

Unnecessary Words: Annihilating Adverbs

March 17, 2008

When you're self-editing, you want to remove superfluous words. To determine what's unnecessary, ask of each word or phrase: Is this something readers *don't* already know, but *need* to? If not, cut it.

Rarely are adverbs needed (except in this sentence). They're only there in first drafts to help you identify where you must strengthen your verb choices or otherwise rewrite. Last week, we scrutinized for adjectives and were left with this paragraph:

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*.

"Immediately" could be eliminated by combining the first two sentences: "...as he walked from the meadow into the woods where the early summer air felt cooler." The second could be nixed by using a stronger verb: "He guzzled half the bottle." Even with these changes, it's not a stellar paragraph, but we'll improve it in a later lesson.

For now, let's work on another passage:

Marge slammed the remote down *forcefully* and muttered, "Crap." She *quickly* got to her feet and *swiftly* walked over to the filing cabinet. She *hurriedly* riffled through folders in the bottom drawer.

Riddled with adverb-plus-bland-verb combinations, this paragraph needs blasted by the Adverbinator! "Slammed the remote down forcefully"—doesn't the verb do the work here? How else can you slam something, but forcefully? Blow away the adverb.

You could replace "quickly got to her feet" with a strong action verb like "jumped." You could change "swiftly walked" to "hurried." By the final sentence, we already know Marge is in a rush; cut "hurriedly."

Search for “ly” words in your manuscripts and use these techniques to annihilate adverbs and strengthen verbs. Your prose will thank you for it.

Next week, we’ll consider eliminating the negative.

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

–Lee Allen Howard