Repetition Lesson 1: Word Repetition

Welcome to lesson one. Let's start by focusing on Word Repetition. This is one of the easiest problems to identify and fix in your manuscript, and will instantly improve your writing.

What are repeated Words?

Word Repetition refers to using the same word, or a very similar one, within the same sentence or paragraph. It's a problem because it makes your sentences feel boring.

Of course, there are some words you have to repeat – functional words that simply help you put the sentence together, like pronouns ("she," "he," or "it"), character names, dialogue tags ("he said") and so on. But in general, try to avoid using the same word.

When is it a problem?

There are several common pitfalls related to word repetition. Let's take a look at an example of each kind.

Pitfall 1: **Using the same word twice in one paragraph or close to each other.**

He made a beeline for the kitchen. Coffee was the only thing standing between him and a total meltdown. At the sight of his kitchen, he stopped short.

Pitfall 2: **Using the same word close together, even though it has different meanings. Remember, it still sounds the same to the reader.**

He slapped the light on and saw a light-colored duffle bag at the top of the stairs.

Pitfall 3: **Using an unusual word more than once close together. The impact of repetition is even more noticeable when the word is uncommon or unique.**

He reached into the cupboard and pulled out two wine goblets. Maybe alcohol would chill her out. He poured the wine into the goblets.

Pitfall 4: **Letting repeated filler words creep in. Readers will always notice.**

He didn't really believe she'd go through it. Did she really think she was capable of hacking into the CIA mainframe? Of course not. She really had lost her mind.

Pitfall 5: **Using similar words too close together. Even though the words aren't identical, the effect is the same on the reader.**

A group of five bikers were parked outside the bar, their bikes glinting in the moonlight.

How do I fix it?

A good rule of thumb is to avoid using the same word within at least three paragraphs of each other.

Let's take a look at several easy strategies to fix repetition problems.

1. Use synonyms or similar ideas to eliminate the repetition.

ORIGINAL:

He made a beeline for the kitchen. Coffee was the only thing standing between him and a total meltdown. At the sight of his kitchen, he stopped.

REVISED:

He made a beeline downstairs. Coffee was the only thing standing between him and a total meltdown. At the sight of his kitchen, he stopped.

REVISED ANOTHER WAY:

He made a beeline for the kitchen. Coffee was the only thing standing between him and a total meltdown. Halfway into the room, he stopped.

2. **Use a different detail.**

    ORGINAL:

    He slapped the light on and saw a light-colored duffle bag at the top of the stairs.

    REVISED:

    He slapped the light on. A yellow duffle bag lay at the top of the stairs.

3. **Use an unusual word only once.**

    As a rule of thumb, the more unusual the word, the longer you should wait before you use it again.

    ORIGINAL:

    He reached into the cupboard and pulled out two wine goblets. Maybe alcohol would chill her out. He poured the wine into the goblets.

    REVISED:

    He reached into the cupboard and pulled out two wine goblets. Maybe alcohol would chill her out. He poured the wine into the glasses.

4. **Cut the filler words.**

    Most of the time, you can simply eliminate most or all of them.

    ORIGINAL:

    He didn't really believe she'd go through it. Did she really think she was capable of hacking into the CIA mainframe? Of course not. She really had lost her mind.

    REVISED:

    He didn't believe she'd go through it. Did she think really she was capable of hacking into the CIA mainframe? Of course not. She had lost her mind.

5. **Change the action or description.**

Here, I'm describing the bikers rather than simply calling them bikers.

ORIGINAL:

A group of five bikers were parked outside the bar, their bikes glinting in the moonlight.

REVISED:

A group of five burly men in heavy leather jackets were parked outside the bar, their bikes glinting in the moonlight.

When can I use a repeated word?

Not all repetition is bad, and you don't need remove every single instance. Here are two cases where repetition works well.

1. Purposeful repetition

In this example, the word "half" occurs twice, but it reads naturally:

But the other half of Jake's brain — the half that had spent the best part of the evening commemorating the one-year anniversary of his friend Marcus's death — was furious someone had broken into the house he'd shared with his buddy.
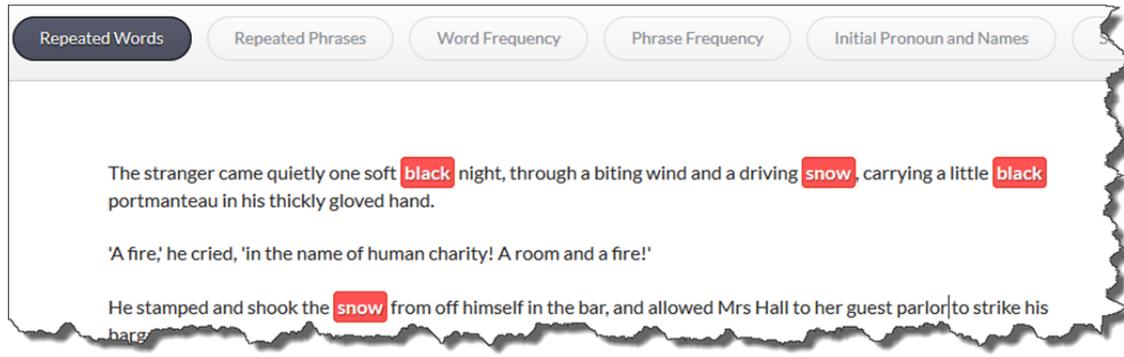
2. Name repetition

For the most part, it's okay to use repeat characters' names, especially here, where the writer is doing it for emphasis:

"I'm drunk as a skunk. Because of Marcus," Simon said.

"Marcus?" Her face paled and her eyebrows lifted. "You knew Marcus Taylor?"

How can AutoCrit help?

AutoCrit has a tool specifically designed to help you spot repeated words in your manuscript. Within the Editor under the Repetition Tab, choose the Repeated Words subcategory. The Editor will highlight areas in your manuscript where you repeat the same words within a few paragraphs. Aim to use synonyms and unique descriptions and eliminate unnecessary repetition.

If AutoCrit shows you that you tend to rely on repeated words, make sure you look at your whole manuscript for repetition using the Word Frequency Analysis. Unusual and uncommon words may not necessarily appear close together and fall through the cracks of the Word Repetition Analysis. Five occurrences of a very uncommon word might feel like one hundred to the reader.

Our next topic: Phrase Repetition

Until then, happy editing!