

Tip #12. Annoying Echoes

In prose, echoes are words or phrases that are repeated in close proximity to each other. They quickly become annoying. They introduce an unwanted rhythm. They are a sign of lazy writing. They bore the reader.

You get the idea.

Echoes crop up all over the place and are best avoided if you want your reader to forget about the words and be absorbed completely in the story. Echoes can be lumped under several categories. Let's look at a few:

1. Echoing Headwords

This happens when a sequence of sentences all start with the same word.

e.g. In my opening paragraph the word "*They*" is repeated ad nauseum. In my second paragraph the word "*Echo*" starts both sentences and does all the nasty things described above, introducing unmusical rhythm, laziness and boredom. The second sentence would be better served by using '*They*' instead of repeating "*Echo*".

And it's not just sentences that can trap an echo. Echoing headwords can also be found at the start of paragraphs, and do just as much damage there. Pronouns such as He or She are the usual suspects but echoes can happen with any words. Of course, this is a general rule and sometimes we may want to introduce an echo, for emphasis or resonance etc, but I would still advocate caution. A headword used twice may work; used three times it seldom does.

2. Word recycling

When a word, especially an unusual word, crops up in close proximity to its first use, it draws the reader's attention onto the word and, more importantly, *away* from the story. It doesn't have to be an unusual word either. Just about any word will do the same. Or even a repeated phrase. And it doesn't have to be identical. Similar words and phrases are equally as bad. Furthermore even if they're quite far apart in the text they can still jar. I've been yanked out of a story by the repetition of a phrase that occurred 50 pages apart, and from the great Robert Ludlum himself: skyscrapers were described as towering edifices of glass and steel, 50 pages on they were towering edifices of steel and glass. This provoked a wry grimace while I left the story and went back to check the earlier pages.

Another e.g:

He wrenched the letter from her hand. She lunged for it. Laughing, he dodged her hand, then grabbed her arm and wrenched it up behind her back.

'wrenched' is the culprit here, 'twisted' or 'yanked' or something else would work better in the second instance.

3. Gallopig 'I' disease

A specific, yet all too prolific, occurrence of echo where the 'I' pronoun is used excessively in a sequence of sentences. Obviously this only occurs with stories written in the first person and follows the form... "I went to the door. I opened it despite the swirling rain. I looked outside. I blah blah blah." Far better to break up these galloping "Is" i.e. "I went to the door. Rain battered the timbers on the outside. With some trepidation, I eased the door open. Peering into the gloom, I blah blah blah..."

4. The Eloquent Echo

Echoing that occurs in dialogue is possibly the most annoying of all. It's usually a red flag that the author is inexperienced which, straight off the bat, makes the reader wary. Usually it signifies that the author doesn't quite have control of his characters. That the author doesn't know where things

are going and is just treading water by inserting words until they get their bearings again. Dialogue such as:

“Hi. How are you?”

“Fine. How are you?”

Or,

“When should we meet?”

“How does tomorrow sound?”

“Tomorrow sounds great.”

“Awesome. Tomorrow it is!”

Avoid echoes like these and you’ll go some way to keeping your writing fresh and interesting.