

## 10 Mistakes That Can Get Your Work Rejected — and How to Avoid Them

IN MY 25+ YEARS AS AN EDITOR, I've seen first-time author mistakes that automatically land them in the rejection pile. It doesn't matter if you've got a great story, complex characters, or a totally unique hook; if you make any of the following mistakes, your manuscript that you slaved over for months — and perhaps years — will boomerang back to you with a polite letter of “no thanks.”

### 1. A copyright notice on the cover page

This sounds a bit ridiculous, but it signals to the reader that you are either an amateur or paranoid. If the publisher is going to buy the book, they will copyright it for you; if it's not good enough to be published, chances are nobody is interested in ripping off your ideas or words.

### 2. A too-short or too-long manuscript

Take a look at all the books in your local bookstore. Notice the size. The vast majority are between 200 and 350 pages — or about 70,000 – 90,000 words. If your manuscript weighs less than a weekly magazine or more than *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, go back to the drawing board — or the computer.

### 3. Poor punctuation

You may be a great storyteller, have vivid characters, and sparking dialog — but if you don't know where to put your commas, if you abuse semicolons, if you pepper your prose with exclamation points, that marks you as a “amateur.” Sure, we have copyeditors to make sure everything is perfect — but you want to let the editor know that you at least have some fluency in the language and care about those things.

### 4. Overusing characters' names

Once you've established a character, you don't need to keep referring to her by name over and over again. That just gets irritating. Only refer to a character by name when you need to for clarity. And avoid having characters address each other by name, unless it's necessary for clarity. Notice how people really talk to each other. They rarely use the other person's name.

### 5. Imprecise language

Avoid at all costs, words such as *really* and *very*, which only modify weak, imprecise adverbs and adjectives. What's better: the dog was really big and very heavy — or — the dog was massive; the cat walked very quickly into the kitchen — or — the cat scampered into the kitchen? In both cases, the second choice presents a clear picture of the subject and action. And that's what you want to do in your writing — make it so that your reader is filming a movie in her mind as she reads. (Over)

## 6. Fancy dialog tags

There's nothing wrong with he said and she said. It does the trick and does not distract from the dialog. But many first-time authors get into the trap of wanting to make their dialog more interesting, so they slap on such tags as he grimaced or she smirked. Try grimacing a piece of dialog. Impossible, right? Equally bad is putting an adverb after said: he said, fiercely, or she said, sorrowfully. If you have to write tags like this, it means your dialog is weak.

## 7. Too much description

This is almost the opposite problem of too much dialog. The writer goes on for paragraphs describing something in excruciating detail. Describing something so minutely does not mean you're being specific in a good way. It means you haven't found the best way to describe it so the reader forms an immediate picture in her mind.

## 8. Exposition dumps

Beware of trying to fill in the reader all at once with background material. That will just make the story come to a grinding halt. Readers don't need to know everything at once. Instead, weave in exposition a little at a time, and only on a "need to know" basis.

## 9. Flabby writing

Most authors have a tendency to overwrite when they are first working out their story or nonfiction book. It's a natural and necessary process. Trouble is, many authors leave too much of that excess writing in the manuscript they submit. Ask yourself: Am I starting my scene/chapter too early? Am I letting scenes go on too long? If nonfiction, have I overemphasized or repeated any points? What would happen if I made cuts? Finally, look for excess verbiage and cut ruthlessly. Use only those words necessary for clarity or effect.

## 10. Taking too long to get the story going

A novel or nonfiction book should begin at page one. Sounds pretty evident, right? But too many authors take as much as 25, 50, even 100 pages before the real story gets going. Nonfiction authors, too, have to beware of loading up the first few chapters with background, process, or research. And slapping on an intriguing Prologue or Introduction won't fix it. No matter what kind of book you're writing, you've got to hook your readers from page one and keep the story moving on every page.

Excerpted from *50 Ways to Avoid the Rejection Pile*

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