

Tip #6. To be Incredible... be Credible

Credibility is one of the cornerstones of incredible writing. Not the other way around. Many writers are so absorbed with mesmerising their audience that they forget to ground their characters and events in credibility. And, while your reader, by and large, is prepared to suspend disbelief for the sake of a good tale, in order to truly be swept away in your story, whether it's a book, a short story or a piece of flash fiction, your reader needs to believe.

Few things jolt me out of a story the way a scene does that I just don't buy. Worse, my trust now broken, I find it difficult, sometimes impossible, to sink back into the arms of the story.

Credibility is not only the domain of non-fiction or contemporary or literary genres — the fantasy and science fiction genres are chockful of highly credible, entertaining works, while at the other end of the spectrum historical fiction and true crime works are just as likely to lack credibility as any other genre. By insisting on credibility I'm not saying your story must be true, but I am saying it must be believable. And, as readers, more often than not, it's the little things that knock our confidence. Consider this, an excerpt from an urban fantasy tale I recently purchased:

'She stepped over the dead body and her bare foot landed with a thud in the soft, moon-lit grass.'

The author was clearly trying to increase the tension. It's night-time. The protagonist has just discovered a body. She steps over it, makes a sound. Did anybody hear her? The murderer perhaps?

The problem here is that nobody's foot makes a thud on grass after taking a simple step, least of all on soft grass. The only way to elicit even the vaguest thud on a grassy surface is to do a Johnny Clegg heel-stomp. Believe me, I've tried. As a reader, sentences like the above, shatter my confidence in the author. From that point on I follow warily.

In another book I recently beta read, the following came up. (No disrespect intended to the author who has published numerous books and claimed many awards, I hastily add. We all make 'credibility' slip-ups occasionally, but it's useful to see where others go wrong).

We came to a scene, where the protagonist, in the process of being kidnapped, was handcuffed with her hands on her lap and shoved into a car behind the passenger seat which was occupied by one of the villains. To extricate herself, the heroine eased a nail-file from her boot, grabbed a handful of the villains lush black hair in her left hand, yanked his head back and proceeded to stab him repeatedly and fatally in the neck with the nail file in her right hand. There was nothing wrong with the writing per se. The events were skilfully described but I was not convinced. I tried to picture the heroine's actions in my mind and I could not. There's simply no way, with hands bound together, a person can simultaneously hold an object and stab it with any realistic force. To generate enough force your arm would need space to swing. You would either need to let go the hair or break the chains. Credibility sank with every plunge of the blade.

Credibility in writing is not constrained to actions and events, it's perhaps even more of an issue when a character's motives come into play. And here the author can often trip up, by imposing their motives on their characters, resulting in a behavioural disconnect. It never hurts to ask why a character does something. Or why they don't. If the logic feels fuzzy you may find you need to plant a motivational seed earlier on in your story.

According to Sol Stein, one method of ferreting out credibility, and other, issues is to affix somebody else's name to the top of your manuscript. It's a good idea. It gives you distance from your work. Perhaps try the name of an author you admire. Or perhaps the name of an author you're not that fond of. Then go over it one more time with a red pen. It's incredible what you'll find.