Book Aesthetics and Reader Advocacy

How the sight and sound of words influence reader engagement

by Jolie Hobbs

Audiobooks can kill you. Sure, you are more likely to die in a head-on collision with a bumble bee, but it *could* happen. My daily reading habits include a healthy dose of audiobooks, devoured on my constitutionals. That's what I started calling my daily walks after the big five-0 kicked me in the keister, and they have become a risk-taking behavior since I was gifted noise-canceling headphones.

Intentionally eliminating the slightest external sound during my audiobook experience makes me a slow-ambling duck for errant bicyclists and drivers. Worse yet is the increased potential to be struck down by non-errant stalkers or serial killing psychopaths who sneak up on me. The latter concern might stem from overindulgence in psychological thrillers, but isn't it best to know your enemy?

Despite these very real threats to my life, I steadfastly indulge in my habit and steal from time for the selfish pursuit of audiobook consumption. I surf seemingly endless options to prepare for these walks, defying all AI recommendations because I don't like to be told what to do. This nonconformist sentiment drives me to exert considerable effort in searching for new voices and under-represented genres. I am an editor and a rebel. See, folks? Two opposing forces *can* co-exist in one being.

After recklessly sampling the wares of 10 or 20 unfamiliar authors, I will purchase several books. At least one purchase surprises me and confuses my app's algorithm—catch that curveball, you presumptuous bot. Like all unhinged reading fanatics, *this* is how I curate my audiobook collection. It is also how I find authors that I will seek out in print.

The Good, The Bad, The AI
Discovering good writers through audiobook consumption largely determines which authors land on my list of print books to purchase. Behind every impressive audiobook is an author committed to authenticity. These authors are adept at *listening* to their stories. Finding these gems can be challenging, especially with Generative AI in the mix.

Given readers' vast options, it's no surprise that a fair amount of content is prone to repetition, poor word choice, misspellings, grammar errors, plot gaps, and mechanical dialogue. An author's overreliance on AI is the cause of some, not all, of these content issues. After all, AI requires editing, too, but many qualified editors forego projects when the author uses AI for more than basic language mechanics. When AI isn't the culprit of poorly written content, I wonder more about the editor's skill than the author's.

Reader Advocacy

The cardinal rule for an editor is, "Do no harm." This rule is emblazoned in the minds of copyeditors and proofreaders responsible for correcting errors. The word "errors" here means breaking the grammar, spelling, punctuation, and format rules. Editors make mistakes, and there are times when an editor thinks they are fixing an error but manages to make one instead. Pobody's nerfect. "Do no harm" reminds editors to check before they correct.

I stand by the cardinal rule for copyediting and proofreading. Regarding developmental and line editing, "Do no harm" is a priority that takes on a different meaning. It doesn't apply to correcting errors but to helping clients improve their work and make it more desirable to readers. The developmental editor's intent to not harm means enhancing an author's unique style and voice—not overpowering them. It also means helping clients engage—not alienating readers. Editors must be a reader's best advocate as much as they are a trusted client resource.

Medium Matters

Last week, I was listening to a fresh book on the scene—the author's debut novel. The reviews were of the typical sort. Critics described the book as "sensational," "impossible to put down," and "breathtaking," so I purchased the book based on their reviews. My gamble *nearly* paid off because it was a story worth telling. Unfortunately, the *telling* of the story spun me off the rails and led me to set the book aside in favor of another.

At times, the dialogue could have been more realistic, and characters unnecessarily repeated themselves, as if the author were concerned about landing their message with readers. A few gaps in dialogue were easy to overlook because they had little impact on the plot or overall readability. It was the repetitive use of the word "said" for speaker attribution that rattled my cage.

To be clear, nothing is wrong or incorrect with using "said" to attribute a speaker. On the contrary, I believe it is a best practice. Using "said" leaves no question about who is speaking and is the shortest route between intent and understanding. In this case, it was so repetitive it became fatiguing to hear, and eventually, the listening experience became downright annoying.

Visual and Audio Aesthetics

Visual aesthetics impact the way readers absorb and process content. Consuming dialogue in print is a different experience from listening to it. I would have grazed over the repetition

without thought if I read the dialogue in black and white. The use of unanticipated words in place of "said" might have resulted in a more awkward experience in print.

The massive shift in audiobook consumption means more authors must write and publish their work with audio in mind as a destination medium. Like the visual experience with print, reading a book aloud creates an audible aesthetic. The impact of this aesthetic on the reader's experience is equally relevant. The repetitive use of the word "said" might be benign in print but can negatively affect reader engagement in audio.

Like artists, writers must work with their medium in mind, and editors must understand the writer's goals before beginning a project. For the editor to make better recommendations, they must understand all of the impacts the medium can have on the book—the greatest impact being the reader experience.

EDITOR'S TIPS

Writing Dialogue
Hundreds of words can be used to identify a speaker as part of interior discourse other than "said."

Example:

"Why do you always say it that way?" Jaime moaned.

"There is only one way to say it!" snapped Gertie. "If you keep your room clean, you won't be bothered by how I say it."

"Fiiiiiiine!" said Jaime, shooting her a look.

Familiarizing yourself with alternatives for attributing speech will be handy if you 1) are worried the reader won't understand your intent, 2) use a lot of dialogue with multiple speakers, or 3) plan on publishing in audio format.

Grammar and Punctuation
- ✓ Indent discourse to set it apart from other surrounding content.
- ✓ Start a new paragraph for each new speaker within a dialogue.
- ✓ If one person's speech is lengthy, start the speech with opening quotes. Then, use open quotes for each new paragraph, but do not close quotes until the end of the final paragraph.
- ✓ Generally, punctuation, such as periods and commas, should be placed inside the quote. However, there are exceptions to this rule, such as when a speaker references something said by another person, like this example:

Was it Coolio who said, "I ain't never crossed a man that didn't deserve it"?