

SMILEY-FACE TRICKS TO IMPROVE YOUR WRITING



1. Hyphenated Adjectives

Use hyphenated adjectives to surprise your readers by turning boring adjectives into unique ones. These are groups of words that are hyphenated because the string of words functions as one adjective modifying the noun that follows. (Note: Don't use a hyphen between the last word of the adjective and the noun being modified.)

Before:

She wanted to look like a French woman.

After:

She wanted to look chic in a Parisian-woman-wearing-a-simple-black-dress-while-riding-a-bicycle-and-carrying-a-bagette-under-her-arms sort of way.

2. Alliteration and Assonance

Use alliteration and assonance to create poetic flow.

- Alliteration is the repetition of the same consonant sound near the beginnings of 3 or more words that are close together.

Before:

Thunderstorms hit central Indiana yesterday.

After:

Storms socked the state's middle on Saturday. (The "s" sound is repeated at the beginning of 4 words.)

- Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds in words that are close together.

Before:

Diets high in fat are causing gout.

After:

A rich diet may pave way for a bout with gout.
(May/pave/way share the long "a" sound.)
(Bout/gout share the "ow" sound.)

3. Humor

It turns boring writing into writing with pizzazz. It adds voice to your writing when you make your readers laugh.

- Hyperbole is exaggeration for effect. Hyperbole does not have to be funny, although it is often used in a humorous way.

Humorous:

Before:

Chinese food seems to last forever in the refrigerator.

After:

I believe the only food that should be kept around is take-out Chinese, which contains a powerful preservative chemical called "kung-pao" that enables it to remain edible for several football seasons.

Non-Humorous:

Before:

Christina Aguilera has long eyelashes.

After:

When Christina Aguilera walked into the room, her eyelashes cast shadows on the wall.

- **Pun:** A joke that comes from a play on words. It can make use of (1) a word's multiple meanings or (2) a word's homonym or (3) a word's rhymes.

Before:

Sir Lancelot told us the bad dream he had about his horse.

After:

Sir Lancelot told us the bad dream he had about his horse; it was a real knight mare.

4. Magic 3

Three examples in a series can create support for a point. A magic 3 is more than listing 3 nouns or 3 verbs or 3 adjectives. It should be 3 full examples, such as phrases or clauses. Three words alone do not make a magic 3.

Before:

Cooking requires chopping, seasoning, and sautéing.

After:

Chopping vegetables into bite-sized pieces, adding herbs and spices to "kick it up a notch", and sautéing until the tidbits are juicy, make cooking an enjoyable pastime for me.

5. Figurative Language

Non-literal comparisons add "spice" to writing and paint more vivid pictures for your readers and surprise them with unique comparisons. Remember to brainstorm the easiest comparisons first. (She was as beautiful as a rose. She was as beautiful as a freshly bloomed flower. She was as beautiful as a model on the cover of a magazine. She was as beautiful as a star in the sky.) Then throw those clichés away and use something fresh and original.

- Simile is a comparison between two unlike things using "like" or "as".

Before:

It is a simple plan.

After:

The plan is simple, like my brother-in-law Phil, but unlike Phil, this plan just might work. (Notice this use of the word "simple" also creates a pun).

- Metaphor states a comparison between two unlike things without using any special words.

Before:

Gary and Terre Haute are smelly cities.

After:

Gary and Terre Haute are the armpits of Indiana.

- **Personification** gives a non-human thing, human characteristics or human actions.

Before:

I scratched my arm on the twig.

After:

Racing toward the house as the storm approached, I was delayed as the trees reached for me. They began to wrap their twisted arms and gnarled hands around me. I fought back, but they didn't lessen their grip; instead, they began to screech at me as they pulled me into their grove.

6. Imagery/Specific Details for Effect/Zooming In

Instead of using general, vague descriptions or "telling" instead of "showing", specific sensory details help your readers visualize the person, place, thing, or idea you're writing about. You must appeal to at least 3 of the 5 senses.

Before:

My grandma's house in Mississippi is nice. ("Is nice" tells the reader about the house but doesn't show the reader why it's nice.)

After:

I am sitting out on an old Dixieland porch in Mississippi. The American flag waves proudly from its pole. Making itself a web in the corner of the wrought-iron railing is a small black spider. The twin rocking chairs glide back and forth, speaking to each other in the tongue of "rickety rack". Hanging from a weeping willow, an emerald birdhouse sways in the wind, as the robins sing their never-ending song. Swooping down toward the nearby field, a crop duster exterminates the boll weevils on the cotton and turns the air a bit sour. I throw up a wave as a muddy 4 X 4 passes the farm. Down here in Mississippi we share Southern hospitality.

7. Repetition for Effect

You can repeat specially chosen words or phrases to make a point or to stress certain ideas for your readers. This focuses your readers' attention on the point you are trying to make. Decide on your purpose before you begin writing.

Before:

Envy sort of takes me over when I see things I want but can't have.

After:

Envy is an ugly person. Envy rears her head when I least expect it. Envy starts whispering in my ear telling me, "Look at how beautiful those women are. Did you see that convertible Corvette Stingray with the red leather interior? Imagine how perfectly decorated that Mediterranean villa is. Oh, but you'll never be able to afford any of that on your teacher's salary." Envy knows how to take a pleasant day and turn it into an unfulfilling one, and Envy knows how to leave me wishing that I owned all of the handbags, bracelets, antique furniture, artwork, and books which catch my eye. Envy has a way of making me feel emptier than I was to begin with. (The purpose was to see how overwhelming envy can be.)

8. Exploded Moment

Instead of speeding past a moment in the story, slow down and emphasize it by exploding the action so that readers clearly see what's happening. The key here is strong/muscle verbs. (Simile: An exploded moment is like slow motion in an action movie; you suddenly see every little movement as it unfolds before you.)

Before:

I am planting some flowers that will bloom in the spring.

After:

Placing my foot on the edge of the shovel, I push down with my arms and leg. My muscles strain as the blade breaks through the soil. Once it's in, I tilt the handle back toward the ground and push until the earth is loosened. I dump the pile of soil onto the ground. Bending down I grab clumps of earth and begin shaking away the loose dirt and returning stray worms to their underground homes. The unneeded grass is deposited in my garbage sack. The ground is tilled to break up the clumps of sod and to smooth the dirt. Using my hand spade, I dig small holes in which to plant my future flowers. I then tuck my tulip and daffodil bulbs into their new beds so they can sleep warmly through the winter.

9. Full-Circle Ending

Sometimes writers need a special ending that effectively wraps up the piece. One “trick” is to repeat a phrase (from the first paragraph) at the very to create a full-circle ending. This is especially potent when used with a quotation or a piece of dialogue.

Example:

I am sitting out on an old Dixieland porch in Mississippi. The American flag waves proudly from its pole. Making itself a web in the corner of the wrought-iron railing is a small black spider. The twin rocking chairs glide back and forth, speaking to each other in the tongue of “rickety rack”. Hanging from a weeping willow, an emerald birdhouse sways in the wind, as the robins sing their never-ending song. Swooping down toward the nearby field, a crop duster exterminates the boll weevils on the cotton and turns the air a bit sour. I throw up a wave as a muddy 4 X 4 passes the farm. Anyone’s welcome anytime to come sit on my Dixieland porch, and share some Southern hospitality.

Adapted from the ideas of Mary Ellen Ledbetter.