

Be A Novelist

Writer's Workshop #10

TAG LINES – HE SAID; SHE SAID



by
Norma Jean Lutz

Be a Novelist Workshop #10

Tag Lines – He Said; She Said

by

Norma Jean Lutz

Dropping the Swifties

During the twenties, a popular children’s book series appeared on the market featuring a boy-inventor named Tom Swift. The author, Edward L. Stratemeyer, held the questionable distinction of using overly descriptive tag lines. Tag lines (also known

as speech tags) are the *he said’s* and *she said’s* used in dialogue to specify who is speaking. Because of Stratemeyer and the Swift series, exasperated editors later referred to overkill in tag lines as “Swifties.”



Swifties can become a crutch of outside explanation. If continually relied upon, they will stilt the professional development of writing good dialogue. **What a character says should be more important than *how* he says it.**

Make an Editor Cringe

The following passage contains several Swifties. Editors cringe at this kind of dialogue. (Readers do too.)

“What about the maid?” Paul queried

Be A Novelist Workshop #10: Tag Lines – He Said; She Said – Norma Jean Lutz

“Her alibi is tight,” Mary answered reassuringly.

“That’s good,” he sighed.

“But the gardener...” she began with a start.

“Quiet! What was that noise?” he interrupted harshly.

“Just your imagination,” Mary jeered teasingly. “The murder has made you jumpy.”

“That’s not so,” he spouted back at her. “I’m as calm as I can be.”

Editors refer to such passages as “thin” or “stiff” dialogue. The characters have not been developed so that they have individuality; therefore, the tag lines are left to do all the work.

A viable goal for a fiction author is to create dialogue which is so believable the reader feels totally involved in the scene and forgets the author even exists.

To capture and hold the reader, characters must sound natural, like “real people talking.” But they can bear out only the traits that the writer has developed within them.

When an author senses that the *tag lines* are carrying more weight than the dialogue, there may be one of two problems present:

1. Poor acquaintance with the characters, or

2. Insufficient skill in dialogue technique.

Possibly both!

“Said” is Best

Said provides the safest and most inconspicuous tag line, contrary to the belief of most beginning writers. Readers are so accustomed to *said*, they skim over it – which

Be A Novelist Workshop #10: Tag Lines – He Said; She Said – Norma Jean Lutz

should delight the author. **Begin to think of tag lines as efficient handles as opposed to lavish adornment.**

Writers who habitually lean on the Swifties call undue attention to the tags. In effect they are sending up a red flag announcing: “Sorry, this is not real dialogue between real people.” They undermine the illusion of reality.

No More Hissing

Remember that words cannot be thundered, hissed, seethed, bubbled, heaved, raged, smiled, flung or beamed. If you want your character to smile, don’t write,

“You’re the greatest,” Jenny smiled. (How can you *smile* a word?)

Change this to read:

“You’re the greatest,” Jenny said with a smile.

OR you could add a period:

Jenny smiled. “You’re the greatest,” she said.

Now you have Jenny saying her words, and smiling her smile. This is a vast improvement over smiling her words.

Said Substitutes

Am I advocating the use of *said* only, with never a descriptive modifier for a tag line? Not at all. Here are several workable said substitutes: *agreed, admitted, replied, answered, asked, muttered, whispered, shouted, protested, and pointed out.*

In my Tulsa Series book, *Tulsa Tempest*, the main character Tessa has just learned that a newspaper article has been printed which could set off a riot (and in actuality, it did). Tessa is a country girl, unaccustomed to the big “city” of Tulsa, but she barges into the newspaper office to confront her own cousin who is a reporter there.

Be A Novelist Workshop #10: Tag Lines – He Said; She Said – Norma Jean Lutz

As she came flying into the newspaper office with the morning newspaper in her hand, she saw Erik across the room through the haze of blue smoke. For a moment she was taken off guard by all the eyes on her. The clacking of typewriter keys fell silent.

"Tessa, what on earth are you doing here?" He came toward her as he spoke.

She waved the newspaper at him. "How can you stand to be a part of this, Erik? These two boys did nothing wrong."

"Tessa please." Erik glanced nervously about and shoved her back out the door. "Pull yourself together. Let's go down to the coffee shop. We can talk there." He had a firm grip on her arm, steering her down the hall toward the elevator.

"Erik, I know these boys. They wouldn't hurt anyone."

"Keep your voice down, Tessa."

"Why should I keep my voice down when I'm right? I don't understand."

"You want me to lose my job?" His words were a hoarse whisper.

"What good's a job where you wind up hurting innocent people?"

If I had written: "she said angrily," or "she said loudly," or "she said vehemently," it would have added nothing to this scene. In fact it would detract from the drama.

No Tags Needed

When only two people are in a dialogue, you may need no tag lines at all. This becomes the closest thing to stage drama in fiction writing. Here is another scene from *Tulsa Tempest*. Gaven MacIntyre has taken Tessa for a ride around Tulsa. They are now at “Standpipe Hill” standing outside the car looking over the city.

Gazing at the scene before her, Tessa changed the subject by asking about different landmarks in the city. Presently, she asked, "Where's the town of Greenwood that I've heard so much about?"

Gaven gave a little laugh. "Greenwood's not a town. It's a street."

"Are there two Greenwoods then? The place I've heard about is a town where businesses are located." She remembered what Chloe said about the tailor and the hairdresser.

"You're talking about the colored section of town. The whole area is called Greenwood because of the street." He pointed off to the east. "It's over in that area north of Archer. Most all those houses off in that direction are in the colored section. Churches and stores too."

"And schools?"

"And schools."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why are they separate?"

"It's best that way, Tessa. The blacks belong with their own people. They're better off there."

Be A Novelist Workshop #10: Tag Lines – He Said; She Said – Norma Jean Lutz

Something unexplainable bristled deep inside her. "How can a person be better off being separated from other humans? How can they be better off by having to sit in the back seats of the trolley. Or to stand if there are no seats left?" Tessa had seen this for herself that very morning. She was appalled.

"Tessa, you're still new in the city. Later, you'll understand. That's just the way things are. It can't be changed." He reached to touch her arm, but she pulled back.

"Then how does that make us any different than the Pattons? Doesn't that make the blacks a type of riffraff to us? Didn't Jesus die for them the same as for us?"

There no tag lines in this scene; no extraneous explanations of how the dialogue is said, and yet Tessa's exasperation comes through loud and clear. How? Through the dialogue.

Studying Dialogue

Studying play scripts often will give a writer a greater sense of story flow through the use of pure dialogue. As you study, ask yourself how the author was able to convey tone and personality without using tag lines. Likewise, study the tag lines in your favorite fiction. It may surprise you how few you find.

Of course on occasion you still may want to explain that a character said something *slowly, softly, quickly, warily, evenly, happily*, or even *argumentatively* and *teasingly*. Just be careful that you do not rely on these to carry the weight of the dialogue passages.

Be A Novelist Workshop #10: Tag Lines – He Said; She Said – Norma Jean Lutz

Remember Mark Twain's admonition: "If you see an adverb, kill it." If you let that adverb live, make sure it doesn't weaken your dialogue.

Glaring Examples

Throughout my years as a writing instructor and also offering a writing critique service, I began "collecting" examples of Swifties. Here are a few which make the points in this Be A Novelist Workshop quite clear.

- "Is she going to be all right?" I slowly asked.
- "Dad needs us to be strong for him," Mom pleadingly said.
- "One to two years of hard work and for what," I surprisingly said to him.
- "I hope she doesn't bring the dog along," moped Jeff from the front doorway.
- "I'll keep working for you," I questionally said. (This is one of my favorites!)
- "It's there at the school," knowingly answered Mike.
- "I guess you can go," reluctantly said their mother.

No amount of heavy tag line will ever improve weak dialogue. It just won't happen.

Conclusion

The key to good tag lines is economy. Work hard to develop strong characters and strong dialogue. Eventually you will drop most of your "Swifties." And when you do you will *swiftly* become a much-improved writer. (Sorry I just couldn't resist!)

© Norma Jean Lutz 2014 No part of this *Be A Novelist Workshop* may be copied, or changed in any format, sold, or used in any way other than what is outlined here or within this written *Be A Novelist Workshop* under any circumstances. www.beanovelist.com

Contact: NormaJean@beanovelist.com

Norma Jean Lutz Bio



Norma Jean Lutz's writing career began professionally in 1977 when she enrolled in a writing correspondence course. Since then, she has had over 250 short stories and articles published in both secular and Christian publications. The full-time writer is also the author of over 50 published books under her own name, plus many ghostwritten books. Her books have been favorably reviewed in *Affair de Coeur*, *Coffee Time Romance*, *Romance Reader at Heart*, and *The Romance Studio* magazines, and her short fiction has garnered a number of first prizes in local writing contests.

Norma Jean is the founder of the Professionalism In Writing School, which was held annually in Tulsa for fourteen years. This writers' conference, which closed its doors in 1996, gave many writers their start in the publishing world.

A gifted teacher, Norma Jean has taught a variety of writing courses at local colleges and community schools, and is a frequent speaker at writers' seminars around the country. For eight years, she taught on staff for the Institute of Children's Literature. She has served as artist-in-residence at grade schools, and for two years taught a staff development workshop for language arts teachers in schools in Northeastern Oklahoma.

As co-host for the Tulsa KNYD Road Show, she shared the microphone with Kim Spence to present the Road Show Book Club, a feature presented by the station for more than a year. She has also appeared in numerous interviews on KDOR-TV.

Be A Novelist Workshop #10: Tag Lines – He Said; She Said – Norma Jean Lutz

Presently (in addition to her own writing endeavors) Norma Jean is actively reaching out to other writers via the Internet and social media.

More helpful information can be found on the Be A Novelist blog site:

<http://www.beanovelist.com/be-a-novelist-blog/>

Why struggle out there all alone when you can benefit from Norma Jean's many decades of experience in the writing/publishing industry?

Contact Norma Jean: normajean@beanovelist.com