

Las Vegas Quill Keepers MINI LESSON THREE

Introduction to Words

Cathe Jones

cj@cathejones.com

A few days ago, I read some of the introductory chapter of the book *I'm Just As You Are* to the Henderson Writer's Group. As I looked down on the page, it dawned on me, I need to read aloud a bit more often, or the words become foreign to me. There are times I may listen to a person speak, and the way they pronounce something will jar me. It is then that I realized, I forget what words are for.

"Word" defined by Webster is "a unit of language consisting of one or more spoken sounds, or their written representation, that function as a principal carrier of meaning". That's a fancy way of saying: the pretty shapes mean something when lined up next to each other a certain way. Or, when the pretty shapes are recognized as commands to speak a certain sound a certain way, so they have some sort of familiarity. There are days when reading a single page of text proves to be too much of a challenge, and the words become gibberish.

Like many of you, I spend quite a bit of time trying to improve my understanding of the English language by playing around with Word Games. Crosswords and cryptograms make up some of the best selling products sold through Dell Publications. Why? Every one of us wants to be the smartest one in the room, the best in her class, and of course, quick witted. If you're like me, you probably want to pepper your conversation with as many references to Asta, the dog of Nick and Nora, and of course, Rhubarb, that summer stalk made into pies. There are board games, such as Scrabble, or Boggle, that have gained such a large following that international conventions and championships are televised in some countries.

Words are what allow us to be understood, to be heard, to be quoted, and to leave a legacy. How we place our words is everything to how we are perceived. I love having a thesaurus by my side, so if I am writing for Associated Press, or for Vet-Click Monthly, I can remove all of the extra "sais", "dids", and "wasses" (is that the plural of was? My spell checker isn't sure.). I want my words to sound almost musical, rhythmic, and at times, daring. To do this, I often use the "three list" principle. As you can see from all of the lessons, including this one, that I tend to give A, B, and C examples in nearly every paragraph. I want my readers to find choices, and their preferred way of understanding things in all I write. It's a conscious decision. And yet, as I read on Monday I started lost, staring blankly at the final sentence in paragraph one. I forgot what I meant by the words, and therefore, had no ability to state what was written.

For those who are just starting out, word placement is probably over analyzed. As new writers, we get excited about taking on the roll of AUTHOR, so we at times,

spend more time spilling everything down on to the page than we do choreographing those words into a well blended symphony of meaning. We become afraid that others won't understand us. We hold back thoughts because we project our own thoughts onto others. One woman emailed me and said, "Everything I write is already out there, and I feel stupid."

Everything she writes isn't out there. There may be similar formulas, such as boy meets girl; girl leaves conversation to meet boy's best friend; best friend and girl rob banks and then die in rain shower of bullets. Just because it's similar to something said before, doesn't mean it conveys the same meanings. No one writes the story the way you write it. Just as no one has exactly the same way of saying something:

My husband, from Buffalo, New York, and I, from Boston, Massachusetts, find we are talking about the same single item but using words that present an entirely different understanding to others who listen in. I say House Coat, he says Robe. I say See-rup and KewPon, and he says Sur-up, and Coo-pon. I say Coke to mean any bubble drink, and he says, Pop or Soda. When I hear pop, I think "I'm going to the bar to have a pop.", meaning a shot glass of alcohol. Neither of us grew up saying Pasta. I say Spaghetti for any pasta dish, and he says, Noodles. Writers have to do the impossible by turning of the inner critic when words are carefully crafted.

The Word Critic is especially cruel to women. Our gender tends to keep our work emotionally driven, often mothering our work so much that we forget we're allowed to let it leave the nest. The nest is our computer, our notebooks, and our diary-- whichever nest you feel as held your work tightly for you. We also have a harder time boasting about our formed phrasings. For some of us from an older generation, we are chided for not being "ladylike" in what we voice. Who is putting all of this energy stopping us from sharing our writings? The Word Critic inside ourselves. There is a deep chasm of difference between a Word Critic and a critique.

Some of us write with the idea that we have a story to tell, others, with the idea that we want to be heard. Words work for us the way thread works for a piece of fabric. As each strand weaves in and out of the length of material, so do our selected verbs, nouns, and descriptors weave in and out of our story. Those who critique well are pointing out minor flaws in the fabric. Some may be tiny runs, others may be missed stitches, and still others may be the pattern making row that seems to be lost halfway through. Instead of taking it to heart that you're words aren't good enough, elect to hear constructive critique as a reference point as to how your readers comprehend what's said.

Words are written for interpretation. Sharing words aloud allows you the opportunity to share the work as you hear it. What I found when I read for Henderson is that I hadn't clearly stated what I wanted to in a single sentence. The use of vowels threw

the pattern of speech off kilter. When I arrived at that sentence, I had no idea what my point was, nor did I clearly comprehend what others thought it should be until after a critique. As I read, I didn't believe that the story wasn't good enough, and that came through. I didn't think that I wasn't making points, and that came through. I'm not always the best writer, but I can disseminate a tale with little effort because I listen to the beat behind the words.

Here are two experiments you can try so that you have a better grasp of how words sound in your writing.

1. Listen to your favorite music, (Beatles, Bach, or whatever suits your fancy), and read your story along with the tune playing. If it sounds like it fits into the music, you probably have done a good job in placing verbiage where it should be.
2. See if you can tell who said the following quotes. As you read them, decide if the language or the presentation of the language is what clues you in. (No peeking on search engines first!) They are all from best selling books, still available at the local stores.

"He prays you save his life. He is a gentleman of good house, and for his ransom he'll give you two hundred crowns"

"Did they imagine that the dying Einstein suddenly pulled himself up in bed and uttered, 'E equals MC *cubed*'? Did they think that he had mumbled, 'Der perfekt tako'?"

"It was so long since she had been anything near the right size, that it felt quite strange at first; but she got used to it in a few minutes, and began talking to herself as usual."

-30-