

On the Use and Misuse of Adverbs

One of the first injunctions writers receive is to avoid the use of adverbs. Eliminate them all, if possible, we're told. "That's just lazy writing," we hear. Wait a minute. Adverbs exist in our spoken language for a reason. Don't they have an equal right to appear in the written word?

Well, yes and no. Adverbs modify verbs. They deepen or clarify the meaning of a verb. But, the thinking goes, if you need to modify a verb, you aren't using the right verb. There is likely a better verb that precludes the need for a modifier.

For example,

"Leaving her in the kitchen, he walked briskly to the market for more garlic."

You might argue there is a better single word for "walked briskly." How about:

"Leaving her in the kitchen, he raced to the market for more garlic." Or maybe he "dashed" to the market or even "sprinted."

See what I mean?

But like most rules, this one is not absolute. Sometimes the right verb does not exist. In that case, it is better to have an adverb help you out than to leave your story less sharp, less precise.

For example,

"Detective Layton asked the suspect one more time where she was at ten o'clock Sunday morning, but Melissa adamantly refused to answer."

Is there a single verb that captures the sense of "adamantly refused?" Simply "refusing" just doesn't sound stubborn enough. "Eschew" sounds too prissy. When you "adamantly refuse," you have really dug your heels in.

For me, the bottom line here is I try to review any and all adverbs in my writing and make sure they are making a necessary contribution.