

STORY CHECKS by Renee' La Viness 2020

Study your story one sentence at a time to find and fix these.

1. Whenever possible, begin the story with action or conflict.
2. POV - Try to write the whole story from one person's **Point Of View**. Johnny can't know what Lisa is thinking or how she feels, unless she tells him.
3. Past or Present TENSE - Past tense narration should stay in the same tense all the time.
Wrong: Johnny closed the door after Ricky runs outside.
Right: Johnny closed the door after Ricky ran outside.
4. Check first words of paragraphs and sentences. If they repeat the subject/verb pattern (He said, The dog barked, Sarah asked, It grew, They asked), rearrange the sentence structure of every third one to prevent lulling your reader to sleep.
5. Show actions and reactions. Don't tell us she was angry. Show us how you know.
6. Avoid thought and feeling words ("She heard the bells ring." vs. "The bells rang.")
→ The first example makes the reader back out of the story to see the girl hearing the bells. The second example lets the reader hear the bells for himself.
7. Use stronger, more specific nouns and verbs. Try using snatched instead of took, gardenia instead of flower, limped instead of went, sandals instead of shoes, gulped instead of ate.
8. Use few adjectives and fewer adverbs, especially descriptive words that end with "ly."
9. Vary the length of sentences to avoid monotony. Don't put your reader to sleep.
10. Is there enough white space on the page? Break large paragraphs into smaller ones.
11. Identify the speaker within the first 10-12 words of a paragraph. The eyes naturally scan for the speaker on the top line or at the beginning of the second line. Who wants to read a long paragraph in the wrong person's voice?
12. Only one person's actions and speech belong in a paragraph. There are few exceptions.
13. Use only periods, commas, and question marks as much as possible.
14. These words should hardly ever be found in narration: *that, get, got, suddenly, immediately, began, started, became, knew, felt, thought, heard, saw, was, really, just, simply, rather, quite, even, very, almost, probably, pretty* (describes how much - "pretty big"), *had* (possession). Run a search to find these, then fix them.
15. When writing past tense narration, consider removing or replacing these words, as they suggest the present time and may feel confusing: *now, this, these, here, today, tonight*.
16. Avoid info dumps. Describe people, places and things with action when they are needed in the story line. **Don't stop the action to describe something**. Examples:
 - a. She was taller and wider than most women. vs She ducked her head and turned sideways to enter the travel trailer.
 - b. He was allergic to cats. vs He coughed and sneezed when the cat sat beside him.

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17. Eliminate repetition of words and phrases in close proximity, unless writing a children's story that uses repetition for fun or learning.
18. Once is enough to make the point. Don't repeat your information in multiple ways. Say it right the first time. (These sentences basically repeat the same message. Avoid this trap.)
19. Are descriptions and events consistent throughout the story? Blue eyes should stay blue. If he's supposed to turn fifteen on his birthday, don't let him turn fourteen.
20. For dialogue, **use a blend** of no tags, speech tags, action tags, and personal tags. You can use no tags for a conversation between two people for three or four short paragraphs. Use action tags to identify a speaker by pointing out something he does. Personal tags might be a lisp or word/phrase common to that individual's speech. Speech tags are words like SAID, ASKED, GROWLED, or SNAPPED. When all these types of dialogue tags are blended properly into your story, they should become nearly invisible.
21. Dialogue should not tell the story. It should enhance it, possibly with clues and details.
22. Keep the reader involved. Avoid boring, meaningless chit-chat for conversations. (Hi. How are you? I'm fine...)
23. Is there enough dialogue to bring the characters and story to life? Make it real.
24. Check all quotes and quotation marks and the punctuation within.
25. Do characters show the proper responses to events, words, and actions? Readers need to experience the emotions (before, during, and after) to stay connected.
26. Did you give the reader a rest after emotionally draining events? After the emotion and adrenaline rush, the reader needs to calm down. You are in charge of that.
27. Does the main character grow or change (mentally) by the end of the story?
28. Did you just drop a clue? If you specified something and it doesn't come back in the story, your reader is trying to remember it for no reason. You just cheated your reader.
29. Throughout the story, the reader should be given every necessary detail—who, what, where, when, why, how—to determine the outcome on his own. Even a surprise ending should make good sense. If you dropped clues along the way, but you find yourself explaining the end, ask what needs to be changed to clear up the confusion.
30. Having an ending that the reader could not have figured out from clues in the story line is like lying to the reader. Don't do it. (It was all a dream, or a surprise twin did it, etc.)
31. NEVER LIE to your reader. Trust is vital. Every word should be based on building trust.
32. Read your story out loud to hear problems you did not see. Have someone else read it to you, so you can hear how others interpret your words and punctuation. If you have a reader program on your computer, let it read for you, also. It will not skip or add words like humans do. It's a great tool for finding problems.