

## Eliminating Abstract or Vague Language

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When writing a first draft, we often throw out any old words to get down the basic idea. But during self-editing, we need to replace abstract or indefinite language with something specific. The fictive dream is deepened by using concrete details.

Compare the following versions of a bit of action, a fight between Sheila and Rudy:

She picked up a heavy item and hit Rudy in the face. Rudy cried out and fell.

Sheila snatched up the ball peen hammer and smashed Rudy's mouth. Rudy bellowed and dropped to his knees.

When you're self-editing to add concrete details, concentrate on verbs and nouns. In the previous example, "snatched" is more precise than "picked up." It's visual and describes the urgency with which Sheila grabs a weapon. "Hit" works, but "smashed" conveys more action and energy. "Bellowed" is a verb that characterizes Rudy. You would achieve a different effect if you used "wailed" or "screamed."

"A heavy item" is ludicrously vague. But "ball peen hammer" is about as concrete as you can get, and it makes the action—and the resulting damage and pain it inflicts—very believable. Where did Sheila hit Rudy? "In the face" is imprecise. Did she plant a hole in his forehead, shatter a cheekbone? Crush his nose? No, she smashed him in the mouth. Can't you hear his teeth breaking, see him spitting blood as he bellows?

I hope you get the idea of how to self-edit your writing to make it more concrete and precise. One area you *don't* want to strive for variety is with dialogue tags. Forget making your characters wheeze, bark, groan, or laugh their dialogue lines. Stick to said!

Next week, we'll focus on cutting unnecessary words and phrases.

—Lee Allen Howard