

Tone Up Flabby Fiction
From the June 2010 Write Brain
Presenter: Linda Berry
Article by Connie McKenzie

Is your manuscript flabby, out of shape, and unfit? If so, Linda Berry's Write Brain taught the liposuction techniques you need to know.

Linda described flabby writing as any writing that does not get the job done or slows the reader down. If the word, sentence, paragraph, or chapter does not move the plot forward, it is full of empty calories you don't need. Cutting it out will make a slimmer, more attractive manuscript.

Linda gave us several ways to tighten our narrative belts while still keeping our story healthy. She suggested getting rid of subplots that don't contribute to the main story. Anything that makes the reader wonder why it's there is unnecessary and only confuses the main story you are telling.

We have all heard the advice, "Show, don't tell." But Linda added, "Don't show AND tell." Once the action has occurred, it is unnecessary to explain to the reader what he has just read.

Get rid of adverbs; use strong verbs instead. Strong verbs drive the story and make it more powerful, while excessive adverbs weaken the sentence structure.

Combine scenes whenever possible. For example, if your character is drinking coffee in her kitchen and thinking about a murder, and later drives to the store, change things up a bit: have her think about the murder and stop at Starbucks on the way to the store. It makes the story more concise and active. Narratives are sometimes necessary, but if possible, dramatize the narrative for a faster paced story. Action and drama are far more interesting to most readers than descriptive narratives. Instead of a scene full of verbose descriptions that do not matter in the context of the story, summarize the scene and move on. A short, snappy scene will keep the reader's attention better than a long, complex, drawn-out scene.

Linda also talked about avoiding clichés and needless repetition. While it might be okay for your main character to use a cliché in dialogue, you should avoid them in your more literary narrative voice. Also avoid needlessly repetitive phrases, such as "another alternative," "more additions," and "free gift." Expanded acronyms, such as "HIV virus," "PIN number," and "NHL league," are other examples of needless repetition.

Linda cautioned us to be careful about "common knowledge." For example, it is not necessary to say, "the famous painting, the 'Mona Lisa,'" as most people are already familiar with it. However, if you are using specialized language, such as "BOLO," which means "Be On the Look-Out," it may be necessary to find a way to define it.

Most of us, as writers, are familiar with being “in the zone”—that magical time when the words just flow out of our pens or keyboards with barely any effort. Most writers cherish those rare occurrences. Linda warned us to be wary of those times, as most flabby writing happens when the prose is pouring out.

In the last part of the evening, Linda had us exercise our newfound skills by editing writing samples and cutting out the fat and flab. Working in groups, we ruthlessly attacked and slashed the samples, making them into much more svelte and readable versions of their former selves.

Linda summarized her advice by telling us to write in an active voice, remember that longer words are not necessarily better, and, most of all, avoid repetition. By following these few pieces of advice, your fiction will lose the unsightly flab and be slimmer, healthier, and much more likely to be picked up in a bar by an editor or agent.

Originally appeared as "Diet Fiction" in The Pikes Peak Writer, Volume IX, Issue 4, July 2010.