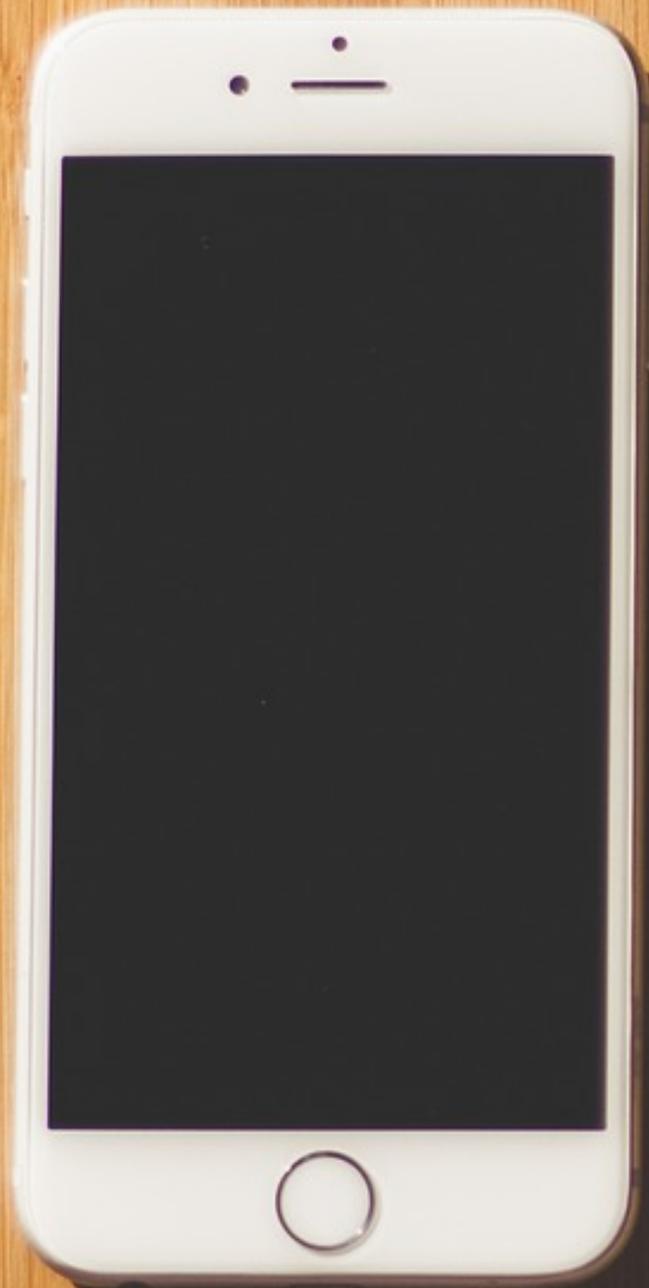

THE WRITER'S EVERYTHING

Five
Texting
Habits
To Eliminate
From Your
Writing



From The Editor

QJ MARTIN

Creating a weekly, or even bi-weekly, magazine takes a lot of work. Throw in a cup of COVID-19, a teaspoon of job hunting, and a dash of divorce, and you have a recipe for disaster. However, when I finally received the two quarterly collections of *The Writer's Everything* in paperback in all their finalized glory, all the work I had put into them felt worth it.

The question I was left with was this: Have a library full of releases that skips the entire middle half of 2020, or go back and fill out the magazine retroactively? I decided on the latter. Now I can only hope I can make that decision a reality.

The Writer's Everything is produced as a free PDF download (more or less) every Monday. If you would like to receive it directly in your inbox upon release, then feel free to sign up for my newsletter at qjmartin.org/newsletter. Be sure to check your junk folder just in case the newsletter is accidentally filtered out of your inbox.

If you would like to support *The Writer's Everything*, as well as my other literary endeavors, be sure that I will never turn down a helping hand. You can pledge your patronage at patreon.com/qjmartin. With your support, I may even be able to offer exclusive Patreon content one day.

Until next time,

QJ



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Developing Your Character

Basic Information > Relationship Status

How long has he been in his relationship?

Some couples spend years together and maintain a strong relationship throughout their time together. Other couples break up after a very short period. Some wish that they'd have the opportunity to break up with their significant other, but stay with them for the sake of children, other family members, or the community. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Ned and Catelyn Stark have been married for seventeen years when he is executed in King's Landing. Their relationship lasts for all that time in spite of apparent infidelity on the part of Ned early in their marriage. In *Deadpool*, Wade Wilson is in a relationship with Vanessa Carlyle for roughly a year before he proposes to her. Shortly after, however, he discovers he is dying of cancer and chooses to abandon her rather than put her through the turmoil of facing his death.

What is their anniversary?

The date of a couple's anniversary can be very significant to them and is often a memorable date for the rest of their lives. It is often the subject of jokes, however, that women remember the dates of their anniversaries better than men do, and that men even go so far as to forget about their anniversaries all together. In *The Fairly Odd Parents*, Cosmo is under the impression that Wanda forgot about their anniversary. Because of this, he feels like

everything he did to prepare for it was a waste, and he chooses to leave and go back home to his mother.

How does he view their relationship?

A character may have strong opinions about their relationship, whether positive or negative. Sometimes a character may be indifferent to their significant other, though that is rare, and even in those cases, their opinion usually leans towards the negative. In *The Incredibles*, Helen Parr begins to have serious doubts about her relationship with Bob. She worries that their marriage isn't strong enough and that her husband is actively pursuing another woman. Bob Parr, on the other hand, never questions the strength of his relationship with her.

Do they live together?

Moving in together can be a big step in the development of a relationship. Not all dating couples take this step, but it's something that most characters who want to be in a serious relationship do. Some have the moral belief that living together should only be for after marriage, while others feel that it's necessary to live together before committing themselves to another individual. While most serious couples would be likely to live together, there's the possibility that married couples may live in separate houses, potentially because they're going through difficulties in the relationship, but aren't willing to call it quits yet. In *The Office*, Michael Scott buys a house. His significant other, Jan Levinson, moves in with him, but eventually breaks up with him and leaves him to live alone.

Five Texting Habits To Eliminate From Your Writing

QJ MARTIN

I've wanted to be a writer for just about as long as I can remember. I can still picture the day when I was playing with my action figures, crafting epic tales in my head, and my grandfather came up and said, "Why don't you write your stories down so you don't forget them?"

Thus began a love/love relationship with writing, with hate rarely coming into the picture, if ever. As the years went on, I found myself incapable of allowing typos and grammatical errors to slip into my work. During one quite memorable English class, the teacher told us to rotate papers all around the room until every student had proofed every paper. Mine returned to me unscathed. I still look back fondly on that, especially considering the number of corrections and crossouts the rest of the papers suffered.

So when I finally found the drive, the ardent desire, to craft a novel in my adult life, I had no question that it was going to be an immaculate manuscript. Imagine my surprise when, after submitting my successful NaNoWriMo novel to a publisher, I received a response pointing out multiple major and consistent errors with my writing. Boy, was I embarrassed.

Why was my writing so riddled with errors? I've since chosen to blame my manuscript's problems on our culture of text messages and

social media posts. Writing an SMS or a Tweet is much different than writing paragraphs in a novel. Unfortunately, however, it's all that many of us know. The use of emojis notwithstanding, if you want to shout, YOU USE CAPITAL LETTERS, if you want to exaggerate, you use reeeeeeeeeeally long words, and if you're upset and flabbergasted, don't you usually end your sentences like this?!?!?

It was an abrupt wakeup call for me, yet it only stung so sharply because when I realized what I was doing, I understood that I should have known better. I had let our modern world full of 160 character SMS messages and 280 character Tweets influence my writing style, much to my chagrin.

Believe me, I've been addressing these issues ever since, and there has been more than one occasion where I simply could not bring myself to remove the capital-letter emphasis. When you're about to be murdered, you don't just yell. You scream at the top of your lungs. Even then, I question my decision again and again.

So how can you avoid my mistake? What steps can you take to make sure that your novel is written with a literary touch, and not tainted by more modern forms of expression? What can you do to avoid the same embarrassment that I suffered just weeks after my first successful NaNoWriMo?



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Writing Definitions

Antagonist

The opposing force that stands in opposition to the protagonist. At times, they are a villain with evil intentions. In other situations, the antagonist may be a good person, even the ‘hero’ of the story if the protagonist is villainous in nature.

Villain

An evil character with goals that would ultimately cause harm or ruin to others. At times they are selfish and self-centered, only thinking about themselves, but some villains can feel like they’re trying to ultimately do the right thing.

Foil

A character who possesses qualities that are in contrast to those of another character. Foils are often present in stories so as to emphasize the qualities of those they contrast. Both Joker and Two-Face are foils to Batman in *The Dark Knight*.

Antihero

A primary character who lacks the traditional qualities of a hero, such as bravery, courage, and morality. Your readers should always understand and sympathize with the antihero’s actions, whether they are ‘evil’ or not.

Well, let’s go over five habits that feel absolutely normal and commonplace in the digital age, and figure out why we need to avoid them in our professional writing. Rather than listing these five habits in order of importance, I’ve decided to list them in alphabetical order, because I’m feeling a little bit obsessive-compulsive today, and I think we could all benefit from a little semblance of planned organization in 2020.

1. Abbreviations

Let’s get this out of the way right now. Abbreviations in themselves are not bad. Or, to put it another way, abbreviations in themselves aren’t bad. There’re plenty of abbreviations that’ve made their way into acceptable English usage and can be used for both dialogue and narrative equally.

For example: “They tried to open the door. It wouldn’t budge. ‘We’re going to be stuck here for hours,’ one of them groaned.”

As far as I’m concerned, these are the exceptions that break the rule when it comes to abbreviations. In fact, some authors avoid contractions and the like in their writing because they feel it causes it their work to sound too informal. And there are certainly some abbreviations that we should avoid at all costs.

Now let me get this out of the way right off the bat. Any character can use abbreviations in their dialogue as befits their personality and upbringing. So what we’re talking about is the prose of your novel, the third-person narration (first-person narration will often contain abbreviations and unique speech patterns just as dialogue does).

Imagine finding this on the page of a book: “They decided they were gonna go inside. They new sum1 had 2 find the clown b4 it killed em all.”

Obviously, replacing words with numbers stands out like a sore thumb for most writers and readers alike. But did you notice the other abbreviations? “They were *gonna* go inside... killed *em* all.

These are the types of abbreviations we use in everyday life and don't bat an eye at. But if we're going to write a clean, professional manuscript that receives the positive attention we want it to, and not the rolling of an editor's eyes, we need to be aware of every instance of these situations and wisely select when to keep them.

2. Capital Letters

This habit, along with the following two, are three problems that I believe exist because of the inherent difficulties that come with expressing verbal thoughts through words on a phone screen. Human language developed with inflections and facial expressions and gestures and pauses and hesitations, all to help clarify the meaning of the message we're trying to convey.

Text messages and online comments contain none of these subtleties, and more often than not, a dry, properly written text message is going to convince its recipient that the server is either angry or sarcastic. So to make up for these inherent texting problems, we alter the text in whatever ways we can to add, with great effort, everything that the written word is missing.

It's an imperfect system, but it only makes sense. No one is going to write in their text: “I can't believe you said that (add drawn-out emphasis on the word 'believe')!” Rather, they're going to say “I can't BELIEVE you said that!”

Novel-writing is a vastly different form of communication, however, and no matter what habits have developed in our transition to unending digital relationships, we have to keep our writing elevated above the likes of texts and Tweets. The writing craft is all about painting pictures with words, and the more eloquently we articulate the events of the story, the better our novels will be.

Descriptions of body language, for example, can easily be used to lay out what is said and how it's intended.

“I can't...” she hesitated, then spat through gritted teeth, “believe... you said that.”

Physical actions can provide the same effect.

“I can't believe,” she slammed her fist on the table for emphasis, “that you said that.”

And of course, we can always use italics.

Her face flushed as her eyebrows distorted with rage. “I can't *believe* you said that.”

In fact, if you have words in your novel that are in all caps, my very first suggestion would be to change each and every one of them to italics instead.

Of course, it's important to remember that the more words we italicize in our novels, the less of an impact those italics will have on our readers. However, to pull a statistic out of thin air, I

would say that you could use a dozen italicized words in your manuscript with less of a negative impact on its quality than one word in all caps would have.

3. Exaggerated Speech

This habit is a direct continuation of the previous one. As I've already mentioned, texting habits have developed out of the desire to help clarify the meaning of our words without any of the context in which they would have been spoken out loud.

In this case, if your parents tell you to take your sister to her ballet recital instead of the football game you had planned with your friends, you might feel exasperated and want to emphatically ask for the reason behind their demand.

“Seriously??? Whyyyyyyyyyy?????”

Or perhaps, to use a “here’s your sign” skit from the comedian Bill Engvall, if you call your wife and inform her that you’re stuck at the airport because the plane you were riding in hit a deer, and she says “Oh my God! Was it on the ground?” your response might be something along the lines of:

“Noooooooooooo. The deer was flying.”

This might be the best way to express such feelings as exasperation and sarcasm digitally. When it comes to your novel, however, you will once again want to go a different route with your dialogue.

“Seriously? *Why?*” he bemoaned in one long breath.

Or...

Writing Concepts

Character Motivation

Character motivation encompasses all the reasons why a character acts the way they do when presented with specific situations, as well as in broader strokes throughout the entirety of the story.

Any primary or secondary character in a story should have their own lists of motivations. If they have no motivations, then your reader will be left scratching their heads trying to figure out why they acted or reacted the way they did or performed the activities they did.

The more important a character is within the plot, the more important their actions are, and the more scrutiny they will be under. So primary characters, main characters, protagonists, and often antagonists as well need especially well-developed motivations.

The motivations of your character can often be related back to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. This is a theory presented by Abraham Maslow. Often depicted as a pyramid, the idea is that characters will not pursue the needs that are higher up on the list, such as friendship and self-esteem, if they have not met the needs that are at the base, such as food, shelter, and clothing.

His rolled his eyes before enunciating with exaggerated precision, “No. The deer was flying.”

A disclaimer: In both of these cases, I chose to use italics in the alternative examples. That might not always be the best choice for most authors, and in fact I personally still have a lot to learn on the subject of writing with an authorial mindset rather than a Twitter mindset, but as with the previous habit, I can all but guarantee that this is the better option.

4. Punctuation

This, more than anything, was the problem that the publisher addressed in my writing which was extremely difficult to swallow. To be honest, I’m still working on adjusting my viewpoint so as to implement his suggestion and break this habit.

The thing that has left me so stumped is a simple problem... What if you want someone to shout a question? Who WOULDN’T emphasize their questions this way?!

So what is the alternative? It’s honestly the same as the alternatives for the previous two habits as well as for the following one. You use your prose to make it clear what the attitude and demeanor of the person speaking is as they utter the question or exclamation.

His harsh, spiteful voice nearly shook the vase off the mantle. “What do you want me to do!”

At this point, it’s also worth noting that if you want the emphasis to be on the exclamatory nature of the question, and it’s obvious that it is, in fact, a question, as made clear by the choice

of words: “What do you” in the above example, then you can actually leave the question mark off and instead write it with a singular exclamation mark. It’s immediately obvious that it’s a question, and the punctuation you choose allows you to present it as an exclamation as well.

5. Writing Accents

This is one habit that might not necessarily be directly related to texting and instant messaging on the internet, but which I believe has certainly been compounded by it.

If some weird guy talked to you in an accent that was barely intelligible, and you want to tell your best friend about the experience, what do you do?

“Eh! Ya pahked in ma spot!”

Or...

“Yawan fries widdat?”

In my debut novel, *Chronicles of the Infected: Those They Betrayed*, I had a character appear at the end of the book who was supposed to be speaking with a German accent. I took this exact route, giving him lines such as, “vaht do you vphant?”

The first thing I’ve since learned from numerous experts who have discussed the topic in detail, one source no doubt being *Writing Excuses*, is that you don’t need to baby your readers through this process. You don’t have to write the dialogue phonetically, misspelling every word to match exactly what you picture coming out of your character’s mouth.

Honestly, at best, this practice is annoying and distracting, pulling your readers out of your story and making them hyper-aware of the writing when they should be aware of nothing but the plot sweeping them away.

At worst, your readers won't even be able to understand what you actually meant for your characters to say, and so the significance of the dialogue, and even the flow of the story itself, go right over the reader's head.

The cool thing about this one is that it turns out all you have to do is tell your readers 'what', and their minds will extrapolate the details from there. If I were to rewrite the dialogue above,

which I no doubt will for a future update to my book, I could say something along the lines of the following:

The doctor's words were hardly recognizable behind his thick German accent, but Logan was able to make out his question. "What do you want?"

Or:

"What do you want?" Gustaf asked in a thick German accent.

If you tell your readers that an accent exists, they're going to hear everything in that accent through the entire rest of the story. That's true

Identifying Theme

Released in 2019, *Star Wars Episode IX: The Rise of Skywalker* is a

moderately entertaining film that attempts to tie together the incredibly disjointed first and second entries in the trilogy, while also providing *Star Wars* fans with everything they could ever want in the finale to a nine-film story arc.

The Rise of Skywalker has a surprisingly omnipresent theme. That theme has to do with trying to find a place to fit in the universe, as well as whether or not a character must be defined by their heritage. Rey begins the film under the impression that her parents were nobodies in the grand scheme of things. The evil Kylo Ren had

Star Wars IX: The Rise of Skywalker

convinced her that they were alcoholics who had traded her

for drink money.

Kylo, on the other hand, was the child of two of the most important rebel figures in the galaxy. So while Rey is trying to find a place to fit in, Kylo is trying to find a way to stand out.

By the end, Rey has discovered that she is actually the grandchild of Emperor Palpatine, but instead of accepting her heritage, she chooses to look to Luke and Leia as her family. Kylo, on the other hand, decides to accept his own heritage, choosing the light over the dark and dying as a hero his parents would be proud of.

even if they don't know what the sounds of that accent actually are. It's the opportunity for their imaginations to play their parts in creating the story-world in their mind's eye.

The greatest thing you can do to help maintain the illusion of someone speaking in an accent is using the proper vocabulary as you write. If you're an American writing a character with one of the numerous British accents in existence, you don't have to spell things out phonetically, but you *should* have them search the flat with a torch for their bloody keys rather than search the apartment with a flashlight for their goddamn keys.

What's a habit you've had to break in order to progress your writing? Better yet, what's one that you're still fighting with? Let me know on Twitter at twitter.com/qj_author.

Disguising Chekhov's Gun

QJ MARTIN

There's a principal in the writing world that we often see referenced, called Chekhov's Gun. It is so named after the author Anton Chekhov, who gave the advice that: 'If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise don't put it there.'

Of course, this principal has multiple layers of meaning. On the one hand, our stories should be concise. We shouldn't include unnecessary details or references to objects or ideas that we

never give pay-offs for. If you mention the possibility of the warp reactor going critical at the beginning of the story, you're going to want the crew fighting to keep it from detonating by the end of the story.

On the other hand, if we have items, events, and concepts occurring in the latter half of the story, they should be foreshadowed in the first act. If you come to the climax and realize that your character has to run across the room and jab a syringe into the silverback gorilla to get it to go to sleep, then you should at some point in the story mention something about the sedatives, or the character's knowledge of hypodermic needles.

As much as this principal does to help writers figure out how to develop their stories and perform accurate foreshadowing, it also presents us with one major, glaring problem: It's almost impossible to surprise your audience.

If you've done your job right, your readers should be able to look back and see exactly how all the pieces fit in place. That being the case, if you've done your job right, it's also possible your readers might be able to predict the ending of the story before they're even halfway through it.

Is there a way, however, to make sure that we surprise our audience while still adhering to the principal of Chekhov's Gun? Of course there is, but as with any aspect of wordcraft, it requires quite a bit of precision.

The solution is that we hide the gun discretely in the background. We dress it up as yet another part of the set, something that doesn't need to

be paid attention to because it's just one more detail to make the world feel authentic and real.

To illustrate this point, let's look at an example from the ten-year-reigning highest grossing movie of all time, *Avatar*.



Avatar

As Jake Sully first disembarks the shuttle that is delivering him to the human mining base on Pandora, a drill sergeant in the background barks orders.

“Exopacks on! Let's go! Remember people, you lose that mask you're unconscious in twenty seconds, you're dead in four minutes. Let's nobody be dead today. It looks very bad on my report.”

It seems innocent enough. Why? Because it's spoken by a mercenary in a setting where it makes perfect sense to be spoken. It blends into the background because it's just another jarhead barking orders at the troops.

However, make no mistake. This moment is the definition of a Checkhov's Gun. How so?

Throughout the movie, there are references to the need for humans to wear oxygen masks whenever they're in the Pandoran atmosphere. There was even a rather bad-ass scene with Colonel Miles Quaritch where he bolts outside shooting round after round at the rogue helicopter before finally accepting a mask and taking his first breath of the entire ordeal.

Again, though, this may come across as set dressing, world-building, background details. But this Checkhov's Gun comes into play in an essential way in the climactic battle at the end of the film. As Jake Sully is leading the fight against the humans in his Avatar body, the Colonel chooses to go after his human body, exposing him to the unbearably low levels of oxygen in the planet's atmosphere.

It then becomes a race against the clock, both to defeat the Colonel and get to Jake in time to provide him with oxygen before he suffocates. How long does he have?

“Exopacks on! Let's go! Remember people, you lose that mask you're unconscious in twenty seconds, you're dead in four minutes. Let's nobody be dead today. It looks very bad on my report.”

An essential moment in the climax of the film, foreshadowed in the very first scene on Pandora, yet at the same time, kept almost completely hidden because of its apparent function as world-building.

Do you have a strategy you like to employ for disguising your Checkov's Gun? Let me know on Twitter at twitter.com/qj_author.