

Stephen King and the road to hell for writers

by Tom Aaron

If you look for advice on your writing, surf the Internet and you will find advice galore. One writing site tells you that one reason we plunk down money for writers like Stephen King is because they use adverbs to make their writing interesting. While adverbs, like adjectives, can help your writing in moderation, many writers overuse and abuse them. This overuse and abuse has resulted in today's overly strong reaction against adverbs and adjectives. As King says, "The road to hell is paved with adverbs."

Mark Twain shared King's lack of excitement about adverbs. He wrote about them in his "Reply to a Boston Girl," in the June 1880 issue of Atlantic Monthly:

"I am dead to adverbs; they cannot excite me. To misplace an adverb is a thing which I am able to do with frozen indifference; it can never give me a pang. ... There are subtleties which I cannot master at all,--they confuse me, they mean absolutely nothing to me,--and this adverb plague is one of them. ... Yes, there are things which we cannot learn, and there is no use in fretting about it. I cannot learn adverbs; and what is more I won't."

King and Twain are looking at writing textually rather than from a grammar perspective. Thinking of grammar, most adverbs end with "ly". A number of writing sites suggest using your search function to find "ly" and editing it out unless the adverb is absolutely necessary. Following this advice, I checked this draft. I found three examples with "ly", two were mine and one was Twain's.

1. From me: This overuse and abuse has resulted in today's overly strong reaction against adverbs and adjectives.
2. From Mark Twain: they mean absolutely nothing to me,
3. From me: A number of writing sites suggest using your search function to find "ly" and editing it out unless it is absolutely necessary.

Let's see if we can edit these adverbs out and improve the texts:

Example 1

Original text: This overuse and abuse has resulted in today's overly strong reaction against adverbs and adjectives.

Revised text: This overuse has resulted in today's strong reaction against adverbs and adjectives, ignoring their value and place in English.

The new text deleted "overly" and added a phrase starting with a gerund, a phrase using a gerund and nouns. From reading this phrase, we can tell that the reaction is too strong and we explain why: because the reaction ignores the value and place of adverbs and adjectives in English. The question is which is your preference: an adjective or the additional informative text?

Example 2

Original text: they mean absolutely nothing to me,

Revised text: they mean nothing to me,

I hesitate to edit the words of Mark Twain. Were he here today, he might agree about deleting "absolutely." Or he might say that "absolutely nothing" sounds better. After all, they both mean the same thing.

Example 3

Original text: A number of writing sites suggest using your search function to find "ly" and editing it out unless it is absolutely necessary.

Revised text: Some writing sites suggest using your search function to find "ly" and editing "ly" out unless the adjective is necessary or improves the writing.

In example 3, more text was edited than simply the adjective. In order to have authentic examples of adjective use in this article, the draft was not edited before selecting the examples. Thus the original text contains unnecessary words, an empty it, and an adjective, all of which were edited out. The new text, without absolutely, is better.

When you write and edit your writing, edit out adjectives whenever possible. If you have difficulty editing your writing, some suggestions may help. You could have two places for your writing work. One place is where you work to write and the other is where you work to edit. The two places are much like the two hat approach. You wear your writer's hat, the blue hat with the red feather, when you write, and you wear your editor's hat, the green hat with the blue feather, when you edit. You sit near the window when you write; you go to the coffee shop when you edit. In writing you may cherish adjectives, but in editing you search and destroy without hesitation.

If you put your writing away for a week, you may be able to read the text as if it had been written by someone else. You may feel no connection to the writing and given the lack of connection, you may begin to edit without feeling ownership of the text.

Still, in spite of everything we've said, moderate adjective use can improve writing.

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