

Chapter 23

Avoiding Ambiguity & Hedging

Most of the confusing or ambiguous parts of your plot and story should've gotten cleared up during your story- and scene-level edit. But ambiguity sneaks into stories on the sentence-level, too.

In your sentence-level edit, you'll want to check for ambiguous words, pronouns, language, and/or phrasing—anything that creates unintentional confusion for your reader.

Ambiguous Pronouns

Anytime you use *it, its, this, that, he, she, him, her, his, hers, they, theirs*, etc. make sure it's crystal clear who or what you're referring to.

Karen took the garlic, carrots, and lemon juice out of the fridge, but according to the recipe it wasn't enough.

What wasn't enough? The garlic? Carrots? Lemon juice? All three? To clarify, keep in mind that a pronoun refers to the last named person (for he, she, they) or object (for it, this, that). So in the sentence:

Karen and Diane unpacked her groceries into the fridge.

Her would refer to Diane, the last named female person. If those are Karen's groceries, you'd need to write:

Karen and Diane unpacked Karen's groceries into the fridge.

It may seem like a minor concern, but ambiguous pronouns can cause serious confusion for the reader, especially if you're trying to show an important event.

Before:

Lars threw the vase at the window, and it broke.

After:

The vase broke when Lars threw it at the window.

In the first example, we can't tell what broke. Was it the vase? The window? The revision, though not exactly poetic, is more clear. Keep in mind that you can rewrite or reorganize whole passages to remove ambiguity, reworking the problem area until it adheres to your unique style and purposes. These are just examples to guide you, not instructions on how *exactly* to reword your sentences.

Common Ambiguous Pronouns

- It
- Its
- This
- That
- Those
- These
- He
- She
- Him
- Her
- His
- Hers
- They
- Theirs

Ambiguous Words

Unless the character is truly uncertain, or you want the reader to be uncertain what you're referring to, avoid using ambiguous words like "something," "somewhere," "thing," "stuff," etc.

Before:

There was something about him she despised.

After:

She despised his beached-blonde hair, and his arrogance.

Be specific! If your character really doesn't know what she hates about this person, "something" could work. But make sure you're not being vague out of habit or laziness.

Before:

She picked up her stuff from the dry cleaners.

After:

She picked up her suit from the dry cleaners.

"Suit" is a better choice here because it's specific, concrete, and *visualize-able*. We can't really get a mental picture of "stuff."

Common Ambiguous Words

- Thing
- Something
- Anything
- Somewhere
- Stuff
- Nothing

Hedging

Unless you *want* to create a sense of uncertainty, cut hedging words like *could*, *might*, *possibly*, *like*, *a little*, or *kind of*. These are also called "weasel words," which are commonly used by politicians to avoid making a direct statement or taking a firm position.

Before:

I didn't really like him.

After:

I didn't like him.

Before:

Her brother was a little annoying.

After:

Her brother was annoying.

Common Hedging Words:

- Kind of
- A little
- Possibly
- Might
- Maybe
- Could
- Sort of
- Really
- Basically
- Like
- Almost
- About
- Practically

When Ambiguity and/or Hedging Works

Ambiguity has its place if your character is truly uncertain *or* if you want the reader to be uncertain.

In Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*, the main character is never named or gendered. This was an intentional choice by the writer, who wanted the reader to be unclear about the narrator's gender and sexual identity.

Similarly, writers of horror, mystery, or magical realism who are trying to create a mysterious mood will use words like "might," "could," and "possibly" to intentionally invoke ambiguity.

The fog drifted through the trees, almost corporeal in its movements. Could it be ghost? An apparition?

In this dream sequence from *Little Kingdoms*, Steven Millhauser uses ambiguous language to emphasize the main character's uncanny experience:

"You see," he said to Max, who for some reason had climbed the desk and then onto the top of the door frame, where he sat crouched like a gnome as dark wings grew from his shoulders; and opening his eyes Franklin could not understand the bright dawn light pouring through the window in his bedroom, while somewhere far away a cup was rattling on a dish.

When used intentionally, ambiguity can enhance mood, raise questions, and contribute to suspense. Just make sure you're doing it on purpose!