

## Purple Prose and Stilted Writing

By Azalea Dabill

Balance is key to writing. Use some -ly adverbs, but not too many. For example, “happily.” Use “was” sometimes. Your word must fit the use you put it too. Trying to always avoid -ly words and “was” leads to awkward, stilted meanings. Use words that flow, that get your meaning across the best.

Below is some poetic prose excellently done in the classic *The Wind in the Willows*. It is also a splendid example of rhythm in a *long* sentence. It has some British spellings.

Perhaps he would never have dared to raise his eyes, but that, though the piping was now hushed, the call and the summons seemed still dominant and imperious. He might not refuse, were Death himself waiting to strike him instantly, once he had looked with mortal eye on things rightly kept hidden. Trembling he obeyed, and raised his humble head; and then, in that utter clearness of the imminent dawn, while Nature, flushed with fulness of incredible colour, seemed to hold her breath for the event, he looked in the very eyes of the Friend and Helper; saw the backward sweep of the curved horns, gleaming in the growing daylight; saw the stern hooked nose between the kindly eyes that were looking down on them humourously, while the bearded mouth broke into a half-smile at the corners; saw the rippling muscles on the arm that lay across the broad chest, the long supple hand still holding the pan-pipes only just fallen away from the parted lips; saw the splendid curves of the shaggy limbs disposed in majestic ease on the sward; saw last of all, nestling between his very hooves, sleeping soundly in entire peace and contentment, the little, round, podgy, childish form of the baby otter.

Purple prose, or adverb and adjective laden writing, makes heavy reading. “Purple prose” is often subjective, depending on the reader’s taste. And some genres accept more or less poetic writing; say, character-driven fantasy with a literary feel vs. plot-driven adventure that is all action. Use your common sense concerning words and study what you admire in other authors in your writing genre.

Here is a modern example of well-done poetic writing from Robin McKinley’s *Deerskin*:

Many years later she remembered how her parents had looked to her when she was a small child: her father as tall as a tree, and merry and bright and golden, with her beautiful black-haired mother at his side. She saw them, remembered them, as if she were looking at a painting; they were too splendid to be real, and always they seemed at some little distance from her, from all onlookers. . . . often gazing into each other’s eyes, often handclasped, often smiling; and always there was a radiance like sunlight flung around them.

Take a bit of your own writing and play with it. See if you lean toward purple prose, awkward word choices, or spare bone writing. Then take authors you admire and look at their

writing. What do they lean toward? Does their lean have a good effect? How do they do what they do? How do they get it to work? And what do you want to learn from them? Write, copy their method a little. Convert sentences back and forth. Don't copy their words, but their technique. And have fun! There are dangers in metaphorical writing or figures of speech.

Anything good can be done to excess, or done in the wrong place, and then figurative writing becomes purple prose. The greater the capability for good, the more for destruction.

But there is no gain without risk. And the gain is worth it. Keep alert for your own, unique metaphors and other figures of speech. Take the time to hunt for the right one, elusive word. Metaphor is a mighty, living tool. Just look at Proverbs.

In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson say,

“. . . metaphors are not merely things to be seen beyond. In fact, one can see beyond them only by using other metaphors. It is as though the ability to comprehend experience through metaphor were a sense, like seeing or touching, or hearing, with metaphors providing the only ways to perceive and experience much of the world. Metaphor is as much a part of our functioning as our sense of touch, and as precious.”

I second this. (Smiling.) If you haven't figured it out from the examples in these flyers, I enjoy poetic writing.

*In this flyer where I use block quotes (if applicable), I have changed to single-spacing for readability.*