

No-No's in Literature

Curriculum: NOVICE and ADVANCED

Created by: Dar Bagby

Definition: Issues that must be avoided when writing.

Goals: 1) Be able to identify all the types of No-No's.
2) Be able to identify No-No's when self editing.

Tools: 1) A copy of the HANDOUTS (#1 and #2) for each enthusiast
2) A highlighter for each enthusiast
3) Costume for the overseer (see Ice Breaker below)

Ice Breaker: Excuse yourself and leave the room for a moment. Upon returning you must present a figure that is inappropriate for the situation (teaching the session) by wearing a raggedy t-shirt/sweatshirt and pants, worn out, muddy shoes (or none). You must do and say things that are not socially acceptable (e.g., pull out a nail clipper and nail file and start to do your nails while talking, eat peanuts or pistachios and throw the shells on the floor, make a phone call or text someone, walk away and talk to someone outside the group without excusing yourself, pick your teeth and comment about the really lousy, greasy burrito you ate right before you came to the session, etc.)

Leave the room again and return wearing the clothes you had on before you left the first time. Ask the enthusiasts to name the things that were "wrong" with the person who just left. When they have named most of the "No-No's," explain that "Readers notice the No-No's in writing just as easily as you did about that figure that just left."

Lesson

Distribute HANDOUT #1 to the enthusiasts and ask them to follow along as you discuss:

Keep in mind that by avoiding certain things while writing, you'll have fewer things to fix when you do your self-editing. I'm not talking about punctuation and grammar—those are easy fixes.

- Avoid **overuse of certain words** should be avoided (that doesn't mean you should NEVER use them, just use them sparingly). Some of the more common ones are: *was, were, had, that, still, felt, noticed, saw, just, nice, thought, up, down, really, beautiful, dark, almost, very, many, so.* Keep them to a minimum.
- Avoid **overuse of adverbs and adjectives**; let the dialogue and beats describe how characters react or how something looks.
- Don't overuse **passive voice**. Remember to keep the action going with active voice.

- Remember to utilize **showing**, not **telling**.
- Avoid overuse of **repetitive phrases**.
- **Altered point of view (POV)** is a no-no; if you want your characters to be as real as possible, you should see the action only through the protagonist's eyes/mind (unless you are writing from an omniscient POV, and that is a most difficult undertaking).
- **Maintain the tense**. Don't confuse the reader by switching back and forth from one tense to another. ("Present, past, and future walked into a room. It was tense.")
- Avoid **overuse of speaker attributes** in your tags. The KIS method (Keep It Simple) creates better dialogue. You must be certain "said" or "asked" absolutely will not suffice before you plan to use something other than those two words.
- Unless right for a character, try not to overuse **polysyllabic words**. They are detrimental to your story by making the reader work extra hard at understanding what a character is talking about. Big, long words tend to muddy-up dialogue. Readers expect some characters to use big words, but only if the character would actually talk that way (e.g., Sherlock Holmes).
- Don't confuse the reader with too much **violation of chronology**. Stories work best if they flow naturally; the natural succession of events builds momentum. If you go back or leap ahead in time at some point(s) in your story, make sure the readers are informed—don't make them guess or leave them hanging out in space wondering what they missed. Tell them how long ago or far ahead the characters are moving. And when/if they return, fill the readers in on those moves, as well. It's best if you avoid too many time switches.
- Stay away from **clichés**; they make you look uncreative, unless of course one of your characters is notorious for using them in his/her dialogue.
- And speaking of characters, avoid "**cardboard**" **characters**. They are flat; characters need depth and should appear multi-dimensional.
- Your antagonists need to be believable, not "**cartoon**" **antagonists**. Making your antagonists too evil, too sadistic, too rapacious, or too vain causes them to be less than frightening, perhaps even less frightening than human beings.
- Try to keep the **dashes** (indicating interruption) and **ellipses** (indicating gaps) to a minimum.
- Avoid **alliteration**. Readers and reviewers readily rate it as rank writing, and rightfully so.

Bear in mind that, as you continue to write, you will become more aware of these things that should be avoided, and your self-editing will become easier as your writing ability increases.

Activity: Distribute HANDOUT #2 and a highlighter to each of the enthusiasts. Allowing them to use the first HANDOUT, ask them to highlight the No-No's they find in the story.

Discussion: Talk about the No-No's they found and how to correct each of them.

Key to the No-No's found in the story on HANDOUT #2

Just as Deshon whipped the cover off the dented, rusted trunk in his aunt's attic, he heard a loud
(repetitive word throughout)

crash behind him. He jerked his head around in a New York minute and saw shards of porcelain still
(cliché)

skidding their way across the attic floor. Mere seconds ago they had comprised a lamp sitting on a small, ornate table just inside the entry of his grandmother's old house. Now they were just pieces that evoked a memory of her tiny abode. He could not guess why his aunt had saved the lamp; to him it was just an ugly, old-fashioned thing that had no sentimental value. The shade was dark and stained...the cord
(replace with a

comma)

was brittle and cracked in places, some of which had been wrapped with black electrical tape...and it was
(replace with a

comma)

most certainly unsafe by today's electrical standards.

His grandmother had died about fifteen years ago, when he was only six, and recently his aunt had just told him he could come up here to the attic and go through the trunk that held some of his grandmother's personal items. He had not even known the trunk existed until a couple of weeks ago when his aunt had said, "Deshon, you're old enough now to go up to the attic and find something of Grandmother's that you'd like to keep in remembrance of her. Until now, you just weren't of an age to have appropriate respect for her belongings."

(polysyllabic words and muddy dialogue; change to "old enough to respect")

So Deshon had finally mustered up enough courage to come up to this smelly, dusty, cobweb-covered place and satisfy his aunt's wish. He could not think of a single thing that had belonged to his grandmother that held any allure for him. But he was young when she had died, so maybe there *would* be some item to catch his eye and make him want to keep it. But probably not. However, he was determined not to let his aunt down by just leaving her attic without one of Grandmother's useless trinkets. After all, his aunt had practically raised him while his parents both worked long hours in the factory. So Deshon felt he owed his aunt this small gesture.

He stared at the broken lamp and thought, *I'll just clean it up later*, and returned his attention to the trunk. There was no lock on the latch, so he just raised the lid. The trunk was empty. No, there was one small item in the bottom left-hand corner. He carefully picked it up and turned it over and over in his hand. It appeared to be a brass ball, heavy and tarnished and dull. "Oh great," he said, unimpressed. "Just what am I gonna do with this?" He breathed heavily onto its surface and tried to polish it on his shirt sleeve.

A warm breeze slid across his face and just slightly rustled his hair. He looked to see if perhaps the attic fan had come on, blowing the balmy warmth out the big vents at both ends of the barely-lit, low-
(alliteration)

ceilinged room. No, the blades of the fan were still. Nothing else was moving—not even any of the lightweight plastic dry-cleaning bags that surrounded the winter clothes hanging from the rafters. His aunt always made room in her tiny closet by exchanging her warm-weather and cold-weather clothing with the change of seasons, bringing the unnecessary ones up here just to hang unused and untended until needed.

Again the warm air passed by his face, like two ships passing in the night, and, just as if a hand

(cliché)

had been placed on his cheek, caused him to face the broken lamp. He frowned. The lamp sat on an old crate, in one piece, obviously never having hit the floor. It was not plugged in—and there was no bulb—but it gradually began to illuminate, (commas would suffice instead of the dashes) revealing a small person standing just off to one side. In only a fraction of a second, Deshon reasoned with himself: *I know that lamp was broken just a few minutes ago. I heard it break and saw the pieces scatter.* His mouth went dry, his stomach felt like it was dropping into his shoes, and his knees weakened. *That person isn't really there. I'm just imagining things because this place is so creepy.* He took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

“Hi, Honey,” the person said. “I wondered when you’d get here.”

Without moving, and barely opening his eyes to a squint, Deshon said, “Grandmother?”

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Handout #1: NOVICE and ADVANCED

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Handout #2: ADVANCED

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Read the following and highlight the no-no's you find. Then discuss them with your overseer.

Just as Deshon whipped the cover off the dented, rusted trunk in his aunt's attic, he heard a loud crash behind him. He jerked his head around in a New York minute and saw shards of porcelain still skidding their way across the attic floor. Mere seconds ago they had comprised a lamp sitting on a small, ornate table just inside the entry of his grandmother's old house. Now they were just pieces that evoked a memory of her tiny abode. He could not guess why his aunt had saved the lamp; to him it was just an ugly, old-fashioned thing that had no sentimental value. The shade was dark and stained...the cord was brittle and cracked in places, some of which had been wrapped with black electrical tape...and it was most certainly unsafe by today's electrical standards.

His grandmother had died about fifteen years ago, when he was only six, and recently his aunt had just told him he could come up here to the attic and go through the trunk that held some of his grandmother's personal items. He had not even known the trunk existed until a couple of weeks ago when his aunt had said, "Deshon, you're old enough now to go up to the attic and find something of Grandmother's that you'd like to keep in remembrance of her. Until now, you just weren't of an age to have appropriate respect for her belongings."

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