

Stop Looking.

This test scans your manuscript for passive voice in dialog beats. Search out places where your characters look, stare, glance, gaze, smile, frown, turn, nod, shrug, etc. while engaged in dialog. These are static ways to express what's going on while characters speak to each other, causing the writer to miss out on opportunities for action in a more dynamic setting.

Twist and Drop

This test addresses characterization. Since characters should change over the course of your manuscript as a result of the dilemmas they've endured in the story, think about taking the person your main character is in the final chapter and dropping them into your opening scene. If the whole story wouldn't have even happened to your stronger, wiser, final-chapter version of the main character, you've passed the test. Passing this test ensures that a character arc has been completed.

One Sentence Test

Write a one-sentence statement summarizing your story that includes the main character, the main theme, and the main problem to be overcome. Keep in mind that a fresh approach to a universally relatable challenge is what your book should be about.

Read with Your Fingers

- This test addresses plot and characterization progress over the course of your manuscript. To perform it, go through your story and read the first paragraph of every chapter. From these isolated paragraphs alone, you should be able to detect forward movement in the story, with both plot and characterization escalating.
- If you don't see an increase in tension or character progression, your story might be meandering.

No Dumping

- This test scans your manuscript for statements of plot facts incorporated into dialog (also known as information dumping).
- You want dialog to illuminate character personality and reveal emotion. It can influence or lead other characters. What it should NOT do, however, is be used as a device to state plot facts. (For instance, a character telling another character something like, "He's at Lakeside Park? Oh, no! That's gang territory, over on the other side of town across the railroad tracks. Plus, Jimmy might be in even more trouble because he always wears a red shirt, which is dangerous because the Lakeside Park's gang color is blue and they might mistake him for one of the Rockland Reds, their rival gang.")

Check Your “ases.”

- This test will refine voice in your manuscript. Search for the word "as" in construction (e.g., As she ran out the door, she grabbed a sweater from the closet. He pulled on his coat as she started the car.) Breaking these constructions into separate sentences will strengthen your voice and give your story more power.
- Also watch out for -ing action constructions (e.g., She took a quick right onto a side street, causing the cop to fishtail when he followed.) Again, direct, separate sentences are more immediate and effective.
- To fix, simply break these constructions into shorter, separate sentences. This will cause your work to include more sentence variety as well as serve to vary sentence length.

Scratch & Sniff

- As you read over your work, do you get the feeling that your characters are standing in front of a blue screen reciting their lines? Setting is often overlooked in favor of dialog and action. Strive not to neglect it.
- To perform this test, use a highlighter pen to mark references to the five senses in your manuscript. Make sure you have at least three references to the senses per chapter.
- Don't forget to show characters interacting with their setting.

The Italics Detector

- Don't use italics for emphasis.
- To make your voice stronger, use an action to denote emphasis, not italics. (e.g., A whiny character saying, "I want to go too," becomes, "She clutched his sleeve. 'I want to go.'")
- Use the search and replace function in Word to seek and eliminate arbitrary use of italics in your manuscript.

Check Your Sleeve

- Are your characters wearing their hearts on their sleeves? Scan your manuscript and highlight direct references to feelings.
- Don't have teens analyze their emotional situations, as this is unnatural and not how teens generally think. Show actions such as observing, judging, acting, and dealing with consequences instead of flat out telling the reader how a character feels.

The Eagle Eye of Igor

- After writing, be sure to copy edit your manuscript, since sloppy use of grammar, punctuation, spelling, and formatting can be a real turn-off to editors and agents.
- Have someone you don't know read your pages for typos and errors. Pay extra for each mistake he or she finds.