

Stephen King: The Adverb is Not Your Friend

This great advice from Stephen King comes from his essential book *On Writing*. It's filled with writing tips and insight into his life and writing process. If you haven't read it – read it! This extract is about the dreaded adverb. One or two may be okay, but beware the adverb – it is *not* your friend...

“Adverbs ... are words that modify verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs. They're the ones that usually end in **-ly**. Adverbs, like the passive voice, seem to have been created with the timid writer in mind. ... With adverbs, the writer usually tells us he or she is afraid he/she isn't expressing himself/herself clearly, that he or she is not getting the point or the picture across.

“Consider the sentence **He closed the door firmly**. It's by no means a terrible sentence (at least it's got an active verb going for it), but ask yourself if **firmly** really has to be there. You can argue that it expresses a degree of difference between **He closed the door** and **He slammed the door**, and you'll get no argument from me ... but what about context? What about all the enlightening (not to say emotionally moving) prose which came *before* **He closed the door firmly**? Shouldn't this tell us how he closed the door? And if the foregoing prose *does* tell us, isn't **firmly** an extra word? Isn't it redundant?

“Someone out there is now accusing me of being tiresome and anal-retentive. I deny it. I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs, and I will shout it from the rooftops. To put it another way, they're like dandelions. If you have one on your lawn, it looks pretty and unique. If you fail to root it out, however, you find five the next day . . . fifty the day after that . . . and then, my brothers and sisters, your lawn is **totally, completely, and profligately** covered with dandelions. By then you see them for the weeds they really are, but by then it's — *GASP!!* — too late.

“I can be a good sport about adverbs, though. Yes I can. With one exception: dialogue attribution. I insist that you use the adverb in dialogue attribution only in the rarest and most special of occasions . . . and not even then, if you can avoid it. Just to make sure we all know what we're talking about, examine these three sentences:

'Put it down!' she shouted.

'Give it back,' he pleaded, 'it's mine.'

'Don't be such a fool, Jekyll,' Utterson said.

“In these sentences, **shouted**, **pleaded**, and **said** are verbs of dialogue attribution. Now look at these dubious revisions:

'Put it down! she shouted menacingly.

'Give it back,' he pleaded abjectly, 'it's mine.'

'Don't be such a fool, Jekyll,' Utterson said contemptuously.

“The three latter sentences are all weaker than the three former ones, and most readers will see why immediately.”

– from *On Writing* by Stephen King

And one final thought:

“I’m convinced that fear is at the root of most bad writing. If one is writing for one’s own pleasure, that fear may be mild — *timidity* is the word I’ve used here. If, however, one is working under deadline — a school paper, a newspaper article, the SAT writing sample — that fear may be intense. Dumbo got airborne with the help of a magic feather; you may feel the urge to grasp a passive verb or one of those nasty adverbs for the same reason. Just remember before you do that Dumbo didn’t need the feather; the magic was in him.”