

# How to Write a Good Book

Four things you can do right now to bring your writing to the next level.

[Shaunta Grimes](#)

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I've been writing a long time. I sold my first novel seven years ago, to Penguin, and I'd been writing fiction for close to a decade before then. I've been teaching fiction writing for three years.

I've come to believe that when someone talks about writing a good book what they mean is writing their story well. If you want to be a writer, I'm confident that you've got a good story to tell.

Learning how to write it well, though. That's a skill and it's something you can learn, just like you'd learn how to do anything else.

There are a few things that I've learned along the way that instantly took my writing to the next level. They made me a better writer and they made my books stronger.

**Here they are:**

# Stop Using Thought Verbs

This is a biggie. I learned it from Chuck Palahniuk. You can read his post about thought verbs here, but be aware that it will change your life. And when he says you're going to hate him at first, he's not lying.

## Nuts and Bolts: "Thought" Verbs

In six seconds, you'll hate me. But in six months, you'll be a better writer. From this point forward - at least for...

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You're going to hate him, because you'll instantly know he's right. And you'll know that every single thing you've written up until now has thought verbs. And that's holding you back.

From Chuck's article:

*From this point forward — at least for the next half year — you may not use “thought” verbs. These include: Thinks, Knows, Understands, Realizes, Believes, Wants, Remembers, Imagines, Desires, and a hundred others you love to use.*

*The list should also include: Loves and Hates.*

*And it should include: Is and Has, but we'll get to*

*those, later.*

*Until some time around Christmas, you can't write: Kenny wondered if Monica didn't like him going out at night..."*

*Instead, you'll have to Un-pack that to something like: "The mornings after Kenny had stayed out, beyond the last bus, until he'd had to bum a ride or pay for a cab and got home to find Monica faking sleep, faking because she never slept that quiet, those mornings, she'd only put her own cup of coffee in the microwave. Never his."*

I'd add 'feels' to the list. You can't have Kenny feel like Monica didn't like him going out at night, either.

Learning how to unpack those thought verbs is kind of like trying to learn how to write with your non-dominant hand. It's frustrating, because you know how to do it the other way and it would be so much easier if you just did what you know.

Write a list of those thought verbs (please include 'feels'. .please. And any others that you find yourself using) on a paper and tape it above your desk. It'll take some time for you to train yourself — first to stop and fix them when you use them, and then to not use them at all. But you can do it.

And your writing will be so much stronger for it.

**Make your manuscript stronger:** Search through it for each one of your list of thought verbs. This isn't an easy fix, but go through and unpack them.

## Up Your Interior Dialogue Game

It's pretty common, when I'm teaching, for me to offer this advice: your character's inner dialogue should be different from what they say or do.

Inner does not equal external.

No one *always* says and does exactly what they're thinking.

By giving your character some interior dialogue that counters their speech and behavior, you'll instantly deepen your story. It's how you both add dimension to your story and give your character voice.

It's important for you to give your characters agency — they should decide to do things, instead of having things just happen to them all the time. Your characters should be active.

You show that agency through internal dialogue.

If Mary is going along to get along at home, just trying not to rock the boat — and she's also thinking *I really just don't want to rock the boat* — then things are just happening to her. And she's kind of boring.

But if Mary is going along to get along at home and on the inside she's planning her escape or thinking how she really would love to just jump ship or wishing that her husband would go along to get along sometimes, too — now she's interesting.

**Make your manuscript stronger:** Read your dialogue out loud and pay attention to whether or not what your character is saying is actually what they're thinking. If it's not, then add some interior dialogue. Invite your reader into your character's brain.

## Resist the Urge to Explain

This is hands down my favorite piece of writing advice. I read about it in Renni Browne and Dave King's (amazing) book [Self-Editing for Fiction Writers](#).

*"It's when the author tells the readers things already shown by dialogue and action—it's as if they're repeating themselves to make sure thier readers get the point." — from the book.*

The acronym is RUE. And RUE means cutting away the fat and tightening up your writing by not repeating yourself.

Sometimes, you might repeat yourself because you don't trust that your reader will remember something you've already told them.

And sometimes, you repeat yourself just because you're on an awesome, killer, kick-ass roll. No I mean really, your roll rocks. (See what I did there? Usually, one adjective is enough and is actually stronger by itself.)

RUE also can be a way to stop yourself from telling, when showing would be better. Narrative is explaining. It's telling me all about the party. Scene is showing. It's taking me to the party with you. It's nearly always a good idea to bring your reader to the party.

Here's a post where Browne and King discuss RUE as it relates to showing and telling.

## [Self-Editing For Fiction Writers: Show and Tell](#)

[by Renni Browne and Dave King The Internet Writing Journal, September 2001 What's wrong with this paragraph: The...](#)

[www.writerswrite.com](http://www.writerswrite.com)

**Make your manuscript stronger:** Look for places where you have narrative — you're telling the reader that something happened — instead of scene. One sign of where you need to RUE is if you have a big chunk without any dialogue at all. Open those narratives up into scenes. Also look for anywhere you've used three words to describe something, where one would do. Choose the

strongest word and cut the others.

## Get Rid of (Most) -ing Verbs

There isn't anything technically wrong with an -ing verb. They're not passive, even though some people think they are. It's just that they feel kind of wishy-washy and they're usually paired with a to-be verb, which puts some distance between the reader and what's happening on the page.

*Jane was running away from the zombie horde* just doesn't have the punch that *Jane ran away from the zombie horde* does.

This is sort of a cousin to the thought verbs. It keeps the reader from fully immersing in the story.

The good news is that if you go through and remove hundreds of -ing verbs from your current manuscript, you'll gain a sort of muscle memory. You'll be highly unlikely to fill your next manuscript with them.

**Make your manuscript stronger:** Search for -ing verbs and remove as many of them as you can by turning them into regular past (or present) tense verbs.

[Here's my secret weapon for sticking with whatever your thing is.](#)

**Shaunta Grimes** is a writer and teacher. She is an out-of-

place Nevadan living in Northwestern PA with her husband, three superstar kids, two dementia patients, a good friend, Alfred the cat, and a yellow rescue dog named Maybelline Scout. She's on Twitter [@shauntagrimes](#) and is the author of [Viral Nation](#) and [Rebel Nation](#) and the upcoming novel [The Astonishing Maybe](#). She is the original [Ninja Writer](#).