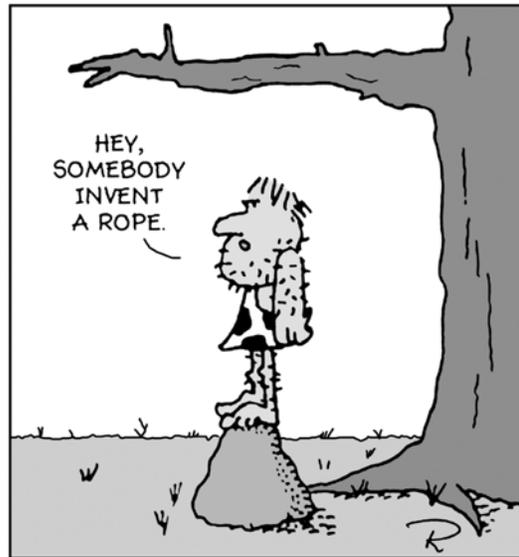


B.C. WRITER

BY RAY RHAMEY



As if rejection weren't enough.

Sample chapters from *Flogging the Quill, Crafting a Novel that Sells*

- It's harsh out there
- Writing for effect
- Make it experiential to characterize (description)
- Tags: a game some writers shouldn't play (dialogue)
- Cook up some tasty beats (dialogue)
- When to tell, how to show
- Adverbs: good? Bad? Yes



## It's harsh out there

**Today's publishing climate is tougher** than ever. To get an agent, your work has to stand out from hundreds and hundreds of submissions. For your agent to get you a book contract, your novel has to cut through hundreds more.

Your book has to be polished, diamond-sharp, and a rarity—you not only have to have professional-caliber writing and a great story, your novel needs to kick-start with compelling tension.

### **You only have seconds in an agent's hands**

Established authors can ease into a story with description and mood (and even they aren't safe in the bookstore), but unpublished writers face a very different reality—agents suffering through heaps of submissions and looking for reasons to reject while at the same time hoping for a story worth reading.

On her blog, *Agent in the Middle*, 20-year veteran agent Lori Perkins said this:

Your novel has to grab me by the first page, which is why we can reject you on one page.

"I know most of what I need to know about a writer's chops in about a line and half."

Dan Conaway, literary agent,  
Writers House

The odds are excellent that an agent will see all the reasons she needs for passing—or for reading more—on your first manuscript page. Just like agents and editors who see rivers of submissions, as a result of seeing hundreds of opening pages for novels, I can tell you that the first page typically foreshadows what’s to come, story-wise and writing-wise. One quick skim usually provides all the reason I need to decide whether I will turn the page or decline the opportunity.

Often I see competent writing that fails to connect because the writer doesn’t get what the novel’s opening *must* do to hook a reader. Frequently I find a gripping opening pages later—too late. Most often a bog of exposition or backstory—what one writer calls “throat-clearing”—drags the story to a halt.

### **You still only have seconds on an editor’s desk**

Let’s say you do land an agent, and the agent sends your story to an acquisitions editor. The same grim reality opens its maws—an audience of one with sharp, particular tastes who has an agenda that your story may or may not fit, who wants a great story but has a pile of submissions to go through, and for whom quickly finding a reason to pass is a good thing. One slip, and chomp, you’re gone.

### **You still only have seconds at the bookstore**

Okay, so your talent and work and luck pay off and your novel is published. Now it faces the cold, pragmatic reality of the bookstore. Sol Stein, a remarkable publisher/editor/author/playwright, writes in *Stein on Writing* of his observations in a bookstore.



“No [bookstore] browser went beyond page three. . .”

Sol Stein, publisher

In the fiction section, the most common pattern was for the browser to read the front flap of the book’s jacket and then go to page one. No browser went beyond page three before either taking the book to the cashier or putting it down and picking up another to sample.

What did those readers see in the novels they chose to purchase, and what did they fail to see in the rejects?

You know.

Ask yourself what readers buy novels for. Is it. . .

- Lush descriptions?
- Great dialogue?
- Fascinating characters?
- Deep themes?

Nope. Just one thing.

## Story

Those bookstore browsers—and the agent and editor before them—either saw signs of a story they wanted to read, or they did not. They either felt compelled to keep reading, or not. That quickly. You do it too, don't you?

It's not like when you ask a family member, or a friend, or even a critique group to read your new novel—they have to read your stuff.

No, in the real world, you have a page or two. And if it's that difficult with a bookstore browser who is on the hunt for a story to read, how tough do you think it is with a jaded, weary agent or a jaded, way-too-swamped acquisitions editor?

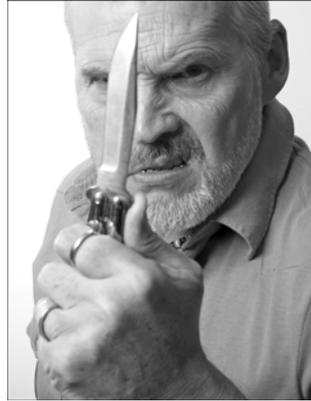
To move your book toward the cash register. . .or generate a request by an agent for the full manuscript. . .or make it to an editorial meeting by an acquisitions editor. . .you need to kick-start your story, sentence by sentence, on your opening pages.

“You can usually tell after a paragraph—a page, certainly—whether or not you're going to get hooked.”

Chuck Adams, Executive Editor  
Algonquin Books

## And then you have to keep pages turning

Beyond openings, this book tackles the art and craft that you need in order to focus every facet of your talent on compelling a reader to turn pages.



## Are you writing for effect?

**If you want me to turn your pages,** here's the effect I want your writing to have on me—I want it to trigger in me the sights and sounds and smells of what's happening. I don't want approximations, I want that *reality*. I want to experience the story, not just learn about what happens. And I want it to be effortless—I should be able to react without having to stop and think about the stimuli you put on a piece of paper. (That is not to say that good writing doesn't give you something to think about.)

*Writing for effect* is the core principle underlying my approach to creating an irresistible fiction narrative that immerses a reader in the experience of the story.

It's the lens through which I critique narrative in an edit and strive to view my own writing.

It's the objective that informs the coaching on storytelling, dialogue, description, and technique in this book.

It's knowing how to show and when to tell. It's why adverbs are often weak writing—and sometimes not.

It is the guiding light that can show you the way to a stronger story, and the searchlight that can illuminate shortcomings in your manuscript.

Failure to write for effect is why too many writers, especially beginning novelists, do little more than put information on the page and end up with little more than a report with a plot.

In storytelling, you're not writing to inform the reader—you deliver information, of course, but that's not the purpose—you're writing to *affect* the reader. To craft narrative that creates an *effect* in the reader's mind—the experience of the story.

### Stimulus/response

Maybe it's the psychology major in me, but I can't help but think of the stimulus/response paradigm. Pavlov taught dogs to expect food when he rang a bell, and thereafter the dogs salivated at the sound of that bell.

You, the writer, produce a stimulus. The reader provides the response, imagining a scene or an action or an emotion. Actually, there's a reader element involved that a writer can't address—the reader's personal filters and baggage. A dog not trained to associate feeding with a bell won't salivate at the sound of one. For readers, as an elementary example, the word “cat” has a different effect on a cat lover than it does on a cat hater. You can't control that, but you can still load your narrative gun with the best possible ammo.

In practice, the workings of stimulus/response aren't simple, but they are the keys to writing for effect, and understanding that can open the door to successful storytelling.

You begin a story with a single stimulus—a word. Here's one now:

Vladimir's

Most words can't do much by themselves, so you string more words into a sentence that forms a different stimulus.

Vladimir's blade cut Johnson's throat, and Vladimir smiled.

Change one or two words, and the effect is different.

Vladimir's blade sliced open Johnson's throat, and Vladimir smiled.

To my mind, *sliced open* is far more evocative than *cut*.

Another part of the effect here is to characterize Vladimir—for some reason, he enjoyed slicing open a man's throat. And this sentence raises story questions: Why did he slice the throat, and why did he smile? All that from just one sentence of nine words.

Although we're writing for effect, and the accumulating stimuli produce a dramatic portrayal of what's happening, it doesn't yet reach the level of de-

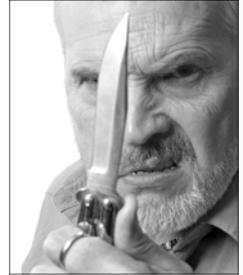
livering the experience of the story. The experience comes through the character.

Vladimir is the point-of-view character, but this narrative is objective so far, a camera's view. Novels provide a unique way to create an experience—*showing* what's happening in a character's mind.

Vladimir's blade sliced open Johnson's throat. The child-killer toppled, hands clutching his neck. Vladimir watched him writhe, and then become still. The bittersweet taste of vengeance filled Vladimir, and he smiled.

Your sentences accrue and, done well, coalesce into a greater stimulus—the story. The final result, the effect on your reader, begins with the word choices you make and how you put them together.

How you arrange words to affect your reader demands professional techniques aimed at maximizing the power of your narrative to create an experience for your reader. We'll dig into techniques that help you do just that.



“The light just came on. This is the best piece of advice on writing I’ve read in a long time.”

J.D. Fox, writer

## Description

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### Make it *experiential* to characterize

**The reader of a novel** wants the narrative to create a very specific effect: he wants to be taken away from the real world he sits in. He wants to feel and see and do things he would never do. Readers want to *experience* the world of the novel.

That’s your task: to create an experience. It is not to *tell* a story. It is to cause a specific reaction in your reader’s mind. A suspension of disbelief, a connection to the life of a character. Characters are the key to and core of creating an experience for the reader.

This relates to the old saw, “show, don’t tell.” *Telling* is the mere delivery of information. A newspaper does that. A novel should be delivering a character’s experience. (Note: I’ll italicize *telling* and *showing* whenever I’m referring to that craft aspect of creating a narrative.)

Description is a key element of every novel, every scene. Scenes need to be set (described) so the reader has a context within which to experience what the character experiences. It’s needed to show action, of course. In a novel, descriptions shouldn’t be simple photographs of what the character sees. Oh, they can be and often are, but snapshots don’t create an experience. They are *telling*, they are information, they are not emotion, they are not experience.

The best description happens from within the character’s point of view, colored by the character’s emotions, needs, beliefs, and desires.

It characterizes.

### **Describe from the inside, not the outside**

Here's description from a writer's sample where characterization could have happened but didn't. The writer describes Jimmy and his girlfriend this way:

Jimmy was high-school skinny, that lean, still-growing time when muscles are tight everywhere and the sinews are loose and respond quickly. He wasn't tall, only five seven, but she was only five three and they appeared to be the perfect couple.

I liked "high-school skinny," but these lines are clearly the author getting some exposition out of the way—we're taken out of the boy's head and made to feel distant from the scene. The phrase "they appeared to be the perfect couple" is clearly from another point of view entirely, since the boy can't see what they look like together. Not to mention a first-degree case of *telling*.

I know it's tough to describe a character when you're in his point of view, and you don't want to resort to the tired old idea of looking in a mirror, but there are ways to do it. For example:

Jimmy worried Kathy would think he was too skinny, which his mother said was just because he was still growing, all sinewy with long lean muscles. But he wasn't so worried about being only five foot seven—Kathy was maybe five three, tops, and he thought they made a perfect couple.

As you can see, this gives a picture of them but characterizes him as well, and it comes from inside the character, not from outside, from the author. The reader not only doesn't leave the character's head, she is drawn more deeply into it.

### **Experiential description of place**

When you "see" a place through a character's point of view, you can do two things at once: set the scene to give the reader the context in which things are happening, and show a character's personality.

Here's an example: a mailroom in a large corporation seen as a simple snapshot, the approach many writers take to description.

In a gray room with fluorescent lights, a rack of pigeonholes for sorting mail sat along one wall. Next to them stood a wheeled delivery cart, a desk with a computer on it, and a worn swivel chair.

Now let's describe that same setting in a way that characterizes a middle-aged man who works in the mailroom.

Jeff switched on the mailroom lights. The fluorescents glared at him the way they had for fifteen years, and the gray walls radiated depression. The rack of pigeonholes for sorting mail along one wall stared at him, each empty hole like his life. The delivery cart stood ready to cause the daily pain in his hip when he trudged through the offices, delivering mail to people who didn't see him, like he was furniture.

On his desk the computer waited to be turned on—no, they said “booted up,” didn't they—its programs lurking, waiting to trip him up again when he tried to send out a shipment. He sat in his beat-up swivel chair, and a small sense of comfort came with the way the worn cushions conformed to his body and it squeaked when he tilted back.

Just as the snapshot approach did, this experiential description gave you a picture of the room and what was in it, so it served the purpose of setting the scene. But it also defined Jeff's character.

The same room seen through another character's point of view has the same physical characteristics, but can be a very different place. Here's the room described through the point of view of Jinny, a twenty-something new employee.

Jinny burst through the mailroom door and was disappointed yet again to see Jeff already there. One of these days she'd beat him in and do the setup. He hadn't even turned on the computer yet. She reached past him, slumped as usual in that crummy old swivel chair with the ratty cushion—why didn't he requisition something decent?—and flicked on the computer. When break came and he went out for a smoke she'd surf her favorite blogs.

The gray walls under the soft fluorescent light soothed her headache. The racks of pigeonholes waited for her to fill

their mouths with the mail that helped the company function. The delivery cart stood ready—maybe today she'd ask Jeff if she could be the one that wheeled it through the cubicles, saying hi, meeting people. Even though she'd only been here a month, the mailroom felt like an old friend.

"Wow, it is amazing how each example is quite clearly a different place, yet actually the same!"

M.S. Jackson, writer

Same pigeonholes, same everything picture-wise, but very different characterization—that's experiential description.

Whenever we step into a room, we not only see what's in it, we react to it in ways that characterize us. Have your characters do the same, and color their perceptions with the result.

### **Experiential description of action**

Experiential description means that the exact same action, as experienced by two different characters, is a very different experience for each character and, thus, for the reader. First, the objective camera technique.

Morticia leaned forward and her nostrils flared. She sank her fangs into Frank's neck. Blood rushed into her mouth and dribbled down his neck. He moaned and writhed, but she pinned him to the wall and continued to drink his essence.

The thing is, characters aren't cameras. They're experiencing this action, not watching it happen. And their experience flavors the action with meaning. So here's this action from Morticia's point of view.

Morticia leaned forward. The scent of Frank's blood, pulsing just below the skin of his neck, aroused her. Her fangs lengthened and she sank them into a vein. The sweetness of blood washed over her tongue and poured down her throat. His moan aroused her further, and when he writhed within her grip, power rushed through her and she pinned him to the wall, drinking in the smell of his fear and relishing the rich taste of his essence.

Do you think Frank's experience of the very same action will feel the same as Morticia's? Hardly.

Frank shrank back when Morticia leaned forward, panic pounding in his mind. She was...smelling him? Oh, God, she

had fangs, and they grew as he watched. She struck and twin points of pain pierced his neck. Hot liquid trickled down—his blood? A moan crawled out of his throat and he writhed, pushing with all his strength to escape. As if he were a child, she jammed him against the wall with terrible power.

Now, I'm not claiming that the above examples are great writing—hey, I just pulled them out of the air. But I do think that the technique illustrated is valid—no, vital—to creating an experience for your reader. Describe, yes, but flavor the scene with how the character feels it, experiences it. Even a color can have meaning. Which of these gives you experience versus information?

Sheila's dress was blue.

Sheila's dress was the same sleazy blue Steve's mother had worn whenever she went out to get drunk.

I came across an elegant use of this technique in *The Silver Swan*, by Benjamin Black. A woman watches a man who could simply be described as lean and lanky, but the author helps us perceive him through her eyes in a way that characterizes both of them.

What a lovely loose way he had of walking, leaning down a little way to one side and then the other at each long, loping stride he took, his shoulders dipping in rhythm with his steps and his head sliding backwards and forwards gently on its tall stalk of neck, like the head of some marvelous, exotic wading bird.

Enough shown?

### **On the other hand**

There are no rules. I feel obliged to point out that, while I think fiction that utilizes experiential description in key passages is stronger and more engaging, it isn't the only way to deliver a fascinating story.

The reason I feel obligated to point this out is that as I was polishing this manuscript, I picked up Stephen King's *The Eyes of the Dragon*. Published in 1988, it's King doing his thing with the classic fairy tale—the good prince and the bad prince, the evil magician, dragons. . .

And Stephen tells the tale. His voice is the storyteller's voice, and once in a while he speaks directly to you. He's not rendering the experience of the

characters, and I'm distant from the story, much more of an observer than a participant.

Because of King's voice, and the fun of the tale, I'm having a great time. The distance from the story doesn't matter, it's fun because I have a gifted storyteller's voice whispering in my ear.

Just sayin'.

However, that is not to say that the same story, and the same characters, couldn't have been more powerful illustrations of how to be a person if they'd been written in a different way. That's the beauty of being a writer—you have an amazing amount of control over exactly what the reading experience will be: the reader's emotional involvement, her intellectual involvement, her takeaway.

It's your bus to drive, your road to take, just make the trip as good as you can.

“Even when it’s a ‘lesson’ that one has already applied, sometimes the style, manner, or direction of your advice light a bulb in my pointy little head and lead to improvement.”

Bernita, writer

## Dialogue

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### Tags: a game writers shouldn’t play

**Because each of us** has a lifetime of experience with talking, writing dialogue in a novel seems like it should be easy, and maybe it is for some writers. But for others it’s the weakest part of their narrative. Three common flaws I see in beginning work are:

- Botched use of dialogue tags
- Lack of effective action beats
- Explaining the dialogue instead of *showing* it happen

Here’s a snippet of dialogue guaranteed to make you flinch:

“Please don’t do that,” he articulated.

“What?” she interrogated.

Okay, perhaps that’s a touch over the top. But how many times have you seen dialogue tags like the following?

Melissa turned to Irving. “Why don’t you zip up your pants?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Air conditioning,” he replied.

What’s with “she asked” and “he replied”? The question mark clearly tells the reader that a question was asked, and the response is clearly a reply,

and the reader damn well knows what they were. Yet “she asked” and the ever-popular “he replied” clog thousands of pages like verbal cholesterol.

When it comes to dialogue tags, a couple of clichés should be applied:

1. Less is more.
2. KISS—Keep It Simple, Stupid

Tags can tangle dialogue and slow pace; their absence can smooth and accelerate. Over-explanatory tags (he huffed, she whimpered) create lazy writing; replacing them with action or description gives the words meaning and tone that involves the reader, creates pictures, and enhances emotional effect.

Rarely is there a need for a dialogue tag other than “said,” even with a question. For example, there’s no need to use “asked” or “interrogated” or “queried” if you write

Farnsworth said, “Where do you think the monster is hiding?”

The reader understands that Farnsworth has asked a question—that’s what question marks are for. To add tonality, use description and action, and remove the “said.” For example:

Farnsworth’s voice came from under the couch in a whispery hiss that ended with a sob. “Where do you think the monster is hiding?”

To illustrate minimizing dialogue tags in a scene, here’s an excerpt from my novel, *We the Enemy*. In the scene, Marion Smith-Taylor, the U.S. Attorney General, is calling her office from out of town. See what you think, tag-wise.

Time enough for one last hail-Mary call—she opened her cell phone and auto-dialed her office. Suzanne Fisher answered. “Ms. Smith-Taylor’s office, how may I help you?”

Marion pictured Suzanne, not in an office outfit but bundled up in her pale blue terry-cloth robe, blond hair tousled, fair cheeks flushed. If Marion had her druthers, Suzanne would be helping her to a tumbler of Scotch—but that would have to wait until she was home. “Hi, it’s me.”

“I was just thinking about you.”

That was one of the things Marion loved about Suzanne—no coy games, she just said how she felt. “Me, too. Listen, they’re about to get here. Anything on the Alliance from Joe Donovan or Sally Arnold?”

“No word.”

“Damn.” She’d been praying for better information on the Oregon situation before the meeting. But she wasn’t surprised; Joe and Sally had been less than helpful for months. Something had changed with them. “If you hear from them in the next hour, call.”

“I will.”

Damn. Damn-damn-damn.

Seven speeches from two characters and no dialogue tags. And I’ll bet you didn’t get lost.

Enough articulated?

### **What about “he thought?”—on using internal monologue**

A common way of indicating the thoughts of a character are to signal with “he thought” and then include the thought in italics or use quotes.

But italics can be hard to read, quotes can lead to confusing thoughts with dialogue, and writing “he thought” isn’t really necessary.

You can include a character’s thoughts as a part of the narrative via internal monologue. Very simply, it’s the thought expressed in the same person and tense as the rest of the narrative. For example, in this scene the protagonist, Jake, sees a woman being assaulted in an alley:

The woman staggered her attacker with a kick to his leg. He slapped her, and then had to dodge a knee aimed at his crotch. Girl had guts. Jake sighed, stepped into the alley, and drew his nine-millimeter Glock from the holster under his windbreaker.

“Girl had guts” is a snippet of internal monologue showing Jake’s thought. It’s a lot quicker and cleaner than this:

Jake thought, *the girl has guts.*

Here's a passage with a couple of instances of internal monologue from the woman who was being attacked. This happens after Jake intervenes and stops the attack. We're now in her point of view.

Jewel settled herself down. Her mama had always said, "In this world, you got to be hard. Ain't nobody there for you but you." Hallelujah, Mama.

She'd been lucky today. She felt compelled to thank the guy, even if he was white—Mama'd taught her manners, too. Jewel hurried after him, trying to arrange her torn top into decent coverage, but one tit or the other kept falling out. Great, now she had to walk down Michigan Avenue with her boobs hanging out. And wouldn't they love it back at the office.

Here, "Hallelujah, Mama" is internal monologue. And so is

Great, now she had to walk down Michigan Avenue with her boobs hanging out. And wouldn't they love it back at the office.

In *Self-editing for Fiction Writers*, authors Renni Browne and Dave King give a good example of this technique, which they call "interior monologue."

Big Jim Billups fondled the .38 in his pocket, waddled over to the back of his truck, and spat. Could've stopped the whole damn thing last night—they don't carry no guns. What was the use of doing a job if you didn't do a good one? He rocked, shifting his weight from one leg to another and spat again. The sound of the marchers was closer now. Soon it would be time.

As Browne and King point out, readers move easily from Big Jim's actions to his thoughts and back again without being aware of what they're doing. Renni and Dave's chapter on interior monologue gives excellent guidelines on the artful use of the technique.

"I've read quite a few books on fiction writing, but have never seen this (absolutely vital) piece of nuts-and-bolts advice."

"Niteowl," a Canadian writer

## Dialogue

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### Cook up some tasty beats

**Naked dialogue**, just the speeches all by themselves, does only part of the job of delivering the experience of a scene. In life, and in fiction, dialogue doesn't happen in a vacuum—it happens in the midst of movement, body language, pauses for thought, and more. To bring dialogue to life, create “beats”—action interwoven with dialogue (including thought as action)—to invisibly accomplish a number of vital storytelling tasks, including:

- Advancing the story
- Increasing tension
- Illuminating character
- Identifying speakers without having to use dialogue tags
- Adding meaning to speeches that wouldn't otherwise be there
- Breaking up long strings of quotations to avoid a staccato effect and to create a pleasing rhythm
- Creating pictures in the reader's mind of what's going on (*Constructive “picture” to include time [pace], scents, sensations, and sounds as well as action and physical description.*)

Here's an example of a beat that does one of those things...and yet is a waste of words. The scene is from a published novelist's first draft of a new story: a man and a woman sit at a table in a café, talking about a woman (his wife/her friend) who has been missing for over a week. In the course of the conversation in the woman's point of view, this happens:

A man from the next table asked to borrow the extra chair to my right. As I nodded, Robert said, “I have not told you everything.”

“What?”

“Her car was found abandoned in Stewart State Park.”

“Oh my God! When? How long after...”

The solo beat at the beginning did inject action into the scene...but it had nothing to do with story—it was “activity,” not storytelling action. It didn’t bear on the subject of the conversation, nor the people talking. It had no impact on the scene.

The dialogue that follows it suffers due to a lack of beats. How about a little body language when Robert confesses he hasn’t told his listener everything? Or a reaction when the narrator learns fraught information?

Robert shifted his gaze away from me. “I have not told you everything.”

How like the man to withhold information. “What?”

“Her car was found abandoned in Stewart State Park.”

“Oh my God!” Fear for my missing friend jolted through me. “When? How long after...”

Here’s what each of those beats accomplished:

- The first told you who was speaking and gave character and nuance to his speech.
- The second is internal monologue that adds characterization for both people.
- The last one injects emotion and more characterization.

Let’s beat up some more dialogue. Here’s part of a scene stripped naked, all of the beats removed. In this scene, KB, a law enforcement officer, reports to her superior, and she expects him to praise her for what she’d done the day before.

Captain Berman’s door was open, as usual. KB tapped on the doorframe and went in.

“Take a seat, Lieutenant. So, you think you found a subject of interest.”

“Yessir!”

“Did you see it with the thermal imaging device?”

“I did, sir.”

“Did you record it?”

“Ah, no, sir.”

“I see. You say it changed appearance on three occasions?”

“From a youngish woman to an older woman, then to a hick, then to a girl. Yessir.”

“Did any of your team see these apparitions?”

“Schultz saw it come in. Sanchez saw it on the stairs, and Bailey saw it come out.”

“After receiving your email, I asked your team for their input. Schultz didn’t see a face.”

“No, ah, he didn’t get a good look. But he saw the glow in the camera.”

“I see. No one else saw the older woman?”

“Not before she, uh, changed into a farmer.”

You learn things, but there’s no tension, no depth, you can’t see a damn thing, and there’s no rhythm—it’s like a radio machine-gunning words at you. Now here’s the full narrative—note one other thing while you’re at it: there’s not a single use of “said” or “asked” or any other dialogue tag in this narrative.

Captain Berman’s door was open, as usual. His white-haired head was bent over a stack of paperwork, as usual. Adrenaline pumped her up, and she tapped on the doorframe and went in. The office was hot, as usual; the radiator must have been cranked all the way open.

He looked up and nodded. No smile. “Take a seat, Lieutenant.”

The old fart was old-fashioned and formal, so maybe he was not gonna come right out with her attaboy. Sitting, she told herself to be patient, something that never came easily.

He signed a piece of paper, placed it in an out box, leaned back, laced his fingers over his belly, and gazed at her. “So, you think you found a subject of interest.”

She smiled. “Yessir!”

“Did you see it with the thermal imaging device?”

Inside, she smirked at his fussy way of talking. “I did, sir.”

“Did you record it?”

Oh, shit. She’d been too excited. “Ah, no, sir.”

“I see.” He leaned forward and studied a printout of her email. “You say it changed appearance on three occasions?”

“From a youngish woman to an older woman, then to a hick, then to a girl. Yessir.”

“Did any of your team see these apparitions?”

Couldn’t the old idiot read? “Schultz saw it come in. Sanchez saw it on the stairs, and Bailey saw it come out.”

“After receiving your email, I asked your team for their input.” He picked up a printout. “Schultz didn’t see a face.”

“No, ah, he didn’t get a good look.” Why did she feel like she was on trial? “But he saw the glow in the camera.”

“I see.” He read more. “No one else saw the older woman?”

“Not before she, uh, changed into a farmer.”

The beats give pace to the conversation and much, much more. Through the beats you experienced:

- His chilly greeting when she expects warmth, and then his dawdling even though she is anxious (*finishing with papers, leaning back, lacing his fingers*)
- Her smugness (*the old fart was old-fashioned*)
- Her eagerness (*she smiled*)
- Her low opinion of him (*smirked at his fussy way of speaking to her*)
- Her realization of a mistake she’s made (*too excited to record the suspect*)
- His calm, steady approach (*leaned forward and studied a printout*)
- More of her disrespect (*couldn’t the old idiot read?*)
- His steady pursuit (*he picked up a printout and read it*)
- Her increasing anxiety (*was she on trial here?*)

You get a sense of escalating tension in KB. The scene continues to build from here, and ends with her feeling defeated, angry, and near tears when she’d begun the scene expecting praise. And it is the beats that take you there.

Not every line gets a beat—that’ll wear a reader out. Every beat is tied to characterization and/or giving a picture of what is going on. The beats utilize

physical action and internal monologue (*Couldn't the old idiot read?*) to add depth and context to the spoken words.

The beats help pace the exchange, creating pauses (*signed a piece of paper, placed it in an out box, leaned back, laced...*) and emphasis (*reading from something, etc.*). Although there are no dialogue tags, you always know who's speaking and how they deliver their speeches.

"I've read a lot of writing books and don't know of any that covered this subject as well as you did."

Ed Richbourg, writer

“While it’d be crazy to suggest that a writer’s performance in the ‘show don’t tell’ drill is what separates amateurs from Olympians, there’s no doubt that internalizing Ray’s wonderful encapsulation of the principle will improve the chances of a reader (like this grumpy editor, say) reading more than a single paragraph of your manuscript before tossing it on the scrap-heap.”

Mad Max Perkins, litblogger  
(aka Dan Conaway, Writers House literary agent,  
formerly executive editor at Penguin Putnam)

## Technique

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### When to tell, how to show

**In a recent edit**, I pointed out instances where I felt my client was *telling* versus *showing*. Even though I included examples of ways to show what she had told, she wrote to me and said, “I’m not sure I know how to ‘show’ rather than ‘tell.’”

I can understand why. After all, we use the *telling* mode all the time in conversations with friends, and it works.

“I was really surprised.”

“I was so pissed.”

“I was incredibly happy.”

#### When to tell

There are times in a novel when *telling* is the right thing to do. It’s when you need to summarize an event because to create a scene for it would be wrong in terms of pace, tension, etc. A common example is when you’ve shown an event in an earlier scene and then the story comes to a place where your character needs to pass along what happened to another character. Rather than drag your reader blow by blow through something she already knows, you just summarize:

April told May how June had told Julie where to shove her opinion.

That's a necessary and effective use of *telling*.

There are other times when it's the best thing to do. For example, when what needs to happen is so mundane that to waste words on it is to waste words. For example, a character is talking on his cell phone. When he finishes the conversation, you could show this:

Bob pressed the little blue phone icon on his cell-phone keypad to end the call.

Truly, that wasn't needed and smacks of overwriting. Instead:

Bob ended the call.

The reader can easily imagine ending a call with a cell phone if they've ever used one, and even if they haven't used one, they've seen it on television.

So what's so bad about a lot of *telling* in a novel? You "tell" a story, right? Not really. In a novel you *dramatize with scenes*. When you're writing for effect, you craft words that create a very specific result in the reader's mind, a vital sense of *what is happening*. You can only do that through *showing*.

Your readers want what they read to trigger in them the sights and sounds and smells of what's happening in the story. They don't want approximations, they don't want a report, they want to experience the story's reality.

## How to show

You spot *telling* by looking for declarative sentences that tell the reader something. The verb "was" is often a sign of a telling statement.

*Showing* is using behavior (action, speech, thoughts) to illustrate or dramatize what the character is feeling/doing.

Here are looks at *telling* versus *showing* that come from actual writing samples.

The scene: Anna is beat from a long, bad day at work and now she's spent hours at the hospital with her father, who has been unconscious for days. You want to give the reader Anna's physical and emotional condition. This author wrote:

Anna was physically and mentally exhausted.

Sure, you get information. You have an intellectual understanding of her condition. But you have no *feeling* for what Anna feels like, do you? To show that Anna is physically and mentally exhausted, you could write this:

All Anna wanted to do was crawl into bed and go to sleep.  
But first she would cry. She didn't think she could be calm  
and composed for another minute.

The scene continues: Anna's father suddenly wakes and thrashes around wildly, gasping, making monitors go wild. You want to give the reader Anna's reaction. The author *told* us this:

Anna was frightened.

She could have *shown* us with:

Oh, God, what was happening? "Dad?" Why didn't he respond? "Nurse, do something!"

Yes, it takes more words, but remember that here you're not trying to inform the reader but to deliver an experience.

As you go through your manuscript, whenever you come across a "was-type" declarative sentence that simply delivers information rather than shows behavior, you probably have an instance of *telling*.

Your task then is to visualize the character in that state or situation. See the movie. As the author, you can also "hear" thoughts. Then *show* the reader the thinking or speaking or moving in a way that illustrates what the reader needs to know.

Another example, one that deals with the use of adverbs.

*Telling:* He stabbed the man furiously.

See how an adverb tells rather than shows?

*Showing:* He plunged the dagger into the man's chest again and again and again, screaming "Die!" each time the blade stabbed into flesh.

One more example. Jesse has been working for hours under the Texas sun. We need to let the reader know how he feels.

*Telling:* Jesse was very hot.

Seriously, I see descriptions like that in manuscripts all the time. How about this?

*Showing:* Jesse felt like an overcooked chicken, his meat damn near ready to fall off his bones.

Now, that's *hot*. Another thing I often see is where a writer does a good job of *showing*, but then feels compelled to add an explanation (*telling*). From a recent edit:

He wrenched her from the quicksand with a last huge pull and fell back onto the ground, panting as if he'd just won a wrestling match, temporarily drained by the supreme effort.

For my money, “as if he'd just won a wrestling match, temporarily drained by the supreme effort” has already been shown by his panting and the effort he put into the rescue, so it's redundant and repetitive. I would delete it.

Boiled down to essentials:

- *Telling* is dispensing information.
- *Showing* is evoking experience.

With each word and phrase you write, slip into reader mode and see what the effect is: is it just informing you, or bringing to life what the character experiences?

“The most understandable and then applicable example I have seen.”

Patti Tucker  
English instructor  
Pennsylvania State University

“Instead of just theory, your ‘rules in action’ method gets the message across clearly and concisely.”

Nienke Hinton, writer

## Words

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### Adverbs: good? Bad? Yes.

**Here’s a simple-minded** example of one of the reasons adverbs can be the bane of writing for effect. This is fundamental stuff, and I don’t mean to insult you...I just want to contrast *effect* to *info*. A story starts with this:

Jimmy walked slowly across the cluttered room.

Simple information. I see, fuzzily, a guy walking. Not very fast (but I can’t really picture it). There’s stuff in the room (but who knows what).

The effect? Not much. No clear picture comes to mind. First thing to do: ditch the verb/adverb combo and choose a verb that evokes a picture, at the least, and at best characterizes the action. If, for example, your story is suspense, then how about...

Jimmy crept across the cluttered room.

Better. Here are other possibilities, depending on the story:

- In a fight scene, Jimmy would have *lunged* across the room.
- If Jimmy is a dancer, then he *glided*.
- Make Jimmy a burglar and he *skulked*.
- If Jimmy is in no hurry, then he *ambled*.
- If Jimmy is in a hurry, then he *dashed*.
- If Jimmy has been over-served at a bar, then he *weaved*. Or maybe he *tottered*, or *staggered*, or *lurched*, or, my personal favorite, *sloshed*.

Each of those verbs evokes a picture of Jimmy's body moving in specific ways. They are "visual" verbs that created a specific effect in your mind.

Stimulus > response.

There's another bit of lazy writing in the example sentence—the adjective "cluttered." It did nothing to create a picture. At the very least, we should see what the room was cluttered with, e.g.:

Jimmy crept across a room cluttered with shrunken heads.

Ooooo. See how specificity stirs up story questions? Don't you want more? What about the room? Is it dark? Any smells? Sounds? Is anyone else there? What about characterization? Put on Jimmy's skin and...

He was glad that the light of his candle was dim—all those tiny faces staring up at him were entirely too creepy. He set a foot down and winced at a crunch. He froze, listening for sounds of renewed pursuit. But only the scurrying of rats troubled the air, musty with the dust of the dead.

Rats?

Oh, fine.

Let's get back to adverbs. There's a reason adverbs rob you of effect.

### **Adverbs are *telling***

I believe that adverbs that modify action verbs are merely a form of *telling*. They are abstractions of action, pallid substitutes for the real thing, mere stand-ins. As a result, they rarely give the reader much of an experience. For example, one of my clients wrote,

She grinned mischievously.

Now, the average reader would take that in, plug in some sort of vague image, keep on rolling and never realize she had been cheated—but she was. There's a much more lively and concrete picture to be created in the reader's mind. For example:

She grinned, mischief sparking in her eyes.

In the original, because you have to interpret "mischievously" (what, exactly, is that?) the effect is to evoke an unsure image of a grin. In the second,

you see a face in action: lips curve, you see a grin, you see eyes, you see playful activity behind those eyes. All that from four extra words chosen for effect. Or, hey, what about something like this...

She grinned like a fox that had just found the keys to the henhouse.

The third example goes beyond word choice to tap into meaning and characterization beyond a simple visual.

### **Watch out for adverbs in dialogue tags**

Many writers use adverbs to explain dialogue rather than show how the dialogue is delivered. For example:

“This is my dialogue,” he said hesitantly.

That’s lazy use of an adverb. You could say something like. . .

He hesitated, then said, “This is my dialogue.”

But that’s not precisely what “said hesitantly” means, is it? There would be a hesitation in there somewhere. Wouldn’t it be more effective if we *dramatized* the hesitation so the reader experienced it rather than read about it? For instance, let’s *show* it this way:

“This. . .” He swallowed and glanced at her face. “. . . is my dialogue.”

Go on an adverb hunt and replace them with the action they only hint at and you’ll be writing for effect.

### **But not all adverbs are bad guys**

I was reviewing one of my manuscripts the other day and spotted, gasp, an adverb. Here’s the sentence:

She saw Murphy, like a big, round boulder parting a stream of girly secretaries cramming in a buzz of noontime shopping—except this boulder stared blatantly at their bobbing chests as they passed.

“Stared blatantly?” Damn. Another case of making an adverb try to do the work of real description. To be fair, this was from my first novel, written several years ago, on the lower slopes of my learning curve.

In this case the answer lay, as usual, in the verb. I swapped out “stared blatantly” for “leered.” Much better, giving a clear picture with fewer words. While I was at it, I tightened the sentence a little, too:

She saw Murphy, like a big, round boulder parting a stream of girly secretaries cramming in a buzz of noontime shopping, leering at their bobbing chests.

And then I came upon a pair of adverbs in one sentence...

He found Emmaline to be annoyingly cheerful but pleasingly proficient.

But these adverbs worked for me. Wait, I thought, how come they seem right when I’ve preached loud and long to avoid adverbs? Then I noticed that these modified *adjectives* rather than *verbs*.

### **Good cholesterol and bad cholesterol?**

There was a time when we believed that all cholesterol was bad. Then we learned that there is good cholesterol and bad cholesterol.

Well, I changed my position that all adverbs are suspect, if not bad. I think there are “good” adverbs, the ones that add just the right flavor to an adjective, enhancing it with a more complete shade of meaning.

Consider the sentence describing Emmaline. Could I have achieved what I wanted, which was to give insight into one character’s feeling and attitudes toward another, without the adverbs?

He found Emmaline to be cheerful but proficient.

Nope. I’ve lost how the viewpoint character feels about Emmaline’s personality.

I went on a search for other adverbs (using Microsoft Word’s Find tool to locate “ly” in words).

Her fair cheeks fetchingly reddened by the cold, she looked no older than a teenager.

Yep, for me this works as well. It would have been okay to write. . .

Her fair cheeks reddened by the cold, she looked no older than a teenager.

. . .and you would have gotten a picture. But take “fetchingly” out and you lose the point-of-view character’s reaction to the girl’s cheeks. With the addition of the adverb to this adjective, you also get the character’s *experience*, i.e. his emotional reaction to the appearance he sees—fetching, attractive.

The pattern I was discovering seemed to be that adverbs are a positive addition when coupled to adjectives in order to add a point-of-view character’s nuance to what would otherwise be simple description. Another instance from the same manuscript:

He loved the Staffordshire blue-and-white rose pattern, beautifully detailed and botanically accurate right down to the thorns on the stems.

Take “beautifully” and “botanically” out of that sentence and I think it loses both meaning and flavor. Once more:

She changed her disguise to the queenly dignity of a white-haired society matron she’d met in Brussels.

Now, to “show” without the adverb would have required something like this:

She changed her disguise to that of a dignified, white-haired society matron with the manner of a queen, whom she’d met in Brussels.

Not as effective, is it?

Here’s an example taken from a client’s manuscript of a good adverb and bad adverb in the same sentence:

A young waiter with carefully streaked hair smiled suggestively at her.

For me, the first adverb expands the picture of the waiter’s hair by giving a hint of precision in the arrangement of the streaks, which tells me some-

thing about him as well. But I'd like to see the second adverb replaced with something more truly pictorial.

When you go hunting for adverbs, it's when they modify action that you should consider looking for a better verb to do the job, and when they amplify adjectives that you may find adverbs to be good cholesterol.

"I have read a lot about the craft of writing, but in my experience, no one has ever suggested the possibility of 'good' and 'bad' adverbs before. Thank you."

Lisa Miles, writer

“Most of what we get  
should never have left  
the writer’s hand.”

An acquisitions editor

## Words

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### Weed out weak, wasted & wrong words

**It’s a cliché**, it’s a truth: Every word counts. Reading and imagining and experiencing your narrative is a cumulative process. Meanings and usage add up, bit by bit, into gestalts that insert what’s happening to the character into your reader’s mind.

Weak words fail to deliver vivid pictures and actions—do you want that? Waste words take up space and slow the pace—and are among the first discouraging things a professional spots. Even worse, wrong words, words used in an incorrect way, confuse your reader and take them out of the story, not to mention costing you credibility and suspension of belief. Yet the manuscripts of novice writers are filled with just that. Here are some of the worst offenders.

#### **-ing**

Let’s start with half a word. “Inging,” over-use of the present participle, frequently slows pace and mashes meaning. More often than not, “ings” should be “eds” for crisp writing.

She was polishing her glasses as she searched for the right words.

I think this is passive and slow to create a picture in the reader’s mind. Much more to the point, and quicker to create a picture, is:

She polished her glasses as she searched for the right words.

Examples from samples I've received:

The rain was turning into snow as they drove. (*turned*)

Dylan was circling the cabin. (*circled*)

Joanne was hoping that she would get to see her family skiing. (*hoped, ski*)

Bob was getting more and more nervous. (*grew*)

"No," the heavy woman said, rummaging through the shopping bag she was carrying. (*carried*)

Lulu was feeling tipsy. (*felt*)

There are times, though, when "ing" (for me) helps convey an ongoing process. For example, consider "Thinking of his face, she hesitated." versus "She thought of his face and hesitated." For me the first version puts a thoughtful look on the character's face and creates a pause in whatever she's doing, and the second version is just action.

### **some**

A waste word, a verbal habit something like the "uh" many people use in speech. A few examples (I almost said "some," but that was so vague); see how cutting the "somes" costs nothing yet makes the sentence crisper.

Married women always wore ~~some~~ bangles around both their wrists.

Do you have ~~some~~ pressing business?

My big band attained ~~some~~ modest local fame and national press.

There was ~~some~~ movement as the crocodiles attempted to steer clear.

She had ~~some~~ packing to do.

~~Some~~ tantalizing smells were wafting towards them from across the river. (and let's change *were wafting* to *wafted*)

He had to have ~~some~~ new tires installed.

## very

Another waste word.

William was one of ~~very~~ (the) few who knew. (*not needed*)

I want the ~~very~~ best students. (*redundant—best is best*)

Mr. Simpson has been ~~very~~ eager to meet you. (*there are no degrees of eagerness—redundant*)

...in the ~~very~~ coldest part of winter. (*redundant—coldest is coldest*)

They were ~~very~~ hungry. (*starving or famished are more specific, more effective*)

During lunch she becomes ~~very~~ quiet. (*redundant—quiet is quiet*)

## of

In my first novel a reader picked up on a habit I had of overusing “of” as in, “He emptied his pot of coffee.” I used my word processor’s search tool to hunt for “of” and found many that I could change to either a possessive or use an adjective, e.g., “He emptied his coffee pot.” This may seem mindlessly simple to you, but I found lots of places to tighten my narrative, which helped with pace and clarity.

## eyes

This is an example of improper usage. Many writers use “eyes” when what they really mean is gaze, or glance, or stare. Some examples in which I take the usage to the next logical step:

Her eyes were on the floor. (*Luckily, no one stepped on them.*)

His blue eyes bored into her. (*And then blood gushed from the two holes in her belly.*)

She felt the woman's eyes searching for her. (*It tickled when they slid across her face.*)

His tired eyes land on me as he glances around the room. (*Then they drop to the floor and roll under the couch.*)

My eyes follow the headlights. (*I ignore the wrenching pain when they leave their sockets.*)

Roger kept his eyes on the road. (*He realized his mistake when the ice cream truck ran over them.*)

Fire up your word processor, open your manuscript, launch the search tool, and type these weak, wasted, or wrong words in the *Find what:* box and go hunting for opportunities to make your narrative stronger and sharper.



## Words

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### Don't get me started

**A common locution** that I see in manuscripts (and published novels) is “started to.” Also, “began to.” While there are times when those expressions are appropriate, they aren’t nearly as frequent as some writers seem to feel.

When/if you use “started to” and “began to” in your narrative, spend a moment and think about what the words really mean. Another usage that tangles meaning is “with.” I’ll get to that later.

Here are some examples of “started to” drawn from a number of submissions.

When we started to get repeat responses to stimuli, we changed the system.

This says that the two things happened simultaneously, although they couldn’t have; they didn’t change the system until after the repeat responses occurred. Rewrite:

After we got repeat responses to the stimuli, we changed the system.

What about this one?

She turned away and started to laugh.

What is the start of a laugh? “H—” and then silence? No, in this narrative, the character laughed. Rewrite:

She turned away and laughed.

Tears make an appearance:

Her tears started to flow.

So they appeared in the corners of her eyes and then just sat there? Nope, if they flowed at all, they rolled on down her cheeks. Rewrite:

Her tears flowed.

Getting a character moving:

Larry slid from his stool and started to follow the beggar.

So did Larry get his feet on the floor, lift a foot, and then stop? Take a step or two and stop? No, he followed the beggar. See how much crisper it is to say:

Larry slid from his stool and followed the beggar.

Can an action be partial?

He started to laugh but stopped short when he saw how angry she was.

Another “H—” here? Wouldn’t this create a better picture of what might really happen?

He laughed, but then stopped when he saw her anger.

What about thoughts?

His mind started to whirl with crazy ideas.

So what’s the idea here? His mind starts, like a song beginning, and then, “r-r-r-r,” dies out? Not likely.

His mind whirled with crazy ideas.

Be careful of continuity.

She started to sob and Steve held the weeping child in his arms.

Okay, if she only starts (which can mean that she stops), then how come she's weeping when she gets into Steve's embrace? Rewrite:

She sobbed, and Steve held the weeping child in his arms.

Actually, written this way, "weeping" isn't needed.

She sobbed and Steve held the child in his arms.

A confusing mix of actions:

She began to back away when a faint movement in the yard stopped her.

A really confusing set of words for me. She was backing and a movement stopped her? Doesn't seem possible. Rewrite:

She backed away, but then stopped at the sight of movement in the yard.

Sometimes, though, "started" is right.

She stopped him when he started to rise to his feet.

This one is okay because the action was interrupted.

### **Do without the "with" redux**

In the Dialogue section I bemoaned saying things with "with," but there's another way in which "with" can befuddle your narrative—when it adds things together nonsensically. When you think about what the words really mean, there are times when "with" is the wrong word—and it's your job to think about what words really mean.

He watched her with a satisfied smile.

So his teeth are capable of vision? Maybe, in a sci-fi adventure, but most of us use our eyes for this sort of thing. Also, this is *telling*—what does a “satisfied smile” *look* like? Rewrite:

He watched her and smiled, satisfied.

This one has one heck of a dog.

The dog started to chase the sheep with a snarl.

A double whammy: first the “started to,” and then how did the dog hold the snarl with which he chased the sheep? In his teeth? How does one use a snarl in a chase, anyway? Rewrite:

The dog snarled and then chased the sheep.

Misuse of roaring.

With a roar of encouragement, the watchers pushed him back into the fight.

So how did they get a grip on the roar in order to push with it? Aren't those things slippery? Rewrite:

The watchers roared encouragement and pushed him back into the fight.

A tragic use of “with.”

She ran into his arms with a strangled sob.

Where did she get the strangled sob? Who strangled the poor thing?

On the other hand, sometimes I could use one of these.

Margaret straightened her back with a groan.

I never thought to use a groan to straighten my back. Rewrite:

Margaret groaned when she straightened her back.

A touching use of “with.”

He touched it with a worried expression.

So did he place his face against it? Rewrite:

He touched it, his worry shown by his expression.

Do a search for “started to” and “began to” and “with” and see if you find any of these potential befuddlements lurking in your narrative.

# without

## Words

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### Do without “without”

I’ll wager you’ve seen one or more of these phrases in stories:

- Without a sound
- Without a glance
- Without a doubt
- Without a thought
- Without a word

You might have even used them.

It seems to me that most of the time these phrases are about as useful as your appendix. They are comfortable-feeling collections of words that describe a negative, an absence. But I think they are frequently lazy writing. They are a missed opportunity to write for effect.

If whatever it is the story is doing without isn’t there, why bring it up? You, the writer, control absolutely everything the character and the reader experience. If you don’t put something into the narrative, it doesn’t exist, does it? So why tell the reader that what isn’t there isn’t there? Actually, in most cases the writer intends meaning, it’s just that using “without” can leave the reader missing the intended sense of what’s happening.

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