

Hints and Help for Writing FanFic

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Here is an often humorous look at a serious topic: Tips for avoiding mistakes commonly made when writing fanfic. Our examples reference BatB, but the concepts are applicable to writing fanfic in general, and many are helpful for use in any type of writing.

1. No I.D. Required

Unless it's essential – and it rarely is – try to avoid using the characters' full names and/or job titles repeatedly. As fans, we already know these people, and when labels are used excessively, it will slow down the narrative.

Example: Assistant District Attorney Joe Maxwell looked up from the report he was reading. Attorney Catherine Chandler was standing in the doorway to his office, with their boss District Attorney John Moreno right behind her.

Better: Joe looked up from the report he was reading. Catherine was standing in the doorway to his office, with Moreno right behind her.

2. The Name Game

When there are only two people having a conversation, it's really not necessary to have them repeat each other's names every two seconds. I know we all love to hear Vincent say "Catherine," but five times in one sentence is a bit much. You don't want people giggling while reading your story, unless the humor is intentional.

3. Talking Heads

However, when the conversation is lengthy and/or more than two people are involved, you do need to identify the speakers from time to time to avoid confusion. Unless at least one of the speakers has unique speech patterns that readily identify him/her (e.g., Mouse), it can be puzzling after a while as to who is saying what. Few readers are willing to reread passages like this just to figure out who is speaking each line.

"Did you hear that noise? It sounded like an explosion."

"Yes, but where did it come from?"

“I don’t know.”

“Do you know?”

“I can’t tell either. Maybe she can.”

“I’m not sure. What do you think?”

“We should see if anyone is hurt.”

“Good idea. Grab a flashlight and let’s go.”

“But where are we going?”

“I think it might have come from the Maze.”

“Maybe it did.”

“I think you’re right.”

“I think I know a fast way to get there.”

“Wait – let’s send a message on the pipes first.”

Inserting a simple “Father said” or “Vincent asked” or “Mary suggested” at appropriate intervals would clear up the confusion immediately.

4. TMI – And It’s All On Page One

Petite, brunette, middle-aged Sabrina Warren was a well-respected pediatrician, living in a small New England town with her six-foot-tall, freckled, balding husband, Jonathan, an editor for the local newspaper. They had three young children, Liam, 6, Emily 8, and Max 10 ½, all of whom were extremely well behaved, intellectually gifted, and destined for greatness in the arts, sports, and politics.

In her spare time, Sabrina trained for mini marathons; whined about driving Liam, Emily, and Max to ballet class, football practice, and Young Socialists meetings; and grew organic kale and Swiss chard in the backyard garden, while keeping an eye on the new neighbors who just might be setting up a meth lab in their basement

Jonathan, while a successful semi-pro golfer, was also a gambling addict who had already worked his way through most of the college fund set up for the children. Sabrina, a closet drinker, knew they should go for therapy, but a bottle of wine at dinner every night seemed to be doing the trick.

Just as dawn was breaking one Thursday morning, Sabrina shaved her head, admired the effect of her lizard’s eye contact lenses, and checked to

see that all her piercings were in place. After making sure her passport and a large wad of cash were secure in the zipped pocket of her favorite black leather jacket, she jumped on her Harley, and without a backward glance, ran over the trash cans and recycling bin and roared off down the road.

If you were writing this story, it would be better to open with the fourth paragraph, then reveal the rest to your readers as the story progresses. No one really wants all that info thrown at them immediately and would rather get to know the characters gradually as the plot unfolds.

5. Go With The Flow

Make it a goal to maintain a balance between appropriate pacing and the inclusion of descriptive details. Since fanfic readers so enjoy reading about their favorite universe, they often can be accepting of detail-laden prose, but a good writer will be careful not to overuse this feature. Too much descriptive detail can drag down the pace of a story, especially when tension, heightened emotion, and excitement are involved. Include descriptive details when they are needed, but edit them out when they become superfluous. Remember: Keep the story flowing, not slowing!

In addition, always keep in mind the phrase “**show, don’t tell.**” A perfect explanation of this concept is in a quotation by Anton Chekov: “Don’t tell me the moon is shining. Show me the glint of light on broken glass.”

6. But I Really Thought You Could Build A House In Central Park!

If it becomes obvious that the writer really doesn’t have sufficient knowledge of what he/she is writing about, readers can become justifiably annoyed and will probably stop reading. The inclusion of specific details (e.g., locations, colors, odors, sounds, etc.) can add a great deal to your writing, but those inclusions must be accurate. Getting your facts straight shows respect for your readers and will build their confidence in you. If you’re not completely certain, it’s very easy to use multiple sources online (e.g., Google) to check things out. It is well worth the effort!

Here are some examples of mistakes that never had to happen:

In the secluded doorway of one of the many decrepit abandoned warehouses near the Chelsea Piers, Vincent and Catherine lingered in the soft,

pre-dawn light. "I'm so happy we had this time together," Catherine murmured. "Another wonderful Halloween."

Vincent smiled down at her. "When the walls between the worlds grow thin..."

"Yes," she answered softly. "And anything is possible."

Together they looked toward the river, waiting for the sun to rise.

Unfortunately, they're going to have a very long wait since they're on the west side of Manhattan, and the sun rises in the east. Also, if your readers have read about, lived in, or visited New York, they'll probably know that Chelsea Piers is a diverse sports and entertainment center with lots of ongoing development. They will immediately wonder why there are decrepit buildings in a very densely populated, busy, high rent district like that. You don't want little, easily corrected errors like these to drag your readers' attention away from the flow and purpose of your story.

Vincent sighed as he recalled a favorite quotation. "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." It's true, he told himself, Shakespeare knew everything.

Evidently, Shakespeare also was prescient because Charles Dickens wrote that line about 250 years after Shakespeare's death. Again, Google is your friend.

Vincent grasped Catherine's tiny hand in his massive grip.

This one crops up repeatedly in fanfic. Catherine's hands may be small, but they're not truly tiny. Tiny is a buttercup, a button, a pea. Vincent's hands are large, but the use of the word "massive" (a skyscraper, a redwood, a Great Lake) is excessive in this instance. (Now, get your minds out of the gutter!)

Catherine's eyes filled with tears. "If only I could find a way to bring Vincent to my cabin in Connecticut."

This is a small detail, but one that makes a difference in maintaining accuracy. One of the writers of this article has lived in Connecticut most of her life, and she has never (a) seen a cabin in the entire state except for a friend's log house – not cabin – and while driving by a summer campsite near a lake; (b) heard anyone

refer to their vacation home as a “cabin”; and (c) known anyone who was in the market for a “Connecticut cabin.” Yes, there may be cabins in Connecticut, mostly at the aforementioned summer camps, and yes, this writer is being extremely picky. Nevertheless, there is a point to be made here.

A family of Catherine’s social position and wealth would call their Connecticut vacation home *a summer home, a cottage, or even just a vacation home*. They might also say “our place at the lake” or “our place at the beach.” They would never call it a cabin. When writing about this well-loved part of canon, it would be best to use the proper terms and keep your story accurate.

7. It’s So Nice When Subjects and Verbs Agree

This is one of the most basic **and** most important considerations in any type, genre, or style of writing. It’s wonderful to be a creative, original writer, but some rules must be followed. Try reading the following paragraph without feeling dizzy.

Catherine opened the balcony door and reaching for Vincent. Why did he always want to stay out there, always hid in the shadows? Sometimes she suspected he resists her efforts to get him into her apartment because he felt unfounded fears. When she tries to get him to talk about it, he never explained or justifies his reasons.

Reading that passage should make you gasp, giggle, and cringe while reaching for your red editing pen!

8. When First-Person Shouldn’t Be Your First Choice

Writing a story from the first-person point of view is challenging and often difficult to do well. There might be several characters in your story, but using first-person keeps you restricted to expressing the perspective of only one character. Your reader will see everything through that single character’s eyes, and not from the point of view of any of the other people involved.

It takes a great deal of practice to be able to write clearly and effectively in this style, but with a lot of practice, it can be done, and it can be highly effective.

One common pitfall is overusing the word ‘I’. You will need to find ways to write continually from one person’s point of view without using ‘I’ too often. One of the best ways to solve this problem is by reading well-written stories in this style and studying the techniques used by effective writers.

9. The Never-Ending Paragraph

If your paragraphs average about twenty-seven sentences, the reader might feel overwhelmed and reluctant to keep reading your story. Three to six sentences should be enough for most paragraphs. Of course, there are always exceptions, but it is important to learn, understand, and use accepted rules correctly before you can successfully get away with breaking them.

As you write, edit, and revise, be aware of the places where your story changes in mood, tone, pace, or focus. Try reading your story aloud and listen for the natural breaks. As you practice, you'll become proficient at identifying the appropriate points to break large paragraphs into smaller ones. Not only does this greatly enhance the tempo and flow of your story, it also is visually more appealing for the reader to see paragraphs of varying sizes on a page.

10. Who Are You and Why Are You In This Story?

Introducing original characters in fanfic certainly is possible and often very welcome. Those characters can expand a well-loved universe and give the writer an opportunity to be very creative. This often has been done very successfully, but it's important to keep a few things in mind.

Your readers probably love many of the BatB characters and enjoy reading about them, but they almost always want to concentrate on Vincent and Catherine. It's best to keep a new character in a supporting role whose purpose for inclusion has some clear, meaningful connection to the main characters. A perfect example of this is Lena from "God Bless the Child." With a more detailed and lengthier plot line of her own, she still could have been an intriguing character, but focusing almost solely on her would have been inappropriate in that episode. Instead, she becomes far more interesting and compelling because of her impact on Vincent and Catherine.

It is very helpful to introduce your new characters in a way that is seamless and appropriate to the existing canon. The inclusion of Sebastian, the magician in "Dead of Winter", works because the invited Helpers are various ages, have various jobs, have various interests and talents, etc. It is believable to have a magician at the party. He enhances our understanding and appreciation of the people connected to the world Below, rather than pulling us out of the story and making us ask, "What's he doing there?"

Please keep in mind that it also is important to avoid being too self-indulgent. You may have just created one of the most amazing characters in all literature, but remember – you're writing fanfic and fans have strong feelings about the constructs of their beloved universe. You need to respect your readers. If you want to elaborate on your new character and can't realistically find a meaningful place to do so in the BatB world, perhaps think about writing an entirely original

story with him/her as the main character. Not every great character belongs in BatB fanfic, but he/she could still have a voice and a story worth telling elsewhere.

11. Did You Really Mean That?

You should always be careful about the inappropriate use of a cliché. Sometimes they can add color to the story, especially if used in dialogue, but in general they are tired, trite, and sometimes unintentionally hilarious. As a writer, you should find a better way to make your point. Don't say things like:

*Catherine sighed, remembering the moment when she **opened her heart and gave it** to Vincent.*

(Would that be when he was doing his homework for that class in surgical techniques Father was offering for the tunnel folk?)

*Samantha glared at Kipper, **turned on her heel**, and stomped out of the dining chamber.*

(Not only is this anatomically very risky, especially on those rough tunnel floors, this one is simply so overused that it has become laughable when you picture the action happening.)

It may be hard to believe, but it's even worse to use a cliché incorrectly! For example, when one is feeling nervous, one does **not** have a pit in one's stomach. One has a nervous feeling in the pit of one's stomach.

So, in conclusion and without further ado, always do your level best to avoid clichés like the plague. As a matter of fact, run like the wind whenever one rears its ugly head. When practice makes perfect and you're better safe than sorry, you'll find that every cloud has a silver lining. If you give your work 110%, it goes without saying that your readers will thank their lucky stars they have found a writer who can make their heads spin, knock their socks off, and take their breath away!

(It was actually a lot of fun to write like that -- but please don't!)

13. This is BatB, not the Try-outs for the Olympics Gymnastics Team

Be on guard against injecting unintentional humor into your story when using references to actions. If you are writing a Vincent and Catherine love scene, you

want your readers to smile and then sigh happily, not break into an ear-to-ear grin, followed by loud guffaws.

One of the most common causes of the latter reaction is not restricting characters' body parts to their basic, typical functions. The following passage is an example sure to inspire comments such as those included in the parentheses.

Vincent's eyes darted wildly, bouncing back and forth from one side of the chamber to the other. (Hope they don't hit those rocky walls!)

He slowly lifted his shoulders with a heavy sigh. (With shoulders like his, he might try using an industrial crane to lift them next time.)

Although Catherine was Above, he could still feel her deeply. (No explanation is needed here.)

He remembered the way she had looked the night before when he found her alone on her balcony, her head in her hands. (She must have been rehearsing for this year's Samhain production of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow".)

When her ears caught his footsteps (With a net? Fishing pole? Catcher's mitt?), *she looked up at him.*

Her eyes traveled the length of his body, starting at his feet and roaming slowly upward until they searched the planes and angles of his face. (Google Earth never explored such interesting territory as Catherine's eyes did!)

"Oh, Vincent, I'm so glad you're finally here. I've missed you so much! Every minute we're apart seems like a lifetime, but now that we're together, nothing else matters," she breathed. (She breathed all that?? She must have tremendous lung capacity!)

Her unexpected ardor gripped his heart. (That has got to hurt!)

"Catherine, you are everything to me. You are my life. You bring light to my world. You give me hope I never had before," he rasped heavily, hoarsely, and deeply. (Oh, that's appealing. He sounds like a chronic smoker on his last gasp.)

Standing, she raised on tiptoe to hold his face in her hands as their eyes met briefly, then parted on a heartbeat, only to return to speak the works of love that eyes alone can utter. (BWAHAHAHAHA!)

Okay, these examples were exaggerated, but they sound a bit familiar, don't they? Always remember that you want to entertain your readers, but inadvertently becoming a stand-up comedian just doesn't do it for BatB fanfic!

14. A Good Editor is Your Writing BFF

Absolutely every writer, no matter how talented, needs a good editor or two. When writing fanfic, a good person for this role is someone who also loves and understands the subject matter, possesses excellent writing skills, and has the time, interest, and commitment to help you as needed. Many fanfic writers are also editors, and they're willing to help, so don't be afraid to ask.

It also is very important to self-edit while you are writing. Try the following techniques:

If you have set your story aside for several days, go back and re-read it from the beginning before resuming your writing. This will help you maintain focus and sequencing.

Read your work out loud and listen carefully to your own voice. This is especially helpful when writing dialogue.

Read your work slowly and carefully. It's far too easy for the eye to skip over small errors if the material is read too quickly or too often.

Use grammar, spellcheck, and other editing features on your computer, but don't rely solely on them.

Know when to stop editing. Yes, you want to produce the best work possible, but there will be a point when you've done all you can, and you must accept that it's metaphorically and literally "the end."
