

The Writer's Paint Box

Parts of Speech and the Work They Do

Words are a writer's paint box. Nine colors, though most writers today can only name five or six of them without stopping to think. That's not a grammar problem. It's a craft problem, because every color in that box does a specific job, and a writer who can't tell the colors apart ends up mixing them by accident instead of on purpose.

This isn't a grammar lesson. You already know how to use every part of speech, you've been doing it your whole life. What this Power Tool covers is something different, what each part of speech is actually load bearing in a sentence, a paragraph, and a scene, and what happens to the reader's experience when that load isn't carried well.

The Workhorses — Nouns and Verbs

Nouns and verbs carry almost all the structural weight in fiction prose. A sentence built on a precise noun and a precise verb barely needs anything else.

Example: The mule dragged the cart through mud.

That sentence works without a single adjective or adverb, because “dragged” already tells you the effort, the resistance, the slow grinding motion. Compare it to a vaguer version propped up with modifiers.

Example: The animal walked slowly and with great difficulty through the very muddy road.

Same information, weaker sentence, because “walked” is a flat verb asking three adverbs to do the work one strong verb could have done alone. This is the pattern to watch for. When a sentence needs a pile of adjectives and adverbs to land, the actual problem usually sits one level down, in a noun or verb that was chosen for convenience instead of precision.

Genre comparison matters here. A thriller usually wants its verbs doing kinetic, immediate work, snapped, lunged, seized, because pace depends on the verb delivering force in one word. Literary fiction can afford quieter verbs, lingered, considered, because the sentence has room to breathe and isn't racing toward the next beat. Neither is wrong, but a thriller written with literary fiction's verb choices will feel slow no matter how tight the plotting is, and the reverse produces prose that feels rushed and thin.

Common failure point. Reaching for an unusual or “impressive” noun or verb instead of the accurate one. A character doesn't need to “ambulate” when they can walk. Precision beats novelty every time, because the reader's job is to see the scene, not admire the vocabulary.

The Compensators — Adjectives and Adverbs

Adjectives and adverbs aren't villains. They're seasoning, and seasoning is only a problem when it's covering for a bland base ingredient.

Ursula K. Le Guin described an exercise she called “Chastity,” writing a page of narrative with no adjectives or adverbs at all, forcing all the descriptive weight onto the nouns and verbs. The result, she found, was tougher and stronger prose, because the energy that would have gone into decoration went into the load bearing words instead.

Example, over-seasoned: *She walked very quickly and nervously across the incredibly dark room.*

Example, re-worked: *She hurried across the dark room.*

The second version loses nothing essential. “Hurried” already contains “quickly,” and the reader doesn't need “nervously” spelled out if the scene around it, the dark room, the reason she's crossing it, has already built the tension. Adjectives and adverbs used well add a precise detail the noun or verb can't carry alone. Used poorly, they're patchwork over a weak word underneath.

Common failure point. Stacking adjectives in front of a noun instead of choosing a sharper noun. “The old, tired, weathered fisherman” is three adjectives doing what one better noun choice, or one specific detail, could do in fewer words.

Genre comparison. Romance and literary fiction generally tolerate a higher adjective density, since mood and sensory atmosphere are often the point. Thriller and noir want the sentence stripped down, because every extra word between the reader and the next beat costs momentum.

The Connective Tissue — Conjunctions and Prepositions

These are the parts of speech nobody notices when they're working and everybody feels, without knowing why, when they're not. Conjunctions and prepositions establish relationships, cause and effect, sequence, position, ownership. Get them wrong and the sentence doesn't announce an error, it just quietly confuses the reader about who did what to whom.

This is where dangling participles and misplaced modifiers actually live. They're not really grammar violations in the abstract,

they're relationship failures, a modifying phrase that's supposed to connect to one noun accidentally connects to another.

***Example, dangling:** Walking through the door, the smell of bread hit her.*

Read literally, the smell is walking through the door, because “walking through the door” has nothing else in the sentence to attach to except “the smell.” The reader untangles this in half a second without consciously noticing, but that half second of untangling is friction, and friction breaks immersion.

***Example, fixed:** Walking through the door, she caught the smell of bread.*

Now the participle attaches to “she,” the person actually doing the walking, and the sentence reads clean.

Common failure point. Long introductory phrases that drift away from the subject they're meant to modify. The fix isn't a grammar rule to memorize, it's a habit, after writing a modifying phrase, check what noun immediately follows it and ask if that's really the thing being modified.

The Stance Words — Pronouns and Articles

Small, constant, and easy to take for granted, pronouns and articles are where a single unclear choice in one sentence can cost you clarity across an entire scene.

***Example, unclear:** John told Mark he was wrong about the plan.*

Who was wrong, John or Mark? The pronoun “he” has two possible antecedents, and the reader has to guess, or worse, guess wrong and carry that wrong assumption forward for several more sentences before the confusion surfaces.

Example, fixed: John told Mark that Mark was wrong about the plan.

Slightly less elegant, more precise. Sometimes the fix is rephrasing rather than repeating the name, but the underlying discipline is the same, know exactly what your pronoun is pointing to before you commit to it, because the reader can't ask you to clarify mid-sentence.

Articles, “a,” “an,” “the,” do quieter work, mostly signaling whether something is new information or something the reader already knows about. “A man stood in the doorway” introduces him as new. “The man stood in the doorway” assumes the reader already knows which man. Mixing these up, especially introducing a character with “the” before the reader has met them, creates a small but persistent sense that information is missing.

Common failure point. Pronoun ambiguity in scenes with two same-gender characters, which is one of the most common and most avoidable confusions in workshop manuscripts.

Interjections

The ninth part of speech barely needs a section of its own. Interjections, “oh,” “well,” “damn,” carry emotional punctuation rather than structural weight, and their main danger in fiction is overuse flattening their impact. Used sparingly, in dialogue especially, they land. Scattered through every paragraph, they become verbal tics that train the reader to skim past them.

Putting the Colors Together

None of these parts of speech does its work in isolation. A precise verb still needs the right preposition to connect it to its object. A strong noun still needs a pronoun later in the paragraph that clearly refers back to it. The paint box metaphor holds up here too, a single

color rarely makes the image, it's the combination, layered with intention, that does.

The discipline this Power Tool is really asking for isn't grammatical correctness. It's noticing. When a sentence isn't working, instead of reaching for a vague fix, ask which part of speech is actually carrying the load, and whether it's strong enough to carry it.