

Title of Session: WriteTalk- Ten Mistakes Writers Make: Repeats

Moderator: Sandra Shattuck

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SandraS: Why don't we go ahead and introduce ourselves.

SandraS: I'm Sandy and I teach literature in Alabama.

BjB: I'm an art teacher in Pennsylvania

ShirleyB: I'm Shirley and I work part-time for National Writing Project

UrsulaC: I am Ursula, I am pre-service teacher at University of Houston- in student teaching program now

ShirleyB: BjB, where in Pennsylvania?

BjB: nw of Harrisburg

SandraS: Lenny, would you like to introduce yourself?

ShirleyB: Hi, everyone.

UrsulaC: hello

SandraS: Welcome to WriteTalk and thanks so much for coming on over

LennyG: I'm from Cleveland, Ohio... just graduated College in a Computer Science Degree

SandraS waves to Lenny

ShirleyB smiles

SandraS: ok, so I've got a 3-paragraph starting talk on National Writing Project and my part in it

SandraS: WriteTalk came out of my experience with the National Writing Project

SandraS: after the introductory spiel, we'll start talking about writing

SandraS: here goes

UrsulaC: What is the National Writing project

ShirleyB: You take the question, Sandra.

SandraS: The National Writing Project (NWP),

SandraS: <http://www.writingproject.org>

SandraS: a federally-funded program, has been around for 30 years as a professional development model. NWP has 3 premises: 1) teachers are the best teachers of other teachers, 2) teachers are better teachers of writing if they improve their own writing, and 3) writing is a powerful method of learning content and process across all subject areas.

SandraS: Currently, NWP has 185 sites, all housed at universities and all working mainly with K-12 teachers. The primary project for each site is the Summer Invitational Institute (an intensive four-week seminar -- participants are usually paid a stipend to attend) where teachers work across disciplines and grade levels to improve their own writing and to share ideas on the teaching of writing.

BjB . o O (if you're new to Tapped In, click on the ACTIONS menu in the top right of this chat window and then click on DETACH)

SandraS: thanks BJ!

SandraS: In June 2003, I attended the Summer Invitational Institute at the Alabama A&M University (AAMU) Writing Project

SandraS: <http://www.knology.net/aamuwritingproject>

SandraS: and became what is called a teacher consultant and a teacher leader -- I help with continuity programs, such as the advanced institute and our writing retreat, which we just had the last weekend of August on top of Monte Sano overlooking the Tennessee Valley.

SandraS: ok, so that's the introductory spiel

SandraS: tonight we'll be starting a 10-session journey through a website called "Ten Mistakes Writers Make" by Pat Holt

BjB waits anxiously for tonight's write talk topic

SandraS: and the first issue she takes up is "repeats"

ShirleyB: is nervous

SandraS: any questions about National Writing project?

BjB is excited

ShirleyB is nervous

SandraS: yiha

UrsulaC: nonr

SandraS: ok

SandraS: so what I'd like to do is just cut and paste in the few paragraphs Pat Holt writes on avoiding repeats

SandraS: then I've got some examples we can work with

SandraS: we can talk about the issue in our own writing

SandraS: and then branch out to anything else that is on our minds

SandraS: how does that sound?

BjB: sounds like a winner!

ShirleyB: It sounds good to me.

UrsulaC: great

SandraS: excellent!

SandraS: ok, here's Pat Holt's stuff:

SandraS: REPEATS

SandraS: Just about every writer unconsciously leans on a "crutch" word. Hillary Clinton's repeated word is "eager" (can you believe it? the committee that wrote "Living History" should be ashamed). Cosmopolitan magazine editor Kate White uses "quickly" over a dozen times in "A Body To Die For." Jack Kerouac's crutch word in "On the Road" is "sad," sometimes doubly so - "sad, sad." Ann Packer's in "The Dive from Clausen's Pier" is "weird."

SandraS: Crutch words are usually unremarkable. That's why they slip under editorial radar - they're not even worth repeating, but there you have it, pop, pop, pop, up they come. Readers, however, notice them, get irked by them and are eventually distracted by them, and down goes your book, never to be opened again.

SandraS: I like this phrase "crutch" words....I know I've got a couple that I tend not to catch. Here's some more of Pat Holt:

SandraS: But even if the word is unusual, and even if you use it differently when you repeat it, don't: Set a higher standard for yourself even if readers won't notice. In Jennifer Egan's "Look at me," the core word - a good word, but because it's good, you get *one* per book - is "abraded." Here's the problem:

SandraS: "Victoria's blue gaze abraded me with the texture of ground glass." page 202

SandraS: "... (metal trucks abrading the concrete)..." page 217

SandraS: "...he relished the abrasion of her skepticism..." page 256

SandraS: "...since his abrasion with Z ..." page 272

UrsulaC chuckles

SandraS: I also like this example Pat gives....abrade.... a lovely word. But as she points out, repeated too often and it loses its stellar quality.

ShirleyB: It's true. I noticed it while reading Egan's book.

SandraS: cool, Shirley!

SandraS: here's more Pat Holt:

BjB: too easy for abraded to become abrasive

SandraS: The same goes for repeats of several words together - a phrase or sentence that may seem fresh at first, but, restated many times, draws attention from the author's strengths. Sheldon Siegel nearly bludgeons us in his otherwise witty and articulate courtroom thriller, "Final Verdict" with a sentence construction that's repeated throughout the book:

SandraS: "His tone oozes self-righteousness when he says..." page 188

SandraS: "His voice is barely audible when he says..." page 193

SandraS: "His tone is unapologetic when he says..." page 199

SandraS: "Rosie keeps her tone even when she says..." page 200

SandraS: "His tone is even when he says..." page 205

SandraS: "I switch to my lawyer voice when I say ..." page 211

SandraS: "He sounds like Grace when he says..." page 211

SandraS: What a tragedy. I'm not saying all forms of this sentence should be lopped off. Lawyers find their rhythm in the courtroom by phrasing questions in the same or similar way. It's just that you can't do it too often on the page. After the third or fourth or 16th time, readers exclaim silently, "Where was the editor who shoulda caught this?" or "What was the author thinking?"

SandraS chuckles at BJ's alliterative magic

ShirleyB: I was just going to comment on that myself

SandraS: the alliterative magic, Shirley?

ShirleyB: Yes.

SandraS: I also like the way Holt points out that it's not just repeats of words that we lean on, but we can also get stuck in a phrase groove

BjB says thanks

SandraS: here's a bit more Holt, and then we can talk:

ShirleyB: I wonder why all of Pat Holt's examples are from fiction. The reason I ask the question is that much of the writing most people do is not.

SandraS: good point, Shirley.

SandraS: Pat starts out talking about being an editor, and I'm assuming she does mostly editing for fiction writers

ShirleyB: gotcha

SandraS: I have a great self-editing book for fiction writers, and I find that a lot of the basic tips apply to any kind of writing

SandraS: I do think Pat goes a bit overboard with the repetition stuff, but we can talk about that in a sec:

SandraS: So if you are the author, don't wait for the agent or house or even editorial consultant to catch this stuff *for* you. Attune your eye now. Vow to yourself, NO REPEATS.

SandraS: And by the way, even deliberate repeats should always be questioned: "Here are the documents." says one character. "If these are the documents, I'll oppose you," says another. A repeat like that just keeps us on the surface. Figure out a different word; or rewrite the exchange. Repeats rarely allow you to probe deeper.

SandraS: That's the end of her section on repeats.

SandraS: And I think the last part is where she goes overboard: NO REPEATS.

SandraS: Some times ya just gotta

SandraS: some times repeats are effective

SandraS: but Holt is trying to point out errors that writers can catch BEFORE they send writing off

SandraS: to anyone....editor, friend, writing group

UrsulaC: There are only so many ways to write something

UrsulaC: eventually you have to repeat

SandraS: I think so, Ursula

ShirleyB: I think Holt has a point. The writer doesn't want to "annoy" the editor with irritating glitches.

SandraS: I think what Holt is trying to alert us to is the repeat that breaks the readers' flow

SandraS: right...the editor or the reader

SandraS: So with each of these 10 mistakes, I'm going to add my own stuff. And it occurred to me that repeats

SandraS: are also like redundancy...so I have a few things on that:

SandraS: redundancy - repeats' first cousin

SandraS: "Cut out redundant pairs. I first heard the phrase, 'The Department of Redundancy Department,' in high school. The pun has stayed with me ever since, so now I throw away repetitive and redundant words that make sentences confusing and convoluted. Hmm ... let's try that one again: throw away redundant words that make sentences convoluted. (Randy Accetta - U. of AZ)

SandraS: I'm often guilty of this.

SandraS: And I see a good number of writers do this.

ShirleyB: Me, too

SandraS: It's because the words just soundddddd so pretty

SandraS: ya know, I like to stack 'em up....

SandraS: but they actually get in the way.

ShirleyB: I think I don't reread carefully.

BjB smiles

SandraS: Randy Acetta is writing in a first-year comp book from U of AZ

SandraS: he does a great job of giving examples

SandraS: Shirley, I think also we just can't catch these things always

SandraS: Holt is urging us to be our own best editors

SandraS: but some times we just have to leave writing for a while and then come back to it

UrsulaC: I agree

SandraS: I've caught things in pieces that I've rewritten and reread a gazillion times

ShirleyB: I agree, but we can't always do that.

SandraS: exactly.... deadlines....

SandraS: no time....

SandraS: here's an example of redundancy:

SandraS: If by chance it happens that you have followed these changes that were made to the sentences that were written above, then you are most likely on your way to becoming a very excellent writer of written words, phrases, expressions, etc.

UrsulaC: I can not write and rewrite. Usually my rough draft is the final draft

SandraS: Actually, this is a paragraph Randy writes and then edits.

SandraS: It occurred to me that most of the problem was repeats and redundancies.

SandraS: I absolutely empathize with your process of writing Ursula.

SandraS: The more I write, the more I find I end up rewriting.

BjB agrees with Sandy

SandraS: Anyone want to try a revision of Randy's passage above?

SandraS: Then I'll post the edit Randy comes up with.

UrsulaC: I will

ShirleyB: I aim to do rewriting. When I do my piece is always better, but the truth is, I don't always have the time for rewrites.

SandraS knows exactly how Shirley feels

UrsulaC: If by chance you followed these changes that were made to the sentences above, then you are likely becoming an excellent writer.

SandraS: oooh, I like the revision Ursula

ShirleyB claps wildly

UrsulaC says thanks

SandraS: you cut out the redundant "it happens"

ShirleyB: Also very excellent

SandraS: and changed the present perfect to past

SandraS: cut "very" from excellent

SandraS: also redundant

SandraS: it always helps me to have clear examples

SandraS: I think it helps students, too

UrsulaC: Yes!!!

SandraS: here's Randy's revision of his own sentence:

SandraS: If you followed the changes in the sentences above, you're on your way to becoming an excellent writer.

SandraS: he pares it down even more

UrsulaC: to the point

SandraS: many students think that "to the point" is too simple and not academic enough

SandraS: I think lots of students perceive academic writing as convoluted....all the time

UrsulaC: well too many words says a lot of nothing

ShirleyB: You're right. Sounding academic is a problem

SandraS: often true, Ursula

SandraS: hey, I'm an academic....I love sounding academic...but I also want to be clear

SandraS: academics who aren't clear ain't doin' anyone a favor

ShirleyB: Oops. Sorry. didn't mean to step on any toes.

SandraS gently steps off soapbox

SandraS: you didn't step on my toes, Shirley...

ShirleyB blushes and hangs her head

SandraS: I think I just get frustrated when students come up with these convoluted thesis statements that sound as if they're saying something....when we revise, they often say, "That's it?"

UrsulaC chuckles

SandraS: I blame the students' muddledness on academic obfuscation!

SandraS: ok, here's another example:

UrsulaC: what?

SandraS: If the curriculum offers a diverse variety of multicultural texts, the number of students reached can expand and increase.

SandraS: (this one is based on something I wrote)

SandraS: I love the sound of "diverse variety"...but it's redundant

SandraS: here's another:

UrsulaC: goodness...

SandraS: Wonderful, creative stories cavorted and caroused in my head, but I could never get them written down.

SandraS: how would you edit this?

ShirleyB: Caroused and cavorted - love it.

SandraS: aha!

SandraS: so you wouldn't cut either word, Shirley?

ShirleyB: I would. I just loved the image.

SandraS: me too....

SandraS: so how does a writer balance voice, style, and clarity?

ShirleyB: Creative storied cavorted in my head, but I could never get them written

UrsulaC: Wonderful, stories caroused in my head, but I could never get them written

SandraS: I like that

SandraS: I think both those revisions show that the writer can get the same idea across perhaps even more powerfully

SandraS: in both of your revisions the reader is asked to focus on one verb

SandraS: does that make for a stronger image?

ShirleyB: Actually, caroused and cavorted have different connotations.

SandraS listens to Shirley

ShirleyB: Caroused implies drinking; cavorting, a kind of playfulness.

SandraS: aha... I think of caroused also as wild partying

ShirleyB: Right. I would agree with that, but I get an image of Falstaff.

SandraS chuckles

SandraS: I think that when I write and I find a couple words that I like, I tend to throw them all in...

SandraS: when actually I don't need them all

SandraS: which is what editing is for....

ShirleyB: But sometimes, the alliteration is welcome.

SandraS: exactly....

SandraS: just like learning that fragments are grammatically incorrect

SandraS: but once you learn the rule

SandraS: you can break it to great effect

SandraS: so also can you use repetition to great effect

SandraS: that's what I meant with Pat Holt going overboard a bit

SandraS: ok, I'm done talking

SandraS: any self-reflections on repeats? redundancies? any other writing challenges?

UrsulaC: what's next

ShirleyB: Thanks, This has been thought provoking.

SandraS: I'd like to know if Pat Holt's comments were helpful to you.

UrsulaC: yes, it is something that I have to be mindful of

ShirleyB: Yes, but I think the redundancies that aren't as obvious to catch are more to the point.

BjB: the comments help me re-read with a different perspective

ShirleyB: The examples that Pat Holt gave were from scattered parts of a book.

SandraS: cool!

SandraS: right, Shirley

UrsulaC: I tend to write exactly as I talk-so you can imagine what my writing is like

SandraS: probably creative, Ursula

SandraS: What do you think about Holt's title - "Ten Mistakes Writers Make"

SandraS: it's succinct

ShirleyB: I write the way I talk, too. My problem is that I jump into the middle of a thought and assume the reader, listener, knows the context.

SandraS: but it sets up the writing process as wrong or right

UrsulaC: sometimes. but there are little phrases that I say over and over-

SandraS: somehow, I get this image of an editor standing over a writing pointing and wagging a finger...

ShirleyB: I agree, Sandra. She doesn't talk about the effect of the "mistakes."

UrsulaC: I repeat- the words like and that are my claims to fame

SandraS: anybody else get that from Pat Holt's stuff?

SandraS: applauds Ursula's claim to fame

ShirleyB: I think anything that we can learn to make our writing effective is helpful.

SandraS: ok, so this is what I run in to with my students

ShirleyB: I don't take admonitions as gospel.

UrsulaC: how will this help me when teaching 2nd graders

SandraS: they mostly see writing as mistakes just waiting to be corrected

SandraS: good question Ursula

SandraS: I think you could use it in vocabulary expansion, for instance

SandraS: especially with a word like "good"

ShirleyB: That is a good question.

SandraS: if the writer is asked to avoid repetition, then the writer has to find other words for "good"

ShirleyB: I mean an insightful question.

SandraS: admires Shirley's revision!

ShirleyB: I'm becoming very self-conscious.

SandraS: Shirley just gave a perfect example

SandraS: translate it to second grade....

SandraS: someone writes, "I had a good birthday."

SandraS: "It was a good day."

SandraS: you can ask, what made it good?

ShirleyB: I had a fun birthday.

UrsulaC: It was an interesting day.

SandraS: there ya go...

SandraS: right....

ShirleyB: I had a happy birthday.

SandraS: avoiding repetition links up with another important skill

ShirleyB: Would a word wall help?

SandraS: be specific

SandraS: oh, cool

BjB: teachers can also model this by writing comments on a worksheet like excellent, marvelous, etc

SandraS: word walls are wonderful

UrsulaC: weird-in Texas do not really focus on writing skills until 3rd grade

SandraS: cool, BJ

SandraS: I love that

SandraS: well, even if you're not really focusing on writing skills, you can still transfer some of the stuff to speaking

UrsulaC: yeah

SandraS: not sure if that's helpful, Ursula

BjB: Ursula, you need to get a hold of the latest Educational Leadership magazine...it's truly inspirational

UrsulaC: Wonderful

BjB: the theme is writing and reading

SandraS: I've gotta see that , too, BJ

ShirleyB: I'm glad you mentioned the magazine, Sandra. Is it as good as it looks?

SandraS: BJ has seen it, but I haven't yet

ShirleyB: Bj?

SandraS: I also think there's a lot of visual and kinesthetic stuff you can do with elementary students to prepare them for writing

BjB nods to Shirley

SandraS: BjB = BJ

ShirleyB: I know. I was asking her for her opinion. Live chat is weird.

SandraS: so if you're working on trying to get more specific in detail, rely on senses

SandraS: describe an object from each sense

BjB: yes, the magazine is excellent

SandraS: that's one way to expand vocabulary, avoid repetition

UrsulaC: cool

SandraS: I think there's so much that can be done with visual arts and writing/literacy

SandraS: more incorporation of creativity and imagination

BjB: one of the articles is on bookmaking

SandraS: oh, that sounds cool!

BjB: a wonderful tool for invented spelling

UrsulaC: when writing should we be concerned with spelling

ShirleyB: Yes, I love the David Perkins material on close looking, and I've just been reading some material by Eliot Eisner. Visual literacy and verbal literacy have some great connections.

SandraS: sounds like great material, Shirley. thanks for the references.

SandraS: what do you think, Ursula?

SandraS: should we be concerned with spelling?

BjB agrees. Lesley Farmer did a session on visual and aural literacy

BjB . o O (Targeting Librarians)

ShirleyB: Notice the repetition of "material" Yuck!

SandraS: no fair editing your conversations!

UrsulaC: not with younger students, but by second grade students should be spelling sight words correctly

SandraS: I think spoken language is off grounds....

ShirleyB: I think spelling can be taught, but it shouldn't be overemphasized in 2nd grade.

UrsulaC: well here is the problem, they are tested in the fourth grade

SandraS: I agree, Shirley.

ShirleyB: I have to leave now, but this has been a terrific conversation. Thanks for setting this up, Sandra.

SandraS: Thanks so much, Shirley.

UrsulaC: bye Shirley

SandraS: I'm glad you could participate.

ShirleyB: Thanks to everyone. I guess we'll talk next month?

SandraS: Yup.

SandraS: I'll send out another reminder.

SandraS: Thanks BJ!

SandraS: Thanks Ursula!

ShirleyB: What's the date? I think I'll be at the Annual meeting.

SandraS: great input!

UrsulaC: thanks-

SandraS: hang on, let's see...

ShirleyB: See ya, Ursula.

SandraS: I think it's the 11 Nov.

SandraS: so a week before the annual meeting

ShirleyB: Oh - good.

ShirleyB: Bye, everyone

SandraS: hope everyone has a restful evening!

BjB: Thanks, Sandy. Inspirational as usual!

UrsulaC: Goodnight and thanks again

SandraS: I love talking with all of you!

SandraS: Ursula, did you join WriteTAlk?

UrsulaC: no, should I

SandraS: only if you want to

UrsulaC: tell me about

SandraS: if it's a group you're interested in

SandraS: you can join it

SandraS: that means that the reminder I send out will come to your email

SandraS: and you can access the group office

UrsulaC: what do you talk about

BjB: it's a good place to post writing for the group to look at, or to ask questions between real time chats

SandraS agrees with BJ

BjB: and there are resources in the group room for you

SandraS: Ursula, so far we've been meeting the second Thursday of the month

SandraS: we've had a variety of topics

BjB: o O (the group room has a threaded discussion board)

SandraS: and we'll be going over the Pat Holt stuff

UrsulaC: at what time-usually in class on Thursday

SandraS: there's a link in the group room

SandraS: same time- 8-9pm central

BjB: you can read the archived discussions at www.tappedin.org/transcripts

UrsulaC: ok

SandraS: no pressure.... just letting you know some of the stuff you can do at Tappe In

UrsulaC: no problem thanks for the information

SandraS: BJ, do you remember the session Lesley Farmer did? I'd like to access that transcript [www.tappedin.org/transcripts]

UrsulaC: I love to write, no time though

BjB offers Ursula chocolate if she joins

SandraS nods to Ursula

UrsulaC: luv ya

BjB: time is a problem for us all

SandraS: Take care, Ursula

UrsulaC: you too

SandraS takes some chocolate and munches

BjB waves goodnight and heads for bed

SandraS hugs all goodnight