



## Lesson 5: Character Action Repetition.

In my previous emails, I talked about how repeated words, phrases, and sentence structures can dull your writing and bore your reader. Today, I'm going to talk about the biggest repetition pitfall of them all: Character action repetition.

### What is character action repetition?

In fiction, we bring our characters to life by showing their actions, behaviors and gestures. This is good—it's about showing the reader who they are and how they feel, instead of simply telling them. But too often, we tend to rely on the same actions or gestures over and over, even using the same gestures for multiple characters—and that's when it becomes a problem of repetition.

### Why is it a problem?

Not only will the repetition seem dull to your reader, but too many of the same actions and gestures can seem clichéd or annoying to your reader. Worse, if we see the same character only ever performing the same few actions, you're missing an opportunity to show us more about that character and to make her seem realistic.

#### **Pitfall 1: Relying on clichés.**

Certain gestures can feel clichéd—for instance, many writers show characters biting their bottom lip to convey nervousness or hesitation. Try to mix it up, especially if more than one character performs that same action to express the same emotion.

#### **Pitfall 2: Giving characters only one or two behaviors.**

Some writers think that if they "assign" each of their characters a different gesture or behavior, it will look like it's a habit, a part of their personality—for instance, having a detective always pace when he's thinking. That's not a bad strategy, but the problem is that people behave in many different ways and have *numerous* habits, so only showing one or two gestures won't feel realistic.



#### **Pitfall 3: Relying on the same actions and gestures for all characters**

In my early drafts, my characters always seem to be doing the same thing—pacing, sighing, tapping their fingernails on the table, and squinting, no matter who they are or what role they play in the story. Many writers fall into this same trap. Remember, a character's actions and gestures have to be as unique and individual as the characters themselves.

### **How do I fix it?**

It's not always easy to find a fresh action or gesture to replace the repeated actions in your manuscript, but there are several good strategies. Here are some of my favorites.

#### **1. Push yourself to be original.**

It's hard work, but it can be worth it to replace an ordinary, repetitive gesture with something more original. For example, you could give a character a weird or interesting habit, like saving a used tea bag for another day, or methodically separating the blue M&Ms from the rest of the bag to eat first. You still have to be careful not to repeat the same gesture too often, but it can be an unexpected and interesting way to show your character's personality and eliminate repetition.

#### **2. Think about who your character is.**

The more you know about their habits, personality and history, the easier it will be to write about their actions and behaviors.

For instance, instead of writing that your young newlywed protagonist was biting her lip in nervousness, tell us that she twisted her wedding ring over and over again. If you have a character that is impatient, show her trying to contain that impatience by silently counting to ten or pressing the pads of her fingertips together.

#### **3. Avoid clichéd behaviors.**

Certain character types are associated with clichéd gestures—the politician who kisses babies, the grandmother who pinches her grandchildren's cheeks, the gangster who cracks his knuckles. If you find yourself falling into one of those



character clichés, mix it up. Make the gangster the one who kisses babies, and the grandmother the one who cracks her knuckles.

## How can AutoCrit help?

Spotting repeated actions can be very difficult. Often you won't see them until you put your manuscript away for a few weeks and then come back to it fresh. If you want to see your repeated actions and gestures in early drafts immediately, AutoCrit can help you identify repeated actions. Use the "Repeated Phrases" feature to find your most common multi-word phrases.

This concludes our series on sharpening your writing by eliminating repetition. I hope you're inspired to go work on your manuscript – and remember, AutoCrit is always here to help!

Happy Editing!