

HI~ARTS

Tip Sheet 2

HUNTING DOWN THE PLEONASM

by
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Introduction

A pleonasm is a word or phrase which can be removed from a sentence without changing its meaning. For example, in the phrase *hunting down the pleonasm*, 'down' is pleonastic – cut it from the sentence and the meaning does not alter.

Many words and phrases are easy to spot: 'for definite', 'that', 'more or less', 'actually', 'just', 'really', 'even'. Those are simple pleonasm.

Some examples:

Actually, it doesn't matter.

Actually, it doesn't matter.

I just know that he's dead.

I ~~just~~ know ~~that~~ he's dead.

I'm more or less okay.

I'm ~~more-or-less~~ okay.

A true classic.

A ~~true~~ classic.

Some are more subtle and harder to root out.

Tautology

One of the most common forms of pleonasm, occurring where the same sentiment is expressed more than once. In the example:

Failure to plan ahead for the future is risky

'ahead' is tautological, as is 'for the future', since all planning is, by definition, 'ahead' and 'for the future'. Thus we can reduce the sentence to:

Failure to plan ahead for the future is risky

while retaining its original meaning.

Tautology also occurs where the writer presents the same information several ways. For instance:

"I will not!" he exclaimed, loudly.

Here the writer is repeating himself. Not only is there an exclamation mark and thus no need for 'exclaimed', but it's also highly debatable whether it's possible to exclaim any other way than 'loudly'.

Another instance is where the writer presents multiple images to say the same thing. For example:

He was scared. He'd never felt this kind of fear before. The terror was overwhelming.

The writer should choose one and cut the rest.

The tautology of show and tell

We've all heard the aphorism: show, don't tell. Much vaunted advice, yet rarely heeded. An example: expressing emotion indirectly. Is your preferred reader intelligent? Yes? Then treat them accordingly.

Tears were streaming down Lila's face. She was very sad.

Can the second sentence be inferred from the first? In context, let's hope so. So it can be cut.

If you want to engage your readers, don't explain everything to them. Show them what's happening and allow their intelligence to do the rest.

Another way of putting this: actions speak louder than words. For instance, you can tell your partner you love them a thousand times, but if you forget their birthday, your words will probably take on considerably less import.

Hesitancy

Not always a pleonasm, but always a close cousin.

Often a writer's lack of confidence creeps into the writing with phrases such as:

I was nearly soaked to the skin.

Is it possible to be 'nearly' soaked to the skin?

I almost wished I were dead.

Would it be more effective to remove 'almost'? *I wished I were dead* is a more powerful sentiment.

It might seem to be the case that I appear to be almost afraid.

Again, more powerful to say: *I was afraid.*

A related area is the use of negatives (often double negatives) where a positive works. The latter is always an improvement.

I'm not unpleasant all the time reads better as *I'm pleasant some of the time*

The Mundane

Passages describing everyday activities are often best cut unless there's a good dramatic reason to retain them. For example:

He yawned, stretched, rubbed the sleep from his eyes. After dozing for a couple of minutes, he pulled back the covers, swung his legs out of bed and teased his feet into his slippers. He staggered, still half asleep, to the bathroom. He turned on the shower, adjusting the temperature till it was just so. Took off his pyjamas and swung his leg over the lip of the bath. He had a nice shower, like he did every morning. Afterwards, he dried himself vigorously and then brushed his teeth.

This is so similar to most people's experience that it sounds dull. Unless there's a reason for including it (such as postponing an event that takes place later in the day to create suspense), then it's serving no purpose in determining character or in advancing the story.

The Transition

Another frequently described mundane activity is that of a character's journey from A to B – where the variables can be different rooms in a house, different locations within a city, different cities, or even different countries. Where the journey itself is uneventful, it's best omitted.

She looked at her watch. Time to leave for Martha's. Stella walked out of the sitting room and into the hall. She put on her shoes and coat, opened the front door and locked it behind her. In the garage, she climbed into her car and put her key in the ignition. The drive was slow and traffic was bumper to bumper but she eventually pulled into Martha's driveway around half past four. Martha waved from her sitting room window.

White space is a superb means of achieving the effect of time passing. The above passage could be rewritten thus:

*She looked at her watch. Time to leave for Martha's.
Martha waved from her sitting room window.*

The Adverbial Pleonasm

Use strong verbs in preference to adverbs. I won't say avoid adverbs, period, because about once every fifty pages they're okay! What's not okay is to use an adverb as an excuse for failing to find the correct verb. To 'walk slowly' is much less effective than to 'plod' or 'trudge'. To 'connect strongly' is much less effective than to 'forge a connection'.

Examples:

He walked slowly.

The Unnecessary Interrogative

A question used simply as an easy means to break up speech is often a poor substitute for action or description.

In many cases, it can be cut. For instance:

*"I told him the good news," she said.
"What's that?" I asked.
"I'm pregnant."*

Could be written as:

"I told him the good news," she said. "I'm pregnant."

Clouding The Issue

Don't confuse the reader. If you write something you think might be unclear, it is. Big time. You can change it. But try cutting it instead. It often works wonders.

The Dialogue Attribution Pleonasm

Use 'said' to carry dialogue. Sid Fleischman calls 'said', "the invisible word." That's not quite true (anyone who doubts this should track down a copy of Fletcher Flora's *Most Likely To Love*), but it's close enough.

It's best not to use adverbs as modifiers. Adverbs used in this way are 'telling' words.

You can use action with dialogue to avoid having to use a tag line.

For instance:

"Don't go," she said mournfully.

works better as something like:

"Don't go." She dabbed at her eyes.

In the latter version, there's no adverbial modifier, no tag line, and the reader isn't told what's happening, but is shown it. The reader also has to interpret the character's action for themselves, which is the sort of engagement found in the best writing.

Implied Chronology

When using 'and' there is often an implied chronology that the first item written occurs first and the second item occurs ... well ... second.

For instance:

I brushed my hair and put on my trousers.

It's clear in the above sentence that the activities take place one after the other. Consequently, the addition of 'then' for clarification *I brushed my hair and then put on my trousers* is unnecessary.

'Begin' and 'start' can be redundant also. Don't use these unless there's a time relationship involved. For instance:

She started to tie her shoelaces

is more concisely written as

She tied her shoelaces

unless she's held up by robbers before she's finished.

Pleonastic Speech

Don't allow your fictional characters to speak in sentences. Unless you want them to sound fictional. Sentence fragments are dialogue's best friend and formal language and correct grammar are for professors. For instance:

I do not know with which item you are concerned, since several spring to mind after yesterday's ordeal, from which I am only just recovered.

This might be more convincing as dialogue if written as:

Don't know which one you mean. Plenty of choices. Anyway, I've only just recovered from all that shit yesterday.

Pleonastic Filters

Cut out filtering devices, wherever possible. When writing from a limited point of view, 'I felt', 'I thought', 'I observed', 'I saw', 'I heard', etc., are all filters. They distance the reader from the character. This applies to all close points of view, not just first person.

Pleonastic Past Tense

Avoid unnecessary repetition of tense. For example:

I'd gone to the hospital. They'd kept me waiting for hours. Eventually, I'd seen a doctor. He'd said I should give up smoking.

Usually, the first sentence is sufficient to establish tense.

I'd gone to the hospital. They kept me waiting for hours. Eventually, I saw a doctor. He said I should give up smoking.

Smiling, grinning, sighing, shrugging

Characters who smile and grin a lot can be in danger of coming across as deranged fools. Sighing and shrugging are also actions to avoid repeating. Eliminating smiles, sighs and shrugs is frequently an improvement.

The Passive Pleonasm

Avoid journalistic passive-construct headlines, such as

Man hit by speeding train.

Instead, try the much more effective active version:

Speeding train hits man.

The Exclamatory Pleonasm

The exclamation mark. Use with caution. The more you use it, the less impact it has. Eventually you'll end up needing to use two just to make the same point. It's used for emphasis, but you should be able to convey emphasis through your word choices and syntax. A manuscript littered with exclamation marks is usually a sign of an inexperienced writer.

Environmental Pleonasms

Describe the environment in ways that are pertinent to the story. And try to make such descriptions active. Instead of describing a book lying on a table, have your character pick it up, glance at it and move it to the arm of the sofa. He needs something to do to break up those long speeches, right?

The Pleonastic Early Entry And Late Exit

Start scenes late and leave them early. Advice oft-heard in the screenwriting industry, but equally applicable for novelists.

For example: if the action in a scene starts at the breakfast table, there's no need to have your point-of-view character walk into the room. Similarly, there's no need to see him leave the room afterwards.

Trim as much as you can from the start and end of each scene.

Extrapolation

What applies to a sentence applies equally to a paragraph, to a chapter, to a novel.

You'll be surprised just how much you can cut without affecting the meaning. So when you finish your book, pinpoint the scene you think is the weakest (if it doesn't spring to mind, go through your manuscript and mark each scene out of 10). Cut it. If necessary, replace it with a sentence or paragraph, but you'll be surprised how often you won't need to replace it with anything at all. Having done this, find the next weakest scene and do the same. Keep doing this till you're satisfied you only have strong, relevant scenes. Your manuscript will be shorter, tighter, and all the better for it.