



It's OK to Just *Say*

By Terri Elders

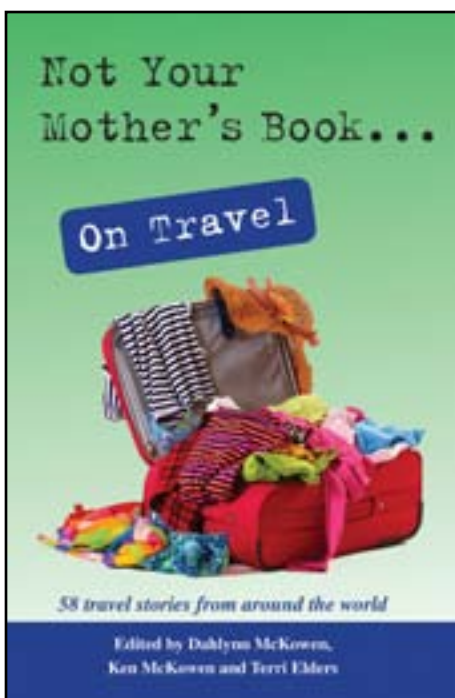
You haven't noticed me prancing around in a felt poodle skirt recently. It's been decades since I ratted my hair. Nor have I recently spotted a guy in mutton chops other than on-stage at Knott's Berry Farm's Birdcage Theatre. Nope. Fashions change, in clothing, in hairstyles and in writing.

They certainly have in dialogue tags. These are the words that make it clear who is speaking in a conversation. Nowadays the fashion is to stick to the basic "he said/she said" when writing dialogue. Such tags are also called "attributives."

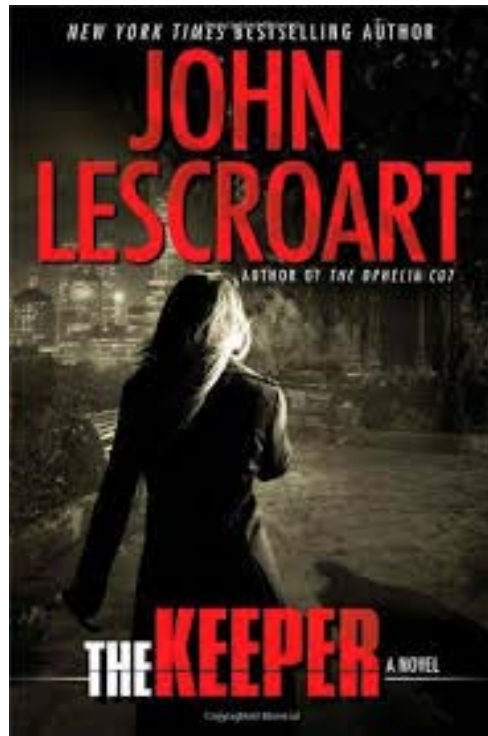
You may recall your junior high English homework assignments where you constructed sentences using synonyms such as whispered, shouted, muttered, and grumbled. Such active verbs are sometimes called bookisms. My stepson, who has his third graders write a novel each year, provides such an exercise for his students. It helps to enrich his students' expanding vocabularies. Indeed, there can be benefits to varying attributives, but the secret to good writing seems to be to use them sparingly, only when necessary for dramatic effect.

Constant use of bookisms can label writers as amateurs, modern day editors claim, and mire writing in melodrama. Do not, they warn, veer too far from said, ask or reply. Why? Stronger verbs tend to interrupt the reader's concentration and draw attention away from the rhythm and flow of the story. The rationale is that readers' eyes skim right over "said," just as they do periods and commas. (Tip: exclamation points, semi-colons and colons, parentheses and dashes also slow down the eye.)

I trolled through the *Not Your Mother's Book* database to find examples of writing that relied on bookisms. Though few stories avoided them altogether, I located one story where I found an infinite number: advised, shouted, decided, responded, replied, corrected, remembered, urged, beamed, wondered,



Terri's book: The perfect gift for that traveler on your holiday



declared and smiled. And only one or two said. That's all in a thousand word piece.

To test the theory, I grabbed a couple of books from my nightstand. I'm reading John Lescroart's hot-off-the-press Dismas Hardy mystery, *The Keeper*. Sure enough, Lescroart presents on his first page seven consecutive lines of dialogue between two characters without using a single tag. Yet it's absolutely clear who the speaker is every time. Next, following a paragraph of exposition, there's five more interchanges and finally an attributive: "Hardy said."

In his second chapter, Lescroart injects a few "he asked," but the rest of the tags are all "said." Finally, in Chapter 8, we

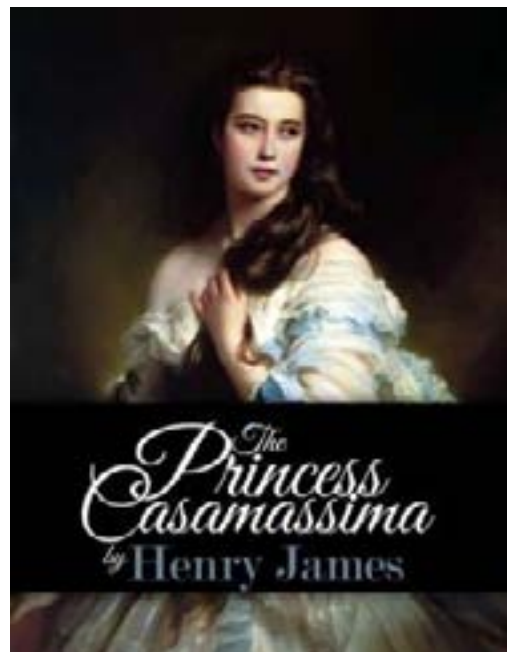
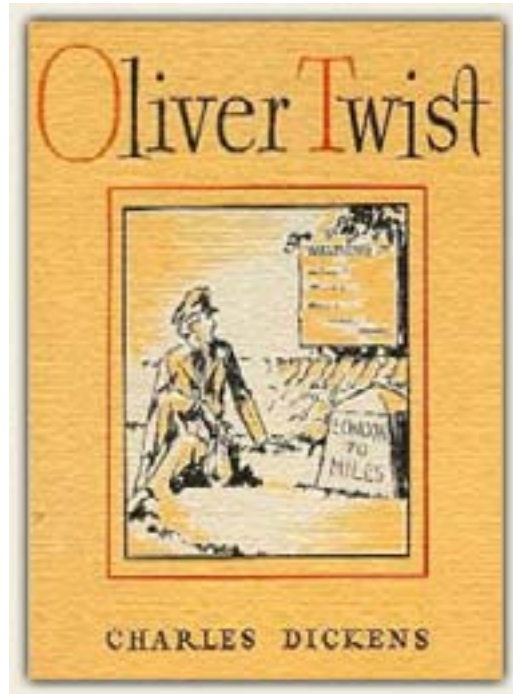
come to a "Glitsky agreed." And the pace of these first few chapters benefits by the avoidance of bellows, simpers or trills. Things pick up in Chapter 9, however, where somebody breaks down and "blurted out."

I examined the opening chapters of Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, published in 1838, expecting more elaborate tags. Surprisingly, I found few beyond an occasional "inquired" or "repeated, in the first couple of chapters, graduating to "urged," "sobbed" and "acquiesced" in the more dramatic scenes of Chapters 3 and 4.

Mostly, though, "he said" was good enough for Dickens.

It apparently wasn't for the Victorians and Edwardians. Henry James, for instance, relied heavily on bookisms. In Chapter 1 of *The Princess Casamassima*, I find: palpitated, gasped, quavered, exclaimed and rejoined. But I had to look closely to locate them. James' depicts his characters with such elegance, that these verbs hardly jar.

Besides the bookisms mentioned previously, there's another unsavory kind that to me really marks careless writing. And that's the use of such non-speech verbs in dialogue tags, verbs such as "smiled," "grimaced," "giggled," or "laughed." You simply cannot smile or laugh a sentence. Try it. I double-dog-dare you to make your second giggled word understood, even if you can giggle an opening syllable. When editing for *Not Your Mother's Book* or other



publications, I find simple ways to get around this, without altering the writer's intent. Take a look at the following:

Submitted example: "I swear I didn't do it," she smiled.

Substitute: "I swear I didn't do it," she said, smiling.

Or if it's clear who the speaker is: "I swear I didn't do it." She smiled.

I prefer the latter, since I try to avoid adverbs in tags. I follow Stephen King's advice: "To write adverbs is human, to write he said or she said is divine." Adverbial tags can be fun in Tom Swifties, the legacy of the *Tom Swift* series of the early 20th century. ("We must hurry, said Tom, swiftly. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tom_Swifty) But in today's writing they can drag down the story, and may convince some editors that you're telling, not showing.

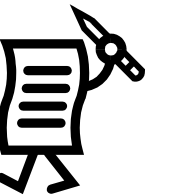
Take heart, though. You can still treat your characters to an occasional grunt, bleat, purr or roar. Just don't do it with attributives. Your characters might reflect on what they're saying or hearing:

Example: Though daintily petite, her bellow, I suspected, could startle a buffalo.

Example: Finally I answered him, lowering my voice to a whisper.

Of course some modern authors still rely on bookisms. You'll find them aplenty in books by Stephanie Meyer, Nicholas Sparks and especially in romance novels. In the latter, you can be sure somebody will pant out a line or two.

In creative writing, there's never any strict right or wrong. In anthology writing, though, the fewer bookisms, the better. You want every word to count. Make your dialogue and action do the work, not your tags.



Click on the word bubble to learn more about Tom Swifties.

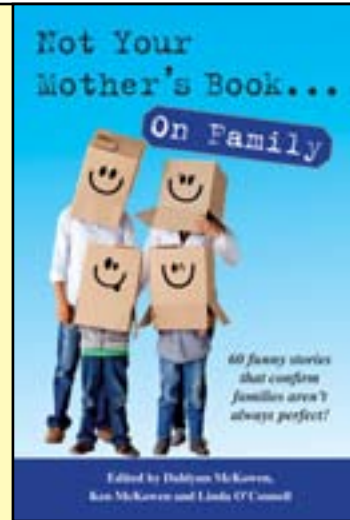
Terri recommends these sites to learn more about this month's topic:

- [The Use and Abuse of Dialogue Tags](http://www.writing-world.com/grammar/said.shtml)
<http://www.writing-world.com/grammar/said.shtml>
- [Dialogue Tags](http://www.palidormedia.com/james/editor/lesson1.html)
<http://www.palidormedia.com/james/editor/lesson1.html>
- [The Rules of Writing: Dialogue Tags](http://cameronchapman.com/the-rules-of-writing-dialogue-tags.htm)
<http://cameronchapman.com/the-rules-of-writing-dialogue-tags.htm>
- [Dialogue Tags](http://edittorrent.blogspot.com/2008/02/dialogue-tags.html)
<http://edittorrent.blogspot.com/2008/02/dialogue-tags.html>
- [Grammar Girl: He Said/She Said](http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/he-said-she-said)
<http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/he-said-she-said>
- [10 Easy Ways to Improve Your Dialogue](http://writetodone.com/10-easy-ways-to-improve-your-dialogue/)
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Great Event!

On July 15th, Dianna Graveman and Linda O'Connell had a very successful double book launch party at STL Books in Kirkwood, MO (www.STLBooks.com). Dianna is the co-creator of *NYMB... On Being a Mom* and Linda is the co-creator of *NYMB... On Family*. Linda continues with the details about Kirkwood, which is just outside of St. Louis, the event and even supplied the captions. Fun!



“This intimate little walking community boasts everything from beautiful Victorian homes to new houses. One of the most famous structures is the Magic House, a renowned children’s museum housed in a refurbished historical mansion.

Kirkwood is progressive and contemporary, a blending of old and new, young and young at heart, and it has that small town feel. There are indie businesses and many restaurants. It is a family friendly town with an outdoor farmer’s market and much more. I encourage everyone to visit.

We had a huge turnout in a very small bookstore. We were elbow to elbow. I counted fifty indoors, but because our party overflowed to outdoors, we had about 75-100 in attendance. We left a few books on consignment, so if

you didn’t get a chance to stop by, drop in and purchase one or both of these funny books. And be sure to say “hello” to Robin and staff.

Unfortunately, Dianna and I didn’t get all the contributors from both books into one photo. Here’s who joined us: Jenny Beatrice, Candace Carrabus, Melissa Fuoss, Marcia Gaye, T’Mara Goodsell, Laura Graf, Ellie Grossman, Mary Horner, Renee Hughes, Jamie Krakover, Cathi LaMarche, Victoria Nichols, Sheree Nielsen, Lynn Obermoeller, Laura Edwards-Ray, Sioux Roslawski, Verna Simms, Donna Volkenannt and Pat Wahler.”

Thank you, Robin Theiss (owner, STL Books, photo to R), for hosting our event. We sold many books and also raised money for The Family Resource Center; 10% of all sales were donated to the worthy cause.



Dianna (in aqua) and me!



Dianna and I gathered with some of the contributors: Laura Graf, Cathi LaMarche, Sioux Roslawski and Tammy Goodsell.



Melissa Fouss (left) read her very funny story about her mom and the Hell’s Angels. Sioux Roslawski and Renee Hughes also read their stories. Laughter and applause rang out!

Jenny Beatrice (below left) read her humorous story from the Mom’s book. She brought her sisters, the wonderful NUNS from St. Joseph’s of Carondelet!



More NYMB contributors!
L to R: Laura Edwards-Ray, Melissa Fuoss and Ellie Grossman

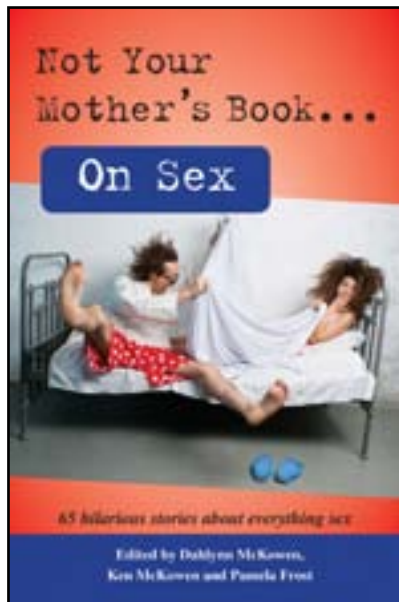
Exciting news! Award-winning marketing professionals at Your Write Platform—Debra Ayers Brown and Meredith Brown—are partnering with Publishing Syndicate to provide tips and strategies for our writing team. That’s YOU! Their articles will focus on writer/author branding and sales for offline and online success. Watch for this social sales training to begin in the August newsletter. We can hardly wait!



Last Page! Last Page! Last Page!

The “Last Page” features contests and story opportunities from Publishing Syndicate and other companies—but only those call-outs that do not compete with PS’ books will be posted.

Not Your Mother’s Book . . . NYMB caters to mature readership, thus, submissions must be written by people age 18 and older. **Click on a book cover** for more info or visit the PS website.



On Sex:

PS is sending out PRF requests in August, but we can still use more stories. Send them in NOW! A little “creative license” is allowed, you know, write it to the best to your recollection. This book is destined to define the NYMB series, so don’t be left out!

DEADLINES

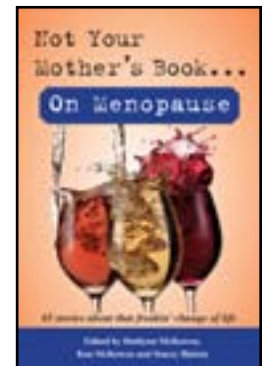


On Military Life:

January 1, 2015

On Menopause:

January 1, 2015



Submission guidelines at www.PublishingSyndicate.com

This just in from www.WritersMarket.com:

WritersMarket.com lists hundreds of magazines for writers of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, writing for children, and more. Here are four markets open to freelancers:

- *Astronomy* is a monthly magazine covering the science and hobby of astronomy. This market is for nonfiction writers only, who should query first. Payment is \$100-\$1,000 for pieces 500-3,000 words in length.
- *The Chronicle of the Horse* is a weekly magazine covering horses. Another nonfiction-only market, writers should submit the complete manuscript on spec. The magazine pays \$150-250 for accepted articles.
- *Gray's Sporting Journal* publishes 7 issues per year. The focus is on high-end hunting and fishing with an interest in fiction, nonfiction, and poetry-writers in all genres should submit a complete manuscript on spec. Payment for fiction and nonfiction ranges \$600-1,000 for unsolicited articles.
- *The Sun* is a monthly magazine that publishes fiction, essays, poetry, and more. Writers should submit complete manuscripts. Payment ranges \$300-1,500 for fiction; \$300-2,000 for essays; and \$100-500 for poetry.

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