

A TROUBLESHOOTING GUIDE

A Well-Told Story

My readers tell me that the story starts too slowly.

- Shorten the exposition, spread it out more within the story, or move it to a later part of the story.
- Move a bit of dialogue or narrative action up front.
- Start with something surprising but critical to the story.

My readers find the chronology confusing.

- Add or change time transitions.
- Look for inadvertent tense shifts and fix them.

My readers feel that the suspense slackens or that the story lacks drama.

- Add remembered feelings and thoughts to heighten anticipation.
- Add an action sequence to build to a climax or high point.
- Cut or shorten background exposition and unnecessary description.
- Build rising action in stages, with multiple high points.

My readers find the conflict vague or unconnected to the autobiographical significance.

- Think about the conflict's multiple and possibly contradictory meanings.
- Add remembered feelings or thoughts to suggest multiple meanings, and cut those that don't clarify the significance.
- Add your present perspective to make the significance clearer and bring out the implications.
- Add dialogue or narrative action to clarify the conflict.

Vivid Description of People and Places

My readers feel that the people in the story don't come alive.

- Add details about distinctive physical features or mannerisms.
- Add speaker tags to the dialogue to characterize people and relationships.
- Read your dialogue aloud, and revise to make the language more natural and appropriate to the person.

My readers have trouble visualizing the places I describe.

- Name objects in the scene.
- Add sensory details (colors, sounds, smells, textures).
- Use a comparison — metaphor or simile — to evoke a particular mood or attitude.
- Add a visual — a photograph or other memorabilia.

My readers feel that some descriptions weaken the dominant impression.

- Omit unnecessary details.
- Add adjectives, similes, or metaphors to strengthen the dominant impression.
- Rethink the impression you want your writing to convey and the significance it suggests.

Autobiographical Significance

My readers do not identify or sympathize with me.

- Add background details or explain the context.
- Reveal the cultural influences acting on you or emphasize the historical period in which the event occurred.
- Show readers how you have changed or were affected by the experience.

My readers don't understand the significance of the story.

- Use irony or humor to contrast your present perspective with your past behavior, feelings, or attitudes.
- Show that the event ended but that the conflict was not resolved.
- Use dialogue to show how your relationship with people in your story changed.
- Indicate how the event continues to influence your thoughts or actions.

My readers think the significance seems too pat or simplistic.

- Develop contradictions or show ambivalence to enrich the implications.
- Use humor to comment ironically on your past behavior or current contradictory feelings.
- Stress the social or cultural dimensions of the event.
- Revise Hollywood-movie clichés, simple resolutions, or tagged-on morals.