

# Show, don't Tell Writing

## Episode 5

**Suzy:** [00:00:00] Welcome to Show Don't Tell Writing with me, Suzy Vadori, where I teach you the tried and true secrets to writing fiction and nonfiction that will wow your readers, broken down step by step. This show explores writing techniques and writing styles. It shows you a glimpse behind the scenes of successful writing careers and coaches writers live on their pages so you can learn and transform your own storytelling.

Whether you're just starting out, drafting, editing, or currently rewriting your first book, or maybe even your tenth, this show will help you unlock the writing skills you didn't know you needed but you definitely do. I'm looking forward to helping you get your amazing ideas from your mind onto the page in an exciting way for both you and your readers so that you can achieve your wildest writing dreams while having fun doing it.

Let's dive in. [00:01:00] If you've written the end on your draft, congratulations! I work with a lot of writers working on their first books, which I love, but I don't love delivering hard news. Like when a 175, 000 words and it's a middle grade novel. If you're new to word count norms in publishing, that's about three times too long.

So what am I talking about when I say word count expectations and why should you care? Word count is simply the number of words in your book when it's completed. Front and back matter, like introductions, acknowledgments, or glossaries aren't usually included in this number. If you're working on a book right now and you're not sure of your total word count, I'd suggest figuring this out right away to avoid painful rework needed later.

This podcast is dedicated to showing you how to make that rework less painful, but you still need to do it. So figure this number out. [00:02:00] If you're writing chapters or scenes in a bunch of Word docs, for example, paste them all together as soon as you can and start working with one document so that you can keep a running total.

Whatever word processor you're using, it'll show your running word count total, usually in the bottom left corner of the software frame. Still not sure? An average novel typed in 12 point font, double spaced, will have roughly 250

words per page, so you can do some math to approximate your word count if you know how many pages you've written.

Okay, so genre expectations can range anywhere from 45 to 65 thousand words for a middle grade novel that's written for kids that are 9 to 12. Or, 50 80, 000 words for a non fiction self help book, all the way to 100, 000 upwards of 120, 000 for epic fantasy. So do your research. There is a little bit of wiggle room in the ranges, but don't be way outside, either under or over.

If you're [00:03:00] not sure what expectations are in your genre, look at similar books that have been recently published, like *In the Last Five Years*. Amazon will usually share with you the page count so you can use that 250 words per page to just approximate the word count. If your book is wildly over the most popular books or the ones that have come out in the last five years in your genre because you're finding this information out too late, don't be tempted to ignore the problem.

I promise you, it's not going to go away, and it's going to hurt your chances of your book getting read, loved, and shared, no matter how you publish your book. Yet, writers come to me every single month, wanting me to developmentally edit their book, even if they know it's way too long. They want me to say, that's okay.

They hope I'll tell them that their book is so good, they can publish it that way anyway. Can't say that because here's the problem with loaded word count. Number one, you're breaking readers expectations, which [00:04:00] will disappoint them. If the book ends too quickly, or if it's so long that they kind of lose focus because it's not what they expect, they might even give you a low review.

Yeah, this can happen for a reason as simple as word count, so don't shoot yourself in the foot. Number two, if you're wanting to traditionally publish, you'll get instantly rejected by agents and publishers. thinking that you haven't done your research and they may not even bother to tell you why, they'll just look at your query in the word count and not read your pages.

So you don't want that. Now, don't fill up the comments with hate saying, Oh, this exception and that exception. I'm going to talk about that in a second, but also there are agents who will look at your book anyway. Absolutely. But let's say it's two out of a hundred, but you've eliminated ninety eight.

Don't make things harder on yourself. Now back to comparing yourself to that one breakout book that is oodles too long in your genre. I have writers point all the time to *Outlander*, the breakout debut novel from epic writer Diana Gabaldon. [00:05:00] *Outlander* is the debut novel in her ongoing *Outlander* series and it sits at nearly 900 pages for the paperback.

That's more than twice, almost three times the usual word count for historical fiction, which should be around 100,000 words. Now several years ago, Diana was a guest at a writers festival that I helped organize and I had the opportunity to ask her about the length of *Outlander* and you might be surprised with what she shared.

This book was first published in 1991. The query process was completely different then, with paper copies of manuscripts and sent through snail mail back and forth. Diana shared that she was aware the book was longer than most in her genre, so when she printed it out, she played with the font size and the margins so the page count would seem a little closer to the norm.

She said, imagine the publisher's surprise when they started to lay it out and realized how long it was. I don't think they were very happy. But in [00:06:00] today's market, where we share electronic copies, and this information is going to be at the publisher's fingertips, or the agent's fingertips, with the software calculating it real time.

For example, as I type out the script for this podcast, I can look down and see that it's just over 4,000 words. It's impossible to hide it. Three of the seven *Harry Potter* books, which started out as a middle grade series, hover around the 200,000 mark, which again, is wildly too long. It's not the first few, which were written closer to the middle grade norms.

Because unless you already have millions of readers lined up, you haven't earned the right to be that exception yet. Because extra word count means higher editing costs, higher layout costs, higher printing costs. Paper is expensive. Also, higher costs to produce an audio book, which is a huge part these days of the publishing process.

In addition, publishers are going to have to charge an arm and a leg to make a profit on your book. [00:07:00] So instead, they'll pass on the opportunity to work with you and choose somebody else's book instead. Even if you publish independently, you're going to struggle to make a profit if your book is too long because the cost will be yours to bear.

You might be better off either trimming the book down to expectations or splitting it into two, and I'll talk about that in a second. If you insist on keeping every word you've written, I'll say this, you're only making your journey to find readers harder on yourself. I get it. You've spent months, probably years, on your manuscript.

You were so focused on producing words that every time you sat down to write, you forgot to track the total word count, or maybe you didn't even know that word count was a thing until you were listening to this podcast. I know you love your characters, and you feel that every scene and action that you included is needed in your book.

And the thought of that, Parting with any of it feels like a vice is squeezing you around the chest. [00:08:00] For the reasons listed above, trimming your word count will be your book's best chance of getting discovered, read, loved, and shared, selling thousands of copies. If you want this for your book, and I know you do, you have to deal with this problem.

Do not stick your head in the sand. But tackling the fix isn't straightforward, I know. So here I'm going to provide you with some specific tips to direct your way forward so you don't get overwhelmed. Sometimes, the answer, and the one that writers usually come to first, is to split your manuscript into multiple books, if there's a natural break.

The problem with this is that you still want to create a natural story arc, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, and not leave readers of book one unsatisfied, hanging on a cliff. If you're going to use self publishing route and do an independent publishing with quick release, this is possible. If you're going to release it every three to six weeks, you're not leaving people hanging very long.

But if you're [00:09:00] going traditional, hybrid, or planning more than just a couple of weeks between releases, you're going to leave a sour taste in your reader's mouths if you just chop it in two. You can rework all the storylines and pull it apart, put it back together to make each book feel whole. Usually there's a better, easier option.

Have I got your attention? Good. Cause that's what this podcast is going to focus on. What if I told you that there are places you can target in your book to get rid of word count while making your writing even more engaging for your reader? The techniques I share here don't even require a rewrite, and they will also make your writing more readable and focused.

You've got nothing to lose by giving them a try, and you're going to make your book better in the process, step by step. Sound good? Alright, let's start with the easiest one to tackle. Number one, slash your filler words. Alright, what the heck [00:10:00] are filler words? When we speak, we use um or uh to pause when we're thinking.

I probably did this when I was recording this podcast. In writing, writers use filler words to fill that gap while they type or use their pen and they want to. Cause to let their brains catch up. We fill those in with words. Weird, right? The thing about filler words is that they're not incorrect, so Spellcheck isn't going to find them.

Your sentences will read fine with them, but about 80 percent of the time, these words distract the reader, and the sentence could be restructured without them. Note, sometimes these words serve a purpose, so please just don't do a find and delete them all. You're going to have to do a find. which is control F on most keyboards will get you to the find function and then type it in and then look them up one at a time and see how you can rework the sentence to replace that word or delete it completely.[00:11:00]

I've had dozens of clients weed out 3, 000 words or more from a trick. That's 12 pages. of filler words. So it's totally worth your time. Probably the biggest bang for your buck. Some of the most common words that writers use as filler are that, just, and like. There are dozens more, and you might be surprised which words you're sticking into sentences as you go.

I've personally had a different problem word with each book I've written that I didn't notice until the revision stage. Brains are amazing, right? Run a find on your manuscript against the full list of filler words and phrases that I've compiled in the Decade of Editing Clients books. You can grab this free list in the show notes, so make sure you download it.

This is a terrific task to tackle when you have time set aside to write and your brain isn't cooperating for whatever reason. We all know those times. It [00:12:00] all has to get done, every single task, so on those moments when you're not feeling super creative, go through each one and get it done. It'll feel great when you're finished.

I'd love for you to drop a note and tell me how many filler words you were able to eliminate from your manuscript when you're done. Number two, kill your filter words and phrases. Filter words, like filler words, are unnecessary in your writing. But these ones have the added consequence of making your readers

care less about your characters and their journeys, because they're used to distance your POV character from the actions that your characters are taking.

When you use them, it's like you've inserted a filter or a narrator between your reader and what's happening on the page. This doesn't make your reader feel like they're in your book and experiencing what your character is experiencing. If you read a lot of classic books, you'll see their pages are riddled with filter phrases.

So, if you're going for more of a literary or [00:13:00] old timey feel, a few filter phrases might be fine. But in recent years, deep point of view is becoming more popular, especially in genre fiction. Removing these phrases will drag your readers in more, making them feel like they're really in your character's shoes.

Not to mention, since you're eliminating several words with each instance, removing them can reduce word count really fast, and that's what we're targeting in this list. Look for these verbs that indicate you might be using filter phrases and see if you can rework the sentences without them. Aim to reduce these by 90 percent if you can.

You're not going to get rid of them all. But some examples to search on and remove include to see, to hear, to think, to touch, to wonder, to realize. Instead of just Seeing that there is a table in the middle of the room. There is just a table in the middle of the room. We're already in your point of view character's point of view, so we don't need those extra filters to tell us that they saw it.

All right, number three. [00:14:00] Eliminate your dialogue tags. If you're writing for adults, dialogue tags, like she said, he said, they said, aren't strictly necessary. Look for places in your draft where you have a dialogue tag and then an action beat, for example. These are really easy to eliminate. An action beat is any action that your character takes.

Adult readers actually skip over these he said she said, so they don't register them anyway, and they certainly won't miss them when they're gone. I'm going to be interested to see what happens though because while readers do skip over these when I'm listening to audiobooks and they read it verbatim, which they must because they have to be the same, it becomes really distracting to hear all these sets.

So it's going to be interesting to see what happens. One of the ways around this is to just go with action beats. When you use an action beat, it shows what the

character is doing immediately before or after your quotation marks. This makes it really obvious who's speaking without [00:15:00] adding extra words that are super boring.

Note, if you are writing middle grade, or if you're writing a book for a lower reading level, you're going to want to leave the dialogue tags in, so don't take this advice. Because newer readers actually need them for comprehension. But if you're writing for adults, go to town! Just be sure to leave the action beats there so that readers can tell who's talking.

This is not a license to just go through and eliminate every indication of who's talking in your entire novel, because you will completely lose your reader. Action beats are way more interesting and can help us understand and deepen your character or your setting or anything else about your book that is much more interesting than just saying she said.

Alright, number four. Remove character names in dialogue. This one is dead easy. We don't go around calling each other by name all the time. Take these mentions out of your dialogue. It sounds goofy. Likewise [00:16:00] with introductions. Hi, I'm Susie. Oh, nice to meet you. I'm so and so. Susie introduced herself would be just great.

And then move on. So far, these tips are technique driven. If you only address these in your manuscript, you'll have cut thousands of words without changing a thing about your book scenes or flow, making your book read even better. Cool, right? But if you still know that your book is too long, keep going and watch for these opportunities as well.

They require a little more finesse to execute, but if you're deliberate about them, they don't require you to turn your book on its head to get it done. All right, number five, combine repeated scenes, recaps, or characters. This is the big one, okay? Look for places in your book that feel similar and merge them together.

For example, Do your characters visit a location several times, like a coffee shop, [00:17:00] all the time? See if you can combine the events into less visits to that location. You'll keep all the stuff that happens, but combining scenes will give you lots of opportunity to tighten up your word count without changing anything that happens.

This is also true if your characters move locations several times within a scene, but nothing happens in some of those locations. Skip them. Number 2. Do you

have a scene where a character is telling their brother about something that the reader has already witnessed in an earlier scene? Don't make us hear it all again.

Reduce it to a quick recap. He told her about the fist fight. Okay? We don't need to go there. So what happens is The first time you write that scene, if you bring us, this is part of Show Don't Tell, right? Bring us to the moment, bring us to the fist fight. We are there with your character that's in the fist fight.

We go through the whole slew of emotions and everything else, and the arc is awesome. We experience that with your [00:18:00] character. Now, if they go and tell their brother about it afterward, we don't want to go through all those emotions all again. It feels identical to your reader, even if the brother is now hearing it for the first time.

So stick to a recap there. Remember, if the reader already has the information, or the reader has already experienced this change, don't do it again. It's redundant. Number three. Do you have a few characters that ended up with similar goals or similar voices in your book? You can combine them into one person.

This is usually with minor characters. Obviously, this doesn't work for main characters. But it will allow you to keep all the dialogue that you wrote. You can keep the events that happened. You can even keep their backstory. But it will definitely save your word count because you have less characters to introduce and include, and possibly less scenes overall.

Here's the thing, even if you [00:19:00] love your draft the way it is, try to keep an open mind regarding word count if you know that you're not within the normal limits. Fitting within a genre's word count expectations is going to make your book more accessible to readers, more saleable, and more profitable overall.

And ultimately, these changes will make your writing as strong as it can be. So addressing the word count problem that you've got is actually a win win situation. But don't get overwhelmed. It's easy to look at it and wonder how to do it. Go through these steps methodically, write them down, pick the ones that apply to you, and then pick them one at a time.

Do a pass where you address one thing. One thing at a time, and thousands and thousands and thousands of words are going to shed off your manuscript, keeping everything that you loved about it intact. I'm wishing you the best of

luck in getting your word count under control, [00:20:00] and hope you share with all of us at Inspired Writing how it goes.

Thanks for tuning in to Show Don't Tell Writing with me, Suzy Vadori. Help me continue to bring you the straight goods for that book you're writing, planning to write. Please consider subscribing to this podcast and leaving a review on Apple podcast. Spotify or wherever you're listening. Also visit [www.suzyvadori.com/newsletter](http://www.suzyvadori.com/newsletter) to hop on my weekly inspired writing newsletter list to stay inspired and be the first to know about upcoming training and find some writing courses in my community. You're feeling brave. Check the show notes and send us a page of your writing that isn't quite where you want it to be yet for a show.

Don't tell page review episodes. Remember that book you're writing is going to open doors you haven't even thought of yet. I can't wait.

You're feeling called to write that book, keep [00:21:00] going, and I'll be right here cheering you on. See you again next week!