Active and passive voice: Do I have a good balance?

**Amanda**:

In this story, I didn’t notice anything wrong with your use of active or passive voice. As a general rule, you want to try to avoid passive voice when possible, as it usually lends itself to weaker writing. In this story, I thought your use was fine.

Commas: overuse?

**Amanda**:

In The Money Trees, I took out some commas and put some in. I thought overall you have a pretty good grasp of commas. I’ve definitely edited books that used excessive commas or not enough, and with this story I didn’t notice either of those things happening.

Semicolons: I think I need to take advantage of their feature more, and learn how and when to use them properly.

**Amanda**:

As a general rule, semicolons are not recommended for use in dialogue. As you know, semicolons can be used in place of a period to effectively connect two complete sentences. I would err on the side of too few semicolons than too many. They are most effectively used when two complete sentences are following the same idea or train of thought. My suggestion would be to keep an eye out for semicolons in books you like to read and see how other authors are using them. That suggestion, of course, comes with a warning: Just because a particular author does something doesn’t mean it’s right or that you should do it, but I think looking at how others use semicolons is a good place to start when examining them in your own writing.

That: Sometimes I'm uncertain when "that" should be included. In this example, I'm reasonably certain it is NOT required, but I think it will be sufficient to give you an idea of what I mean.

        They agreed more jobs were needed but disagreed on methods of stimulating job growth.

Sometimes I might include a "that" so it would read, "They agreed that more jobs were needed [...]"

When deciding whether or not to use "that," I go by what's more clear to me, but I would like to find or be made aware of a more definite rule or guideline.

**Amanda**:

Unfortunately there isn’t a definite rule, at least that I’ve found, regarding use of “that.” I also tend to go with what’s more clear. I will say that I end up removing “that” more often than I add it in. I find that most authors overuse it, which leads to wordiness. My suggestion here is the same as that with semicolons: try to look for these as you read other books and see what other writers do with them. In the case of your example sentence from the story, I do not think it needs “that” added.

Wordiness: I've had problems with this in the past, so I mentioning it here. I'm sure that's a pretty basic thing for an editor to look for, and you did make a couple notes about it in "The Search for the Enchanted Balls."

**Amanda**:

You will notice in my edits that I do make some suggestions along this line. In The Money Trees, your biggest problem seemed to be unnecessary adjectives and adverbs. You also used the words “therefore” and “however” a lot. Those should be used sparingly. Never use two words when one will do just fine. Whenever you write, carefully consider your word choice; I often use the Thesaurus to find words that perfectly fit what I’m trying to say so I can use fewer words. Of course, the words should always fit the scene and your author voice, but a Thesaurus is a good place to go to find alternatives if you need them.

Related to wordiness, I had some doubts about my parenthetical remark (noted below), and would like a second opinion after you're edit.

An excerpt from the money trees:

        Because of the scarcity of rain, it had withered and died (two weeks before

        the king declared drought conditions).

I've used the parenthetical remark for two reasons. I wanted to give an indication of elapsed time, and also for satirical (is "satirical" the right word) purposes. (The king (a politician) made an official decree, a pointless thing to do because the citizens already knew about the drought).

**Amanda**:

I made a note about this in the story. I did notice this remark and suggested you remove it even before I read your question about it. Refer to my in-text note for more.

**Other comments**

-Title: I think the title is good. It’s about what the story is about, and it’s short, which is preferable. I can’t really think of a title that would be better.

-Dialogue: I think the dialogue should fit with the story. This is something I noticed while I was reading. The characters are dealing with princes and living in a kingdom and in a time when a single penny can actually buy things, which suggests an ancient setting. Yet, the characters do talk with rather a modern tone. The dialogue needs to match the setting, or readers will notice, and it will sound out of place. In this story, I didn’t think it was too far off, but you could include some timely phrasing and even better word choice. You asked if I had some reading material for you on this line. I don’t have any off hand that I can think of, but I can look into it. To be honest, since your dialogue needs to fit whatever setting you choose, the best way to find out what kind of words and phrases to use is to research it. This is the kind of thing authors of historical fiction and nonfiction have to do before they can start to write. Find books about what kinds of words people in that time period said. What were some common phrases? Read books based in the time period in which you’re writing. How do those characters speak? Once you have some ideas, you can incorporate that into your story.

-Personality: This is a huge topic, and it would take more time than I have to write out all the specifics and intricacies of character personality. The short answer, however, is this: it’s nice to write nice characters, but hearing you say “my characters don’t have much personality” is concerning. No one wants to read about a character that doesn’t have a personality, just like in real life no one wants to be friends with someone who has no personality. People with no personality are boring. Just because someone is nice doesn’t mean they don’t have a distinct personality. You can write a nice character who doesn’t cause trouble who still has a personality of his or her own. That being said, in The Money Trees book, I honestly didn’t notice this as a problem. Also, you should consider that it’s going to be hard to give a character much personality in so short a space. Short stories like this are forced to be more action than character driven, leaving little room for character development. Giving your characters back story, families, specific likes and dislikes—all of those things add to personality.

-The ending: I’m a little confused about why you included the wife being pregnant at the end. As I just mentioned, the story is short. The main focus is on the money trees and healing the sick son. It felt random to throw the pregnancy at the end, and I wasn’t sure of the point since it wasn’t a part of the story in any other way.

-Questionable plot points:

1) You wrote that the prince heard rumors about money trees and went to approach Johann. The money trees apparently are magical everywhere, since Johann, Elijah, and the prince were all able to produce one. How were there rumors that were large enough to reach the prince, yet no one else actually tried to make a money tree. At first I thought Johann had found a special penny or something, but it seems like if they were that easy (just bury a penny), everyone in the kingdom would have made one. What am I missing?

2) At the end, after the rain comes, why can’t the men all just grow another money tree? Is this a plot point you want to close? Are we to assume that after the first ones dried up, they can’t make another? That didn’t feel resolved to me.