LITERARY FORENSICS
A diagnostic tool for writers and editors
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READING YOUR OWN WRITING is like looking in the mirror: You can't see yourself as others see you. You are blind to your comeliest curves; you blink past your literary cellulite.

All writers have trademark quirks — things they do with little awareness. They are the writer's version of an athlete's "muscle memory" — patterns that can be great strengths or chronic weaknesses.

A simple diagnostic tool can help identify those writing patterns so you can focus on strengths and start to tackle weaknesses. It can help writers and editors alike get to the bones of writing, understand it and strengthen it.

The same tool can be used to check accuracy, use numbers effectively or ensure clarity.

WHAT YOU NEED:
- o   Highlighters.
- o   Printouts of 3 pieces of writer's unedited writing.
- o   A working knowledge of grammar and syntax, a good grammar book, and a stylebook.
- o   An hour every few weeks.

HOW IT WORKS:

SELECT ONE COMPONENT OF WRITING (ex: verbs, adjectives, attribution). Do one at a time. Go through the three stories as fast as you can and highlight the chosen component wherever it shows up. Do this without judgment. This isn't about good or bad, but about identifying patterns. (What's good in one story might be bad in another.)

STUDY THE COLORED HIGHLIGHTS. Does a pattern appear? Are verbs mostly active and vibrant, or are they passive and flat? Do dependent clauses lead almost all the paragraphs, and thus rob power from the subject and verb? Are numbers consistent and spare?

STUDY THE COLORS AGAIN. What effect does a writing pattern have on the overall piece? Do those dependent clauses add needed information — or slow stories down? Do quotes get to the essence of voice or emotion — or run on without adding anything to the story?

NOTE TO WRITERS: Once you see the colored marks on the printed page, your mind will see them when you next write on the computer. Don't overreact or get too self-conscious; it will slow you down. Write as you've always done. Then print out and read through your draft with the highlighter marks flashing in your mind's eye. Rewrite accordingly. Over time you will internalize what the highlighters reveal, and will gain that muscle for early drafts.

NOTE TO EDITORS and TEACHERS: Understanding a writer's individual patterns helps you know what to focus on for an efficient edit or point out where a writer can improve. It gives you editing language that is specific and constructive rather than vague and judgmental. It gives you tools to help stories get better in the moment and writers get better over time.

REMINDER TO BOTH: This is an effective accuracy tool. Print your story out, move away from your usual writing desk, and highlight every name, age, fact, address, number, etc. Study the highlights and double-check their accuracy.

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DIAGNOSTIC WRITNG COMPONENTS

You don't need to be a grammarian to have a working knowledge of language. Naming the components of speech   subjunctives, intransitives, conditionals   isn't as important as having a core understanding of how language works or doesn't, and a shared language for communicating that to others.
As you apply the diagnostic tool to copy, here are some basics:

WHAT TO LOOK FOR
Fundamental but specific writing components:
- Verbs (active, passive, linking. Or simply: action and non-action)
- Adjectives
- Adverbs (especially -ly adverbs)
- Prepositional phrases
- Pronouns (especially non-specific pronouns)
- Dependent clauses (length and placement)
- Conjunctions

Writing components specific to journalism:
- Ledes
- Nut grafs
- Attribution
- Quotes
- Transitions

Literary writing:
- Telling detail
- Parallel construction
- Metaphor, simile, analogy
- Description
- Characterization
- Scene
- Foreshadow
- Pacing

Genre or topic specific writing:
- Numbers
- Jargon
- Legal language
- Explanatory terms
- Titles

That list is not all-inclusive. It can grow with time, and be fitted to the particular writer or writing style. But it does require writers and editors to get back in touch with the fundamentals of language, to understand the impact of individual components on clarity and meaning, and to develop shared language.