

Tip #9. Let me explain. Actually, we'd rather you didn't.

As new writers we often feel overcome by the urge to clarify things for our reader. We've laid out the plot, the characters and the setting as best we can, but for some reason we feel that maybe, just maybe our reader doesn't quite get it. So, in an attempt to be ever so helpful, we lean over and whisper in their ear. Unfortunately, our average reader is by and large a wee bit sharper than we give them credit for. And the only thing we accomplish with these delicate whisperings is the raising of eyebrows and the rolling of eyeballs.

Consider the following examples: (*Whispers in italics.*)

He wiped the gun down with a cloth, *to get rid of his fingerprints.*

She donned her raincoat, *so that her new mink coat would stay dry,* and ran to her car.

She hid under the bed, *hoping no one would find her there.*

The following day, he returned to the scene in the woods, and placed a 9mm cartridge and an empty bottle of vodka on the Buick's passenger seat, *where it would catch the eye of the FBI.* Then he dialled 911.

There are four main reasons why explanations like the above are unwelcome. Firstly, they indicate to your reader that you don't trust them to be able to follow your story. Effectively, you're dumbing things down for them, and nobody tolerates condescension for very long. Secondly, it's a form of "telling" your reader what's going on, when your reader mostly wants to be "shown" what's going on – in fact it's probably one of the weakest forms of "telling" because you've already "shown" your reader the action but now you elect to "tell" them about it as well. Thirdly, where the "explanations" are more subtle than the obvious examples given above, they deny your reader the pleasure of working things out for themselves, or hazarding a guess at motives for example. Fourthly, they slow down the pace and decrease tension. Consider removing the italicised parts from each of the above sentences. Has anything been lost from the context? No. In fact, in each instance, the tension is ratcheted up a notch.

The key to avoiding unnecessary explanations in the first place is to set up your story correctly with a logical cause and effect foundation. If your characters act and react appropriately according to the situation or their own abilities or idiosyncrasies, then you should never have the need to paint a further explanation for your reader. Unfortunately, it's all too easy to simply add a few words of explanation rather than go back and fix the fundamental problem. Laziness such as this, shines through in a story, and costs you the respect of your reader, so don't do it. Enough said!