

Avoid Adverbs

Almost every book and writing course advises against using adverbs. I agree and believe overusing adverbs can kill a good story.

Steven King describes using adverbs in another way:

I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs.

Using adverbs in dialogue tags or internal thoughts tells the reader what's happening instead of showing it, and sometimes adverbs are redundant. In other words, adverbs are a lazy way of expressing action, drama, or emotion.

That said, sprinkling a few adverbs here and there is acceptable. But the fewer adverbs you have in your writing, the better.

Adverb definition

Adverbs words describe or give information about the word they are modifying, such as a verb, adjective, clause, verbal phrase, or other adverbs.

Most adverbs end with “*ly*,” but not all of them. Some can end with “*ward*” or “*-wise*,” such as (forward, backward, otherwise) or keep the same form as adjectives (hard, fast, right).

A few common adverbs not ending in “*ly*”:

afterward	instead	otherwise	very
backward	just	quite	yet
furthermore	meanwhile	rather	

however
indeed

most
much

so
therefore

Adverbs in dialogue tags

No doubt adverbs have their place when writing a story, and sometimes even helpful. But adverbs will kill dialogue. Dialogue is where you should show movement, emotion, and body language. You want to add beats that enhance the story.

Deep POV is about removing adverbs and dialogue tags (said, questioned, asked, etc.)

Issue: (said angrily)

“I don’t want you here,” Joe said angrily.

► The word “angrily” is a vague (telling/explaining) word and does not show the reader anything. What is the context of the visual image in this scene?

Fix:

“I don’t want you here!” Joe balled his fists and breathed hard.

► Removing the (said) tag makes the sentence better. Replacing the adverb (angrily) with showing description helps the reader better understand Joe’s emotions and actions.

Issue: (said happily)

“Thank you for the birthday present,” Sue said happily.

► The word “happily” is vague and communicates little. The reader gets the idea, but why not improve the sentence?

Fix:

“Thank you for the birthday present.” Sue wiped a tear from her eye and smiled.

► This sentence gives a better description of Sue’s emotions. The reader will get a better image.

Issue: (very, totally, said sadly)

“I am *very* sorry that I *totally* forgot to pick you up,” Joe *said sadly*.

► Here the adverbs *very* and *totally* try to intensify the verbs sorry and forgot. The adverb *sadly* is vague, and does not describe an emotion.

Fix:

“I am sorry I forgot to pick you up,” Joe swallowed the knot in his throat, sighed, and dropped his gaze to the floor.

► This sentence reads much better. The reader can better imagine Joe’s feelings and sincerity.

Verb and adverb combos

Using a verb to enhance an adverb is a Deep POV violation. The goal is to replace [weak verb] + [adverb] combos with a single, more descriptive

verb. Doing so will make your writing tighter, more engaging, and faster-paced.

Issue: (walked loudly)

Joe *walked loudly* up the stairs into his room.

► This sentence has a [weak verb] + [adverb] combo and is wordy. This tells the reader how Joe walked. Reword to show how Joe walked.

Fix:

Joe stomped up the stairs into his room.

► This reads better with fewer words. The reader can better visualize how Joe goes up the stairs.

Issue: (loudly said)

The drill sergeant *loudly said* the instructions.

► This sentence has a [adverb] + [weak verb] combo. Replace with a stronger verb.

Fix:

The drill sergeant shouted the instructions.

► Replacing the [adverb] + [weak verb] combo with a single stronger verb “shouted” makes the sentence better.

Issue: (walked quickly)

Joe *walked quickly* down the hallway.

- ▶ How would you remove the [weak verb] + [adverb] combo without changing the sentence’s meaning?

Fix:

Joe hurried down the hallway.

- ▶ The word hurried replaced “walked quickly.” This sentence is less wordy, and it implies Joe’s urgency.

Here are a few more examples of strong verbs that can replace [weak verb] + [adverb] combos:

speak loudly	shout, yell, bark
move swiftly	speed, dart, bolt, zoom, dash, zip
hit lightly	tap, touch
say jokingly	joke, kid
attempt bravely	dare
perform poorly	fail, flunk, bomb
note subtly	suggest, insinuate, imply
eat voraciously	devour, scarf, chomp
take forcefully	grab, seize, snatch
look extendedly	stare, gaze
study closely	scrutinize, inspect
do repeatedly	repeat, redo

Redundant adverbs

Redundant adverbs tell the reader something the verb already implies. This happens when a strong verb carries the action taking place. Watch for [redundant adverb] + [verb] phrases.

Issue: (briefly)

Joe *briefly* glanced at the wall clock.

► The adverb briefly and the verb glanced are redundant. Why? The word “briefly” implies taking a quick, brief, or hurried look, which has the same meaning as a glance.

Fix:

Joe glanced at the wall clock.

Removing the adverb briefly did not change the sentence’s meaning.

Issue: (slowly, leisurely)

Joe and Sue strolled *slowly* and *leisurely* on the beach.

► The verb strolled means walking in a slow and relaxed way, without hurry. Which makes slowly and leisurely redundant. There is no need for these two adverbs.

Fix:

Joe and Sue strolled on the beach.

► Removing the two adverbs does not change the meaning/content of the sentence. The sentence reads more direct and to the point.

Or.

Under the moonlight, holding hands, Joe and Sue strolled on the beach.

► Same sentence with added spice.

A few redundant adverb and verb phrases:

assert boldly

shouted loudly

complete entirely
completely demolish
crawled slowly
hurry quickly
insist adamantly
scream loudly

smash forcefully
squeezed tightly
stare intently
totally obliterate
wander aimlessly
whisper softly

Misplaced adverbs

You should avoid adverbs, but if you must use them, make sure the placement is correct. A misplaced adverb can change the sentence's meaning. If possible, put the adverb close to the verb it modifies to avoid confusion.

Issue: (only)

Joe and Sue *only* go to college on Wednesdays.

► Here, the adverb *only* modifies the verb *go*. This sentence has several potential meanings:

1. Joe and Sue go to college on Wednesdays and nowhere else.
2. If that is the case, the sentence is correct.
3. This sentence is wrong if Joe and Sue do other things on Wednesdays.

Issue: (rarely)

Sue goes to Houston to visit her sister *rarely*.

► The sentence is confusing, with two or three potential meanings.

Does Sue go to Houston rarely?

Or does she visit her sister rarely or both?

In Summary:

As mentioned earlier, I believe sprinkling a few adverbs here and there is acceptable. But the fewer adverbs you have in your writing, the better.

- Avoid adverbs in dialogue and thought tags.
- Replace adverbs in narration using inner thought, movement, emotion, and body language descriptions.
- Watch for redundant adverbs that have the same meaning as the verb.
- Most adverbs are not necessary. Removing the adverb will not alter the sentence's meaning or phrase.
- Watch for misplaced adverbs in a sentence that can lead to confusion.