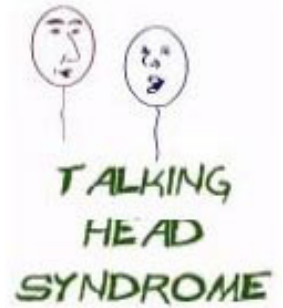




# Talking Head Syndrome



by  
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“Hi,” said Bob.

“Hi,” said Charlie.

“Are we going to hit the bars tonight?” asked Bob.

“Sure,” replied Charlie.

Hmm, four lines and already I’m bored writing this dialogue. I can only imagine how you feel reading. This is what I call “Talking Head Syndrome.” It’s dull and hard to read. In short, it stinks. Why? Because no one knows what is happening. There is no sense of place or character. What is Bob doing while speaking? How about Charlie? I have no idea either.

In my experience as an editor, I have come across this common sin of writing more times than I care to count. “Talking Head Syndrome” tends to show up when writers rush through scenes in favor of getting to more interesting or, at least more active ones. This problem is not limited to the beginning or end of a novel; more often than not, it appears in the middle, ruining all the previous scene and characterization you have done.

As a writer, you already know what you want to say, what the reader will want and need to know about the character and which details to put in. Dialogue is one of the best ways to do all this, if you avoid “Talking Head Syndrome.” There has to be more to a conversation than just words. People just will not stand around, arms stiff at their sides, knees locked and staring straight ahead, while having a conversation. It doesn’t happen in real life, and it shouldn’t happen in your novel. People move around, they pace, gesture with their hands, have differing pitches and inflections on words. In short, they are animated. Bob and Charlie are boring. These two are nothing more than two undescribed heads hanging in the air, speaking at each other. Hence the term, “Talking Head Syndrome.” So, how do you fix the problem if you have it and avoid it if you don’t? Well, read on, MacDuff, that’s what this article is here to answer.

Let’s look at another dialogue scene.

“Hi,” Bob said to Charlie.

Charlie looked up from his newspaper. “Oh, hi, Bob.”

Bob sat at Charlie’s table. “Hey, are we hitting the bars tonight?”

Charlie leaned back in his chair, wood creaking under the strain. He stretched and yawned before replying. “Yeah, sure.”

This conversation is still stiff and boring, but not quite as much as the previous one. Why? Because the characters are doing something besides speaking at each other. Action is taking place outside of their mouths moving and below the neck. Okay, sure, the scene still isn’t set, but that should’ve been done before this conversation. However, you do need to continue the scene description through the dialogue, using the characters’ words to add even more realism, but that’s another article.

So, how do you avoid “Talking Head Syndrome” or get rid of it if your characters already suffer from it? By making sure the character’s actions surrounding his words are real and believable. Narrative description has to be intermixed with the dialogue. Blocks of dialogue followed by blocks of narrative will only be followed by more blocks of dialogue and then more blocks of narrative, and so on, until you have entered a vicious circle that will inevitably cause a fatal case of “Talking Head Syndrome” and bore your reader.

Why is getting rid of, or avoiding “Talking Head Syndrome” such a big deal? Well, because as I said, it is boring, and readers tend to skim over boring areas, providing they don’t just skip them entirely. The last thing you, as an author, want, are readers skimming or skipping your hard work, the words you have slaved over, not to mention any key information given in the dialogue would be missed, never to be recovered, much like your reader’s interest.

So, dear author, prevent a fatal case of “Talking Head Syndrome” and the paralysis it brings to your characters by giving them a healthy dose of narrative description. Let them move around and jump and play; let Bob and Charlie gesticulate wildly if the scene calls for it, or at least shake hands. Exercise is good for your characters, and good for your reader’s interest level. After all “movers and shakers” are always more popular than the “wallflower.” Don’t let Bob be a wallflower. Prevent “Talking Head Syndrome.” Your characters lives may depend on it.



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