

Use Your Right Words

By Jessie Desmond

“Say your right words, the goblins said, and we’ll take the baby away forever and ever.”

Sarah, *Labyrinth*

Wordsmithing is an art and fanfiction is a great medium to practice this art. Choosing the best words for descriptors and for dialogue is going to elevate your writing to a whole new level. The goal with this article is to help you create a more intense character or situation by using a better choice of words, despite them meaning the same thing as the lesser choice.

Let’s start by describing the Bog of Eternal Stench. This is a fan favorite and it is often mentioned in stories. Think back to the film, or watch the BOES scene, and come up with 15-20 descriptors for the bog that includes things that live there, smells, textures, etc. Here is my list: flatulence, vultures, twisted trees, putrid, green fog, moist, humid, crumbling, rough granite, rot, bubbling, engulfing, spoiled, brackish, vapors, choking, garrote, and smothering. Depending on your vocabulary level and your attention to detail, finding descriptors could be a very hard or very easy thing for you to do.

The next thing you will want to do is look at this description of the BOES and try to figure out how it makes you perceive the bog.

The Bog of Eternal Stench was stinky. Hoggle tried holding his breath as he tried to find a path to use, wanting to hurry out of the smelly bog. He hated it when Jareth sent him to this gross, disgusting swamp. Everything looked dead and, of course, there was the constant worry about being touched by bog water.

What do you think of that paragraph? Was it an effective way to talk about the BOES? Was it lacking something? It tells us that it’s stinky, but as a reader do you understand how stinky it really is? Does it seem like Hoggle really wants to get out of there? Is it a struggle for him to be there?

By using the right words, you can change this around and make it more effective. Pull out your old thesaurus and definitely look up some synonyms! Also, look up archaic terms that might help you out (depending on what you’re doing). Using my wordsmithing skills, I’m going to slightly change the paragraph above to make it MORE INTENSE.

The Bog of Eternal Stench was full of brackish vapors, crumbling rough granite, and blackened twisted trees. Hoggle tried holding his breath so the engulfing green fog wouldn’t burn his throat and nostrils as he tried to find a path to use, wanting to hurry out of the putrid bog. He hated it when Jareth sent him to this gross, disgusting swamp. Everything looked dead and, of course, there was the constant worry about being touched by bog water.

Well...what do you think? I didn’t make a huge amount of changes, but what I did was help you to understand how much of a pain in the butt it is for Hoggle to be in the BOES. There is insinuation that the bog is turning on itself with the crumbling granite and black twisted trees. We also learn that there is a horrible burning sensation from the vapors of the bog. That is something we can all understand as being very unpleasant.

Try to revise your work, chapter by chapter, and look for lacking descriptions. Amp them up by using your right words.

Let's step this up a notch and move onto something a little more advanced - dialogue! If you have read my article *He Said, She Said*, then you know that having a character speak a certain way is very important. It is also very important that you keep proper descriptors inserted into their speech and motions, which is what we're going to look at.

To keep with our BOES theme, since we already came up with some descriptors, let's use Sir Didymus talking to Hoggle. Here is the dialogue that we're going to examine:

"My dear friend Hoggle! What a pleasant surprise finding you here among the mighty swamp elm" Sir Didymus said. Hoggle stood up from his shoveling and found his friend sitting on top of his steed, Ambrosius. "What art thou doing?" "Digging" Hoggle said. "For what? Treasure?" Sir Didymus asked. "Just for something 'buried in a sack under the elm marked with a bird'" Hoggle said. Sir Didymus wasn't much amused, but he stayed to keep Hoggle company.

It's a bland conversation right now. What we are looking to do is add some better descriptors, perhaps add a little more padding to the situation to make it more exciting, and boost the dialogue. It's important to keep in mind that they are meeting in the bog and Hoggle is apparently in the middle of digging something up. Upon revision of this small bit of dialogue you will want to ask yourself about Hoggle's and Sir Didymus' actions and reactions to each other and their environments. Let's look at a revised version of this conversation.

"My dear friend Hoggle! What a pleasant surprise finding you here among the mighty swamp elm" Sir Didymus exclaimed from behind Hoggle. Hoggle paused in his shoveling and found his friend sitting on top of his steed, Ambrosius. Poor Ambrosius looked displeased to be back in the swamp while Sir Didymus had his usual pleasant smirk. "What art thou doing?"

"Digging" Hoggle grumbled. He plunged the shovel into the rocky soil and scooped out another plod of dirt. Hoggle stopped only to cough at the choking rancid air of the swamp.

"For what? Treasure?" Sir Didymus asked curiously. He strained from his saddle to see into the waist-deep hole and his nose automatically began a slight sniffing. "Perhaps buried gold or silver? A relic?"

"Just for something 'buried in a sack under the elm marked with a bird' that the King wants" Hoggle replied. He pointed to the trunk of the tree where there was a primitive carving of a bird. Sir Didymus wasn't amused with the idea of digging up an old sack, but he stayed to keep Hoggle company. He would at least be able to keep his friend amused with tales of adventure and swashbuckling.

The scene has been expanded upon. Sir Didymus seems rather curious and Hoggle is back to being a hard worker, whether he likes what he's doing or not. We even get a hint that Hoggle and Ambrosius are bothered by the bog, while Sir Didymus doesn't seem to mind. The changes that were made added to the mood of the situation, created a better picture for the reader, and helped with characterization.

Wordsmithing is a hard art to learn. It takes time and patience. Your work will improve. If you need to, elicit the help of a beta reader. Sometimes a second set of eyes will see things that the first set has missed.