

Resist the Urge to Explain (RUE).

Over-explanation That Insults The Reader

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(Courtesy of Jeanne Leach)

As a reader, nothing gets on my last nerve faster than having to work my way through every...single...tiny...detail of a scene's progression. I am at least semi-intelligent. I can figure out a few things on my own. I *want* to do that. On the other side of the reading scale, nothing marks an author as an amateur faster than subjecting readers to page after page of over-explanation.

Two very good reasons *not* to allow yourself the luxury of over-telling your story.

What is over-explanation? Exactly what it sounds like: over-explaining, often to the point of talking down to a reader. **Hint: Difficulty in staying within a word count limit is usually a sign that you've explained too much.**

Let's start with an example:

Cindy ¹pulled into the driveway, ²brought the car to a stop and ³turned off the ignition. She puffed out her cheeks and huffed a breath, allowing her head to fall back against the headrest. It felt good to be home. For a moment, she sat with her eyes closed, absorbing the quiet after an overly hectic day at work.

But she couldn't stay in the car all night. With a tired sigh, she ⁴grabbed her purse with one hand, ⁵opened the door with the other and ⁶hailed her weary body up and out of the vehicle. She ⁷stooped to pick up the newspaper on the way to the door, ⁸inserted her key in the lock and ⁹let herself into the house.

Cool air caressed her face, and she heaved a sigh of relief. Surely Heaven couldn't be any better than home on a Friday night. (145 words)

The above is a prime example of an author taking a reader by the hand and *dragging* her through nine steps of unnecessary explanation. Let's try it again:

Cindy leaned against the headrest and closed her eyes. Home at last. She heard ... nothing, and the silence felt good after the hectic, end-of-week atmosphere at the office. But she couldn't sit in the car forever. With a moan, she hauled her weary body out of the vehicle.

Inside the house, cool air caressed her face, and a light lavender scent teased her nostrils. She'd grabbed the newspaper on her way in. Now she tossed it onto the sofa along with her purse and heaved a sigh of relief. Heaven couldn't be any more welcoming than home on a Friday night. (100 words)

Less wordy, and you've figured out everything you need to know. Cindy just arrived home from work, she's had a hard day and she's tired. Without my saying so, you assume she turned off the ignition when she parked her vehicle, that she somehow got out of the car, and that she brought her purse with her. And you don't really need to be told that she unlocked the door before she entered the house.

As a writer, all you need to do is provide the scenario in a realistic, believable manner. Avid readers are quite adept at figuring out a great many of the details on their own. So what if the "scene" in their heads differs from the one in yours? They will still arrive at the destination you intended. Let's visit Cindy's homecoming one last time.

Cindy parked in the driveway and took a moment to appreciate the quiet of the evening before hauling her weary body out of the car. On the doorstep, she stooped to pick up the newspaper. Inside, cool air caressed her face, and a light lavender scent teased her nostrils. After the hectic day she'd had, her little living room felt like Heaven—or as close as she was likely to get on a Friday night. (75 words)

That's about half the original word count. It's pretty barebones, and some writers will prefer the second example. But on a tight word limit, the last version works. It clues the reader in without making her feel she's being led by the hand.

Most readers do not lack imagination. If they did, they wouldn't be reading fiction. Furthermore, they're smart enough to pick up on it when someone insults their intelligence.

Ever had a friend recount her day in painful, excruciating detail? A trip to the grocery store becomes an epic tale of fortitude and stamina, and you're forced to "ride along" as she describes every car she saw on the way and who was driving it, every turn she took to get there, and every item on every shelf she walked by once she arrived. You "watch" her dig out her money at the cash register, one crumpled bill at a time, while being treated to an itemized description of the contents of her purse. By the time she arrives back in her car, you're bracing yourself for the ride home—because you know you're going to feel every bump in the road.

And you're exhausted!

Had your friend told you she went to XYZ Market and bought \$100 worth of groceries, you'd have gotten the picture. You know where she lives (she *is* your friend). You're pretty clear on the route she takes to XYZ Market, which will most likely be the same route she takes home. As for all the cars she passed on the way, who cares? (You don't...do you?)

That's what we do to our readers when we over-state a point.

Note: for more information about Delia and her books, visit www.delialatham.net

RUE - Resist the Urge to Explain

Getting a firm grip on a handful of dos and don'ts will make over-explanation a non-issue in your writing.

1. **Show, don't tell.** What does that have to do with our subject? Everything. Passive writing breeds over-explanation.

Ex. 1: "I can't even look at you right now," **she said in an angry voice.** (She's mad. We know that by her statement alone...and then *the writer makes certain we know by telling us!*)

Ex. 2: "Get. Out. Of my sight." (Now the reader *sees* the character's anger and *feels* the implied iciness of tone ... without the need to be told she's fuming mad.)

Showing eliminates the need to explain, and gives the reader an opportunity to use her imagination. She can attribute the speaker with a deadly cold tone of voice, or make it hot-to-the-point-of-combustion. As mentioned earlier, her mental scenario may not be the same one you see as you write, but it will lead her to the same ultimate destination.

2. **Don't state the obvious.** We all *do* state the obvious, many times without realizing we've done so. I'll provide three examples. You come up with three more.

Ex. 1: He looked about with a puzzled expression **on his face.** (Where else would his expression be?)

Ex. 2: She fell **down.** (It would be difficult to fall **up.**)

Ex. 3: They studied three **different** species. (A species is, by definition, different from all others.)

3. **Don't talk down to your reader.** Yes, you do. We all do. Not intentionally, of course, but we do it nonetheless. Read your work out loud, and really listen to what you've written. If you find yourself speaking as if to a slightly obtuse child, then count on it - you're talking down to your reader. Find another way to say it.

Do. Not. Explain. News articles often require a certain amount of explanation. Technical documents demand it. Fiction does not. Assume your reader is on an equal intelligence level with you, and write to that intelligence.