

Writing Quality Fiction Worksheet

This is the worksheet for July's seminar, which you can find in audio and transcript forms at: www.writershuddle.com/seminars/july2014.

“Quality” fiction doesn't mean “literary” fiction. Instead, it's about being seen as a “safe pair of hands” – the reader trusts you to tell the story well, and not to break their sense of immersion.

Quality shows up on both a detailed level (word choices, sentence structures) and a bigger-picture level (characterisation, world-building).

Here are some things to watch out for on a micro level:

1. Avoid using the same word – or a similar word – several times within a short space.
2. Be careful with tenses, especially if you're writing in the past tense. It's easy to accidentally slip into present tense.
3. Don't use fancy synonyms for “said”. (It's fine to use straightforward alternatives *where they're needed*, e.g. “asked”, “whispered”, “shouted”.)
4. Use the most basic word that does what you want: don't write “Jon observed” if you just mean “Jon saw.”
5. Pay attention to the sound of your writing and the rhythms of your sentences. You might find it helps to read aloud.
6. Trust the reader. You don't need to tell them that a character is angry, or feckless, or obsessed with power and control, or whatever; it comes across!
7. Be careful with similes and metaphors. They can add colour to your writing, but it's also easy to make them *too* novel and break the reader's focus on the story.

On a bigger picture level, quality can sometimes be lacking in these key areas:

- **Characterisation.** Are your characters engaging and three-dimensional? Do they change throughout the course of your novel?
- **Pacing.** Does the book drag in parts ... or whizz past key scenes without enough time for the reader to take them in?
- **World-building / fact-checking.** Are the details consistent either with reality or (if you're writing SF/F), with one another?

Here are a few examples of the quality slipping in otherwise good books, illustrating some of the issues that can occur on a word or sentence level.

I've taken these from what I happen to have been reading (and broadly enjoying!) recently – almost every book will have *some* issues with the writing quality at times.

#1: Using the Same Word Too Frequently

From [*Off to Be the Wizard \(Magic 2.0, Book 1\)*](#), Scott Meyer:

His computer was still back at home, so he couldn't simply teleport home. Instead, he walked home, eating a bad Boston Market meatloaf sandwich...

The word "home" appears three times in the space of little over a sentence. It feels a bit clumsy, and would be easily fixed:

His computer was still back at home, so he couldn't simply teleport there. Instead, he walked, eating a bad Boston Market meatloaf sandwich...

#2: Slipping from Past to Present Tense

From [*The Girl Who Tweeted Wolf \(Hobson & Choi, Book 1\)*](#), Nick Bryan

Security at the Inspiration Gestation Station was a joke, Hobson thought. That's the problem with these way-too-trendy places: too busy looking good...

Although "that's" could arguably be short for "that was", I think readers would always interpret it as "that is". It's a simple change:

Security at the Inspiration Gestation Station was a joke, Hobson thought. That was the problem with these way-too-trendy places: too busy looking good...

(An alternative fix here would be to put Hobson's thoughts into italics and present tense, as internal speech.)

#6: (Not) Trusting the Reader

From [*Spell or High Water \(Magic 2.0, Book 2\)*](#), Scott Meyer:

Before Roy could respond, Garry raised his hand and cleared his throat. Something about it unnerved Martin. *I don't know why*, Martin thought. *He's being perfectly polite*. Then Martin realized, *that's why it seems odd. Gary's being polite*.

This felt over-explained to me. I'd cut Martin's thoughts considerably:

Before Roy could respond, Garry raised his hand and cleared his throat. Something about it unnerved Martin. It took him a moment to realize what: *Gary's being polite*.