

Tip #8. Intruder alert

Ever notice how sometimes you're engrossed in a chapter when something changes in the flow of the narrative? All of sudden it feels like you're being spoken to. Like you're being fed information. You frown, ponder, withdraw from the story while you consider who exactly is talking or acting. This is called authorial or narrative intrusion. It's the author's voice coming through and most of the time, it's unwelcome. Authorial intrusion was a fairly common literary device back in the day, with many famous proponents from Tolstoy to Bronte. Many authors in those days employed it blatantly, even going so far as to address the reader directly as "reader", giving rise to scenes such as this: "Little Frank crept into the woods that night, all alone. And what, dear reader, do you think he found there?" Audiences back then accepted this without batting an eyelid. However, today's reader, for the most part, is a different beast. Most modern readers enjoy visual stories and get turned off from this sort of thing simply because it interrupts the visual effect of the story.

Authorial intrusion, when used deliberately and skilfully, is fine. However, when it occurs unintentionally it can jar the reader, and is one of the hallmarks of weak or lazy writing.

Authorial intrusion can take many forms. Some examples of authorial intrusion include:

Info dumping:

The author wants to give the reader more information about a character or place or event.

e.g.

Julie thanked the waitress and sat down. As she waited for her date to arrive, a man plonked himself down at her table. "Looking good, Jules," he said.

It was Brad. Her ex. She and Brad had been high school lovers. He had gone to army, she to secretarial college. Two years later they had hooked up again, then married, then had kids. Then blah blah blah._

This dump of information interrupts the scene and is unnecessary. Rather introduce the information in a more natural manner. ie. "Looking good, Jules. Where's your ring? Not hanging around, are we?"

Soapboxing

The author lets the reader know how the author feels about some issue or thing.

e.g. Ben heaved on the fishing rod, bringing the shark close to the side of the boat while Gary aimed the shotgun at the fish's massive grey head. Jenny watched with disgust at what was about to unfold. Great white sharks were an endangered species and every one of them deserved to live free and wild, away from the sadistic destruction of man, blah blah blah.

It's not clear who that last thought belongs to. Presumably to Jenny but, would that thought really be going through her head in that situation? It comes across as false. As having been placed there solely for the education of the reader.

Being too obvious

Blaze turned slowly towards the girl. He grinned and his incisors lengthened in anticipation. Vampires were bloodthirsty creatures and Fiona knew she was in grave danger.

The reader already knows all about vampires and their habits.

The Author addresses the reader directly

Blood gushed from the wound on John's forehead. You wouldn't believe how much blood a cut to the face produces. He tried to staunch the flow with his shirt.

!?! Are you talking to me?

Foreshadowing

Barbara placed her empty wine glass on the table and picked up her car keys. Little was she to know it would be her last glass of Chardonnay.

In the past this literary device was used to increase tension by building suspense. However, more often than not it fails to impress modern readers and actually detracts from the tension by interrupting the pace.

In summary, a simple way to avoid unwanted authorial intrusion is to make sure that all thoughts, dialogue or actions in your writing can be attached to a character. Ask yourself, who owns this thought, action or dialogue?

And, if you're writing from an omniscient viewpoint, which by its very nature makes use of narrative intrusion, make sure any intrusions are consistent and belong to the voice of the omniscient narrator and not you, the author.