



## The Unavoidable Sin of Repetition

By  
Michael McCollum



The interesting thing about being alive at the beginning of the twenty first century is that people can travel halfway around the world in relative comfort and in less than one full day. Not much less, mind you, but less. I have traveled twice to Perm, Russia, in the Ural Mountains. The journey from Phoenix to Perm takes 23 hours. That's pretty good considering that the two are twelve time zones apart, and that it wasn't all that long ago (historically, speaking) when *Around The World in Eighty Days* was considered to be the wildest of science fiction stories.

When I fly, especially such a long distance, I always like to make sure that I have plenty of reading material along. That is because the airlines always seem to be playing movies that I've already seen, or are just plain bad. So, with nothing to do while strapped into my airplane seat, I reached into my overstuffed computer bag and dragged out one of my favorite science fiction novels that I hadn't read in a decade or so. As I was reading along, I noticed that several of the characters used the exact same expression independently in the space of about ten chapters. The expression was, "*No battle plan ever survives first contact with the enemy!*"

Now this is a fairly famous quotation; but it was still disconcerting to hear it out of the mouths of three different characters in the space of approximately 30,000 words. How could three different people just happen to use that same piece of folk wisdom independently? The answer, of course, is that there weren't three people involved. There was only one. The author!

We sometimes forget when reading a book that all of the characters are merely alter egos of the author. They don't really exist except in his or her imagination. Thus, it wasn't that three different people just happened to have the same favorite saying. Rather, the author was a little lazy. He threw in one of his personal favorite sayings whenever he got stuck for something to write, and he must have gotten stuck three times. Then, because it *is* one of his favorite sayings, he didn't notice the repetitiveness of having three different characters mouth the same words when he reread the manuscript.

One of the ways you can tell how careful an author was in preparing his or her book or story is to watch for these repetitive passages; words or sayings that are distinctive, but that are unlikely to be repeated verbatim by more than one character. If you find them, it means that the author was straining, or tired, or just didn't care as much as usual while writing that particular passage. He or she was being sloppy. If these

repetitions survive the editing process, it probably means the editor wasn't doing his or her job, either. It is the job of the editor to catch anything that is likely to strain the readers' "willing suspension of disbelief."

Repetitive writing is fairly common at book length. That is because we spend a year writing a book, and months after having written some particularly witty passage, we repeat it in another context, having forgotten the earlier usage. If writing takes a year or more, reading is an activity of only a few hours. Thus, the excessive repetition stands out to the reader even if the writer is oblivious to it. When writing a book, it's important to remember that the crowd of people in your fictional universe are just that — fictional! You need to take special care not to let all of them sound like you, the writer. Their personalities, mannerisms, and dialogue must be as distinctive and unique as you can make them.

Repetitiveness is a trap into which all writers fall. It's a trap because it leads readers to believe that we lack imagination, when in fact, repetition is just a bad habit. In effect, excessive repetitiveness is a result of the process of learning to write in the first place. What got me thinking about this was the fact that an event that I had been dreading for 17 years finally occurred. The time had come to teach my daughter to drive. Fathers who have done likewise will understand when I say that it is a harrowing experience for all concerned.

One lesson was a 50-mile roundtrip on the local freeway to get her used to the high speed, long distance travel that is so common in Arizona. We drove from Tempe, where our home is, down I-17, to the highway rest stop just north of Casa Grande and then back again. About twenty miles into the journey, just after my daughter began to relax a bit, she let the car drift over the white line that marks the right boundary of the Interstate and onto the shoulder where cars park when they break down. Because we were traveling at 70 miles per hour, leaving the main roadway caused a loud "thrumming" noise as the tires moved onto the rough texture of the shoulder. We've all had similar experiences and we know enough to correct by drifting carefully left until we return the car to the driving lane. However, since my daughter was a new driver and had never experienced this before, she thought it a major disaster. She swerved left, overcorrected, fishtailed a bit, and then steadied in her lane. All the while her adrenaline was pumping and her heart pounding in her ears. The incident frightened her out of all proportion to its seriousness, so much so that she was close to hyperventilating when we pulled into the rest stop five miles further south.

The above incident made me think about what it is like to learn any new skill, and specifically, to learn to be a professional writer. There you are with a terrific story in your head, yet you aren't quite sure how you are going to get it out of your cranium and down on paper. In fact, a major frustration for all writers, especially new ones, is this inability to translate a mental concept into a finished project. Like a baby comfortable in its womb, your magnum opus has no plans to leave the warmth and comfort of your brain in order to risk the cold light of day.

The reason why writers can't instantaneously produce Pulitzer Prize material is the same reason that pilots don't start their first flying lesson by soloing. Any skill must be practiced before you become even halfway proficient at it. Learning involves developing the necessary neural pathways in your brain to facilitate the activity. Some people refer to this as "training one's reflexes." Whatever it is called, human beings do

not come pre-wired for anything except breathing and excreting. Before we can do anything else, we have to go through the frustrating process we call “learning.”

Remember that first time you sat down at a typewriter or computer screen and started to write something that you hoped might sell? I do. I’ll bet you stared at the blank paper for a long time, stymied as to how to move your fingers! Then when you began to type, you slowly and hesitantly spelled out the words, “It was a dark and stormy night,” or at least, something equivalent.

Then, after a hesitant start, you began to type. It wasn’t exactly Hemingway, but it wasn’t awful either. You probably had the same experience I did. That first story didn’t sell, nor the second, nor the third. In fact, in my case it took twenty attempts before I was able to sell something. But I persevered and continued to grind out the words. Eventually, I became more skilled and the sentences began to flow more smoothly.

What happened, of course, is that I began to learn what I needed to know to become a writer. Essentially, I learned by doing. Each time I did something right with my writing, a particular pathway in my brain was reinforced. Effectively, what had been a single track in a trackless forest widened just a bit, making it easier to travel that path the next time I had the need. After numerous repetitions, that track became a footpath and I no longer had to cut away the undergrowth with my mental machete in order to get the words to flow. Sometimes I tried an experiment that turned out wrong, and the experience taught me not to do that again.

Then, after a million words or so, I started to become sufficiently proficient at my craft that the editors began to notice me. By this time the footpath through the neural forest had become as wide as a two-lane highway. No longer did I have to claw and scrape for every word. Suddenly, when I was in the mood to write, I wrote. My sentences flowed effortlessly. When I was especially inspired, the words flowed so quickly that I merely had to read the story as it wrote itself.

It is at this point in the learning process that I fell into the trap of repetition that I complain about so much in others. Having reached the “comfortable” stage where placing one word after another had ceased to be like a dentist pulling teeth, I suddenly began to notice that the pathway in my brain had become a trifle too broad and easy to navigate. That is when I realized that I was writing the same thing over and over again. Having been successful once, my natural tendency was to return to that success and attempt to repeat it, *ad nauseum*. Nor was I alone in making this discovery. It is an experience common to nearly all writers. It usually happens shortly after they make their first sale, and certainly by the time they’ve made their tenth.

It is at this point that most of us become hypersensitive to this tendency toward repetition. This includes *macro-repetition*, in which we write the same story over and over again; and *micro-repetition*, where we merely repeat the same phrases time and again. Largely this desire not to repeat ourselves is a good thing. Like a Valley Girl inserting “you know” into every sentence, there are certain peculiarities that make each of our writing styles unique, peculiarities of which we need to remain aware so that we can keep from using them to excess. My own tendency is to overuse the word “which,” and whenever describing something large, I find that I can put the word “vast” six times in the same paragraph. Then there is my problem of writing dialogue mixed with description. I find that my people “smile broadly” and “shrug their shoulders” a lot, as

in: *“Tell Manuel to come home early,” his mother said, smiling broadly.* It isn't that I don't know other ways to describe my characters. It's just that “smiling broadly” and “shrugging” seem to be hard wired into my brain. When I first began writing, I used those two descriptions as means of breaking up my dialogue, and having succeeded, my brain returns to the scene of the crime again and again.

There is one special case, however, in which repetition is not a sin and lack of repetition is not a virtue. So, before we get too deeply into how to prevent excessively repeated phrases, descriptions, and character actions, a caution about the one form of repetitive writing that is actually good. I refer to that bugaboo of nearly every new writer, the “he said-ism.”

Having become sensitive to repetitious writing, most writers will reach a stage where they realize that they are repeating “he said” and “she said” perhaps a dozen times a page when writing dialogue. And having become convinced that the readers will get tired of this, they begin to search for synonyms to substitute for this monotonous recounting of who it is that is talking. While some variation in “he said/she said” is always welcome, too often the synonyms become both strained and strange. A word that has the same meaning as “said” is called a “said-ism.”

When taken to extreme, the search for synonyms of “said” lead the writer to put down phrases like “he spoke”, “he voiced”, “he uttered”, “he explained”, “he exclaimed”, “he pontificated”, “he expostulated”, “he criticized”, or “he spouted”. Each of these words is a perfectly valid synonym for “said,” but taken in total, the effect can be distracting to the reader. By long experience, readers are used to seeing “he said” interspersed every few sentences in dialogue, and are usually not even aware that it is taking place, let alone bothered by it. The synonyms, on the other hand, are highly intrusive since many of them are multi-syllabic and somewhat exotic to the average reader. Then there is the possibility of triggering an unwanted mental image through the clumsy use of synonyms. In fact, the most atrocious said-ism ever recorded is the result of triggering an unintended mental image. I refer, of course, to the infamous, *“I can't swallow that,” he ejaculated!*

Had the writer kept with the simple “he said,” there would have been no triggering of the reader's gag response caused by the fact that while “ejaculate” is a perfectly good synonym for “said,” it also has a more common meaning that does not fit well with the overall sentence.

Having warned against this common mistake, however, we will now get back to the subject of preventing excessive repetition in writing, especially in physical descriptions and actions interspersed with dialogue.

So just how does a writer keep from going down that well traveled pathway in his or her brain? The answer is that you don't. When you write, it is highly likely that you will use all of the techniques that you have found to be successful over the years. In fact, you don't want to write completely differently each time you seek to follow your muse. After all, repeating what you are good at is what gives your writing its distinctive style.

However, you can reduce or eliminate your tendency to write repetitively if you are aware of your own weaknesses. When I finish a manuscript, I do a computer search for the word “which,” a word I realize that I use too much. Most of these I change to “that.” Then I read my dialogue very carefully, because I have a tendency to insert the same actions or descriptors. I also make sure to appeal to all five of the readers' senses,

and not merely the senses of sight and smell that I seem to have a fondness for. Finally, I watch for colloquialisms like a hawk (funny, there's one now) and remove any that seem strained or out of character for the viewpoint narrator. I also watch to make sure that I don't have too many characters uttering the same colloquialism. Again, this is a good use of the search capability of most word processing programs. If you are fond of saying "like a hawk" the way I am, then searching for the word "hawk" is a good way to ensure that you don't overuse it. If you find that same colloquialism in a dozen places in your book, I suggest that you work at changing them.

By being aware of my own tendencies, I have been able to improve my writing over the years. It still reads like me, but I don't bore the readers or cause them to become cross with me because I keep repeating the same phrase over and over again. At least, I don't think I repeat ... repeat ... repeat! You, the readers, will have to be the final judges of that.

### A Tool for Combating Repetitiveness

Writing, especially fiction, is about human beings and what is known as "the human condition." It is an exploration of our species' strengths and weaknesses, fortunes and foibles, desires and fears. In the process of writing, we introduce numerous characters. Usually we give each a short physical description when they are first introduced, then intersperse references to their actions or physical features throughout the manuscript. We do this for a variety of reasons. The first is to remind readers of who it is that we are talking about. You may introduce John Smith as a gray haired, arthritic gentleman with a permanently bowed back on page 14 of your opus, and then not refer to him again until page 120. It is a confident writer who thinks that the reader will remember John Smith some 106 pages later. So, to remind readers as to the character's identity, and to also add some action to what might otherwise be a static scene, we say: *John Smith shuffled through the door, his face grimacing as his arthritic spine protested at the strain of pushing open the heavy iron portal.* Then later, we may remind readers further by saying, *John Smith brushed a lock of silver-gray hair aside and grinned widely as he said, "I knew they would do that if we just gave them enough rope. When do we spring the trap?"*

The latter sentence is an example of mixing both description and action with dialogue. Not only are we reminded of one of John Smith's two distinguishing characteristics — his gray hair — but we are also treated to him performing an action while listening to what he has to say. Between the dialogue (which the reader hears through his or her mental ears) and the brushing back the lock of hair (which the reader sees in his or her mind's eye), the readers' subconscious minds become convinced that John Smith is a living, breathing, bent-over human being.

One of my personal tendencies is to describe my characters using the same terms, especially when interspersing descriptions with dialogue. I say things like, *John looked at Mary, and **nodded**.* "I must agree with your assessment," Joe said, **nodding**. Harold **nodded** his acceptance of Ann's comment. "Time to go," Homer said, **nodding** his assent.

Let's face it. A human being has five appendages, one torso, and hundreds of muscles used to rearrange the facial muscles. Surely there is some other response a



human body can make to an external stimulus than to nod the head. Because I have this tendency to be repetitious in the use of descriptors and action words regarding the human body, I have always wished that someone would write up a simple list of body parts, synonyms, descriptors, and actions that can be taken using those body parts. If I had such a crib sheet, whenever I was describing someone, I could consult the list and make sure that my descriptions were varied and interesting.

Well, since no one else has done it, I decided to develop just such a tool to combat repetitiveness. That tool is *The Writer's Guide to the Human Body*, a special purpose thesaurus. It has a section for each major body part, then lists synonyms, descriptors, and actions that particular body part can take. For example, take the word "head:

**HEAD – SYNONYMS: CRANIUM, NOGGIN, MELON, GOURD — DESCRIPTORS: ROUND, SQUARE, LOPSIDED, HUGE, LARGE, SMALL, TINY, BULLET-SHAPED -- ACTIONS: NOD, SHAKE, INCLINE, TILT, TURN.**

Using this reference, whenever I describe someone's head motion, I can look down the list and make sure that they just don't *nod* every time. I can also give each of my characters a different looking head, thereby making sure that they aren't all "lopsided."

The *Writer's Guide* can be downloaded for free on the Sci Fi – Arizona Writers' Workshop page. It is in the Bonus Items at the bottom of the page, on the left.

The *Writer's Guide* isn't intended to be a substitute for creativity. It's merely a lookup table that reminds the writer of all of the possibilities with regard to the parts of the human body, their descriptions and the actions that they can take. By giving you these alternatives, you can more easily vary your descriptions and avoid the sin of needless repetition in your writing. At least, you will avoid it with respect to your physical descriptions. There are still all of those clichés and other idiosyncrasies with which you pepper your writing to worry about.

The End

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When the sun flared out of control and boiled Earth's oceans, humanity took refuge in a place that few would have predicted. In the greatest migration in history, the entire human race took up residence among the towering clouds and deep clear-air canyons of Saturn's upper atmosphere. Having survived the traitor star, they returned to the all-too-human tradition of internecine strife. The new city-states of Saturn began to resemble those of ancient Greece, with one group of cities taking on the role of militaristic Sparta...

## 8. The Sails of Tau Ceti – US\$5.00

*Starhopper* was humanity's first interstellar probe. It was designed to search for intelligent life beyond the solar system. Before it could be launched, however, intelligent life found Earth. The discovery of an alien light sail inbound at the edge of the solar system generated considerable excitement in scientific circles. With the interstellar probe nearing completion, it gave scientists the opportunity to launch an expedition to meet the aliens while they were still in space. The second surprise came when *Starhopper's* crew boarded the alien craft. They found beings that, despite their alien physiques, were surprisingly compatible with humans. That two species so similar could have evolved a mere twelve light years from one another seemed too coincidental to be true.

One human being soon discovered that coincidence had nothing to do with it...

## 9. Gibraltar Earth – First Time in Print — \$6.00

It is the 24th Century and humanity is just gaining a toehold out among the stars. Stellar Survey Starship *Magellan* is exploring the New Eden system when they encounter two alien spacecraft. When the encounter is over, the score is one human scout ship and one alien aggressor destroyed. In exploring the wreck of the second alien ship, spacers discover a survivor with a fantastic story.

The alien comes from a million-star Galactic Empire ruled over by a mysterious race known as the Broa. These overlords are the masters of this region of the galaxy and they allow no competitors. This news presents Earth's rulers with a problem. As yet, the Broa are ignorant of humanity's existence. Does the human race retreat to its one small world, quaking in fear that the Broa will eventually discover Earth? Or do they take a more aggressive approach?

Whatever they do, they must do it quickly! Time is running out for the human race...

## 10. Gibraltar Sun – First Time in Print — \$7.00

The expedition to the Crab Nebula has returned to Earth and the news is not good. Out among the stars, a million systems have fallen under Broan domination, the fate awaiting Earth should the Broa ever learn of its existence. The problem would seem to allow but three responses: submit meekly to slavery, fight and risk extermination, or hide and pray the Broa remain ignorant of humankind for at least a few more generations. Are the hairless apes of Sol III finally faced with a problem for which there is no acceptable solution?



While politicians argue, Mark Rykand and Lisa Arden risk everything to spy on the all-powerful enemy that is beginning to wonder at the appearance of mysterious bipeds in their midst...

### **11. Gridlock and Other Stories - US\$5.00**

Where would you visit if you invented a time machine, but could not steer it? What if you went out for a six-pack of beer and never came back? If you think nuclear power is dangerous, you should try black holes as an energy source — or even scarier, solar energy! Visit the many worlds of Michael McCollum. I guarantee that you will be surprised!

## Non-Fiction Books

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### **12. The Art of Writing, Volume I - US\$10.00**

Have you missed any of the articles in the Art of Writing Series? No problem. The first sixteen articles (October, 1996-December, 1997) have been collected into a book-length work of more than 72,000 words. Now you can learn about character, conflict, plot, pacing, dialogue, and the business of writing, all in one document.

### **13. The Art of Writing, Volume II - US\$10.00**

This collection covers the Art of Writing articles published during 1998. The book is 62,000 words in length and builds on the foundation of knowledge provided by Volume I of this popular series.

### **14. The Art of Science Fiction, Volume I - US\$10.00**

Have you missed any of the articles in the Art of Science Fiction Series? No problem. The first sixteen articles (October, 1996-December, 1997) have been collected into a book-length work of more than 70,000 words. Learn about science fiction techniques and technologies, including starships, time machines, and rocket propulsion. Tour the Solar System and learn astronomy from the science fiction writer's viewpoint. We don't care where the stars appear in the terrestrial sky. We want to know their true positions in space. If you are planning to write an interstellar romance, brushing up on your astronomy may be just what you need.

### **15. The Art of Science Fiction, Volume II - US\$10.00**

This collection covers the *Art of Science Fiction* articles published during 1998. The book is 67,000 words in length and builds on the foundation of knowledge provided by Volume I of this popular series.

## **16. The Astrogator's Handbook – Expanded Edition and Deluxe Editions**

The Astrogator's Handbook has been very popular on Sci Fi – Arizona. The handbook has star maps that show science fiction writers where the stars are located in space rather than where they are located in Earth's sky. Because of the popularity, we are expanding the handbook to show nine times as much space and more than ten times as many stars. The expanded handbook includes the positions of 3500 stars as viewed from Polaris on 63 maps. This handbook is a useful resource for every science fiction writer and will appeal to anyone with an interest in astronomy.