

Unnecessary Words: Scrutinizing Adjectives

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During the creativity of a first draft, we plop down lots of words, many of which are unnecessary and must be trimmed during self-editing. This week, we'll look at adjectives. Consider the following paragraph:

The *afternoon's* sun *silent rays* warmed Brook's skin as he walked from the *grassy, open* meadow into the *deeply forested* woods. Immediately the *early summer* air felt cooler. He sat down on a *gray* rock, took off his *Columbia nylon* backpack, pulled open the *sticky Velcro* fastener from a side pocket, and took out a *plastic* bottle of *spring* water. He opened the *blue screw-on* top and drank thirstily.

Every noun seems to have a parasitical adjective attached to it. Most could be eliminated. But the trick is deciding which ones are fluff, and which ones are necessary. The way to determine what stays is *what advances the story*. Anything unnecessary to the story can go, as can *whatever states the obvious*. Let's examine these modifiers.

Time of day might be important, so "afternoon's sun" could stay. If you haven't established the time of year in the story, you could also keep "early summer air."

Is "silent rays" necessary? Sunbeams are always silent; this is an example of stating the obvious. "Rays" is also unneeded.

"Grassy, open meadow." This is more of stating the obvious—meadows are usually grassy and open. If the field *wasn't* grassy, you might want to substitute a different descriptor—but only if it's important to the story. If not, drop the adjectives.

"Deeply forested woods." Aren't the woods usually forested? Is it important that readers know the rock is "gray"?

"Columbia nylon backpack." Are these important details? If your story centers on a mix-up between two backpacks, maybe they are significant. If not, they're a symptom of WGAS writing—Who Gives a Sh*t!

“Sticky Velcro”? That’s the nature of Velcro, but WGAS how the pockets are kept shut!?

“Plastic water bottle”? “Blue screw-on top”? “Spring water?” WGAS! You want significant details, not minutiae about the mundane.

Applying what we’ve learned, how does our paragraph look now?

The afternoon sun warmed Brook’s skin as he walked from the meadow into the woods. Immediately the early summer air felt cooler. He sat down on a rock, took off his backpack, opened it, and took out a bottle of water. He drank thirstily.

This paragraph is improved, but it’s still not good writing. Next week, we’ll focus on eliminating adverbs.

Source: Kaplan, David Michael. *Revision*. Cincinnati, OH: Story Press, 1997.

–Lee Allen Howard