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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

"The crown of literature is poetry. It is its end and its aim. It is the most sublime activity of the human mind. It is the achievement of beauty and delicacy. The writer of prose can only step aside when the poet passes." —W. Somerset Maugham

Not a poet but an admirer of poets, William Somerset Maugham lived from 1874 to 1965. An English playwright, he also wrote novels and short stories. He was considered the highest-paid author in the 1930s.

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One: From the Editor's Desk: WRITE WHAT WE KNOW?

Dear Fellow Writers:

I grew up in the segregated South, and I lived through tumultuous times.

In 1963 I was a sophomore when, despite protests and death threats, three brave young blacks—two men and one woman—matriculated at the previously all-white University of South Carolina. I was perhaps the only student who dared to visit the woman in her assigned dorm, one of the oldest on campus. I also took her on a tour of my newer dorm. To my horror my dorm mother later threatened me and said never again to bring Henrie Monteith (now the esteemed Dr. Henrie Monteith Treadwell) to my dorm where "blacks weren't allowed."

In 1968 I returned to South Carolina at a time when folks marched in protest to the Vietnam War and threw beer bottles at soldiers in uniform. With the huge Fort Jackson adjacent to Columbia, irate protesters unfortunately had plenty of targets.

In 2020 I see protests on TV that make me realize how little progress we've made, and to make matters worse, we are enduring a pandemic even more frightening than the one I saw as a young child when polio was our fear. The iron lungs of the 1950s have become the ventilators of the 2020s. The protests of the Vietnam era have become protests over wearing masks, even though masks protect our fellow man. As for Civil Rights, we have a long way to go before everyone in America is treated with equal respect and dignity.

The protests, conspiracy theories, and debates over everything, including politics versus science, dismay me. I've never seen quite as much division coming together in a perfect storm. When Americans elected Barack Obama, I breathed a sigh of relief, thinking Americans had finally set racism aside. Much more edification from people of color made me realize how wrong I was. On top of everything, we're enduring a waning economy because many of us must stay home if we want to stay alive.

As writers we have even more issues. We live in a time of a pandemic, while "Write what you know" gets pounded into our skulls, yet traditional publishers aren't buying books about pandemics. They aren't even publishing as many print books as they used to. What is a writer to do?

The simple answer: We writers should do what we always do. Write. Somewhere in the back of our minds is the next thing to write about, perhaps a memory or perhaps a fantasy. If the pandemic is all you can think about, then write about it, as I did in this letter. Get your feelings and opinions out and move on to the next project. Not everything we write has to be marketable. Sometimes it's cathartic.

I wrote this diatribe, and now I'm writing my memoirs regarding my joys, grief, and humorous adventures with the many animals that have blessed my life over the years. I hope those stories will uplift people more than would a story about the pandemic.

What are your feelings on the subject?

Yours in writing,
Bobbie Christmas Bobbie@zebraeditor.com or bzebra@aol.com
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: CULTURAL POINTS OF VIEW

Q: My fiancée thinks I should change my main character to a woman, to make my novel more marketable. What say you?

A: Marketability is something to consider, and few writers can authentically write from the point of view of a person from a different culture or sexual orientation. If you do not feel confident writing from the perspective of the opposite sex, the book will be less marketable, not more marketable. Use

caution with any suggestion; always follow your writer's gut. We all have things we do instinctively, and we do them for a reason.

I'm a woman, so I write from a woman's point of view. The one time I tried to write from a male perspective, the men in my critique circle pointed out serious flaws in the thoughts and actions of my male character. Few of us understand the opposite sex or the opinions of those from another culture. I say stick with what you know.

Q: America is often called a melting pot, and its blend of cultures is reflected in American English as well. A recent survey of the thousand most frequently used words in English revealed that only about sixty percent of them had Old English origins. The other forty percent were from foreign sources.

I want to incorporate other cultures into my writing. Can you please give me some examples of English borrowings from other languages, like French, Latin, Greek, Native American Languages, Spanish, German, Scandinavian Languages, Italian, South Asian Languages (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka), Yiddish, Dutch, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, or Russian?

A: While I am an editor, your question is one for a specialist in etymology, the study of the origins of words and how they arrived at their current form and meaning. I've read some great columns written by etymologists, and one of the best put his columns together into a book, *The Word Detective*, by Evan Morris (Algonquin Books). His playful writing style keeps the subject anything but boring. You'll find things like the fact that the word pedigree originated from the French *pie de grue*, which translates to "crane's foot." I'm sure you wonder how that term relates to the American usage of pedigree, so you'll have to buy the book and look it up on page 149.

The Oxford English Dictionary is the ultimate source for English words and their origins, but the book is gargantuan and expensive. It's available on CD and MP3 as well as print. I found a resource on the Internet that lets you search the Oxford English Dictionary for free, though. Check this out: <http://www.askoxford.com/>.

Q: How can I make my history book more interesting? Can you comment on interpretive sense for historical writing?

A: History books become interesting when they include interesting stories and show the interplay among personalities, countries, cultures, and times. Contrast and conflict add interest to writing of any kind. To show conflict and contrast, the author might personally interpret events, use conflicting historical "facts," rely on the opinions of others in the same era, or even use the opinions or interpretations of historians today, especially in light of the outcome. Any time you can resurrect actual conversations or quotations, they too aid readers in understanding and enjoying the content. In other words, writing that shows rather than tells engages readers, and writing that tells rather than shows lectures to the reader. Few folks enjoy being lectured to.

Do you have a question about writing or editing? Get a quick and personal answer by contacting Bobbie at Bobbie@zebraeditor.com or BZebra@aol.com.

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 at <https://tinyurl.com/y7p9xkbb>.
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Three: Subjects of interest to writers

MEMBERS WRITE

Al Reynolds wrote, "I have a problem with this headline as phrased. Adding 'the presence of' would work."

Here's the headline in question: Trump Suggests Federal Officers in Portland Is Only the Start.

I answered, "Adding 'having' would work too."

Never one to let me get in the last word, he responded with his typical tongue in cheek, "Your version is commendably terse. Shorter is gooder."

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William Speir, five-time Royal Palm Literary Award Winner, asks, "Am I the only person who believes that the people responsible for THE CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE are just making up new rules as they go so people will keep having to buy and subscribe to their books so they can stay in business, and NOT because they are the elected, accountable, and credible final word on what is and is not the English language and grammar?" He adds, "This constant going back and forth, violating historically accepted rules of grammar, and in general making everything right today be wrong tomorrow and making everything wrong today be right tomorrow is really getting on my last nerve."

William is not the only person who's annoyed. English is a changing language, though, and as a result the rules of punctuation, capitalization, and other things have changed over the years as well. In my opinion the CMOS, which is on its seventeenth edition since its first appearance in 1906, tries to keep up with the times, rather than dictating ahead of time. Updating its information on the average of about seven years at a time is probably about right. Granted each edition grows larger and costs more. The most recent edition, the seventeenth, originally cost \$70, but it's now on Amazon for about \$37. Keeping up with the changes is annoying to both authors and editors, and as an editor I must buy and study each new edition. I then must update and create a new edition of my book doctor's reference book, *PURGE YOUR PROSE OF PROBLEMS*, as well. For the past two editions of CMOS, though, I've been able to find a source on the Internet that provides me with a list of the most obvious changes, and I can then look up each item and learn the updated style. For creative writers the changes aren't copious. Most of the changes are for publishers or for folks writing academic works with citations.

CMOS standardizes punctuation, capitalization, and other things for the book-publishing industry and gives writers an up-to-date and irrefutable reference.

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About wearing masks in public, several people responded as follows:

Ruth White says, "In New Mexico we have been mandated to wear them (by our governor and city mayor) since early in the pandemic, and it seems to have been very effective, since so far NM has had a low incidence of virus spread, in comparison to other states. In the 1960s I saw people in Japan wearing masks in the winter to protect against (spreading) the flu, so wearing a mask is not a new idea. Have we so little concern for others? Are we so politically conflicted? Do we just not care? Appalling!"

Thank you for your response as well as your attitude, Ruth. Keep up the good work.

Amber Lanier Nagle writes, "For the life of me I can't understand why more people aren't willing to wear [a mask] for others. Had everyone worked together, practiced social distancing, reduced their time in public, and worn a mask, we would not be in this surge situation." She says that her thirty-year-old nephew insists that wearing a mask is an attack on his freedom, and she says she responds with, "You are mandated by law to wear clothes when you walk around in public. What's the difference? You snap on a seat belt before putting your car in motion. What's the difference? There's almost no effort involved in wearing a mask for a short period of time. Can't you just do it for the vulnerable folks around you?" She adds, "I ask myself the same question you do: How did wearing a mask become political? And how is it that so many of my high school friends who struggled through basic math and science classes see themselves as smarter than world-renowned epidemiologists and public health authorities? Everything is political now. Will we ever rebound from this?"

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Natalie Reid took exception to my attempt to label a verb that showed no action. I'm not a grammarian, but a creative-writing mentor, so she wrote to correct me. Here's her more informed explanation:

About “he was dancing”: Alas, say I (the itinerant grammarian), it is not a “linking” verb. The linking verb (for the verb “be be”) is only the verb “to be” all by itself (e.g., He was tired / She is tall / The Fourth of July is always a holiday).

The verb to “be” plus a verb plus “ing” (e.g., “was dancing”) is the progressive form of the verb, because it shows action progressing over time.

While we use the present tense to show habit (“I eat an apple for breakfast every morning), the progressive shows what “is happening” right now or “was happening” at a past point or “will be happening” next week.

When teaching my non-native-English speaking students, I give this example as I stand in front of them: “I am standing. You are sitting. [pause]. Some of you are looking puzzled.”

The progressive, as you can see, has past, present, and future tenses: “Yesterday I was standing here. I am standing here now. Tomorrow I will be standing here as well.”

Thank you, Natalie. I should leave technical terms and references to grammarians and stick to teaching the tenets of creative writing.

My original creative-writing point—grammar labels aside—remains, however: All forms of “to be” lack strength. Strong writing opts for verbs that show action or that reveal clear descriptions. Weak: She was walking for exercise. [“Was” shows no action.] Stronger: She walked for exercise. [“Walked” shows action.] Weak: He was ugly. [“Was” tells, rather than shows.] Stronger: His buck teeth hung over his wet lips and accentuated his pock-marked cheeks. [The recast shows his looks and lets readers decide that he was ugly.]

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EDITING TIPS: UP/DOWN and JUST

When I speak about creative writing I often say “Write tight.” Here are a few words you can search for, find, and often delete for tighter writing.

**Up/Down**  
Up and down are often superfluous. Strong writing deletes unnecessary words. “John stood and left” is tighter than “John stood up and left.” We can’t always delete those words. For example, “Mary sat down to supper” may be fine. “When John pointed, Mary sat,” however, is stronger than “When John pointed, Mary sat down.” Although not all instances of “up” or “down” can be deleted, whenever possible, delete extraneous words.

**Just**  
“Just” has many meanings. As an adverb it can mean precisely, exactly, only a moment ago, by a narrow margin, barely, at a little distance, merely, only, simply, certainly, perhaps, and possibly. As an adverb, though, “just” often is superfluous.

For clarity and to reduce word repetition, avoid using “just.” Opt for the explicit adverb you mean or even better, avoid most adverbs. Instead of this: “Just as I predicted, it rained” consider this: “As I predicted, it rained.”

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NOVELS SET DURING A PANDEMIC

If you feel the urge to write a novel that takes place during a pandemic, read what National Public Radio learned from interviewing several literary agents. <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/09/872711033/literary-agents-see-an-uptick-in-writers-submitting-pandemic-stories>

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PUBLISHERS CUT BACK; WHAT’S AN AGENT TO DO?

Scroll offers an interesting article written by an agent responding to the reduced volume of books publishers are producing during the pandemic. <https://scroll.in/article/966045/how-the-literary-agent-will-be-affected-as-post-pandemic-publishing-tightens-its-belts>

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Follow my adventures, opinions, and observations: <http://www.facebook.com/bobbie.christmas>

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Get news, writing-related cartoons, immediate updates, and other good stuff for writers. Like and follow Zebra Communications at <https://tinyurl.com/ydyn3pcu>.

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CMOS ONLINE Q&A

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

Q. Is it okay to use “Latinx” instead of “Latino” or “Latina”?

The answer to this question isn’t simple. 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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WORDS WRITERS SHOULD KNOW

Words that have contradictory meanings, their own opposites, are known as contronyms. Here are a few:

APOLOGY: a statement of contrition for an action; or a defense of one

BOLT: to secure; or to flee

BOUND: heading to a destination; or restrained from movement

CLEAVE: to adhere; or to separate

DUST: to add fine particles; or to remove them

FAST: quick, or stuck or made stable

LEFT: remained; or departed

PEER: a person of nobility; or an equal

SANCTION: to approve; or to boycott

WEATHER: to withstand; or to wear away

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HOW TO PICK THE RIGHT EDITOR FOR YOUR MANUSCRIPT

FREE REPORT

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Four: Contests, Agents, and Markets

SHENANDOAH

Shenandoah editors believe that reading through the perspective of another person, persona, or character is one of the ways we practice empathy, expand our understanding of the world, and experience new levels of awareness. Shenandoah aims to showcase a wide variety of voices and perspectives in terms of gender identity, race, ethnicity, class, age, ability, nationality, regionality, sexuality, and educational background (MFAs are not necessary). We love publishing new writers; publishing history is not a prerequisite either. Checking out our current issue is another great way to get a sense of the kind of work we like.

Short stories and creative nonfiction (essays, memoir, etc.) should be under 8,000 words. Editor Beth Staples loves writing that stretches her imagination and way of thinking, surprises, makes her laugh, moves her, is formally interesting or challenging, defies genre, explores the confusing or uncomfortable, introduces her to new writers, thinks globally, has a distinctive voice, cares about the world, and does not assume white people are literature's default characters. We're happy to consider flash fiction—short stories under 1,000 words. You may include up to three pieces of flash in a single submission (all in one document).

For Shenandoah's fall 2020 reading period, we will be open for short stories, essays, and novel excerpts from August 15 to August 31, 2020. Pay: \$100 per 1,000 words of prose up to \$500.

Submission guidelines: <https://shenandoahliterary.org/submissions/>

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AGENT LISTINGS

Many writers have asked me how to find an agent. The process is tedious. Entire books have been written on the subject. Here is a listing of literary agents, which is at least a beginning.

<https://www.agentquery.com/default.aspx>

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PseudoPod

PseudoPod is a genre magazine in audio form. We're looking for horror: dark, weird fiction. We run the spectrum from grim realism or crime drama, to magic-realism, to blatantly supernatural dark fantasy. We publish highly literary stories reminiscent of Poe or Lovecraft as well as vulgar shock-value pulp fiction. We don't split hairs about genre definitions, and we do not observe any taboos about what kind of content can appear in our stories. Originality demands that you're better off avoiding vampires, zombies, and other recognizable horror tropes unless you have put a unique spin on them. What matters most is that the stories are dark and compelling. If you're a writer with a short horror story that you'd like to hear narrated by one of our talented performers, we'd like to see it. Probably. When we're open, you can send it to us through our Moksha portal. Check to see if we're open by reviewing our schedule.

[PseudoPod is open to general submissions from October 15 to November 2.]

Pseudopod welcomes submissions from writers of all backgrounds. We are especially interested in seeing more submissions from people of backgrounds that have been historically underrepresented or excluded from traditional publishing, including, but not limited to, women, people of color, LGBTQ or non-binary gender people, persons with disabilities, members of religious minorities, and people from outside the United States. Our goal is to publish horror that reflects the diversity of the human race, so we strongly encourage submissions from these or any other underrepresented groups. We pay the pro rate of \$.08/word for original fiction, \$100 flat rate for short story reprints, and \$20 flat rate for flash fiction reprints (stories below 1500 words). Read full guidelines at <https://pseudopod.org/submissions/>.

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Do YOU have news for The Writers Network News? Send it in the body of an email to [Bobbie@zebraeditor.com](mailto:Bobbie@zebraeditor.com) or [bzebra@aol.com](mailto:bzebra@aol.com). Deadline: 18th of each month.

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