

Mastering Mitch's Rules of Writing
...and other tips to tighten your writing
by Marley Gibson

Who in the world is Mitch and why should I care what his rules are?

Because his rules could change your writing and self-editing...for the better!

Insert back story: Mitch Rouda. My boss in my dot.com days. Former editor-in-chief of *Builder* magazine. Okay, so he's not famous (well, he is in the building industry), but he taught me the best lessons a writer could ever learn. And he did it the old-fashioned way. No beating around the bush or tossing out unnecessary niceties. He merely told me how to improve my writing...plain and simple. These rules might be brash, callous and directly to the point, but they make a lot of sense.

Any time you're writing *anything*—a manuscript, a business letter, a thank you note—you have to ask yourself the following questions...

So what?
Who cares?
What's the point?

You may be sitting there with a shocked look on your face as I did when Mitch was editing my eight-page corporate newsletter back in 1997 and spoke these words to me. But he's right. It's sort of like Charlie Chaplin's Tramp movies where the actors were instructed to "cut to the chase." Well, that's what we writers have to do to keep our manuscripts tight and flowing.

Grab a book, a magazine or your work in progress. Pick a paragraph and read it. Now, let's examine each of Mitch's questions.

So what? How does each sentence and paragraph advance the plot? Are the characters actions appropriate and necessary? Are the descriptions called for? Why is this or that line of dialogue necessary or important? If you can't answer this question, then more than likely you're adding too much information, too much writer's brain dump or unnecessary back story.

Who cares? Well, if your reader doesn't care, they're going to skip ahead, skim read or worse...put your book down. Are your characters sympathetic? Relatable? Distinct in their actions? Are their voices individual? Is what they are saying important? Are you wasting dialogue? ("Hello Bob." "Hello Mary." "How are you?" "I'm fine." — see my point?) Does your reader really need to know specific details about the hand-woven, imported, cerulean Oriental rug in the aged Victorian, post modern, Ethan-Allen meets Chippendale living room? Don't get bogged down in things that aren't essential to telling the tale and building the world for your reader. If they don't care, they're not going to keep reading.

What's the point? You should ask yourself this about everything you're writing. What is the point to each scene, each line of dialogue and each chapter hook leading to the next page? Are

certain characters needed or are their actions appropriate? Why do your characters say something a particular way? Is it necessary to have characters speak inane dialogue? And to make the point, how can you go deeper, further into your characters, their goals, motivations, conflicts and fears. What makes them tick? If your reader can't distinguish that, they'll give up reading.

Makes a lot of sense, eh?

So, the next time you start editing your writing, put Mitch's Rules of Writing to work and see if you can answer these questions. It's guaranteed to help tighten your writing and strengthen the message of your manuscript.

Through the years, I've expanded on Mitch's Rules of Writing to include a few of my pet peeves I see. I went to college and took journalism and copywriting classes back in the days when we used typewriters for our press releases. (Okay, I'm really not as old as I sound!) But in communication school, you're taught about what I like to call unnecessary words. Words that (like "that") sit on the page with no grown-up responsibilities or function in life. They take up precious word count space when other more important, more appropriate words could take their place. They are...

Very
Little
Rather
Pretty
That

Lather. Rinse. Repeat. Again. Chant it in your head. Make it one word. VeryLittleRatherPrettyThat. You don't need them. Take them out of your writing. Make a macro on your computer that (crap!) eliminates them the moment you type them. You'll see by purging these unnecessary words, your writing will become extremely tighter.

Oh...and I'll add a sixth word to the list. *Just*. Talk about the most over-used word in manuscripts today. I see it in contest entries, I see it with my critique partner and most of all, I see it in my own attempts at story telling. And my e-mails are riddled with justs. They're not always necessary. Most times those nasty justs can be exterminated...or replaced with "merely," "only," "simply" if absolutely necessary. Once you start hunting them out, you'll never be able to look at them the same way again.

Now, go forth and edit thy manuscript! Make Mitch proud. Make me proud. Just watch those rather annoying little words that pop up and make your very interesting manuscript just run-of-the-mill rather than that stunning epic we know that you can write. (Did I get them all in one sentence?)

Marley Gibson is an RWA PRO, member of the New England RWA chapter and President/Founder of Chick Lit Writers of the World online RWA chapter. She has seven chick

lit manuscripts under her belt. She's been a marketing communication writer for over 15 years writing many corporate newsletters, collaterals and press releases. An avid reader, travel enthusiast and total movie buff, she works full-time in marketing/editing at a local university and lives in the Boston area with her husband and best friend, Mike.