

## ASK THE EDITOR

Q: It seems to me that agents and editors these days care more about pacing than any other aspect of crime novels. A fast pace can hide a multitude of flaws -- the reader doesn't stop long enough to consider mistakes and mediocre writing. Do you see a lot of pacing problems in the books you edit? Can you give us some tips on improving the pace of our work?

*-Sandy, Washington DC*

A: The mss I edit tend to be from first-time, never-before submitted writers and from midlist writers who've had an unexpected rejection. In some cases it's a midlist writer in another genre who's trying her first mystery. In most of these cases their pacing IS too slow, often because of too much background and set-up from the start. By the time their pacing picks up, it's too late, and major restructuring is needed, because it's not merely a question of lopping off the first couple of chapters. But I agree with you that some of the newer releases do reveal flaws that probably wouldn't have been acceptable if the pace hadn't thrown the reader onto a roller-coaster ride from the get-go.

One of the aids I suggest, which gives writers a picture of their own pacing, is to make a list of scenes before they submit a ms for editing. This not the hated outline done before writing but an autopsy of the actual ms after it's been written. I suggest making the list as the left-hand column of a graph or matrix, then assigning an arbitrary number to each scene (1 to 5, though some writers tell me they prefer 1 to 10), a number that represents the level of anxiety the writer expects the reader to feel when reading that scene. In one of the 5 (or 10) numbered columns that marches horizontally across the matrix, the writer can put a dot representing that level of anxiety, then draw a line connecting the dots.

When the matrix is turned on its side, the connecting line should look pretty wild, like a volatile day of stock market trading. A closer examination shows that the pacing is most effective when the line begins at a place that's midway between high and low, and drops down only slightly before rising. Overall, the line should rise, with the climax earning the highest score. The lowest reaches of the line ideally follow immediately after one of the highs. This produces only a crude picture of pacing, but it does reveal to the writers who do this some of the areas needing their attention. I find that the exercise tends to reveal other issues that the writer wants to work on-- which is good, because all this occurs before submitting for editing. Most line editors are able to do more with a ms that's in the best shape it can be before it's edited.

Q: I have a question about proper names. When you're writing about a family should you say "the Middleton's" or should it be "the Middletons?" I know the apostrophe shows possession but I've seen it used to show more than one in the family. This has always confused me.

*-Lynette, North Carolina*

If you're referring to the family's house or some other possession, the plural plus the apostrophe is correct. But if you are referring to the family itself, the reference is plural only: the Middletons.

Apostrophes are all over the place, most of them incorrect (slack's on sale).

If the family were named Williams, for example, the plural would be the Williamses, and their house, the Williamses' house--to distinguish from the place owned by one fellow named William, whose possessive form would be William's house. The Chicago Manual of Style is the premier authority on things mechanical, the bible of the book editor, as distinguished from the Associated Press Stylebook, for example, for journalists, who must save every bit of space on a typeset line. The AP even tolerates the missing serial comma, such as the one that rightly belongs in eats, shoots, and leaves, an abomination skewered by Lynne Truss, of Eats, Shoots & Leaves popularity, but commas are another subject. Truss says of the proliferation of misused apostrophes that quite frankly the whole thing has spiraled into madness.

In my opinion the one legitimate area of debate is typographical: how to show the plural of something that's not a word as much as a set of letters; for example, the boy is learning his a, b, c's. Somewhere somehow, someone resolved the "cs" ambiguity by sticking an apostrophe in it. But because I can't tolerate the apostrophe where it doesn't belong, where no letter is missing and no possession is involved, I simply capitalize the primary letters and let the "s" for the plural remain lower cased: A, B, Cs.

Q: My question is about the word "then." There's an ongoing argument about whether it should have a comma in front when used as follows:

He worked all morning then went to lunch.

*-Ellis via susterincrimelistserv*

A: Yes. My recommendation is to use the comma. However, if a writer felt strongly about leaving it out I would not get bent out of shape over it. Instead, I'd recommend changing "then" to "and." Here's why.

If the sentence were a true compound, with both parts of it complete sentences in their own right, a comma would be necessary. But this sentence isn't a compound; 'went to lunch' doesn't have its own separate subject, so if the conjunction were "and" instead of "then," a comma before the conjunction would be labeled a comma splice--a definite no-no.

I see unfortunate comma splices all the time, even in the work of fellow editors. I also see compound sentences missing the necessary commas, with sometimes amusing results. One that I quote in Don't Sabotage Your Submission, which I've changed the details of to protect the author, goes like this:

*The crazed killer shot her and her entire family decided to have the body cremated.*

*The crazed killer shot her and her entire family*

*there MUST be a return after the word "family" so that the rest of the sentence, decided to have the body cremated.*

*starts a new line.*

I think the need for a comma before "and" in a compound sentence speaks for itself. Now back to your example. Shouldn't the rationale be the same whether the conjunction is "and" or "then"? Superficially yes, but not really, because "then" isn't functioning as a conjunction but as an adverb. Ignoring the parts of grammar for the moment, look at it this way--the way a writer and an editor ought to be looking at it from the angle of suggested meaning:

The author deliberately chose "then" instead of "and," probably because it more accurately suggests a sequence of events: first one thing, then another. A comma supports the emphasis on sequence. The absence of a comma supports the sense that both events are closely linked--hence, my recommendation for the substitution of "and."

This brings me to another issue, which has started to become one of several pet peeves. Many writers say "and then." Not only is this an unnecessary use of two words where one would do, but also the emphasis is muddled. If you think about it the next time you come across the two words together, in almost all cases one or the other would convey a stronger, clearer meaning. Most of the time, "and" is the stronger choice. Where sequence is the desired emphasis, "then" is the more effective choice.

Please note that whereas the combination of "and then" is less effective, in my opinion, than either word used separately, the construction itself is grammatically correct.