

The Writers Network News, Never Say Never, September 2018 issue

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The Writers Network News

No Rules; Just Write!

Editor: Bobbie Christmas

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Writer's Quote of the Month

Don't be seduced into thinking that that which does not make a profit is without value. --Arthur Miller, playwright and essayist (1915 – 2005)

Miller was an American playwright, essayist, and a controversial figure in the twentieth-century American theater. One of his best-known plays is DEATH OF A SALESMAN.

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ONE: FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK: NEVER SAY NEVER

Dear Fellow Writers:

When will I learn never to say never? Even as a septuagenarian, I am still learning lessons I should have learned in my youth. In my twenties I left Baltimore, Maryland, after a few frigid winters there, and once I settled much farther south, I said, "I'll never go back to Baltimore." Less than two decades later my son graduated from college and took a job in—you guessed it—Baltimore, at Johns Hopkins Medical University, no less. Of course I had to visit him in Baltimore many times until he married a wonderful woman from Baltimore and they moved to verdant Virginia together, where he went to veterinary school. Later they settled in a town outside of D.C., a town I much prefer to visit than Baltimore. I'm not big on big cities.

When I left the corporate editing world and began editing books some thirty years ago, I said I would never edit a romance novel. I didn't read them and thought I had no advice to impart to a romance novelist. I had also heard they were all poorly written. About ten years into my career as a book doctor, though, one of my regular traditional-publisher clients asked me to edit a novel from its romance imprint. I reluctantly agreed and was pleasantly surprised to find the book well written and, I might add, hot! The experience changed my opinion, for sure.

Life went on, and most recently a fellow editor wrote to me asking me if I edit Google docs and PDFs. I'd never even seen a Google doc, but clients who used that format have been able to transform the document to a Word document before sending it to me to edit. As for PDFs, I've refused to pay the fee to Adobe to get the software that would allow me to edit a PDF, so I told the fellow editor I would never work on either a Google doc or a PDF. Period. Never. Send me Word documents or even Mac Pages documents, and that's that. End of discussion.

Ha!

Within weeks one of my best clients asked me to proof a book in PDF form. Proofreading takes place after a book is laid out to be printed. Mind you, proofing is not supposed to include editing. Proofreading involves ensuring the layout has no flaws, no bad breaks, no inconsistencies, and such, but it also involves ensuring that the editing didn't miss a thing or two. It does not involve changing anything, only noting what needs changing. I agreed to proof the PDF only to discover that the manuscript had been poorly edited by someone

else and included typos, errors in continuity, many incorrect commas, dozens of missing commas, and comma splices, as well. I learned to highlight each error and add a note explaining what needed to be fixed. Proofing usually might pick up an average of one error every two pages. That project had six to eight errors per page. It was a mess. Nevertheless, I highlighted and added notes throughout and charged the client extra for the time I spent editing, as well. In essence I edited a PDF, only weeks after saying I would never do so.

The universe wins again. I must remember never to say never.

In fiction when a character says, "Never," the incident could be used to foreshadow an upcoming plot twist, when an event challenges or changes the character's resolve.

In real life, have you ever had an experience where you swore you would never do something, and then the universe turned on you and made you eat your words? Share it with me, and it might appear in a future issue of The Writers Network News.

Yours in writing,

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Author of two editions of *WRITE IN STYLE*, owner of Zebra Communications, director of The Writers Network, coordinator of the Florida Writers Association Editors Helping Writers service, and senior editor of *Enjoy Cherokee Magazine*

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## TWO: ASK THE BOOK DOCTOR

### AVOID CLICHÉS LIKE THE PLAGUE

By Bobbie Christmas

As soon as we take writing seriously, we learn to avoid clichés. In my decades of editing book-length manuscripts for publishers and individuals, though, I see a vast difference. While the manuscripts that traditional publishers have purchased have few clichés, the books that unpublished but hopeful writers send me often are loaded with clichés. Maybe unpublished folks don't understand that clichés go far beyond recognizable similes like the one in the title of this column: avoid (whatever) like the plague. For that reason I want to spend time addressing clichés today.

First, a cliché is anything—and I do mean anything—that you have ever seen written before. Just as many similes (quiet as a mouse, drink like a fish, run like the wind, etc.) are clichés, so too are many other things. Let's start at the beginning. Literally.

We writers know the wisdom of starting a novel with an exciting scene filled with tension. Robust openings build excitement and make readers want to keep reading. If the scene turns out to be a dream, though, big mistake! Major cliché! Opening with a dream also makes readers feel duped, drawn into the story under false pretenses. Strong writing does not use dreams to fabricate excitement. Yes, later in a novel a dream sequence can reveal information about a character or a character's situation or concerns, but readers should always know it's a dream.

Another cliché opener that is the opposite of opening with an exciting dream is opening with a character waking in bed. I see it often in novice work. Not only is it overused, but it's also boring. Everyone wakes up at some time during the night or day, and waking up adds no pizzazz to a story. If, however, a character finds himself waking up in a Dumpster or in the hospital, that's another story. Such an opening could be interesting indeed.

In weak writing I also see words that have been used together so often that they are cliché. Here are a few:

1. Bored stiff
2. Bird's-eye view
3. Crystal clear
4. Few and far between

The list of words used together too often could extend into the hundreds, so let me move on to redundancies, because many clichés are also redundant. Examine the following:

1. She cried (or shook) uncontrollably. [Few of us can cry or shake controllably. Delete the adverb.]
2. He shrugged his shoulders. [What body part other than shoulders can we shrug? Delete "his shoulders."]
3. She just stood (or sat) there and watched. [If someone doesn't move, we don't need the extra verbiage. Consider this recast: She just watched. Or She didn't move.]
4. Thought to himself. [We can't think to anyone else but ourselves. Delete "to himself" or "to herself," as the case may be.]
5. She gently caressed the baby's back. [Caresses are always gentle, so "gently" is redundant. Recast this way: She caressed the baby's back.]

As you may note, most adverbs are redundant, which is one reason why strong writers avoid them. I tell writers to allow themselves to use adverbs in the first draft, though, because in the next draft those adverbs will often indicate adjacent verbs that need to be stronger. Once you strengthen the verb, you can delete the adverb. Examples include the following:

1. He ran quickly toward the door. Recast: He raced toward the door.
2. Suddenly she heard a loud noise. Recast: A loud noise startled her.

I could go on all day about clichés and redundancies, but "I could go on all day" is a cliché too, so I'll end here. If you feel the urge, send me your favorite clichés to hate. I may use them as future examples.

Have a nice day. Whoops! Cliché!

Bobbie Christmas, book editor, author of *Write In Style: Use Your Computer to Improve Your Writing*, and owner of Zebra Communications, will answer your questions, too. Send them to [Bobbie@zebraeditor.com](mailto:Bobbie@zebraeditor.com). Read Bobbie's Zebra Communications blog at

<https://www.zebraeditor.com/blog/>.

For much more information on these subjects and hundreds of others of vital importance to writers, order PURGE YOUR PROSE OF PROBLEMS, a Book Doctor's Desk Reference Book at <http://tinyurl.com/4ptjnr>.

Bobbie Christmas's award-winning second edition of WRITE IN STYLE: How to Use Your Computer to Improve Your Writing is available from Amazon at <https://tinyurl.com/y7ppcdkd> or buy it directly from me at <https://tinyurl.com/y7p9xkbb>.  
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### THREE: SUBJECTS OF INTEREST TO WRITERS

#### MEMBERS WRITE

Jennie Inglis responded to last month's definition of solecism and my call for examples readers have seen. She said, "While maybe not a solecism, here's a change that I do not understand. I thought that a troop was a group of people, my Girl Scout troop, for example. Some years ago, newscasters began referring to soldiers as troops 'Thirty-three troops killed in \_\_\_\_.' This may not be an issue in writing, but in reporting, it is prevalent. I am irked by it. Comments?"

I answered, "A solecism in language refers to an error or nonstandard usage. Merriam-Webster defines a troop as a group, not a person, so the recent usage in news broadcasts is indeed a solecism. I imagine the news media use 'troops' to avoid both bluntness and gender-identifying nouns. 'Thirty-three troops died in combat today' sounds less specific than 'Thirty-three men (or men and women) died in combat today,' but like you, I don't like it."

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TERMINOLOGY FOR WRITERS

Comma Splice

Editors often speak in terminology that writers don't quite understand. We may recall having heard a term, maybe in school or in a critique circle, but we aren't quite sure what it means. The term "comma splice" is one of those things we've heard, but what is it? Is it bad?

The answer of the last question, is it bad, is not simple. Comma splices are indeed a structure that is not considered grammatical, but one or two can be used for literary effect, and then a comma splice can be good.

Okay, what is a comma splice? Comma splices occur when a compound sentence is connected by a comma rather than a semicolon or conjunction. Here is an example: Comma Splice: John loved Mary, she was the woman of his dreams. Better: John loved Mary; she was the woman of his dreams. Or this: John loved Mary because she was the woman of his dreams. Or this: John loved Mary. She was the woman of his dreams. Here is another typical comma splice: She noticed the dilapidated buildings, the crumbling asphalt in the street, the putrid trash piles. That type of comma splice can make a strong statement, if not used often. If too many comma splices have already occurred, though, the safer rewrite would be this: She noticed the dilapidated buildings, the crumbling asphalt in the street, and the putrid trash piles.

You have seen comma splices everywhere, though, so are they awful? Not completely, but strong writing uses them only in a rare sentence for literary effect. If comma splices are used too often, the effect is lost.

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**EASY ACCESS TO BOBBIE'S BLOGS**

Read creative writing tips as well as some of my personal experiences. Access the Write In Style blog here:  
<https://www.zebraeditor.com/blog/>

On the other hand, for my relationship-related blog, see my blog titled "Neurotica: Crazy Stories of Love, Lust, and Letting Go." If you like to read about disastrous dates and ridiculous relationships, I've got a ton of them, and they all happened to me. Some are funny, some are a little sexy, some are sad, and all true. My latest addition is a little scary, because it happened when I was only six years old. Read it here: <https://neuroticastories.blogspot.com>.

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TWELVE COMMON WRITING ERRORS

The University of Wisconsin has put together twelve of the most common writing errors, and I couldn't say it better myself. The information is especially helpful if you aren't sure about things such as dangling modifiers or comma splices. Check it out at <https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/grammarpunct/commonerrors/>.

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CMOS ONLINE Q & A

This month someone posed the following question to The Chicago Manual of Style Online:

Q. What is the proper way to write the commonly used speech abbreviation "twenty-four seven" (meaning 24 hours a day, 7 days a week)? Would one write "24-7" or "24/7" or something else?

To get the answer to this question and many more based on Chicago style, go to <http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/qanda/latest.html>.

THE CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE sets the standard in book publishing for issues such as punctuation, capitalization, and much more. If you write fiction or nonfiction books, you will want to know about Chicago style or be sure to use a professional book editor intimately familiar with Chicago style.

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#### HOW TO FIND A TRADITIONAL PUBLISHER FOR YOUR BOOK

I haven't read the Author's Publish GUIDE TO MANUSCRIPT SUBSCRIPTION, but many people have asked me how to find a traditional publisher. I can only tell them about how I did it, but this book promises to give all the usual steps necessary, and it's free. To download the book, go to <http://authorspublish.com/manuscript-submission/>.

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WHAT DOES A MYSTERY PUBLISHER LOOK FOR?

The following tips come from Poisoned Pen Press, a subsidiary of Sourcebooks. Although the publisher does not accept unagented submissions, it gives a list of great guidelines for all writers, both mystery writers and other writers, to heed. Here goes:

EVALUATION CRITERIA

Excellence in writing: Above all, you must show us that you treat writing as a craft, not just a means of relaying information. There is a difference between exposition and art. Show us art!

Originality: Someone somewhere said something about there only being seven (or nine, or twelve, depending on your internet search engine) basic plot lines for stories. That doesn't mean you can't set yours apart. We may skew towards traditional mystery—where solution of the puzzle drives the plot—but that doesn't mean your characters, setting, and voice need to be conventional. In fact, we'd prefer they weren't!

Voice: See Originality. Give us your quirky, your downtrodden, your snarky, your unintentionally ironic. You get the picture.

Character: It sounds trite, but your characters should leap off the page, punch us in the face and steal our spot in the coffee line.

Plotting: Here's where we get back to the "traditional mystery" thing. We want sleuthing; we want clues and red herrings and plot twists, and "DAMN! I never saw THAT coming."

Setting: Anywhere, anytime, so long as it supports and enhances your plot and allows your characters to shine. The right setting almost becomes a character itself.

Dialogue: Should suit your characters and setting. No modern slang in historicals, no flowery language in modern police procedurals. Nothing takes a reader out of a story quicker than dialogue that doesn't ring true to the time, place, or speaker. Also, avoid excessive dialogue tags ("he said"/"she proposed"/"they queried," blah blah); these tend to slow the pace, and are often completely unnecessary (she proffered).

Final, IMPORTANT Note: Please, please PLEASE—do NOT begin your story with a description of the weather, unless it is so integral to your plot that removing it would damage the story irrevocably and cause you acute existential anguish. There's a reason why the phrase "It was a dark and stormy night" is so often lampooned (and is, in fact, the inspiration for an annual writing competition where contestants strive to submit their absolute WORST opening sentences. Really! Here's the link: <http://www.bulwer-lytton.com/>).

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FOUR: CONTESTS, AGENTS, AND MARKETS

PHILOSOPHY BLOG SEEKS ESSAYS

The Partially Examined Life takes submissions for essays related to philosophy, culture, and ideas. We'd love to see queries from writers who can contribute:

- Philosophy-related essays, personal essays, and interviews. See The Stone for great examples of this sort of content: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/category/the-stone/>
- Book Reviews of philosophical texts.
- Review essays about any genre and medium, including thoughtful takes on literature and film. These need not explicitly be about philosophy and philosophers.
- Thoughtful pieces related to politics and culture, especially pieces that analyze current issues by way of political philosophy, social thought, moral philosophy, moral psychology, and psychoanalysis.
- Pieces related to the intersection of philosophy and popular culture (as in the Popular Culture and Philosophy series).
- Anything else you think you can persuade us is suitable to our site--pitch away.

Please send queries or pieces on spec to submissions@partiallyexaminedlife.com.

Unfortunately we cannot respond to every query.

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For full submission guidelines see <https://www.perseabooks.com/contact>.

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SHORT STORY CONTEST

The Ojai Art Center Literary Branch announces its "80 Words for 80 Years Short Story Contest" to celebrate the Art Center's 80th Anniversary. Submissions are accepted August 15 - September 15. All ages as encouraged to participate as there are two age categories, 17 and younger and 18 and older.

Said Ilona Saari, Literary Branch chair, "We wanted to give people a chance not only to be creative, but disciplined, while we celebrate the Art Center's 80 years of creativity in exactly 80 words."

A panel of judges will select the winners in each category. Winners will be announced at an Art Center reception on October 14 at 7 p.m. First, second, and third place winners in each category will receive a cash prize and will be asked to read their entries at the reception. Seven honorable mention writers will be chosen in each category, who will also have the honor of sharing their stories at the reception.

The Literary Branch seeks submissions with the following guidelines:

- Each story must contain exactly 80 words—no more, no less.
- Submission Fee: \$10 per entry
- Submissions accepted August 15 - September 15
- Two Categories: 17 and younger and 18 years of age and over (please indicate your category with your submission)
- All entries must in either .doc or .docx format
- All entries must be made through the website at <https://bit.ly/2Y5qc38>

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For more information, please email: Ilonalonie@gmail.com

Learn more and enter at <https://bit.ly/2Y5qc38>

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Deadline: 18th of each month.

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