

By Deborah Raney

Every first draft, whether from the pen of a beginner or a seasoned professional, contains weasel words. What are they? Weasel words sneak into a manuscript in the passion of getting the story down, but don't belong in a final draft because they are repetitive, unclear, or unnecessary.

Each author has her pet words or phrases. These become almost invisible because they are such a part of her vocabulary—even her voice. Such words distract readers when they pop up too often.

Don't worry too much about weasel words in the first draft.

It's great to understand your list of weasel words, but they don't hurt anything in the first draft and are relatively easy to eradicate in rewrite.

SEARCH AND DESTROY

I keep a list of my weasel words and pet phrases because I tend to have different weasel words for each novel. One of the first phases of my rewrite process includes a thorough search to eradicate those irksome weasels. Here are a few of the most common:

That: It's not that the word *that* is used *that* often, but that it is used in places that it doesn't really need to be that prominent. Oops! Let's try that again: The word *that* is often unnecessary or redundant. The best way to decide if you need *that* is to read your sentence aloud without it. If it still works, delete it.

Really: Usually, *really* means *very*. In dialogue, if your character would use *really* instead of the more formal *very*, then by all means leave it. But in narrative, or for a more sophisticated character, *very* is probably the word you want. Sometimes *really*



Self-editing: Pop Goes The Weasel

means *truly* and sometimes it actually means—well, *actually*. Say what you mean to say.

And or But or Or at the beginning of a sentence: Don't misunderstand. In fiction, it is acceptable to use sentence fragments and to begin sentences with conjunctions. But it should be for emphasis. (Or to make a point in a column on writing.) And not due to sloppiness or laziness. So tick the *Case Sensitive* box in your search field and weed out sentences that don't have good reason to begin with *But*, *And*, or *Or*.

Just: Usually when I've written *just* what I really mean is *only*, *merely*, or *simply*. So I first determine if I need the word at all, and then I just ...er, I mean, I *simply* replace it with one of the above.

STRUGGLING FOR CLARITY

Another type of weasel word I look for is a verb or phrase I've developed an undue affection for and used too often.

When rewriting, you obviously can't delete a verb. Say you discover you've used forms of the word *struggle* 100 times in your novel. So search the word (search "struggl" since that will

find *struggled*, *struggler*, *struggles*, *struggling*, etc.) then strategically replace 25-30 percent with appropriate synonyms (*fight*, *wrestle*, *grapple*, *grasp*, *troubles*, *issues*, etc.).

Be aware you may have used one of those synonyms as many times or more than the original offending word, so before you replace, do a search/count for synonyms, too. Keep in mind that when you use an unusual word—*grapple*, for instance—it will be more memorable to readers than the common word *struggle*, so you'll want fewer repetitions of unusual words.

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This weeding can be a time-consuming process, but well worth it when you see how it cleans and streamlines your manuscript.

DEBORAH RANEY'S first novel, *A Vow to Chensh*, inspired the World Wide Pictures film of the same title. Her books have since won the RITA Award, ACFW Carol



Award, HOLT Medallion, National Readers' Choice Award, Silver Angel, and have twice been Christy Award finalists. *After All*, the newest book in

her Hanover Falls Novels series, releases in May from Howard/Simon & Schuster. Deb and her husband, Ken Raney, enjoy small-town life in Kansas. They have four children and four grandchildren, all of whom live much too far away.