
Writer's Blot

WRITER'S PROMPT /

Writers' Purgatory: Eradicating Your Pesky Pet Words

BY KIMBERLEY FEHR

The first novel, Draft 3. I turned the final page with a sigh of relief. In my own biased opinion, the book, called The Great Cubicle Escape, had a compelling momentum, coming together in a way that was more than the sum of its parts. Maybe I was really, finally, done.

But something was nagging at me. Skimming the manuscript again, words began jumping out. The same words, used the same way, much too often.

There was *feel* and *seem*.

Just. Even. Still.

Suddenly. Realize. For a moment. At this moment. Really.

And the kicker combos: *suddenly feel, really seem, suddenly realize*, and best of all: *suddenly just feel*.

Leah, my main character, felt a lot of things, and constantly needed to express them starting with "I *feel*..." She could barely turn her head without *realizing* something or other, most of which happened *suddenly*.

My pesky pet words *just* kept popping up despite my best intentions. They were an infestation running rampant in my manuscript. I had no choice; I had to kill them all.

Early readers had warned me about my overwhelming fondness for the word *suddenly*. The classic writing maxim, "Show, don't tell," said that instead of saying *suddenly*, you convey the suddenness with the story. Or not, as the case might be.

In my 357 pages, there were 167 instances of *just*, 151 of *even*, 121 of *feel*, and 132 of *realize*. *Suddenly* had enjoyed a good purge already, but *still* managed to evade detection.

Here were the insidious pet words in action.

Just what this country needs: more Cambodian babies. It doesn't mean anything, this imagining, *just* a biological phenomenon in women when longing and love collide. But now, marrying an opium farmer *just* doesn't seem prudent.

or

I *suddenly feel* the strength of the sun on my body. It's like a *thick blanket of heat* (another of my catch-all phrases.)

Crutch words weren't an issue in my short stories, where space demanded every word be precious. But the novel, with so many pages to fill, and a sense of drama and intensity required to fuel it all, had me using fodder to bridge the gap between what I was trying to say and *actually* saying something.

For my writing sins, I spent a week in find-and-replace purgatory, hunting down my pet words one by one and eradicating them.

Thankfully, words like *just*, *still*, and *even* are throwaway words. You don't *even* miss them when they're gone. *I feel* and *I realize* are self-evident. Removing them only strengthened my sentences.

Occasionally, my pet words added a little something, and I let them be.

The process was painful. I had thought I was nearly done, and I wasn't. I had to be merciless. A week in purgatory made me more aware of the errors of my ways. Now when I use my pet words, it's because I intended to. *Really*.

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