

The courtroom scene beginning on page 363 where Jordan questions Detective Marrone is a great example of a scene that does everything it is supposed to do. It provides information that moves the plot forward, such as the details about the location of the fingerprints and the gunpowder residue, which creates some doubt about what happened that night at the carousel. There is very little exposition, which makes the scene feel very immediate, like we are right there in the courtroom listening to Jordan and Marrone go back and forth. There is also a sense of excitement and forward motion that creates a desire to know what's going to happen next. But when you close the scene, things are still unsettled. We know that there may be another way to look at the evidence and the events of the night Emily was killed, but we still have questions. Which means we want to keep reading. The scene also provides information about the personalities of Jordan and Marrone in an organic fashion, information that contributes to the tension you've created in this scene. We can tell from the dialogue in this scene that Marrone is a bit arrogant and self-righteous. Could that mean that once she had jumped on the idea of Chris as the murderer, she would be unlikely to let go of it, no matter what the evidence showed? Jordan comes across as confident and strong, a balm to the soul of the worried reader who fears for Chris' future. If Chris' attorney is confident, I can be, too, right? This scene does a great job of moving the story forward and providing information in a way that feels natural.

Let's contrast this with the scene in which Chris and Emily are riding in the car with Emily's parents on the way to Sugarloaf (page 100). Chris and Emily begin arguing in the back seat about a game they are playing. The dialogue goes like this: "You are so lying." "Am not." "Are too." "Oh, right." "Whatever." This exchange does convey the fact that Chris and Emily are so close that they sometimes fight like siblings, but because this discussion of the video game goes on for three pages, it slows the forward motion of the book down at this point. Do you feel this exchange between Emily and Chris is vital to portraying this aspect of their relationship, or could this point be emphasized in the other areas of the book where you have also brought this up? The scene also acts to move the characters from home up to Sugarloaf where a couple of important things happen—we see Chris using a gun and reacting to shooting the rabbit; Chris shows that he can act recklessly where Emily is concerned; and Chris and Emily kiss for the first time—but getting them to Sugarloaf could be accomplished with a transition sentence or two, rather than through a scene. The scene does end with a powerful statement by Chris that "sometimes he wanted to kill her." I believe that your intent here is to plant a seed of doubt about Chris' state of mind, and I do feel this is important to maintaining tension and uncertainty throughout the book. But the fact that this scene takes place four years before Emily's death when they are only 13, and is in reference to a fight over a video game makes me question whether this is the best place to do that. Would most people consider it a serious matter for a kid of this age to have a thought like that? If not, it won't have the desired effect of making your readers wonder what Chris is capable of. Without that punch at the end, the scene does little to move things forward and you may be better off recasting this as summary that gets Emily and Chris to Sugarloaf more expediently.

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I would like to review your use of dialogue in this next section of the letter. I noticed that you frequently use verbs other than "said" for your dialogue tags. A few verbs that showed up repeatedly were "whispered," "cried," "stammered," "commented," "yelled," and "exclaimed." While many authors worry that using "said" over and over again will seem repetitive, for the most part, "said" really is the best word to us. It is practically invisible to readers, fading into the background and going unnoticed. When you begin to replace "said" with other verbs, it can catch the reader's attention, causing them to

focus on the writing, rather than the story. While it is important to inject some variety and eliminate the repetition of “he said”/“she said” through long sections of dialogue, there are other ways to do this. One technique that you use quite successfully is the use of action beats instead of dialogue attribution to show who is speaking. For example, on page 112 you say:

*Emis walked into the room. “You look better.”*

*Haylee attempted to clear her thoughts. “Aaaah, thanks.”*

It is very clear who is speaking without the use of a dialogue tags and this is a good way to keep your readers “in the loop” without unnecessary repetition. You also seem to be quite aware that you don’t need to attribute every piece of dialogue. Readers are able to keep track in a dialogue between two characters as long as you attribute every few lines and you have done a good job of this.

I would also like to discuss your use of adverbs to describe the way a piece of dialogue is being said. For example, on page 8, you say, ““Do you feel up to getting dressed?’ Gene asked kindly.” It is certainly important for us to know that Gene is being kind here because Haylee has said that he has not paid much attention to her recently and this lets us know that he is paying attention now and is aware she is having a difficult day. But by just telling us that he said this kindly, it removes us a bit from the emotion. We are hearing you say that he is kind instead of experiencing him being kind for ourselves. Can you find a way to show us with his actions how he is responding to Haylee instead of telling us? For example, you could have him pat her hand or stroke her hair after he asks if she feels up to getting dressed. You actually did this quite well in other places in the book but still added an adverb to the dialogue tag. For instance, on page 9 you say, “Frannie casually glanced over her shoulder and flippantly replied, ‘Sorry,’ with a shrug as she continued on her way.” You did a great job of showing us her flippant attitude by having her glance over shoulder, shrug, and walk off; the word “flippantly” is not necessary. Consider looking for other places in the book where you used adverbs instead of showing your readers more concretely how a character was responding. In areas where you have already painted a picture for your readers, trust in your powers of description and leave the adverb out.