

5 Mistakes Every Writer Makes

Introduction

Every writer stumbles on the same pitfalls. From emerging storytellers to seasoned professionals, these mistakes appear in first drafts, polished manuscripts, and everything in between. The good news? Once you recognise them, you can transform your work. This guide walks you through five critical mistakes and how to fix them.

Mistake 1: Telling Instead of Showing

The Problem

Writers often explain emotions, actions, or character traits directly rather than allowing readers to experience them. “She was angry” or “He felt nervous” tells readers how to feel instead of letting them discover it through action, dialogue, and physical detail. This happens because we think in abstractions. When we imagine a scene, we know our character is furious, so we write “She was furious” and move on. But readers don’t live inside your head. They need to see the clenched jaw, the whitened knuckles, the sharp intake of breath.

Telling distances readers from the story. It creates a barrier between them and your characters. When you tell, you’re asking readers to trust your interpretation rather than forming their own emotional connection. And that’s where engagement dies.

Why It Matters

Showing creates immersion. Readers connect with what they see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. They connect with body language, with the tremor in someone’s voice, with the way a character avoids eye contact. These concrete details trigger emotional responses in readers that abstract statements never can.

Consider the difference: “John was terrified” versus “John’s hands shook as he reached for the door handle. His breath came in short, shallow gasps. Sweat beaded on his forehead despite the cold.” The second version doesn’t mention fear at all, yet readers feel it viscerally.

Showing also respects your reader’s intelligence. It invites them to participate in the story, to interpret and feel alongside your characters. This active engagement keeps them turning pages.

The Fix

Replace telling with sensory detail and action. Instead of naming an emotion, demonstrate it through physical reactions, dialogue tone, and behaviour. Instead of “She was furious,” write: “Her jaw clenched. She gripped the edge of the table until her knuckles whitened. When she finally spoke, each word came out clipped and cold.”

Look for emotion words in your draft: angry, sad, happy, nervous, excited. These are red flags. Circle them. Then ask: How does this emotion manifest physically? What does my character do? How do they move, speak, breathe?

Practice this exercise: Write a scene where your character experiences a strong emotion, but never name the emotion. Force yourself to convey it entirely through action, dialogue, and physical detail. You’ll be surprised how much stronger the scene becomes.

Remember, showing doesn't mean you can never tell. Sometimes a quick summary serves the story better than a detailed scene. But when the moment matters emotionally, when you want readers to feel something, show them.

Quick Tip

Ask yourself: Can I demonstrate this through dialogue, movement, or physical reaction instead? If yes, do it. Your readers will thank you.

Mistake 2: Weak Dialogue

The Problem

Dialogue that sounds like exposition or lacks subtext feels flat and lifeless. Characters speak in perfect, grammatically correct sentences without personality, interruption, or the tension that exists beneath real conversation. They say exactly what they mean, explain their motivations clearly, and never talk over each other or leave things unsaid.

This happens because dialogue serves multiple purposes, and new writers often focus on only one: conveying information. They use dialogue as a vehicle for backstory, world-building, or explaining plot points. Characters become mouthpieces rather than people.

Real conversation is messy. People interrupt, change subjects, avoid difficult topics, say one thing while meaning another. They use fragments, slang, repetition. They have verbal tics and speech patterns. They lie, evade, and manipulate. None of this appears in weak dialogue.

Why It Matters

Strong dialogue reveals character, advances plot, and creates rhythm. It's one of your most powerful tools for showing who your characters are without telling readers directly. The way someone speaks—their word choice, sentence structure, what they avoid saying—tells us about their background, education, emotional state, and relationships.

Dialogue also controls pacing. Short, sharp exchanges create tension and urgency. Longer speeches allow for reflection or revelation. The rhythm of conversation affects how readers experience your story.

Weak dialogue, by contrast, bores readers and slows momentum. When characters sound identical, when every exchange feels like an information dump, readers disengage. They skim. They put the book down.

The Fix

Give each character a distinct voice. Listen to how people around you speak. Notice differences in vocabulary, sentence length, formality. A teenager speaks differently than a corporate lawyer. A nervous character uses different patterns than a confident one. These distinctions should appear in your dialogue.

Layer subtext into conversations. What characters don't say matters as much as what they do. A character who responds to "I love you" with "That's nice" is communicating volumes through avoidance. Conflict often exists beneath the surface of dialogue, creating tension even in mundane exchanges.

Use interruptions, pauses, and incomplete sentences for realism. Real people don't wait politely for others to finish. They jump in, talk over each other, trail off when

uncomfortable. Capture this rhythm: “I just thought—” “You thought what?” “Nothing. Forget it.”

Remove exposition masquerading as conversation. If your characters are explaining things they both already know just so readers can learn it, rewrite. Find more natural ways to convey information, or trust that readers will pick it up from context.

Read your dialogue aloud. Better yet, have someone else read it to you. You’ll immediately hear where it sounds stilted, where the rhythm falters, where no real human would speak that way.

Quick Tip

If your dialogue feels flat, add an agenda to each character. What does each person want from this conversation? What are they hiding? What are they afraid the other person will say? These underlying tensions transform ordinary exchanges into compelling scenes.

Mistake 3: Passive Voice and Weak Verbs

The Problem

Passive constructions and vague verbs drain energy from your prose. “The letter was written by Sarah” distances readers from the action. “He went to the store” lacks specificity and visual impact. “She was thinking about the problem” tells us about mental activity without showing us the character’s actual thoughts or struggle.

Writers fall into passive voice for several reasons. Sometimes it feels more formal or literary. Sometimes we’re uncertain about who’s performing an action. Sometimes we’re simply not paying attention during the first draft, letting weak constructions slip through.

Weak verbs—went, said, was, had, got, made—are placeholders. They’re generic, colourless words that convey basic meaning without creating vivid images. They’re the verbal equivalent of beige. They work grammatically, but they don’t work emotionally.

The cumulative effect of passive voice and weak verbs is prose that feels distant, sluggish, and forgettable. Readers don’t connect with passive constructions. They don’t visualise weak verbs. The writing becomes wallpaper: present but unnoticed.

Why It Matters

Active, precise verbs create momentum and clarity. They make readers feel the action rather than simply understanding it intellectually. “Sarah wrote the letter” is clearer and more direct than “The letter was written by Sarah.” “He strode to the store” or “He shuffled to the store” creates a specific visual image that “went” never will.

Strong verbs also eliminate unnecessary words. Active constructions are typically shorter and punchier than passive ones. This tightens your prose and increases its impact. Every word earns its place.

Precision in verb choice also reveals character and mood. Consider: “She walked into the room” versus “She stormed into the room” or “She crept into the room” or “She glided into the room.” Each verb tells us something different about the character’s emotional state, intention, and personality. Weak verbs surrender this opportunity.

The Fix

Favour active voice wherever possible. Identify the actor and the action, then structure your sentence around them: Subject performs action. “Sarah wrote the letter.” “The committee approved the proposal.” “Lightning struck the tree.”

Replace weak verbs with stronger alternatives. Instead of “went,” use strode, shuffled, sprinted, wandered, marched. Instead of “said,” use whispered, shouted, muttered, declared, stammered. Instead of “was,” restructure the sentence entirely to show action or state directly.

Cut unnecessary qualifiers and intensifiers: very, really, quite, rather, somewhat. These words weaken rather than strengthen. “She was very angry” is less powerful than “She was furious” or, better yet, showing her anger through action.

Hunt for “was” and “were” during revision. These words often signal passive constructions or weak verb phrases. Nine times out of ten, you can strengthen the sentence by eliminating them and restructuring around a concrete action.

Be ruthless. Every sentence should earn its place through clarity, precision, and impact. Weak verbs and passive constructions rarely meet this standard.

Quick Tip

Create a personal “weak word” list. Track the verbs and constructions you overuse, then search for them during revision. Replace systematically. Your prose will tighten and strengthen with each pass.

Mistake 4: Inconsistent Pacing and Structure

The Problem

Scenes drag on without purpose. Transitions feel abrupt or non-existent. The narrative rhythm loses readers' attention because tension and relief aren't balanced. Some chapters race forward while others stall. Readers feel the unevenness even if they can't articulate why.

Pacing problems stem from several sources. Sometimes writers fall in love with a scene and extend it beyond its narrative purpose. Sometimes they rush through important moments because they're eager to reach the next plot point. Sometimes they simply haven't considered rhythm as a craft element.

Structure issues compound pacing problems. Scenes that don't advance character or plot create dead weight. Chapters that end without hooks lose readers. Stories that maintain the same intensity throughout exhaust readers or, conversely, bore them.

The result is a story that feels uneven, that loses momentum at critical moments, that doesn't build toward satisfying climaxes and resolutions.

Why It Matters

Pacing controls reader engagement. It's the heartbeat of your story. Fast pacing creates urgency, excitement, and tension. Slow pacing allows for reflection, emotional processing, and world-building. Both are necessary. The key is knowing when to use each and how to transition between them.

Good pacing keeps readers in a state of engaged anticipation. They're pulled forward by unanswered questions, rising stakes, and the promise of revelation or resolution. They're given moments to breathe and process before the next wave of tension arrives.

Poor pacing, by contrast, creates frustration. Readers skim through slow sections, missing important details. They feel exhausted by relentless action without relief. They lose track of cause and effect when transitions are abrupt. Eventually, they stop reading.

The Fix

Vary sentence length strategically. Short sentences create urgency and impact. They quicken the pace. They demand attention. Longer sentences allow for reflection, description, and the exploration of complex thoughts or emotions. Mix them deliberately to control rhythm.

Cut scenes that don't move character or plot forward. Every scene should accomplish at least one of these: reveal character, advance plot, deepen relationships, raise stakes, or answer a question while raising new ones. If a scene doesn't meet this standard, cut it or combine it with another scene.

Build tension gradually, then release it. Think of your story as a series of waves. Tension rises through conflict, obstacle, or revelation. It peaks at a climactic moment. Then it releases, giving readers a chance to process and reset before the next wave begins. This rhythm creates satisfaction.

Use white space strategically. Paragraph breaks, chapter breaks, and section breaks all affect pacing. Short paragraphs speed things up. Longer ones slow them down. Chapter breaks create natural pause points and opportunities for cliffhangers.

Map your story's emotional arc. Identify high-tension scenes and low-tension scenes. Look for patterns. Are you maintaining the same intensity for too long? Are you alternating effectively between action and reflection? Adjust accordingly.

Quick Tip

Read your work aloud or listen to it read aloud. You'll hear where pacing falters, where scenes drag, where transitions feel jarring. Your ear will catch what your eye misses. Trust it, then revise.

Mistake 5: Forgetting Your Audience

The Problem

Writers sometimes write for themselves rather than their readers. They include inside jokes, obscure references, or unexplained jargon that makes perfect sense to them but leaves readers confused or disconnected. They assume readers share their knowledge, context, or emotional investment in the story.

This happens because we're too close to our own work. We've lived with these characters for months or years. We know their backstories, motivations, and relationships intimately. We forget that readers are encountering them for the first time, without our insider knowledge.

Writers also forget audience when they prioritise self-expression over communication. They write complex, abstract passages that feel profound to them but impenetrable to readers. They indulge in tangents that interest them but don't serve the story. They forget that writing is an act of communication, not just self-expression.

The result is work that feels inaccessible, confusing, or self-indulgent. Readers struggle to follow the story, to understand character motivations, or to care about what happens. They feel excluded rather than invited in.

Why It Matters

Clarity and connection are everything. Your reader doesn't live inside your head. They need guidance, context, and clear pathways through your story. When you forget your audience, you break the contract between writer and reader: I will tell you a story you can follow and care about.

Understanding your audience also helps you make better craft decisions. If you're writing for young adults, your voice, pacing, and themes should reflect their concerns and reading preferences. If you're writing literary fiction for adult readers, you have more latitude for complexity and ambiguity. Knowing your audience doesn't limit you; it focuses you.

Forgetting your audience leads to self-indulgent writing that serves the writer's ego rather than the reader's experience. It creates work that might be personally meaningful but fails to connect with others. And if your work doesn't connect, it doesn't fulfil its purpose.

The Fix

Know who you're writing for and what they care about. Define your ideal reader. What are their interests, concerns, reading habits? What do they want from a story like yours? This doesn't mean pandering or dumbing down. It means understanding who you're communicating with and meeting them where they are.

Test your assumptions. Read your work with fresh eyes, or better yet, have someone unfamiliar with your story read it. Where do they get confused? What questions do they

have? What feels unclear or unmotivated? Their confusion points reveal where you've lost clarity.

Cut self-indulgent tangents that don't serve the story. We all have favourite passages that feel brilliant in isolation but don't advance character or plot. Kill your darlings. If a scene, paragraph, or sentence doesn't serve your reader's experience, it doesn't belong in the final draft.

Ensure character motivations are believable and visible. Readers need to understand why characters make the choices they do, even if they disagree with those choices. Motivation creates logic and emotional coherence. Without it, characters feel like puppets serving your plot rather than people making authentic decisions.

Provide context without info-dumping. Readers need enough information to follow your story, but they don't need everything at once. Reveal context gradually, naturally, through action and dialogue rather than exposition. Trust readers to piece things together from clues.

Quick Tip

Share your work with a trusted reader outside your inner circle, someone who doesn't know your story intimately. Their fresh perspective reveals where you've assumed too much knowledge or lost clarity. Listen to their confusion without defensiveness. It's the most valuable feedback you'll receive.

Moving Forward

Recognising these mistakes is the first step. The second is practice. Each revision is an opportunity to show more, strengthen your voice, and connect more deeply with your reader. Your craft grows with intention and patience. Keep writing.

Ready to deepen your craft? Explore Creative Story Mastery for comprehensive guidance on character, dialogue, scene, and the full storytelling toolkit.