

Pet Words

A Brief Tutorial



We all have words that show up frequently in our writing. My pet word – at least right now – is “clearly.” Clearly, I need to pay attention to how frequently I use it in a manuscript.

See what I mean?

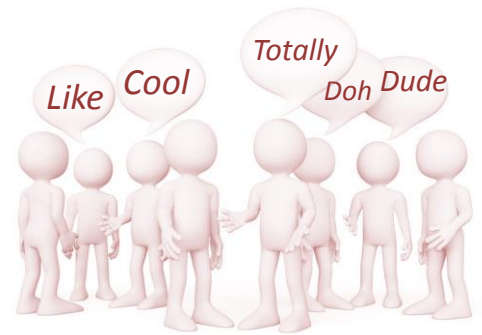
This very short tutorial covers the words and phrases we need to pay particular attention to as we’re editing our work.

Happy writing!



Like, uh, totally awesome, you know?

Remember when you were a teenager and there was a new fad word everybody was using and your mom was on your case every time you said it at home?



Others hear our repetition more than we do

And when readers see it on the page and hear it in their heads, it can get amplified to the point that it overwhelms the narrative we're trying to spin.



Your Voice

We all have patterns of expression that are natural to us and that flow almost without thought – that's part of what makes each writer's voice unique

*There was clearly no love lost between Alan and Marcia.
Both sides of the debate were clearly entrenched in their views.
Jane was clearly in over her head, but she couldn't see it.
Clearly, the terrain would determine the outcome of the battle.*

But you don't want your voice to sound like the trendy teen

Keep your natural patterns when they have impact
Look for opportunities to add variety

*Without a doubt, there was no love lost between Alan and Marcia.
It was obvious both sides of the debate were entrenched in their views.
Everyone but Jane could see she was in over her head.*

In the fourth example, however, the natural pattern has the most impact – don't change it

Clearly, the terrain would determine the outcome of the battle.



Your Character's Voices

Characters have unique speech patterns too, shaped by

- **Regionalisms**

words or turns of phrase that are indigenous to the location of the story

- **Dialect**

speech that reflects the locale, the education level of the speaker, or even a character who isn't a native English-speaker and is struggling with the language



- **Historical words and phrases**

patterns of speaking that are true to the time period of your story, whether it's the 1980s, the Elizabethan Age, the California Gold Rush, or the 21st century

- **Age and gender of the character**

yes, you might have one of those trendy teenagers 😊
or guys who love sports metaphors
or a romantic heroine who obsesses over emotions



Keep your characters' voices true to the character

But provide enough character-appropriate variety to avoid having them sound like a broken record



“Writer” words

Words we probably wouldn't actually say in conversation, yet somehow feel compelled to put into our written prose

We probably picked up these habits in school, when we were encouraged to expand our vocabularies, sound educated, and write essays of a specified number of words.

That

Probably the biggest offender of all. You wouldn't say, “It was obvious that Jane was in over her head.” You'd say, “It was obvious Jane was in over her head.” So why put the “that” in your written prose?

In order

In order to, in order for, and similar phrases. Padding words that don't add any meaning. You wouldn't say, “She lit the fire in order to warm the room.” You'd say, “She lit the fire to warm the room.” So write it that way.

However

And its conjunctive adverb cousins. “However” is another big offender. Writers tend to see it as more literary than “but.” Don't think of it that way – “but” is a perfectly good word. Save your “however” for when you *really* need to highlight a contrast, draw a distinction, or emphasize a difference. Read the sentence using “but” – if it works just as well and flows better, that's the way to go.

Cull your “thats”
Kill your “in orders”
Rein in your “howevers”

Use these words mindfully and carefully – when they are *truly* essential to convey precisely the meaning you intend



So how do I find my pet words?

▪ **Read Your Manuscript Aloud**

One of the easiest tricks. And literally read every word as it appears on the page. You'll hear repetition and unnecessary words more easily than you'll see them. Not only will you find “writer” words, you'll also begin to identify the pet words in your voice that occur too frequently.

- I actually recommend printing your manuscript and reading aloud from the printed page. You'll be surprised what you also see in print that you may have become blind to on the screen.
- Printed copy also gives you a chance to make notes as you go, so editing will be easier.

▪ **Use Microsoft Word Tools**

For “writer” words or other words you know you tend to use repeatedly, Microsoft Word's built-in capabilities can help. For example, do a search and replace on “that” – just change “that” to “that” (so it doesn't affect your manuscript) and do a “Replace all.” Word will tell you how many replacements it made – which will give you an idea how prevalent the word is.

▪ **Word Usage Analysis**

If you use a writing or editing tool such as ProWriting Aid or another tool that provides a feature to analyze word usage, do the analysis. If you find 5,000 occurrences of “that” in a 75,000-word manuscript, chances are, a vast number of them are superfluous. A statistical analysis can also help identify your personal pet words.



Then what?

- Time to edit
- The more you can do yourself, the more time and money you save when you turn the manuscript over to your editor
- But don't be discouraged if you don't see everything or if editing is just not your strength – your editor is there to help with the final polishing