

**Tip #14. The definitive question**

See if you can figure out why I had a problem with this opening paragraph to a story I recently critiqued.

Wendy dumped her handbag on the kitchen table, shrugged off her jacket and hung it over the back of a chair. She gave a sigh and closed her eyes. One hand massaged her temples briefly while the other loosened her tie and undid the top button of her blouse. Breathing slightly easier, she draped the tie over her jacket and poured herself a large glass of Chenin Blanc filled to the brim with ice. Then she kicked off her heels and padded through to the carpeted lounge. She flicked on the lights and flopped onto the couch in front of an oversize leather ottoman. Settling herself within the couch's luxurious embrace she removed her wire frame glasses and contemplated the ottoman. It occupied the centre of the room, more or less where she'd left it, the medieval styled clasp and padlock still intact. She extended a shapely leg and gave the ottoman a nudge with her toe. Nothing. Her leg pulled back and she heel-kicked it with a force that belied her petite frame. A stifled growl escaped from the leather clad box, then the lid started bucking. Satisfied, Wendy took a long sip of wine. The bucking stopped and she sipped gently, lost in thought. After a while she set the glass down on a side table, aimed a remote at the TV and reached for the four-pound hammer. With The X-Factor blaring in the background she pointed another remote at a control panel on the wall, dimming the room to a gloomy dusk, then she stood up.

So, what snagged my eye? One word out of that whole paragraph caught my eye, making me frown, pause, go back and re-read. One tiny, three letter word...

The word "the". Specifically when it was used to describe "the four-pound hammer". Why? Because the word "the" is definitive. It's specific. It points us to one particular thing and implies we have a specific knowledge of that thing already. She picked up "a four-pound hammer" implies no pre-knowledge – i.e. "a" hammer happened to be lying around and she picked it up. But "the" hammer implies that we should have known about it before reaching this point. The problem came in because this was the very first mention of it. But what about the opening sentence you may well ask? Where we were introduced to "the kitchen table"? The difference lies in the reader's expectation. We *expect* to find one kitchen table in a kitchen, not many. Using "a" kitchen table, in this context, *could* have implied more than one table was present. Possible, but not likely, and it would probably also have snagged the eye.

With our lounge scenario the situation is compounded by the fact the reader would not naturally

expect a four-pound hammer to be present in a lounge in the first place. The fact that it was then referred to as “the” hammer widens that gap in the reader’s expectation further. No doubt the author was aiming for a little shock value here by nonchalantly referring to the hammer in this way, but a shock that also confuses the reader is a risky gambit. The last thing we want is for the reader to stop reading and start analysing.

While the author could have gotten away with using “a four-pound hammer”, without upsetting the reader too much, I would always suggest cueing the reader beforehand. A few words planted earlier would smooth the ride for the reader and close the gap between expectation and event. For instance, had the protagonist “moved *a* four-pound hammer” off the couch before sitting down, as readers we would be mildly intrigued by the presence of a hammer, but we wouldn’t question it. Our curiosity piqued we would even anticipate a further reference to it and we would read on. The author could then quite naturally have the protagonist reach for “the” four-pound hammer – the reader has been primed: in our minds the hammer she reaches for should logically be that hammer she moved earlier.

Again, context is everything. And there may well be a case for “shocking” the reader in this way if it adds tension or foreshadowing or some other element, but think carefully whether you aren’t also sowing seeds of confusion.