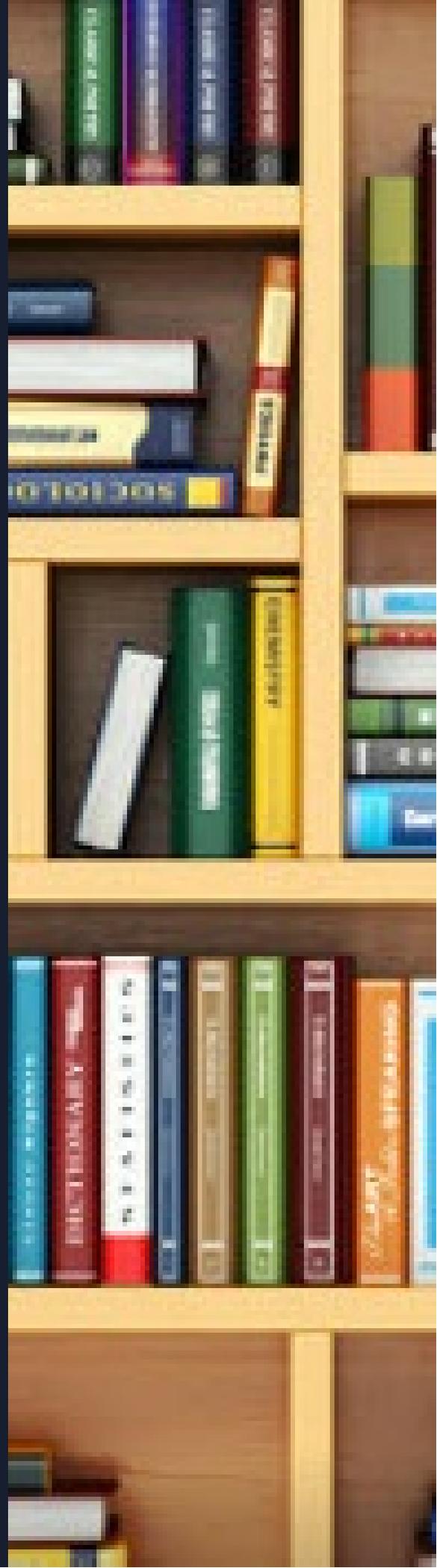# AutoCrit

Three Red Flags That Will Stop Agents From Reading Your Novel (and how to fix them)

What self- and traditionally published authors can learn from an agent's five-minute manuscript test.

Agents are expert readers.

They know within the first few pages whether a novel has a spark, a hook—that magical quality that will keep readers flying through the pages.

But they also know when a book isn't going to cut it—and they don't have to read far to figure that out.

All they have to do is look for these **three red flags**, and they'll shut your book forever.

First, It's Time For a Reality Check…

Agents receive hundreds of manuscripts every day from aspiring writers. That's a lot of pages to read!

So they need to be quick and decisive when they get to your pages.

They're looking for two things:

A great story, told by a great writer.

If your writing is not up to snuff, the game is over.

It doesn't matter if your story is the next *Harry Potter* — if the writing itself doesn't hold up, an agent is going to move on to the next manuscript within minutes.

What are those red flags that tell an agent it's time to move on? Here are the big three:

1. Poorly Written Dialogue

One of the first things agents often do with a new manuscript is turn to a passage of dialogue.

Dialogue is widely considered to be one of the most difficult aspects of the writing craft to master—it's easy to write weak dialogue, but hard to write sharp, realistic, revealing dialogue.

An agent can often tell how well you write and your experience level just from reading a passage or two of dialogue.

An author who frequently peppers his or her dialogue with words other than "said" or "asked" might be an amateur.

Amateur writers often make the mistake of thinking that using *said* or *asked* is too repetitive, and try to spice up their dialogue tags with more interesting verbs. But professional writers know that constantly using tags like, "**she exclaimed**," "**he queried**," "**she wondered**," "**he cried**" and so on can be distracting for the reader.

The goal of a dialogue tag in fiction is to inform the reader who is speaking—and that's about it.

You want the reader to read right over the dialogue tag, so the focus is on the dialogue itself. If agents see a proliferation of fancy dialogue tags, it's a red flag.
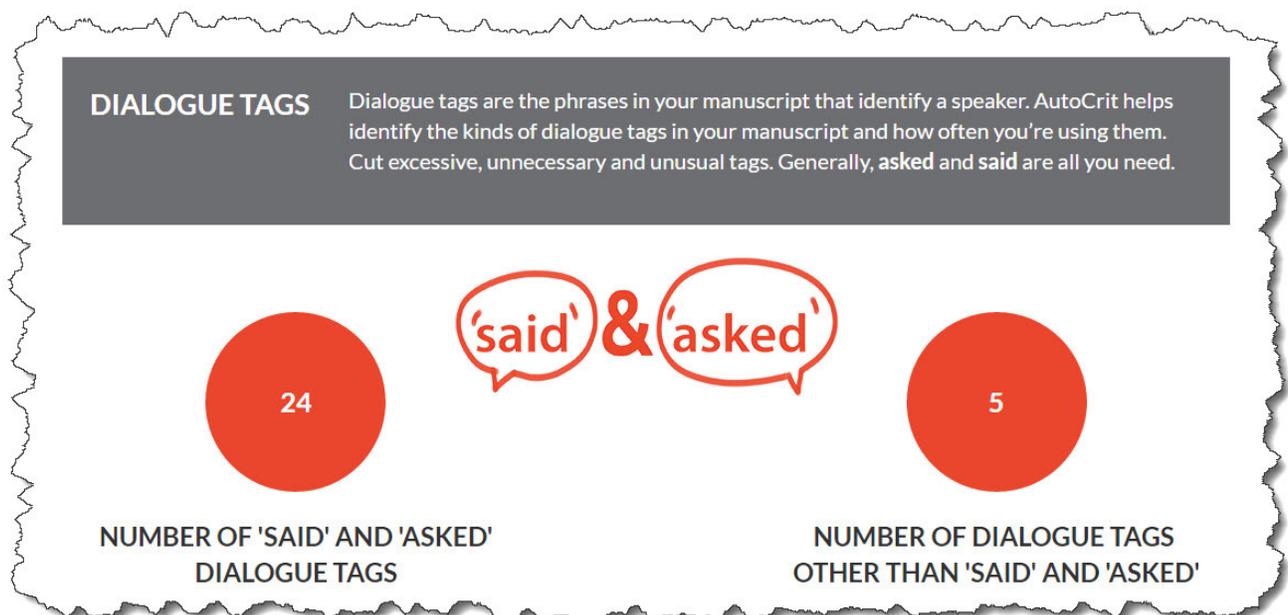
1. Poorly Written Dialogue

What can you to do fix dialogue tags?

This is a simple fix—just go through your manuscript and change most of your dialogue tags to *said* or *asked*.

Occasionally, if the scene or situation truly warrants it, you can use something else —**exclaimed, shouted, whispered, gasped, etc.** But that should be the exception, not the rule.

Bonus Tip:

AutoCrit includes a tool that can easily help you review all of your dialogue tags at once, so you can spot any of those fancy verbs that might have slipped by. You can also see how the dialogue tags in your manuscript stack up against novels by bestselling authors.

DIALOGUE TAGS   Dialogue tags are the phrases in your manuscript that identify a speaker. AutoCrit helps identify the kinds of dialogue tags in your manuscript and how often you're using them. Cut excessive, unnecessary and unusual tags. Generally, **asked** and **said** are all you need.

'said' **&** 'asked'

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NUMBER OF 'SAID' AND 'ASKED' DIALOGUE TAGS

NUMBER OF DIALOGUE TAGS OTHER THAN 'SAID' AND 'ASKED'

2. Too Many Adverbs

Adverbs are a huge red flag for agents.

Adverbs are those –ly words, like **quickly**, **slowly**, **angrily**, **gracefully**, etc, that modify verbs and adjectives.

> *They're a problem for a number of reasons, including the fact that they break one of the oldest rules of writing: show, don't tell.*

Show, don't tell.

Show, don't tell means that that writers should aim to help readers visualize a scene or emotion, rather than simply coming right out and telling us.

It's the difference between telling us,

"The kitchen was the heart of the home," and showing us.

It's much stronger to say this:

"The kitchen was where everyone gathered—for dinners and holidays, for breakfast at the start of the day and warm milk before bed, for math homework and phone calls to Grandma, for cookie-baking afternoons and neighborhood gossip over coffee."

> *Showing is vivid and energetic; it invites readers into the story and allows them to experience it for themselves. Telling is flat and boring.*

2. Too Many Adverbs

Choose strong words to draw in your reader.

There other problems with adverbs, too. They're weak, and most often used to modify another weak word, when in reality, a single strong, vibrant word would be better.

For example, you could say that the girl **walked quickly**, but it's so much better to say she **galloped, raced** or **sprinted.**

Similarly, writers often rely on adverbs in a dialogue tag to convey tone and emotion—but that's weak writing.

> *It's much more powerful if you can show that emotion in the dialogue itself.*

For example, this is weak:

"I disagree," Dave said <u>angrily</u>.

This is much stronger, because we can see the emotion in the dialogue itself:

"I disagree. This is an outrageous decision that puts all of us at risk," Dave said.

There's one more reason adverbs are red flags, and it's this:

2. Too Many Adverbs

Eliminating adverbs is very common writing advice.

In the writing world, it's perhaps the second best-known rule, after showing versus telling.

> *If you rely on adverbs, it tells an agent that you aren't familiar with some of the essential rules of writing—and if you don't know the basics, it's unlikely that your manuscript is going to be worth reading.*

It might sound harsh, but remember: the agent has hundreds of manuscripts coming in. If she sees a sign that your writing is weak, she's probably going to keep looking for a manuscript with stronger writing.

How do you fix an adverb problem?

Search carefully for those adverbs.

They can sneak into your writing even when you're trying not to use them. When you find adverbs, either eliminate them altogether, or look for ways to replace them (and the word they modify).You can do this with a single strong word instead. For example: *sprinted* vs *walked quickly*.

Bonus tip:

Searching for adverbs can be tedious, especially those sneaky ones that slip into our drafts. It's far more complicated than just running search-and-replace.

2. Too Many Adverbs

Fortunately, *AutoCrit* has you covered—we have a tool that will help you search your entire manuscript for adverbs, including looking specifically for adverbs in dialogue tags.

Then we'll highlight each one in your manuscript and give you guidance on how many you need to remove.

This lets you quickly fix the problem and move on to the next. A simple fix!
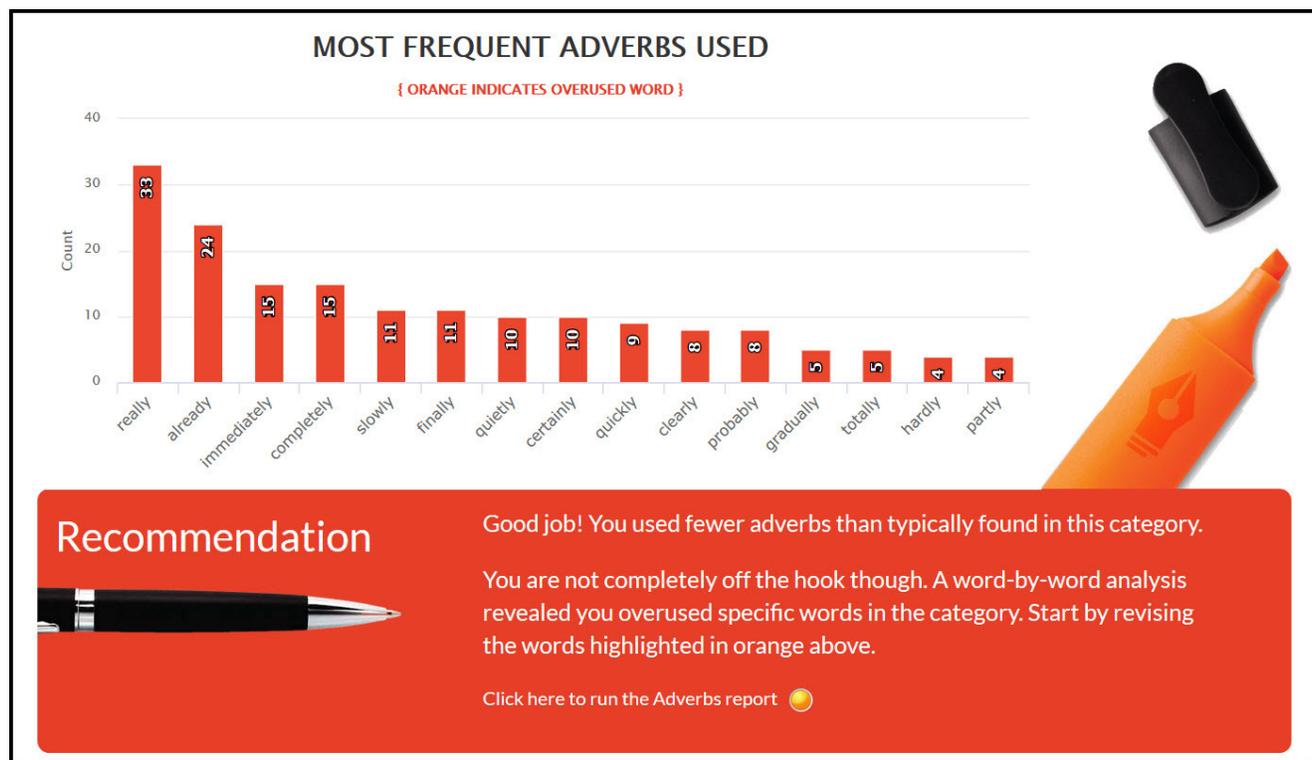
3. Chunks of backstory, especially at the beginning

Including backstory in your manuscript is the third red flag.

Backstory is anything that happened before the events of the main story—the history of your characters, childhood memories, context and background information, and so on.

It's not always a bad thing to include backstory in novels—in fact, a character's background and history can be both interesting and revealing for the reader.

But it can also be a huge red flag for an agent if that backstory is dropped into the novel in big chunks, especially in the beginning of the book.

Backstory slows the pace of a novel, and can even stop the forward momentum of the story altogether.

While the pace of a novel can and should vary over the course of the story...

Too many slower-paced sections can torpedo the suspense and momentum that keeps the reader turning pages.

3. Chunks of backstory, especially at the beginning

Backstory can also signal amateur writing.

New writers often include too much backstory in their drafts, and even experienced novelists sometimes can't resist an info dump.

If an agent sees those slower-paced passages, especially early in the book, she might assume the novel is weak—and she'll move on.

How do you fix it?

Ideally, backstory should be sprinkled in gradually throughout the novel, in short bursts over many pages.

The general rule of thumb is: there should be less backstory at the beginning, and then it can gradually increase as the novel gains momentum.

Look for those slower-paced places in your manuscript and ask yourself if the reader *really needs* that information right then, at *that* moment in the story.

You'd be surprised at how much backstory you can eliminate and the story will still sail on smoothly.

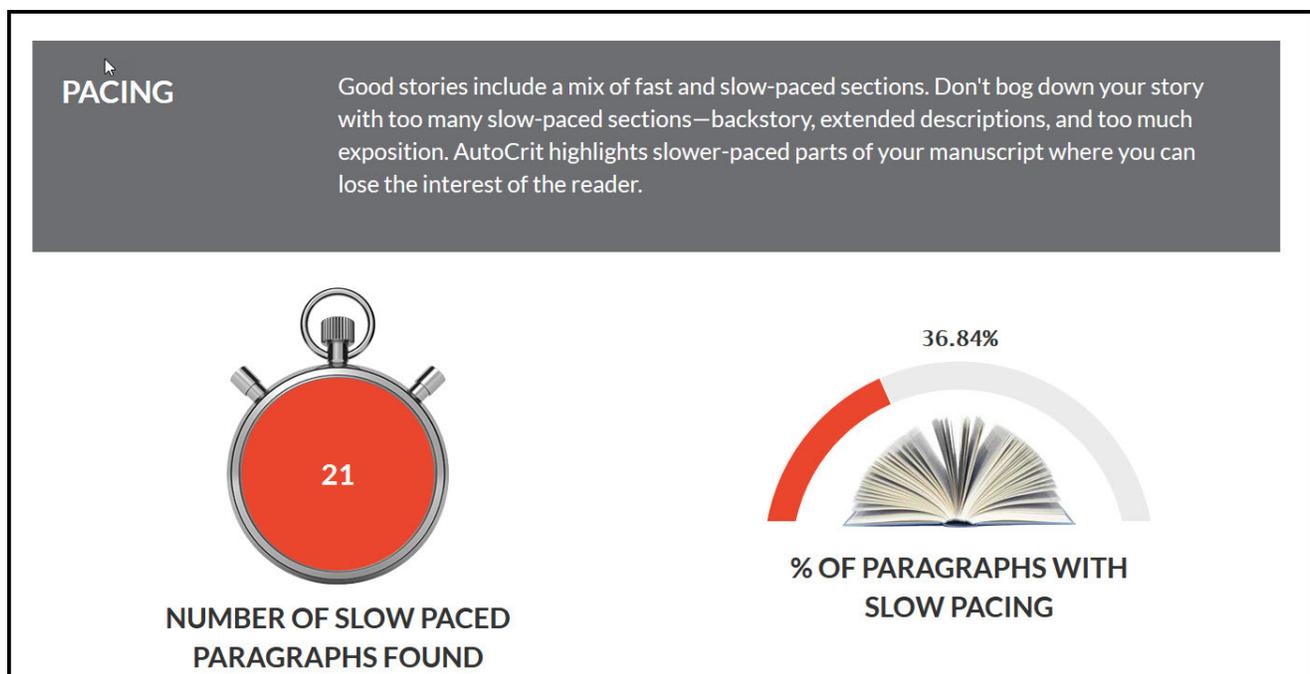# 3. Chunks of backstory, especially at the beginning

Bonus Tip:

It's not always easy to gauge the momentum of your novel, to spot those fast and slow paced sections, or to visualize the rhythm of your entire book.

AutoCrit helps you do just that.

Our pacing and momentum tool helps you find every slow-paced section of your novel. With a quick glance, you can see if your slow sections are sprinkled throughout or if you have multiple paragraphs in a row that may lose your reader.

It also creates a visual guide of individual chapters, paragraphs, and sentences...or your entire novel at once. Nifty, huh?

PACING

Good stories include a mix of fast and slow-paced sections. Don't bog down your story with too many slow-paced sections—backstory, extended descriptions, and too much exposition. AutoCrit highlights slower-paced parts of your manuscript where you can lose the interest of the reader.

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NUMBER OF SLOW PACED PARAGRAPHS FOUND

36.84%

% OF PARAGRAPHS WITH SLOW PACING

Where do you go from here?

Agents aren't looking for reasons to turn down your manuscript—they're looking for reasons to keep reading.

They want to find that next bestselling novel, and it just might be yours.

But they're too busy, and the industry is too competitive for them to ignore red flags. So don't give them any.

By making these simple fixes, you will immediately improve the quality and professionalism of your writing and give your manuscript the best possible chance.

Ready to take your manuscript to the next level?

Join AutoCrit and start editing your manuscript within minutes. It's easy to use and designed to help you quickly and efficiently improve the quality of your writing.

CLICK HERE to join the thousands of writers using AutoCrit to polish their manuscripts and publish books readers LOVE!

Want your readers to LOVE your book?

Become an AutoCrit Member today!

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