

Polishing Your Masterpiece

How to find the rough edges

Point of View (POV)

- Check the beginning of each scene to make sure POV is established as soon as possible. By the end of the first or second paragraph, the reader should be “inside” the focal character.
- For third person limited POV, watch for subtle shifts in POV and other POV errors.
- Strive for intimate point of view.

Early POV Established

- Jason steadied himself on the stone-movers' raft and scanned the sky from horizon to horizon. Elyssa had said dragons lurked in the area. Her Diviner's gift of detecting a presence in the air or hidden in the shadows seemed as sharp as ever. The fire-breathers were out there ... somewhere.
- Randall halted his march and let his gaze drift from a tall evergreen tree to a moss-covered boulder to a marshy pool. The sounds of the forest had diminished, ominously so. Even the breeze had settled, and the treetops no longer rustled. Leaves fell from the deciduous trees like rain, as if autumn had arrived at an accelerated rate. The loss of shelter was troubling. Soon, any flying beast could spot them.

POV Errors

- In the dark of the night they cried out to be saved, but their screams for mercy could not be heard over the terrible thundering of the German Ocean. – Shadowmancer, G. P. Taylor
- Blinking, Monica stumbled back.

Alyssa kept her hold on the girl's arm. "Just wait a second. Don't panic."
- Jim sank in his chair, his cheeks turning red. This had to be the most embarrassing day ever.

Information Dump

- Look for places where you provide information to the reader in which the action stops to deliver it. Purge them.
- Provide back story information in tidbits, usually through the characters' current actions, not in lengthy narrative.
- Build a bridge to the back story.

Order of Events

- The “As” Factor – Use “As” to show simultaneous events
- Participle Phrases – Another method to show simultaneous events
- Motivation/Reaction Units or Stimulus/Response – Events in their proper order

The “As” Factor – Cause and Effect

- He arched his back as electricity shot through his spine.
- The sidewalk dampened as the rain fell.
- As her stomach growled, the food cart passed by.
- Her knuckles turned white as she gripped the rope.

The “As” Factor – Events Unfolding

- The corridor grew darker as she walked.
- He studied the words as they appeared on the wall.
- Her feet barely made any noise on the carpet as she walked.

The “As” Factor – Either is Okay

- As tears coursed down her cheeks, she touched the boy’s arm.
- Mary stroked the wounded dog as she whispered words of comfort.

The “Ing” Factor – Participle Phrases

- Missy turned, knocking her elbow against the table.
- Letting out a sigh, Harold surveyed the field.
- Keeping her stare on the road, Jennifer battled fatigue.

The “Ing” Factor – Repair

- Peter jumped, landing on the other side of the creek.
- Drawing his sword, Max battled the monster.
- Opening the door, Frank ran into the room.

Show, Don't Tell

- Don't give a vague adjective. Show what the adjective looks like.
Examples of vague adjectives:
 - Fierce (Show teeth bared)
 - Wet (Dripping hair)
 - Cold (Shivering and chattering)
- Most emotions can be shown through body language
 - Happiness – smile
 - Sadness – drooping shoulders
 - Embarrassment – flushed cheeks
 - Anger – clenched fist

Show, Don't Tell - Repair

Carol ran inside, completely wet. "What's going on?" she said angrily.

"It's just a thunderstorm." Bill was amused. "You should be used to it by now."

Feeling embarrassed, Carol sighed. "I suppose so."

"I called you here to tell you some news in person."

She gave him a curious expression. "What?"

"Grandma Rose died this morning."

"Oh," Carol said sadly. "That's too bad."

When not to show:

"Show, don't tell," like all rules, has exceptions. According to James Scott Bell: "Sometimes a writer tells as a shortcut, to move quickly to the meaty part of the story or scene. Showing is essentially about making scenes vivid. If you try to do it constantly, the parts that are supposed to stand out won't, and your readers will get exhausted."

Pronoun Antecedents

Check your pronouns to make sure the reader knows which noun it references. Find the confusing pronoun in the paragraph below.

Koren turned toward the tunnel leading to the long stairway. Taushin waited outside the castle, and the white dragon abided somewhere within. Since Taushin was able to see through her eyes due to the connection he'd forged, he had likely watched everything that happened within the star, but without the transmission of sound, he couldn't know what Brinella had said. Still, he probably had read the girl's facial expressions and figured out that something went wrong. Yet, no matter what Taushin thought about her actions, he couldn't do anything to stop her, at least not right now.

Avoid using a plural pronoun to rename a singular noun. – "The package came from an anonymous donor, but how could I tell who they were?"

Dialogue Issues

- Every change in speaker must have a paragraph break.
- Avoid most speaker tags by using “beats.” Beats provide visual imagery as well as emotional connections.
- Eliminate impossible speaker tags: “I think you’re funny,” he smiled.
- Avoid creative speaker tags: “It’s a beautiful day,” she chirped.
- “Invisible” speaker tags: Said, asked, replied.
- Place a visual beat in every natural pause in speech.
- For relatively lengthy dialogue, put speaker tag as early in the spoken text as possible.
- Avoid contrived (informational) dialogue. The “As you know” problem.

Dialogue Beats

- Monica dusted off the back of her dress. “Do you just sit here in the dark, doing nothing for hours between deliveries?”
- “Not if nobody sees me. I’m a wall slave. I would never report anyone.” Monica gripped the scarf in her pocket. “Can I go now?”

Speaker Tag Placement

- “It’s late evening now anyway, and it’s winter. The sun goes down early in the day, so even if the doors were open, they wouldn’t help much. That’s why I carry these around,” Sham said.
- “It’s late evening now anyway, and it’s winter,” Sham said. “The sun goes down early in the day, so even if the doors were open, they wouldn’t help much. That’s why I carry these around.”

Foreshadowing Issues

- Every weapon, tool, ability, and character is better introduced through foreshadowing
- Show or indicate these things in an inactive state before they become active
- Allow their appearance in an inactive state to be incomplete or mysterious

Foreshadow Setup and Delivery

She pressed her forehead against two cool bars and peered in between. A semicircular apse lay at the far end of the high-roofed building, the Separators' meeting place where, according to the theories of some slaves, they determined Promotions and many Assignments. Behind that, a lofty dome with a central belfry towered over the rest of the building. The bell inside rang at midday and also whenever a Promotions ceremony had ended. Now it was time to find a way in to see all these mysteries for herself.

Once again probing the dark air with her hands, she slowed. Her fingers struck something solid, a flat wall. A dead end! Yet, something fibrous brushed her face. It moved easily from side to side. Was it a rope?

She set the lantern down and grasped the rope, a braided cord too thick to wrap her fingers around, but a series of knots helped her get a grip. With her first pull, the rope descended with her weight. A loud gong sounded above. Then, the rope jerked her upward, and another gong reverberated all around.

Koren grimaced. A bell!

Motivation/Reaction

- Motivation (stimulus) precedes reaction (response)
- Misty cringed when she heard the dog bark.
- Usual reaction order: Feeling, action, speech
- The Doberman snarled. With fear buckling her knees, Misty ducked behind a skinny tree and cried out, "Help me!"
- Every action, without exception, must have a reasonable motivation.

Motivation/Reaction

Wrong order - He arched his back and cried for mercy as electricity shot through his chip, running up and down his spine.

Right order - Electricity shot through his chip, running up and down his spine. He arched his back and cried for mercy.

Wrong order - His head cracked on the floor once more as another jolt shook him, and blackness overcame all his senses.

Right order - As another jolt shook him, his head cracked on the floor once more, and blackness overcame all his senses.

Intimate Point of View

- Have your focal character react to or reflect on every significant event.
- Introduce thoughts (interior monologue) with intimate action.
- The key to intimate point of view is to show what the character sees, hears, feels, and smells, and to do so without drawing your reader away from the character.

Intimate Action Introduces Thoughts

- Elyssa returned her gaze to the sphere. What did this peculiar torture device mean to the dragons? With its prominent placement in the observatory, it had to be more than a lie detector. It was a treasure, perhaps even an object of worship. And that made it a point of vulnerability.
- “So you are not from the Orphan Pool?”

Koren cringed. Those words revived so many bad memories. Fortunately, her days in that place were few. There was no way she would ever go back.

Intimate Action Introduces Thoughts

- How nice it must be to sleep so peacefully when doom awaited at dawn. Letting out a sigh, Faye pulled a threadbare blanket from a top bunk and surveyed the many beds and sleeping bodies lined up in the cramped room. How little they all knew, these poor, ignorant laborers. Perhaps they would die unaware of the tragedy about to befall them.

As she folded the blanket and laid it back on the bed, tears welled in her eyes. Why did it have to happen this way? She was only a nursemaid, one slave in the midst of thousands. Why should she die because of one man’s actions? It simply wasn’t fair. No, it was cruel, inhumane, tragic . . . evil.

She slowly clenched a fist. Fair or unfair, the time had come. The plan had to proceed.

Intimate POV Contrast

- Signaling for Wallace to follow, she closed in. She saw a heavy chain and an iron manacle that bound the dragon's back leg to the pedestal. She also noticed long scratches on his wings and a gouge dividing two scales on his neck. He appeared to have been scourged and then shackled, a prisoner left here alone. *But for what purpose?* she thought.
- Signaling for Wallace to follow, she closed in. A heavy chain and an iron manacle bound the dragon's back leg to the pedestal. Long scratches covered his wings, and a gouge divided two scales on his neck. He appeared to have been scourged and then shackled, a prisoner left here alone, but for what purpose?

Intimate POV Mistakes – Your Turn

The other rider had disappeared after releasing his sword.

Where? He rolled his eyes to one side and saw the hilt against the blue sky.

Following the line of its shaft down to his own side, he watched as air gurgled from the dark red jelly.

Before his world went dark he forced a final vaporous huff over the iron bit as the ground began, once again, to rumble.

Intimate POV Repair – My Effort

The hammering impact to Thunderbolt's side dropped him to the sand, sending him into a slide. When his momentum eased, he lifted his head toward the pain. A sword hilt appeared, stationary, against the blue sky.

He followed its shaft down to his ribs. Air gurgled from dark jelly forming at the blade's entry point, a deep slice into his flesh. Beyond the sword, his rider mounted the boy's horse and disappeared into the line of soldiers.

As the ground began to rumble once again, Thunderbolt dropped his heavy head to the sand. Before his world went dark, he forced a vaporous huff over the iron bit. The battle was lost.

Intimate POV Mistakes – Your Turn

He saw a dark shape in a small clump of grass close to the edge of an arm. In the bright starlight he could vaguely see the glinting of polished metal. –
Shadowmancer, G. P. Taylor

Thomas looked to the window. The painted tree framed a scene of complete blackness. It was now night. He felt as if the time of peace and safety was drawing to a close, like the tide rising on a man stranded on the rocks. He knew that they would both have to leave the sanctuary of Boggle Mill to challenge Demurrall. –
Shadowmancer, G. P. Taylor

Intimate POV Repair – My Effort

A dark shape appeared in a small clump of grass close to an arm. In the bright starlight, polished metal glinted, vague and fleeting.

Thomas looked out the window. The painted tree framed complete blackness. It was now night. The time of peace and safety was drawing to a close, like the tide rising on a man stranded on the rocks. They would both have to leave the sanctuary of Boggle Mill to challenge Demurral.

Passive Voice and The “Was” Problem

- Look for cases in which the subject is being acted upon (passive) instead of performing the verb (active).

Passive – The fish were caught in the net.

Active – The net scooped up the fish.

When passive is acceptable: Cases in which being acted upon is emphasized. – “The knight was beaten. Although he fought valiantly, he had been pummeled by the forces of evil.”

- Watch for overuse of “was” and “were”

It was a still October night. On the cliff top the harvest was gathered in and sheaves of corn were stacked together to form peculiar straw houses. – Shadowmancer, G. P. Taylor

Jack-o'-lanterns glimmered on porches, their candles unwavering in the breezeless night. On the cliff top, sheaves of corn stood in pyramids, more like peculiar straw houses than symbols of a gathered harvest.

The “Only” Problem

- Look for places where “Only” is placed before the verb.
- Wrong placement - “The memories of the lean times were only kept alive through the nobles’ stories and history books.”
- Correct placement – “The memories of the lean times were kept alive only through the nobles’ stories and history books.”
- Wrong placement - “The light only works in these corridors.”
- Correct placement – “The light works only in these corridors.”
- It’s okay to put “only” in the wrong place in the dialogue but not in narrative.

Loose Body Parts

- Watch for loose or flying body parts.
- Hazel dropped her eyes.
- After catching Jessica eyes, Steve gave her a wink.
- John threw up his arms.

The “Before” Problem

- Before usually describes an action that precedes another action. “Bill opened the parachute before he reached the ground.” Did both actions occur?
- “John caught Mary before she hit the ground.” Did both actions occur?
- Make it clear. “John caught Mary, keeping her from hitting the ground.” Or perhaps, “John caught Mary before she could hit the ground.”

“Listening” for Repeated Words or Phrases

- Scan the entire manuscript for:
 - Multiple paragraphs in a row that begin with the same construction, especially the same name.
 - Consecutive sentences that begin with the same construction.
 - Consecutive paragraphs with speaker tags.
- When you are at a polished-draft stage, get someone to read out loud for you. This is the best way to find repeated words. They are much harder to find with a visual scan. Words I often repeat – But, get, after, back, each, every, nodded, sighed, now, as, way (away), body.