

Filter Words and Their Effect on Mood and Voice

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There are a lot of *Do This* and *Don't Do That* rules (or suggestions) available to the author to help create a more readable and more compelling work of fiction.

Examples of writerly rules may include:

Show – Don't Tell.

Showing is generally a good idea, but there is nothing wrong with telling, if the genre and scene support that sort of information roll-out.

Minimize LY adverbs.

This is generally true if you tend to use weak verbs. Strong writing (what the heck is strong writing) might suggest you use a more appropriate verb that describes the action more completely, without the need for description (speak loudly ---> yell). So a good grasp of word choice may be the ticket here. But LY words can still be useful.

Don't use Filter Words...

What the heck is a **Filter Word**?

One goal of storytelling is to bring readers into a specific character's thoughts and experiences. To get into the mood.

When done right, the reader is right there in the story. Done wrong, and the reader will feel like a voyeur.

One way to get your reader closer to the character's thoughts is to eliminate filter words.

Some of the most commonly used filter words :

saw	heard	thought
wondered	seemed	decided
knew	felt	gave
looked	noticed	realized
watched	could	noted
chose	experience	remembered
sounded		

Why are they called filter words and what's wrong with using them?

Filter words are extra words that enforce filtering the scene through a character.

If you consider narrative voice, the narrator needs to be in the story, and be a part of the story. The voice telling you the story has to let the reader into the story as well. Through well crafted voice, the reader experiences the illusion they are part of the story as well.

By definition, a filter prevents something from getting through.

A filter word can prevent the reader from getting though.

Examples of using filter words.

Mary saw the bombs raining from the sky and she dove for cover.

Can you see the filter word?

saw

But saw seems like a perfectly fine word. Why not use it, and what's the problem...

Sentence construction requires a Subject and Predicate. The predicate says something about the subject.

Mary saw the bombs raining from the sky and she dove for cover

Note (and this is nothing to do with filter words): this is a compound sentence. It has two clauses. Each clause is a statement of thought. The second clause is used to support the first clause.

Subject (*Mary*) Predicate (*saw the bombs raining from the sky*)
and Subject (*she*) Predicate (*dove for cover.*)

The predicate tells us something about Mary. Why she dived for cover.

All in all, it's an okay sentence.

The question must be asked. What is the author saying? What is the author trying to say? What is the meaning of the sentence?

Mary saw the bombs raining from the sky and she dove for cover.

Are the bombs the important thing, or is Mary's reaction the important thing?

If we say **saw** is a filter word, we are saying :

The author chose to tell the reader about the bombs through Mary's eyes.

Well, this sounds perfectly fine. We're in Mary's POV and the bombs are falling.

But –

By telling the reader what Mary is seeing, the author has created distance between the reader and the bombs themselves. There is a sense of being told...

Mary saw the bombs raining from the sky and she dove for cover.

or

Bombs rained from the sky and Mary dove for cover.

Same scene – does it give you a different image? For many people, it does.

Subject (*Bombs*) Predicate (*rained from the sky*) and
Subject (*Mary*) Predicate (*dove for cover*)

The second clause supports the potential consequences of the first clause.

The focus is not on Mary, but the bombs... and the consequence of the bombs is Mary's reaction. Bombs as subject adds immediacy to the scene.

For me, the second example is easier to absorb than the first as it puts me in the moment of the event.

The filter word **saw** results in the reader disengaging, and allows the reader to become a voyeur rather than a participant.

*Frank **peered** into the pit and he **felt** his stomach turn at the sight of countless mangled bodies strewn across the murky bottom.*

Subject (Frank) Predicate (**peered** into the pit and he **felt** his stomach turn)

The author has plotted the events in the story so that Frank finds the bodies – and the above sentence works, telling us Frank found them and how he felt.

Or

Perhaps the author wants the reader to discover the bodies and compare the reader's feelings with Franks.

Remove the filter words **peered** and **felt**. The filter words distance the reader by telling us what Frank is doing.

Mangled bodies lay strewn across the murky bottom of the pit, and Frank's stomach twisted.

The setup to the revised line may need to be different than the previous line... probably. More work? Likely.

Either line can work. Author's choice. Which one engages you the reader? I find the second one more immediate and engaging.

*Sarah **felt** a sinking feeling as she **realized** she'd forgotten her purse back at the cafe across the street.*

Filter words : **felt** and **realized**

Sarah's stomach sank. Her purse—she'd forgotten it back at the cafe across the street.

Eliminating the filter words removes the words that distances the reader from Sarah's experience. The second sentence provides a quick and accurate description of what's going on, nicely paced, nothing more needed

In the first sentence **felt** becomes authorial intrusion.

Sarah's stomach sank. Or... Sarah felt a sinking feeling...

They both say the same thing. Is the word **felt** serving a purpose then? Not really.

She realized she'd forgotten her purse. Or... Her Purse—she'd forgotten it.

Of course she realizes it. Realization is implied, so no need for the word.

Not only is less words better, but it allows the reader to get to the point of the sentence quicker. And some may suggest the reader is more in the moment.

- *Sarah **felt** a sinking feeling as she **realized** she'd forgotten her purse back at the cafe across the street.*
- *Sarah's stomach sank. Her purse—she'd forgotten it back at the cafe across the street.*

In the first example, we're being told what Sarah's dealing with.

In the second, we're right there with her.

Filter words : **heard see looked guessed**

Dirk heard the door click and looked up from his paperwork to see his assistant escort the new client in. She looked like a young woman and he guessed she was barely out of her teens.

Or...

The door clicked and Dirk looked up from his paperwork as his assistant escorted the new client in. She was young, barely out of her teens.

The second example is more immediate, perhaps faster paced, less words – and the implication is Dirk understands the girl is young. The point of the scene is to convey that Dirk has a very young client.

Again...

The door clicked and Dirk looked up from his paperwork as his assistant escorted the new client in. She was young, barely out of her teens.

The lack of filter words invites the reader to imagine what Dirk thinks. The reader is in Dirk's mind and in the scene. Not a bad place for the reader to be if you want them to continue to turn the pages.

So... are filter words bad?

Generally speaking, yes.

But

not

always

To justify a filter word in your sentence :

The filter word must significantly add to the *meaning* of the sentence.

*He wished he could go back to those warm summer days when he'd sat on the back steps and **watched** her dance among the flowers.*

Take out the filter word **watched**.

He wished he could go back to those warm summer days when he'd sat on the back steps as she'd danced among the flowers.

Both sentences are great.

The second sentence tells us what he did and what she did.

*He wished he could go back to those warm summer days when he'd sat on the back steps and **watched** her dance among the flowers.*

The sentence with the filter word **watched** tells us what he did and what she did – but the intention of the sentence is to show he's focused on her. So, the filter word is absolutely needed here.

Of course, you could add more words to the second sentence to layer in why he's there... but the one filter word does the job perfectly.

Use it.

You write the first and maybe second drafts as quickly and as best they can to get the nuts and bolts on the paper.

Then you edit... rearrange stuff, delete stuff, add stuff... whatever.

Do a search for filter words. You will find them. A TON of them. Then do the editor thing. Decide, sentence by sentence... what did the author intend with this sentence.

If you feel the reader needs to be deeper in the scene, following the character and action, then a filter word is not doing the work you think it's doing... Delete it, and re-write the sentence using better words.

This is a shitpot of work...

When a story receives a good edit, the reader will always get a better experience.

Your readers trust you (the author) and want you to entertain them.

With self-editorial work you'll eventually not use filter words as often in your first draft, because...

With practice (write a lot...) you'll have a better understanding of how to write what you're trying to say, with the reader in mind.

Discussion and sharing ???

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