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Nuts and Bolts: "Thought" Verbs

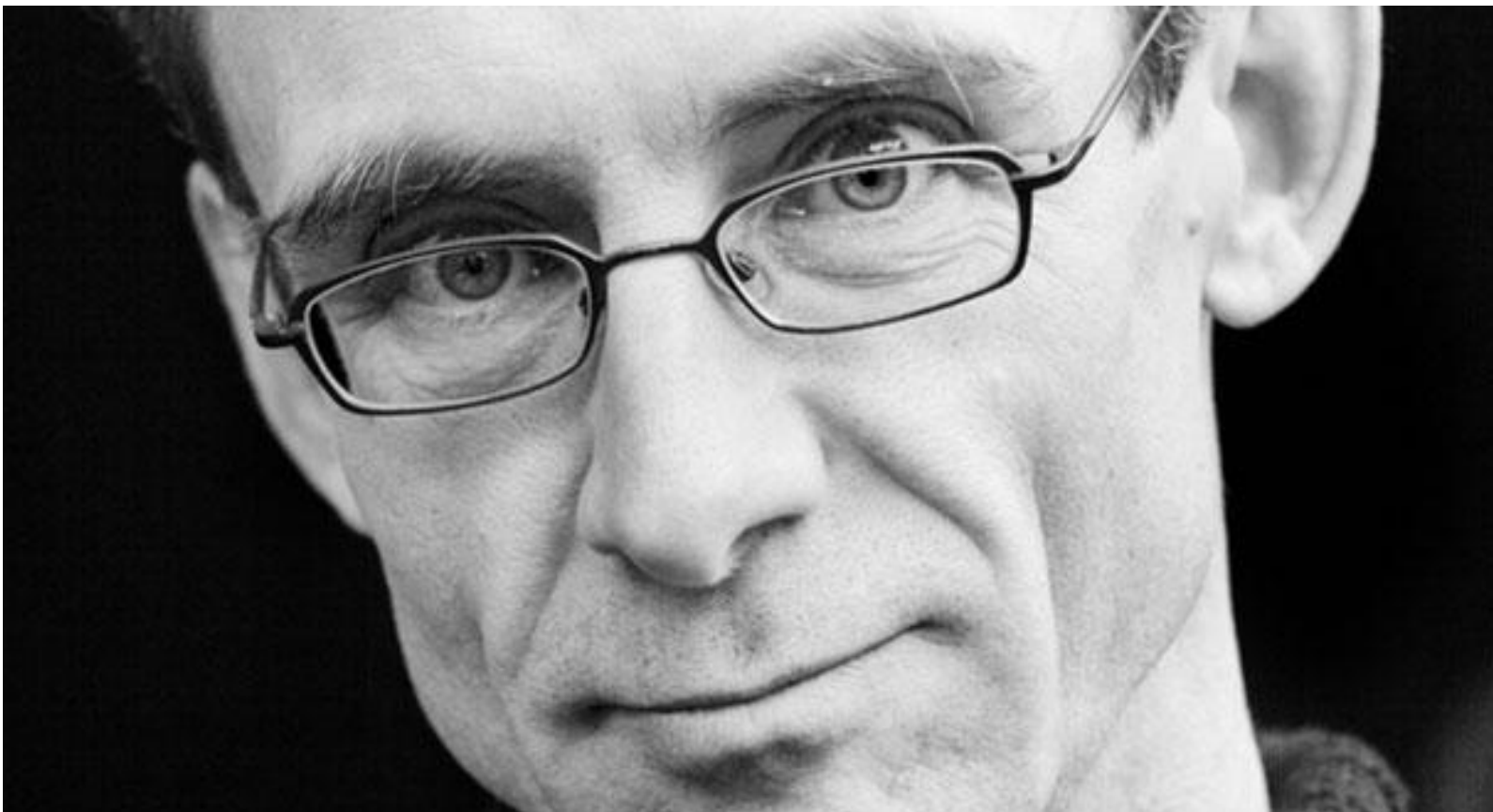
ESSAY BY **CHUCK PALAHNIUK** AUGUST 12, 2013

48 COMMENTS

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In six seconds, you'll hate me.

But in six months, you'll be a better writer.

From this point forward – at least for the next half year – you may not use “thought” verbs. These include: Thinks, Knows, Understands, Realizes, Believes, Wants, Remembers, Imagines, Desires, and a hundred others you love to use.

The list should also include: Loves and Hates.

And it should include: Is and Has, but we'll get to those, later.

Until some time around Christmas, you can't write: Kenny *wondered* if Monica didn't like him going out at night...”

Instead, you'll have to Un-pack that to something like: “The mornings after Kenny had stayed out, beyond the last bus, until he'd had to bum a ride or pay for a cab and got home to find Monica faking sleep, faking because she never slept that quiet, those mornings, she'd only put her own cup of coffee in the microwave. Never his.”

Instead of characters *knowing* anything, you must now present the details that allow the reader to know them. Instead of a character

**Thinking is abstract.
Knowing and believing
are intangible. Your
story will always be**

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More essays by Chuck Palahniuk

**One Word Leads To The Next: Unconventional
Conjunctive Devices**

wanting something, you must now describe the thing so that the reader wants it.

Instead of saying: “Adam *knew* Gwen liked him.”

You’ll have to say: “Between classes, Gwen was always leaned on his locker when he’d go to open it. She’d roll her eyes and shove off with one foot, leaving a black-heel mark on the painted metal, but she also left the smell of her perfume. The combination lock would still be warm from her ass. And the next break, Gwen would be leaned there, again.”

In short, no more short-cuts. Only specific sensory detail: action, smell, taste, sound, and feeling.

Typically, writers use these “thought” verbs at the beginning of a paragraph (In this form, you can call them “Thesis Statements” and I’ll rail against those, later) In a way, they state the intention of the paragraph. And what follows, illustrates them.

For example:

“Brenda knew she’d never make the deadline. Traffic was backed up from the bridge, past the first eight or nine exits. Her cell phone battery was dead. At home, the dogs would need to go out, or there would be a mess to clean up. Plus, she’d promised to water the plants for her neighbor...”

Do you see how the opening “thesis statement” steals the thunder of what follows? Don’t do it.

If nothing else, cut the opening sentence and place it *after* all the others. Better yet, transplant it and change it to: Brenda would never make the deadline.

Thinking is abstract. Knowing and believing are intangible. Your story will always be stronger if you just show the physical actions and details of your characters and allow your reader to do the thinking and knowing. And loving and hating.

Don’t tell your reader: “Lisa *hated* Tom.”

Instead, make your case like a lawyer in court, detail by detail. Present each piece of evidence. For example:

“During role call, in the breath after the teacher said Tom’s name, in that moment before he could answer, right then, Lisa would whisper-shout: ‘Butt Wipe,’ just as Tom was saying, ‘Here’.”

One of the most-common mistakes that beginning writers make is leaving their characters alone. Writing, you may be alone. Reading, your audience may be alone. But your character should spend very, very little time alone. Because a solitary character starts thinking or worrying or wondering.

For example: Waiting for the bus, Mark started to worry about how long the trip would take..”

A better break-down might be: “The schedule said the bus would come by at noon, but Mark’s watch said it was already 11:57. You could see all the way down the road, as far as the Mall, and not see a bus. No doubt, the driver was parked at the turn-around, the far end of the line, taking a nap. The driver was kicked back, asleep, and Mark was going to be late. Or worse, the driver was drinking, and he’d pull up drunk and charge Mark seventy-five cents for death in a fiery traffic accident...”

A character alone must lapse into fantasy or memory, but even then you can’t use “thought” verbs or any of their abstract relatives.

Oh, and you can just forget about using the verbs *forget* and *remember*.

No more transitions such as: “Wanda remember how Nelson used to brush her hair.”

Instead: “Back in their sophomore year, Nelson used to brush her hair with smooth, long strokes of his hand.”

Again, Un-pack. Don’t take short-cuts.

Better yet, get your character with another character, fast. Get them together and get the action started. Let their actions and words show their thoughts. You -- stay out of their heads.

And while you’re avoiding “thought” verbs, be very wary about using the bland verbs “is” and “have.”

For example:

“Ann’s eyes are blue.”

“Ann has blue eyes.”

stronger if you just show the physical actions and details of your characters and allow your reader to do the thinking and knowing. And loving and hating.

One of the most-common mistakes

The Haunting: How To Conquer The Shame Of Being A Writer

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Developing a Theme

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Submerging the “I”

1 of 4 >>

Our Upcoming Classes



Versus:

“Ann coughed and waved one hand past her face, clearing the cigarette smoke from her eyes, blue eyes, before she smiled...”

Instead of bland “is” and “has” statements, try burying your details of what a character has or is, in actions or gestures. At its most basic, this is showing your story instead of telling it.

**that beginning writers
make is leaving their
characters alone.**

And forever after, once you’ve learned to Un-pack your characters, you’ll hate the lazy writer who settles for:
“Jim sat beside the telephone, wondering why Amanda didn’t call.”

Please. For now, hate me all you want, but don’t use “thought” verbs. After Christmas, go crazy, but I’d bet money you won’t.

For this month’s homework

...pick through your writing and circle every “thought” verb. Then, find some way to eliminate it. Kill it by Un-packing it.

Then, pick through some published fiction and do the same thing. Be ruthless.

“Marty imagined fish, jumping in the moonlight...”

“Nancy recalled the way the wine tasted...”

“Larry knew he was a dead man...”

Find them. After that, find a way to re-write them. Make them stronger.

Thanks for last month’s questions. If you have more, submit them, and I’ll get to them in mid-June.

**If You're Thirsting For More Writing Lessons From Chuck
We Have 35 More Of Them Right Here!**

**Photo credit: Yasmina Moya*



Beautiful You: A Novel

Author: Chuck Palahniuk

Price: \$19.68

Publisher: Doubleday (2014)

Binding: Hardcover, 240 pages



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Comments



brolytaylor1

September 18, 2015 - 5:01am

Thanks a lot for the post. It has helped me get some nice ideas. I hope I will see some really good result soon. [Descriptive Statistics](#) [Statistics Project Help](#)

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Vinod Singh

August 12, 2015 - 7:45am

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Vinod Singh

August 12, 2015 - 7:44am

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Vinod Singh

August 12, 2015 - 7:43am

This article is really fantastic and thanks for sharing the valuable post.

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Redd Tramp from Los Angeles, CA is reading *Jesus' Son* by Denis Johnson

June 5, 2015 - 8:14pm

Chuck makes his point in the same way he conveys themes and rants in his books: exaggeration. Having read all of his essays on here, I've realized he presents his advice to such an extreme degree purposefully. The way he goes way over the top in his own work to get your attention and drive points home, he's challenging us to start from a tight grip, discomfort, being super conscious of every line and detail, making it tight, spare, effective. And from there, when it gets easier, every writer can discover wiggle room, their own space to work in with the techniques that've stuck.

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Alan Donnelly

March 30, 2015 - 5:45pm

Karie,

If it's a thought process then you don't need to say "she thought" or "he wondered", ect.

The reader already knows this.

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Karie Limage

March 15, 2015 - 6:56pm

dies slowly

I just have one question. What do you do if it's first person narrative and they're thinking to themselves? Example: *That dress is hideous*, I thought to myself.

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arianab from Seattle, WA is reading *Dean Koontz - STRANGE HIGHWAYS*

January 23, 2015 - 7:44pm

Not to be among the beautiful bots above and below me, but this was a great article. I am in the midst of editing a book right this second. I had to pause and see if the current chapter held any of these.

I have these words on my "Editing Checks" notes that I keep (things I find to look for, things my editor points out, or notes that my readers send me to check), and I never understood how to *improve* the sentence, and why specifically the words sucked. This cleared that up, and made *much* more sense. Thank you!

P.S. I love that definition: un-pack the sentence. This is something I am trying to learn. Noticing the details in my head and the scene playing out in there, and being able to write it down for the reader to get the sense of the same scene. Or as close as possible to my own since nobody can ever get the exact replica of what I'm seeing.

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jspcrazyboy7 from Amherst, NH is reading *Neverwhere* by Gaiman



Thank you for taking pliers to my eyelids. I definitely needed this read.

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Ciaran Deevoy from Ireland is reading *Diary*

December 1, 2014 - 11:25pm

Awesome.

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Phil Sykora is reading *Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck

September 19, 2014 - 1:43pm

@Remittancegirl In my opinion, films and other visual media haven't resulted in a lack of emotional engagement. I think that's kind of ridiculous. It's like saying that movies and television shows never have you connect with characters, that you can't feel anything when a character suffers.

In short: it's a false analogy. Just because you don't feel very much when reading Palahniuk's novels doesn't mean that visual media fails to evoke any sort of reaction. Or, just because you "see" a movie and "read" a book doesn't mean that one beats the other in terms of emotional involvement. That's all up to the consumer.

I understand your point. Use books to the best of their story-telling ability. But you're being a little general when you say that leaves people entirely emotionally unengaged.

P.S. the lack of a proper reply system on this site is almost as bad as the "free college paper" spammers. Almost.

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junoba from Canada is reading *Ann Beattie The New Yorker Stories*

March 14, 2014 - 5:35pm

To be blunt: This has been a worthwhile experience. It is hard, but truly rewarding. I'll always keep his advice in mind.

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ElaineJackson from England is reading *The Intruders* by Michael Marshall Smith

March 9, 2014 - 6:14am

I found this post via @Roz_Morris on Twitter. So impressed that I've signed up to <http://litreactor.com/classes/the-craft-of-character-with-david-corbett> .

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charmingmanuk66 from England is reading *Autobiography - Morrissey*

February 11, 2014 - 8:13am

Would anyone care to practice applying these gems on this poor piece of writing?

Thanks in advance.

"Come on people, let's help the guy. If that's hit the femoral artery he's in trouble."

Claire didn't know what Solomon was talking about but he clearly knew more than her and it didn't sound good.

Here is my (poor) attempt

Claire had played Operation as a child but had no idea what he was talking about except that it was bad news.

OR

Femoral artery? How did Solomon know? Claire was worried even though she had no idea what he

was talking about.

Help please!

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Adam Birch from all over, currently North SF Bay Area is reading *Brotherhood of the Blade* by Diana Gabaldon

So many writers tell you "show, don't tell". You showed us how to show, not tell. This masterstroke aside. This single essay was worth the entire six month subscription I bought tonight and so much more.

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cowardm

December 30, 2013 - 12:12pm

Dear Chuck,

I completed the first draft of my first novel recently and while I'm pretty proud of my accomplishment, I've always felt like I was stylistically missing something. I already kind of knew the stuff you talked about here (we talked about it briefly in my creative writing class in college and Brandon Sanderson covers it in his online lectures), but to have it so much more in-depth was really helpful.

While I haven't completely gotten away from the passive voice, you've taught me a lot about writing in an active and more descriptive voice.

I just wrote a nice piece in my second novel and thought "Damn it, I need to stop and go thank Chuck." So, thanks.

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Jeannette Welsh from Marlboro NJ is reading *The Chronology of Water*

December 16, 2013 - 8:43pm

This is a very helpful article!

I have just joined this group and i am already having a hard time reading people's posts and comments. I cannot believe the audacity of people who can challenge and criticize. I see them giving themselves their little "I got you" pats on the back.

I am not sure i like humans and their ability to sit behind a computer and use all of their energy to try to poke at someone's work; especially when the writer is successful and is only trying to help others emulate his commercial successes.

I saw you in baltimore at a reading for your new Book- Doomed. It was a thrill to hear the words from the mouth and brain of the creator. Thank you for your words!

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Ameraka

December 16, 2013 - 12:34pm

Thank you for the article. It does in general make writing stronger to show instead of tell, but I wouldn't go so far as to say never use thought verbs. Use them sparingly, only when they can best say what you want to say. The abstract IS sometimes necessary; one of my favorite things about writing/reading is that you can get into a characters' thoughts, which is what separates books from film, which can only imply what a characer is thinking. I believe that showing a character's thoughts is what helps create more empathy in the writer/reader than only showing the externals. You actually get to BE that character, rather than being a passive spectator. Also, one of my favorite authors, Dostoyevsky, was in his character's heads at least half the time, deliciously navigating the psychological intricacies of a character.

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Natso from Mongolia is reading *Moby Dick*

December 6, 2013 - 2:01am

I think this is very important tool in the craft of writing. Thank you, Mr. Palahniuk.

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whiskey_neat from Chicago is reading *End of Alice*

November 26, 2013 - 2:25pm

So simple in theory, much harder in practice...but worth it. Thanks, Chuck!

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Justin Womack from USA

November 9, 2013 - 3:58pm

I love this advice, but truthfully the word "was" bothers me as much. As do easily corrected proofing errors. It takes guts to put one's self out there in words, and I'm not trying to be a troll, but, for me, the impact of the advice in this essay is dulled by these problems. Perhaps it would be a useful exercise for this site to encourage its readers to copyedit the pages here. Something of a "homework assignment." Different choices may offer opportunities to highlight creative and stylistic differences. Some of the most basic nuts and bolts of writing, explored through the work posted here -- a kind of meta-exercise.

And yes, I realize my first sentence above ignores the advice in the essay, as does this sentence.

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simon.dewar83 from Canberra, Australia is reading *The Twelve by Justin Cronin*

November 5, 2013 - 1:50am

Judicious use of this technique might make short story writing more challenging..

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charmingmanuk66 from England is reading *Autobiography - Morrissey*

October 16, 2013 - 9:00am

Felt compelled to offer my congratulations for a really useful article. You have really set the bar high. It's not easy, it requires work and discipline. Thank you for challenging us to be better.

And for those who are not prepared to make the effort I would say *don't worry*, for every lazy writer there are lots of lazy readers who devour lazily written books - but curiously these books are never remembered or prized.

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Just Ryan

September 24, 2013 - 10:24pm

NO! This article is heresy (yes, I used "is").

"At its most basic, this is showing your story instead of telling it." ("is" showing??)

Pick up a pen and write like you have a camera, he says.

My response: why not just pick up a camera?

To suggest meaning through visual complexity IS the essence of film, not writing.

Images can do what words can't, and words can do what images can't. Writers use words.

Utilizing words to paint images is not the process for writing stories but rather story-films.

I, for one, am not in the hobby of writing story-films.

With that said, this article is helpful when its principles are applied with balance and tasteful measure.

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Great article with awesome content.

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Bill Sterling from Pasadena is reading *The Name of the Rose*

September 1, 2013 - 5:23pm

Well, I guess I know what I'm doing tomorrow . . .

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ellynpeace

August 22, 2013 - 5:40pm

Just became a member here in order to comment on this article which came to me via the Pocket app. The confusing title drew me in, as well as the dare to hatred! Sorry Chuck, I love you! You dare to tell writers that we suck and why. What's not to love? Honesty is hard to come by when asking for critiques. Thanks for telling me something that I might never have realized .

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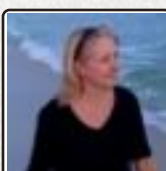


lilian from Rio Negro Argentina is reading *Dickens*

August 22, 2013 - 5:15pm

Thank you Chuck for this particular piece of information. You have eliminated the bog of word confusion pollution. It is stronger to write this way. Look forward to other gems !

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Covewriter from Nashville, Tennessee is reading *& Sons*

August 21, 2013 - 11:22pm

Awesome essay.

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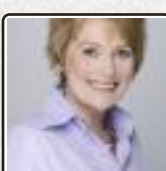


mhorner

August 21, 2013 - 8:22pm

I love Chuck's books. That being said, when getting on people's cases for essentially being lazy writers and taking "short-cuts", I would discourage grammar errors (i.e., "Wanda remember how Nelson used to brush her hair"). Thusly, Chuck, if you're ever in need of a good copyeditor, let me know.

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Carey Fern from Auckland, New Zealand is reading *Sepulchra*

August 20, 2013 - 4:38am

This is a great essay. I am a new member and this is the first piece of writing I've read and it has proved a great help to me. Thank you. The homework assignment is also a great idea to engage readers. I will certainly be revising my own work using this. Again, thank you Chuck.

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Remittancegirl from Vietnam is reading *The Rise of the Warrior Cop*

August 17, 2013 - 9:46pm

Although I agree that too many 'thought' verbs can bog writing down, human experience is made up of both the concrete and the abstract. One of the reasons I can't get through half Palahniuk's books is specifically because the abstract element of his characters is missing. I feel so ambivalent about them, I can't be bothered to care for them - either positively or negatively or a nice crunchy mix.

This approach to writing is a consequence of the enormous influence film and visual narrative has

had on writing. Although it has the very real effect of aiding readers in 'seeing' the story unfold in their heads, it also can leave them entirely emotionally unengaged.

I prefer a judicious mix of the immediate and the concrete, and a drop of the abstract, the cerebral, the emotional. It's what real experience is made of and the way in which writing can deliver a narrative differently from film.

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Michael Varian Daly

August 17, 2013 - 2:25am

I'm perfectly happy being a hack writer as long as I can keep writing without too much pain.

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coquette from texas

August 15, 2013 - 3:47pm

great advice- super helpful

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leah_beth from New Jersey - now in Charleston, SC is reading *five different books at once*.

August 14, 2013 - 8:58pm

I love this. Great illustrations of showing and not telling. Thank you. :D :D :D

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So from Strasbourg, France is reading *Port Mortuary*

August 14, 2013 - 6:48am

Some amazing advices. Not sure I'm good enough, but I'm trying! Is it more difficult at the first person? Maybe... I went from: "I am pissed at him for not getting in touch more often."

To: "Each time the phone vibrates, I can't help checking it compulsively - *is that him? No, of course not*. But some times, some scarce, so freaking rare times, a message from him pops up on my smartphone. His warm and sensual voice, his naughty words, his kinky desires - materialized on that tiny little screen. Enough to shake my world upside down, to light up my brain and send electrifying thrills down my spine. That burning urge to read it right on the spot, and at the very same time, to throw the phone smashing on the wall, to tear down my own junkie skin and get the hell out of this maddening cycle. *And still*. Still, I am already drawn to him, back to my dealer, to get my little fix - never enough to get me satisfied, always sufficient to keep me hooked... Back on my knees to beg for my next shot - of his presence - with that twisting soreness in my guts for vomiting over my own self-esteem - for bowing in front of him, stepping over this deformed mirror that flashes my horrified reflection back at me."

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I'm New!

stellapiano from Canada is reading *Bossypants*

August 13, 2013 - 6:50pm

I've already cleaned up my current piece of writing a huge amount because of this advice.

Thank you!

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I'm New!

Theravada

August 13, 2013 - 5:51pm

Excellent read! I'd love to hear your take on dealing with this in a first-person narrative.

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Dino Parenti from Los Angeles is reading *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn

August 13, 2013 - 3:39pm

Can this be reposted every month?

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Tom1960 from Athens, Georgia is reading *The Leftovers* by Tom Perrotta

August 13, 2013 - 1:05pm

I read this essay over a year ago and it has been a tremendous help. Thought verbs and adverbs are writing's shortcuts to nowhere.

Thanks for the wonderful essay!

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Doug Allan from Fife, Scotland is reading *Last Exit to Brooklyn*

August 13, 2013 - 9:09am

great advice chuck! you're so wise :)

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Anders Aslund

August 13, 2013 - 4:15am

I don't hate you. I love you for writing this. I know that I will have to go through my manuscript with a bloodied scalpel. It's actually a new version of the old "show, don't tell", but far better explained than I've ever seen before.

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lakrfool

August 12, 2013 - 11:32pm

Paint it in a noir Jim Thompsonesque picture.

I want some Gatorade.

The dryness of the West TX night as I slept soundly left my tongue making sparks against the roof of my mouth,...mere water was only a temporary fix. I needed a greater liquid.

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typado

August 12, 2013 - 8:03pm

This is really good advice, though I think there is room in good writing for some of these "thought" words. An ardent refusal to use simple sentence structure and straightforward syntax can come across as bloody forced and pretentious writing. Even Chuck P. has used a few here and there.

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Rick Pieters from Dayton, Ohio is reading *Spring Fevers*

August 12, 2013 - 7:18pm

Tough one. And excellent. (He said, afraid to look through his own novel.)

Question on using "to be" forms: Do you prohibit it in progressive verb forms, so often mistaken as passive, such as "At its most basic, this *is showing* your story instead of telling it"?

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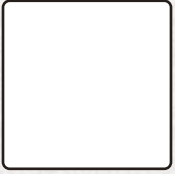


Ispieller from Los Angeles is reading *LEVIATHAN*

October 31, 2012 - 6:16pm

i just cut 20 'thoughts' out of the first half of my novel. BOOM.

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Larry Nocella from USA is reading *Loser's Memorial* by Larry Nocella

February 15, 2012 - 6:35pm

I'm working my way through the Chuck P. essays in sequence and this is the best one yet. I especially liked brainstorming and unpacking the phrase "Larry knew he was a dead man..."

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bryanhowie from FW, ID is reading *East of Eden*. Steinbeck is *FUCKING AMAZING*.

October 23, 2011 - 4:11pm

I've always called these words (think, knows, feels, wants, etc.) "Ego" verbs, because they make the narrator (or protagonist) the subject of the sentence. And, in first person stories, they usually follow the word "I".

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