



TRANSCRIPT: SEASON 2, EPISODE 4
ADVERBS: USE AND ABUSE IN WRITING

Denise Cowle: Hello and welcome to The Editing Podcast! We've got a belter for you this week, haven't we, Louise.

Louise Harnby: Hello. Yes. Actually, I'm a bit nervous about this one because we're going to be talking about one of those things that get people in a right old knicker knot.

DC: And it's not the serial or Oxford comma. Though we are going to tackle that in Season 3. Every season needs to have at least one knicker knot. We should make that our manifesto!

LH: We should. Consider it done. So, this week we're talking about Stephen King. Yay! We both love Stephen King, don't we, Denise?

DC: We are NOT talking about Stephen King, but we are talking about something he talked about.

LH: I know. But can I just say that Stephen King is the person responsible for getting me reading grown-up books? I think I was 9 or 10 when I read *Carrie*, so that alone makes him worth quoting. Anyway, what we're talking about is adverbs. So go on, Denise, let's have THAT quote.

DC: That quote! So, Stephen King said: '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 in 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.'

LH: So is he right? Well, he doesn't say don't use them ever, ever, ever. He's saying, be careful. He's saying, look at your writing and ask yourself if the adverb's necessary ... is it adding anything? He's saying, ask yourself if there's

a stronger verb you can use. Don't turn your flowerbed of a book into a weed. And that makes sense.

DC: Yes, I agree. And that applies whether you're writing fiction or non-fiction, doesn't it? Though I do think the knicker-knotting comes up more in discussions around fiction. I don't see people getting quite so upset about whether to embrace or banish these things in non-fiction.

LH: It's interesting. I wonder if it's there's more pressure around creative writing for some authors ... perhaps because the focus is on entertainment rather than education or professional development. Do you think that might be a thing?

DC: I think so. I think with some non-fiction people are constantly being told to cut the fluff and flowery language and keep the message clear, certainly in business and education, and perhaps there's less of a drive to be creative with language in those cases.

LH: And the problem with adverbs is that you don't want to get rid of them thoughtlessly any more than you want to *include* them thoughtlessly. So if someone reads what King said about adverbs and went through their novel hitting the delete button, that's not going to make them a stronger writer. That's the lazy way.

DC: That's it – good writing is about intention. It's not about hitting delete. It's like what you said earlier. It's about thinking, does that adverb need to be there or is there a cleaner or smoother way of doing the job it's doing, and that'll retain the mood, texture and flow of the writing?

LH: So let's start with the basics and define an adverb because not everyone knows the lingo. So an adverb is a word that describes a verb – the action or doing word in a sentence ... just like an adjective describes a noun. Examples, please, Denise.

DC: Okay, missus. So podcasts are a bit of a mare for this type of thing. It's so much easier when you're blogging because you can use bold! I'll try to embolden my speaking voice. So here goes.

- To **boldly** go.
- Stephen ranted **gently**.
- I spoke **eloquently**.
- 'James, sit **there**.'
- Louise leaned **backwards** into the chair and chugged her gin **greedily**.

LH: I'm liking that last one! So notice that adverbs often end in -ly (**boldly**, **greedily** and so on) but not always – like Denise's **there** and **backwards** examples. There are also adverbial phrases, which behave in the same way as adverbs but use two or more words to describe the verb. So here are a couple of examples:

- Denise and Louise laughed **like a couple of Mutleys!**
- The writer eradicated her adverbs **under the watchful eye of Stephen King.**

Right, so instead of saying to you, 'Don't use adverbs' what we're going to do is talk about the adverbial red flags you need to be aware of so you can make informed decisions whether you're using or abusing them.

DC: That's a much better approach. So when do we need to take care? The first thing to watch out for is the **double tell**. That's when the adverb tells us something that we already know because the verb is strong enough in its own right. So examples include:

- whispering **quietly**
- inched **step by step**
- yelled **loudly**
- gasped **breathily**
- glanced **briefly**

LH: Yes, those are all great examples of redundant adverbs that can be gone from your file. And here are a few examples that you might find in non-fiction ... we've done this the wrong way around, haven't we!

- researched **systematically**
- facilitated **helpfully**
- spoke **verbally**

Ooh, and I've got another fiction one that I see a lot when less experienced authors are dealing with thoughts. So I might see something like:

- How on earth would he get that kind of money by tomorrow, Jimmy thought **inwardly**.

DC: Yes, so I can see how in that example things have gone awry because you can't do anything but think inwardly – thinking is something that goes on in your head.

LH: And I don't know if you agree with this, Denise, but I think that in fiction, at least, these kinds of double tells worm their way in because writers don't quite trust themselves or their readers to get it. It's like they're thinking, I just need to make sure it's clear. Or they're just so immersed in the message that the line craft gets a little muddled.

DC: I think it's exactly the same in non-fiction. It comes down to confidence and taking the time to learn and apply that line craft you talked about.

So the next red flag concerns **dialogue**. So I'm going to hand over to the fiction editor for this.

LH: Right you are. So there are a couple of issues here. The first is when the adverb tells us what we already know from the dialogue, and the second is when the adverb tells us something we already know from the dialogue tag. So I'll give you an example of double telling with the dialogue first.

- 'I'm warning you – you take another slug from that gin bottle and you're for it,' Louise said **threateningly**.

So we know from the speech that Louise is speaking in a threatening manner so the adverb 'threateningly' is redundant.

And now I'll give a couple of examples of when the double tell relates to the speech tag.

- 'Are you sure that's a Scottish accent?' Denise asked **questioningly**.
- 'Hey, Stephen, can I ask you something?' she whispered **quietly**.

DC: So I can see how in both those examples, the adverbs are just cluttering 'asked' and 'whispered' and we can get rid of them.

Now here's another situation that's worth watching out for. Sometimes an adverb might seem necessary but in fact a **stronger verb** would be better.

So we could change 'He walked slowly' to 'He ambled', 'He strolled' or 'He edged'.

LH: Yes, and that means thinking about the mood of the scene to make sure the verb we pick evokes the right emotions in the reader. And it might seem obvious, but a thesaurus is your best friend here. Word has a built-in thesaurus that's brilliant as a quick reference tool for finding alternatives to weak verbs. And of course, the other way to fix the problem is to strengthen the dialogue.

I think we ought to talk about adverbial phrases a little more because I think some writers try to get rid of their adverbs by just replacing them with adverbial phrases.

DC: Yes, and all that does is add more words. It doesn't make us think about writing purposefully and keeping things tight. So an example would be changing 'he spoke gently' to 'he spoke in a voice with a gentle tone'. The first version with the single adverb is far more effective than the more clunky alternative that's still behaving adverbially but in phrase form.

LH: That's it. So we're not saying get rid of all your adverbs. I don't think either of us like that kind of prescriptive advice when it comes to writing creatively or academically. What we're asking you to do is think about whether your adverbs are working or whether you can say what you want to say without them or by tweaking your word choice.

DC: Yes! And that applies to any part of language and grammar really. It's not about adhering to rules; it's about considering the reader experience and the story you're telling, and which words will do the best job of helping you do that well.

So I've got a question for you, Louise. Given that you're not a prescriptivist, how often do you find yourself removing adverbs and adverbial phrases when you're editing for indie authors?

LH: It varies from client to client but in general I'd say a lot. And it's not because of this or that rule, or because I like doing things this or that way. It's because those adverbs are redundant. They're not adding anything but clutter. It's sometimes is a case of that lawn full of dandelions that King talked about. And they're a blight on what is, at structural level, a fabulous story. And as soon as the redundancies are removed or changed to stronger words, that story can really begin to pop.

How about you? Is this something that you see from indie business authors a lot?

DC: Yes, I see the double tell quite a lot from business writers – lots of speaking verbally and working together in partnership. When I point it out they're surprised – they've never really noticed what's going on when they do that. Hopefully, they'll do it a little bit less in their next book!

So to sum up, use adverbs when they help your reader understand more than they would have done without them. A well-placed adverb will still nudge a reader in the right direction and keep your business message or novel tight.

LH: And if they're repetitive clutter that add nothing we couldn't have guessed, get rid of them. If the writing feels flat, head for a thesaurus and find alternative verbs that will bring your prose to life.

By the way, I'm dreading seeing the transcript of this episode. I bet it's littered with adverbs!

DC: Ha! I know! Right, moving swiftly on (see what I did there?), now it's time for Editing Bites! This is the part of the show where we offer you a recommended tool or resource. What have you got for us this week, Louise?

LH: So my friend and fellow fiction editor Cally Worden put me onto this. It's *How to Write Dazzling Dialogue* by James Scott Bell. Poor dialogue can really let a novel down so an accessible text that demystifies how to get it right is worth its place on any fiction writer's and editor's bookshelf.

DC: Mine is *The Oxford Guide to Plain English*. It's a handy paperback, packed full of really solid advice on keeping your writing clear and concise, always putting the reader first.

LH: That's all for this week. Thank you so much for listening to The Editing Podcast. You can rate, review and subscribe via your podcatcher.

DC: And please tell your writer, editor and business friends ... basically anyone who writes! You can get in touch with us via The Editing Podcast Facebook page. Drop your questions in there too and we'll get back to you.

LH: And don't forget – all the links we've mentioned are in the show notes. Thanks for listening.

Byeeee!

Editing bites

- *How to Write Dazzling Dialogue* by James Scott Bell
- *Oxford Guide to Plain English* by Martin Cutts

Other resources

- *Stephen King on Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*