



Build the Story

Warm-up Exercises to Help Key Story Elements

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Each time you write a story, choose one of these key elements and focus on putting it to work to make your story even better. Here are some practice warm-ups. Some suggestions for rewriting are at the end.

Replacing Adverbs and Adjectives with Strong Verbs and Nouns

Your story will be more interesting if you use strong verbs and nouns instead of depending on adverbs and adjectives. Here are some examples:

Weak: He walked slowly toward the building.

Better: He [sauntered, plodded, crept, tiptoed, hobbled, tottered] toward the [lighthouse, bus station, skyscraper, castle, field house].

Weak: The really small girl let wet, slimy drops of saliva drip down.

Better: The infant drooled.

How can you change these verbs and nouns to make stronger, more interesting sentences?

#1 Weak: She ran quickly away from the opening.

#2 Weak: The little dog ate his delicious food.

#3 Weak: The tiny sea creature moved quickly away.

#4 Weak: The very tall, broad man moved heavily.

More About Replacing Adverbs

Showing action instead of depending on an adverb can help the reader see new and interesting details, like the character's personality or even a plot line. It can help the reader experience the scene (which they really like!).

Example:

Weak: Tyler stared happily at the new bike.

Better: Tyler's eyebrows shot up when he saw the new bike. Then he smiled. "This is awesome!"

Better: A wide smile spread across Tyler's face as he gripped the new bike's handlebars. *When the Tiger Rally comes around, first place is mine*, he thought.

How can you leave out the word *angrily* but still show anger in this scene?

Weak: "I don't know what you mean," said Kate angrily.

Simplifying Speech Tags

Too much variety in speech tags can be distracting and even irritating for the reader. It's better to stick with plain old *said* most of the time, with an occasional *asked*, *shouted*, *whispered*, etc. so the action of the story does the heavy lifting instead of the speech tag. Example:

Weak: "I don't know how," lamented Lacie.

Better: "I don't know how!" said Lacie. Her eyes filled with tears.

Also, a person can't *smile*, *grin*, *laugh*, or *frown* words. Example:

Weak: "That's great," smiled Dad.

Better: "That's great," said Dad, smiling.

A favorite trick is to give the character an action, so we know who is speaking, then add the words in quotes without a speech tag.

Example #1: Grandma Suzie laughed. "You betcha!"

Example #2: Dad waved his ladle toward us. "Who wants chili?"

Sometimes, when it is obvious who is speaking, you may not need a speech tag at all for a few lines of dialogue (but not too many so we don't lose track). This is especially true if the action is fast-paced to show excitement or danger. In this example, Riley and Noah are the only characters present:

Outside, a chain clanked around the front door handles.

"Noah! We're locked in!"

"Hurry to the front doors! Maybe we can still make them hear us."

How can you rewrite the following conversation using only *said* as the speech tag so we see the action?

“I’m tired,” complained Lucy.

“We’ll be there soon,” encouraged Briana.

“All right,” scowled Sam. “I’ll carry you for a while.”

Eliminating Prepositional Phrases

Prepositional phrases will drag out your sentences and complicate your story. Some are necessary, but most are sneaky words that will make your story tiresome and boring. Here are some examples:

Weak: The door at the front of the house

Better: The front door

Weak: The opinion of the director was that kids experiencing a problem with discharge from their noses should avoid contact with other students in the group.

Better: The director believed kids with runny noses should stay home.

Underline all the prepositional phrases in this sentence. What can you eliminate to simplify and “clean up” the sentence?

Weak: In the days of our ancestors of long ago, people who wanted to go somewhere traveled in boats with sails made of cloth attached to masts in the hull of the boat.

Eliminating Fluff Words

Usually, you don't need words like *up*, *down*, *just*, *that*, *really*, *very*, *began to*, *extremely*, *totally*. Here are some examples:

He walked ~~up~~ to the door.

She sat ~~down~~ on the bench.

She felt ~~very~~ proud.

What fluff words can be deleted from these sentences? Could you rewrite to simplify? Or maybe to also show us something new?

Weak #1: The dog began to whine.

Weak #2: Alice really wanted that prize!

Weak #3: Mason was extremely afraid of the water.

Weak #4: Shannon saw a very high mountain.

More About Fluff Words

Remove words that tell that the main character saw or heard something, and simply state what happened, even when writing in first person. You will help the reader feel closer to the action. Examples:

Weak: Tom looked out the window. He could see the car had stopped.

Better: Tom looked out the window. The car had stopped.

Weak: I noticed that Melanie was crying.

Better: I stopped and listened. Melanie was crying.

How can you remove the extra layer between the character and the reader in these sentences?

Weak #1: I heard a crash in the garage.

Weak #2: Just before he leaped, Alex saw a flash of light in the ravine.

Show Don't Tell/Writing in Scene

There may be times you need to move a story along by summarizing less important actions, but most of the time the reader will be more engaged if they get to see what happens in a scene, instead of your just telling them about it. Imagine it playing out as a scene in a movie. Here's an example:

Show the reader that it is summer without using the words *summer* or *summertime*.

Here's a fair writing that meets the task, but it is still just telling: The sun was a huge ball of fire and the sidewalk was hot. Amy wiped sweat from her forehead, tied her windbreaker around her waist, and tried to hurry up the hill.

Better:

Amy squinted. If only the sun would take a break! It was barely nine in the morning, but Amy was already slinging sweat. She sure didn't need the windbreaker Grandma had made her wear.

Tying the windbreaker around her waist, Amy jumped from the grass to the sidewalk. *This will be faster*, she thought.

"Ouch, ouch, ouch!" Already, the sidewalk felt like a million degrees. Amy blew cooler air onto the bottom of one bare foot as she hopped double-time back to the grass on the other one.

Amy scrunched her face at the hill. "You're not going to win," she said. Then she scampered up the grassy slope like a squirrel

Write a scene in which you show the reader that the hot chocolate is hot without using the words *hot* or *hot chocolate*.

Sample Rewrites for the Exercises

Here are some sample rewrites for the above exercises, but these are not the only correct answers. There are many ways to write a story!

Replacing Adverbs and Adjectives with Strong Verbs and Nouns

#1 Better: She [sprinted, bolted, zoomed, raced] from the cave.

#2 Better: The chihuahua [devoured, gobbled, wolfed] his kibble.

#3 Better: The [shrimp, angelfish] [darted, zipped] away.

#4 Better: The [giant, linebacker, sasquatch] [stomped, lumbered].

More About Replacing Adverbs

Better #1, one option:

Kate tightened her fists. Her eyebrows pushed together and her lips curled. "I don't know what you mean," she said through clenched teeth.

Better #1, another option:

Kate kicked the boulder and whirled to face Justin. Her face was beet red. “I don’t know what you mean!”

Simplifying Speech Tags

Better:

“I’m tired,” said Lucy. She shuffled her feet in the dirt.

“We’ll be there soon,” said Briana, giving her sister a hug.

Sam scowled, but he lifted Lucy onto his shoulders. “All right, I’ll carry you for a while.”

Show Don’t Tell/Writing in Scene

This one is a fair rewrite, but is still telling, not showing:

Jack took the cup that Aunt Margaret held toward him. Steam rose from inside the mug. His icy hands began to warm. He blew on the contents and took a cautious sip of the sweet, brown cocoa, but the drink burned his tongue.

Better:

With a tired nod, Jack took the steaming mug that Aunt Margaret held out to him. Almost immediately, the ice blocks that were his hands thawed as he alternated holding the mug in each hand for a few seconds.

Aunt Margaret’s glistening eyes were on him, her hands clasped under her chin like a child. An expectant smile on her face.

Oh. She means drink it now, thought Jack. He lifted the mug to his lips, blew across the top of the sweet, brown liquid, and took a tiny sip. *Whoa, wish I hadn’t done that!*

“I’ll wait a bit longer,” he said. Then seeing Aunt Margaret’s face fall, he added, “But it’s very good.”

Eliminating Prepositional Phrases

Better: Long ago, travelers rode in sailboats.

Eliminating Fluff Words

Better #1: Suddenly, the dog whined.

Better #2: Alice wanted that prize! or

More than anything, Alice wanted that prize! or

Just thinking about that awesome prize made Alice dizzy.

Better #3: Mason was terrified of water. or

Mason had been terrified of water since he was five and nearly drowned.

Better #4: A mountain loomed before Shannon, its peak hidden by a cloud.

More About Fluff Words

Better #1: Something crashed in the garage.

Better #2: Just before Alex leaped, a light flashed in the ravine.