

Train your pet words

Who's the boss? You are, and you'd better take control of your out-of-control tics

By Noelle Sterne

Pets can be wonderful—I loved my orange-and-white cat. But when an editor critiqued my short story “Casey” before publication, I was horrified to learn that it sheltered a menagerie of unwanted pets. She marked in oxblood a herd of my beloved words and phrases.

The favorites my editor skewered weren't those pet words we all hug—overuse of passive tense (“The computer was powered up by the writer”), adverbial abuse (“definitely,” “very,” “weakly”), and modifiers clawing for a foothold (“Writing this article, the errors were glaring”). No, my pets crept in more subtly. Softly whimpering, I share four of them here so you can spot your own and train them to your command, whether it's STAY! or DELETE!

And or but. And do you start a sentence with a conjunction? I'd always thought this pet word provided gracious transitions, but my editor growled otherwise. And in the first 12 pages, I harbored seven. Here are two:

- Page 5, Casey's mother on a neighbor's boy: *Clive has a lot of friends, he's good at sports. **And** he's so smart. I just wish some of it could rub off on Casey.*
- Page 9, Casey's observations on Clive: ***But** who could argue with his perfect answers, perfect grades, perfect manners not only with every grown-up but even with the other kids?*

And I could go on. But I'll refrain. Not unreasonably, my editor rewarded

occasional conjunctions. But read these sentences without the conjunctions—they're stronger and cleaner. And I had to admit she was right.

Now and then. These conjunctions seem to add to the flow, which explains their elevation to pethood. But the editor barked, “No!” I routed out 22 *nows* and 28 *thens* and reluctantly shooed them all out to pasture, including:

- Casey at his supermarket job: *He'd finished the vegetables and fruit **and now** headed for Aisle 9, Pet Supplies.*
- Corinne, a young mother whose baby becomes ill: ***Now** she looked down at the baby sleeping so evenly.*
- Corinne listening to her ill baby: ***Then** she heard three more hiccougs.*

Delete *nows* and *thens* and you'll see how removal tightens your writing and accelerates the action.

The verb with the -ing tail. This pet sidles up and nestles because it's mellifluous and possibly logical. In pedigreed grammatical circles, it answers to “past continuous” with the gerund verb form. After the editor's scolding, I slunk away, nursing my smarting ego. When I sneaked back up on the manuscript, my eye caught 13 unruly -ings, such as:

- *Casey's father **was finishing** his coffee.*
- *Binky **was sitting** on his hind paws on her bed.*
- *The baby **kept rasping and gulping.***

The obedience technique? Substitute the simple past (“finished,” “sat,” “rasped



And or but?

and gulped”). My editor noted that “was” and “kept” aren't inherently bad words, but quickly added that the simple past gains you directness, conciseness and forward movement.

Same-start paragraphs. This pet may sprawl lazily across neighboring paragraphs. Combing all 35 pages of my story, I found 14. Here's one sequence:

- *Casey felt his cheeks grow hot. He wasn't slacking off, like some of the boys in the back ...*
- *Casey said nothing and quickly slid the cans in his arms onto the shelf ...*
- *Casey jogged over to Aisle 15, Baby Needs ...*

I revised the last two sentences:

Holding his tongue, Casey quickly slid the cans in his arms onto the shelf.
“Fifteen,” Casey repeated silently,
“Baby Needs.” He jogged over.

Pets can be terrific—but they should not be allowed to jump up and nuzzle in your pages. With firm pen in hand, use the training tips here to assert your alpha dominance as prose leader. Then your pet words and phrases won't run wild, trampling your manuscript. They'll behave better, obey on command, and eagerly please you, the master, in increasing your readers' pleasure.

Noelle Sterne

Writer, editor, writing coach and consultant, Noelle Sterne writes for mainstream and writing publications. She is currently completing her handbook of practical spirituality, *Trust Your Life: Forgive Yourself and Go After Your Dreams*.



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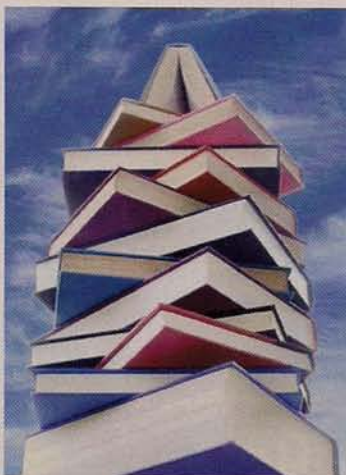
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