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## Top Seven Novel Writing Mistakes and Two Bonus Mistakes

Presented by James Thayer via Zoom  
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### **Illustration 1: Begin a scene late, end it early.**

Where should this chronology begin and where should it end to best pace the scene?

- A. Susan wakes up and makes her bed.
- B. She prepares breakfast for her daughters and then her husband cleans the dishes.
- C. She drives to work, thinking about her day ahead, dreading it, and particularly her boss.
- D. Her boss comes to her cubicle, and rudely demands a report the boss thinks is overdue, but which isn't.
- E. Susan's breathless husband calls to tell her they have just won the mega lottery, worth \$50 million.
- F. With great satisfaction, Susan tells her nasty boss she quits. He is dumbfounded. Who will do Susan's work? How can he replace her? She can't quit, he yells. She smiles, and walks out.
- G. She drives home, wondering how all that money will change her family's life.
- H. She pulls into the driveway. Her husband is there, waiting for her, two champagne glasses in hand, a big smile on his face.

## **Illustration 2: Too much, too early back-story.**

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“Did you jam the bolt anchor in?” Burkhart called. “I’m slipping.” He gripped the granite ledge—not more than two inches wide—his fingers sinking into the lichen.

Thirty feet above him, Monroe yelled, “The anchor has come out a little. I’m pulling out the hammer.”

Burkhart looked up the granite face at his partner. “I’ve taken the weight off the line, but I can’t hold on here much longer.”

Burkhart’s fingers of one hand were white with chalk. A belaying glove was on the other hand. Sweat seeped down his forehead from under his helmet. Spring-loaded cams, nuts, and quickdraws hung from his harness. Monroe’s foot loosened granite flecks that peppered Burkhart’s helmet.

He was tight against the cliff face, the toes of his rubberized climbing shoes jammed into crevices. The boulder-strewn valley floor was three hundred feet below them.

He yelled, “Hurry, Ron. My fingers are giving out.”

This was the Dan Burkhart’s third climb of this precipice, but the first time he had attempted the Devil’s Tail route, a class 5 ascent. Burkhart had begun rock climbing when he was a fourteen years old on a wager from his father. Burkhart had been begging his family for a dog, and his dad had told him that if Dan could climb Mount Baldy at Lehi State Park, and reach the top, the family would get a dog. Burkhart spent a month learning climbing techniques, and by the time he had conquered Mount Baldy, he had forgotten about a dog. When he graduated from high school, he already climbed the Fire and Ice Face on the Chieftain in British Columbia and the Skyway Route on Mount Constance in Washington State.

After college he had joined the Army’s 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division, and had served as an instructor in the division’s climbing school. Although the division was headquartered at Fort Drum, New York, the climbing school was at Breckenridge, Colorado. Burkhart rose from second lieutenant to captain, and was the deputy director of the school when his father passed away, and Burkhart left the Army to try to keep his father’s business together.

The business—Burkhart Distributing—employed 120 people, and had delivery routes throughout eastern Washington, and it took him five years before he felt comfortable giving instructions to employees. He had met his wife Anne when she spent a summer at Burkhart Distributing on an internship from the University of Montana Business School, and . . . .

### **Illustration 3: Point of view that jumps around.**

“I don’t understand why Sandra puts up with him,” Jolene said, wondering if Ally was interested at all. “I mean, I’d have bailed out of that relationship a long time ago.”

“Me, too,” Ally replied. She didn’t want to upset Jolene, who she knew could get angry thinking of Sandra. “I would’ve been long gone.”

The waiter arrived with their wine. They were quiet until he filled their glasses. He returned to the service area.

Brushing her hair from her forehead, Monica smiled at Ally. Monica knew Ally had her own problems with her boyfriend. She wanted to yell, “Follow your own advice. Leave him.” But she knew better.

“Sometimes Sandra acts like a fourteen-year-old.” Jolene glanced again at Ally, trying to read her eyes. “Ally, you okay?”

Ally made a dismissive gesture. “I’m living the dream. Couldn’t be better.” She wondered if her words sounded hollow, and friends could see through her.

### **Illustration 4: Too much interior monologue.**

“I’ll be here next year.” Scott kissed her cheek. “Same time, same place. I’m already looking forward to it.” He smiled at her, then walked under the big clock.

Julie watched him disappear among the Christmas shoppers. They had been meeting at this Macy’s café once a year since they had graduated from college--- six years now—to talk about friends and family, and to give each other updates. Sometimes it was the best ninety minutes of her holiday season. Sitting across from him a moment ago, she had been tempted to ask if he’d go to dinner with her tonight, but she had quelled the urge. They were friends, and had been for ten years. Why ruin that? He had been geeky when she had first met him, with tortoise-shell glasses and hair that wouldn’t seem to lie down--but he had changed over the years, growing into himself, and last year and again this year she had found herself being flirty with him, smiling and eyeing him as she had never done before. She should’ve just asked him to dinner, maybe.

She was more attracted to Scott than she ever had been to Jonathan, whose company had transferred him to Hong Kong, and it had taken her only a week to determine she was glad he was gone. The old saying that absence makes the heart grow fonder was less true than another old saying: out of sight, out of mind. She missed being kept busy by Jonathan—movies, dinners, parties—more than she missed him. She had laughed more in ninety minutes with Scott than she had in a year with Jonathan.

Julie stepped out of the way of a woman carrying six Macy's bags. Would Scott be interested in an actual date? Did she dare ask him for dinner? He had always treated her more like one of the guys than as a young lady, much less a desirable young lady. Maybe that's what attracted her to him. She was tired of guys hitting on her, especially the buffed fellows at the gym, who always flexed their pecs when they talked to her. She liked a more circuitous approach, and she appreciated subtlety. She smiled at the thought that perhaps Scott was indeed trying to approach her, but was being so subtle she wasn't picking up on it. Maybe he just needed some encouragement. But would she want to be in a relationship with him? She wondered about . . . .

### **Illustration 5: Avoid interior monologue.**

**This is interior monologue. The reader is hearing Carolyn think:**

Carolyn worried about her son's safety. Tommy was so impetuous. Sometimes he did dangerous things. And he was small for his age. The boy had been angry ever since his dad had left for the gold fields. Tommy didn't obey her, and sometimes she would catch him scowling and staring at her. She wished Tommy had friends nearby but town was six miles away, and his closest friend, Jake, lived a mile away on the other side of the river.

**Here's the way to show the same worries with action and dialogue:**

She leaned out the open window. "Tommy, get away from that fire. That stump is going to burn all day and night, and don't you get too near it."

Her son stared at her, then stepped closer to the bonfire.

"Didn't you hear me?" She crossed the parlor, lifting her apron so it wouldn't trip her, and ran into the yard. "You get away from there." She grabbed him by his suspenders and yanked him back.

"Dad would let me tend this fire." He tried to swat her hand away. "He taught me how to burn these stumps and clear this field."

"Your dad isn't here."

He was wearing hand-me-down wool pants. She had taken the hem up six inches. His gingham shirt was patched at the elbows.

His voice was piping. "Dad should have taken me with him. I want to dig for gold with him. I don't want to go to school any more."

"Your dad will send us train money soon, and we'll go out to California. Then you can dig all the gold you want." She led him away from

the burning stump. "I'll walk you over to Jake's. You and he can ride his pony."

"He lives a hundred miles away. And I don't like his sister."

"He lives just down the river and across the footbridge." She pulled him toward the house. "Let's get you some cornbread. Then it won't take but fifteen minutes to get there."

Tommy wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "No gold miner eats cornbread."

"I want you to promise me you and John won't go near the river." She squeezed his hand. "You hear me?"

### **Illustration 6: Use scenes rather than summaries.**

Novelist and writing instructor Jack Bickham defines a scene: "It's a segment of story action, written moment-by-moment, without summary, presented onstage in the story 'now.' It is *not* something that goes on inside a character's head; it is physical. It could be put on the theater stage and acted out."

**A summary:** My mother and father lived on Elm Street, and were happy for many years until the truck ran over father's leg. He was in the hospital two months but never fully recovered. I had to get a job at the factory.

**A (partial) scene:** Joe Smith buttoned his coat and made his way down the sidewalk. The street smelled of coal smoke and sewage. He glanced over his shoulder into the wind, and pulled the coat's belt tighter. His foot missed the curb, and he tumbled forward onto the asphalt. He tried to scramble away but a pickup's fender clipped his shoulder, and Smith's leg fell under the wheel snapping his leg, sounding like a gunshot.

### **Illustration 7: Avoid direct answers.**

**Wrong way:**

*"Did you bring the bag?" John asked.*

*"Yeah. It's in the car."*

*"Did she give you any trouble?"*

*"No. She was too afraid," Dan said.*

*"Were you followed here?" John asked.*

*"No. I made a lot of cut-backs and quick turns."*

*John rubbed his chin. "I told you to stop for ten minutes and watch the sidewalk for cops before coming into the building. Did you do that?"*

*"Sure. Just regular people walked by, with shopping bags, walking their dogs, that kind of thing."*

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**Illustration 8: Avoid as-you-know dialogue.**

Gillie lowered the backpack of explosives to the ground. Cork had darkened his face, and his winter field uniform blended with the snow. His Sten gun was strapped to his belly. "How much farther, Lieutenant?"

"Quarter mile. I can already hear the water from the spillway."

Gillie glanced at his watch. "The diversion will begin in fifteen minutes. We going to make it?"

Ten Sten gun clips hung from the lieutenant's belt. "They didn't hire us to be late, Gillie. Let's go."

"You sure this dam is worth it, Lieutenant? I mean, you and me, we're going to have the dogs on us, and half the Wehrmacht in Saxony."

"It's worth it. As you know, the Keibler Dam was built in 1915 to prevent seasonal flooding on the Wilhelm River, thereby opening up 40,000 acres to agriculture. Other benefits include the twenty-mile irrigation channel that delivers water to orchards and grain fields in lower Saxony, and the two twenty-thousand watt electric generators that provides electricity to six thousand residences. The dam cost four million German marks, and employed 3,000 workers during its construction."

"Well, hell, Lieutenant, I guess it is worth all this trouble after all."