standard dictionary and style guide for the type of writing you’re doing.

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