

FICTION BASICS CHECKLIST

Things to Watch for when Crafting Fiction

By Editor Karen Ball

1. “Speaker attributions,” she said, “aren’t needed unless readers might confuse who is saying what.” Use beats instead.
2. “When you do use speaker attributions, make sure they are physically possible,” she cringed. (One can’t cringe, smile, or grin a sentence.)
3. “The best speaker attributions,” she said, “are he said/she said, because they’re virtually invisible to the reader’s eye.” Forget more descriptive attributions, such as *he yelled, she screamed, they joked*. Those inch into telling and make the writing ponderous.
4. Don’t be redundant. Don’t repeat yourself. Don’t keep saying the same thing over and over and over and over again.
5. It’s pretty safe to say your writing is very weak when you use too many modifiers. (*pretty, really, very*; weaker words, slows pacing)
6. “Show what’s happening—” her firm tone drove the point home—“don’t tell!” (watch for “like” phrases, -ly adverbs, and emotion words: *angrily, joyously, in frustration, with anger*. Even something like “She threw him an angry glance” can be telling. How can you *show* that the glance is angry?)
7. Don’t give away too much too soon. You don’t have to explain everything that’s motivating the characters, all their struggles and secrets, at the beginning. Let things unfold as the story develops. Keep the readers guessing and you keep them interested.
8. Using what she thought was the right technique, the story was written by her in weaker tenses and passive voice. (Avoid staring sentences with “ing” verbs. They aren’t as strong. Also, remember that active voice is more immediate. Don’t slip into passive voice and let your characters be done unto: “She took *the hand of* the author and told her the story was too passive”.)
9. POV: Remember whose eyes you’re using! We can only see what the POV character can see. If we’re in John’s POV, we can’t know what Mary is thinking.
10. Hit ‘em with a strong hook! Make sure the ends of your chapters and scenes build anticipation through a foreshadowing of doom, foreboding, even a touch of humor.
11. Did you know cars have four wheels? And they have at least one door. And windows. And NONE of us needed to know that, did we? Watch out for unnecessary information, which slows the pacing.
12. Resist the Urge to Explain (R.U.E)! Don’t tell us what you just told us (she screamed in fear—screaming generally implies fear; he froze in amazement—*show* the amazement, etc.) Let actions & dialogue show emotion.
13. Actions speak louder than words—especially when they’re done a gazillion times. Avoid repetition in your beats/actions. Watch for too much smiling, grinning, or head shaking. Find your own pet descriptives/beats/phrases and get rid of them.
14. “So, John, I don’t think, John, that we need to use your name, John, quite so often.” (Using names too frequently sounds stilted)
15. Q: What should you never end a sentence with? (A: Prepositions!)
16. Don’t use too many exclamation points!!!!!!
17. Keep the “punch line” at the end of the sentence. It’s stronger. (Not: *She’d rip his head off if he said that one more time, But If he said that one more time, she’d rip his head off!*) Keep section of sentence with most impact at the end.
18. Internal monologue should be present tense. (*I know the answer. She sighed, relief washing over her only to be erased by a surge of heat. Whoever came up with story problems should be shot!*)