

**WRITERS' EASY GUIDE**

# E-Quotient

**How Words Affect  
The Reader**

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The Empty Page Society

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***Making Readers  
Laugh is a Good  
Thing—If That’s  
the Reaction You  
Want***

### **How Words Affect the Reader**

All too often, we believe readers will experience laughter, anxiety, fear, anger, or excitement by certain passages in our text only to discover they don’t get it. That emotional content is in our own minds when we write, so why didn’t it come across?

This is not an easy question to answer. Most writers have a propensity for creating one or more emotions—perhaps you’re especially good with humor. People laugh when they read what you write. But when you write a steamy sex scene, they also laugh--and that’s not what you intended.

Or you do well with creating suspense and anxiety in the reader. But your main character—who is wonderful and exciting in your eyes—comes off flat. Nobody seems to remember the

character's name or the fact that he's strong yet sensitive, sexy yet funny, powerful yet sentimental.

### **What are you doing wrong?**

Writing fiction is about creating emotion in the reader. Word choices, sentence construction, description, action, and pacing control the emotional flow.

That's a lot to keep track of while we write. On rewriting, however, we can toss out words, insert others, restructure entire passages. Look at the following paragraph.

***Write with  
Abandon, Never  
Worrying About  
Word Choice.  
Rewrite with a  
Synonym Finder  
Under Your  
Thumb***

*Lying under the Wrangler, I listened to Bragg's footsteps coming toward me on the gravel road. I had worked my ropes loose, rubbing my wrists raw in the process. I didn't want another beating. Once he glanced in the back seat and found me gone, would he look under the car and see me?*

Where do you become concerned about this character? Anxious about what will happen? Fearful for the character's plight? On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate the anxiety level at beginning middle and end?

*Now look at the paragraph rewritten. I looked up at the Wrangler's rusty tailpipe and prayed Bragg wouldn't glance down and see me. I could hear his heavy work boots scuffing the gravel as he approached. My*

*wrists burned from working the ropes free. My split lip felt huge. When he found me gone from the back seat, what would he do?*

Where do you become concerned? Anxious? Fearful? On a scale of 1 to 10, rate the anxiety level at beginning middle and end.

***Rewriting is Your  
Opportunity to  
Choose Every Word  
for the Exact  
Emotional Impact  
You Want to Make***

Compare the first sentences in both paragraphs. The “rusty tailpipe” is a visual detail that instantly draws the reader under the car. “I...prayed Bragg wouldn’t...see me” shows the character’s fear. In the rewrite, we know the character’s goal (not to get caught) in the first sentence and we begin to worry along with the character. In the earlier version, the first sentence is more objective--the reader doesn’t know the approaching footsteps represent a menace.

Now compare the second sentences. In the original version, an expository sentence tells us, “I had worked the ropes free....” Now we begin to worry. Yet, in the rewrite, we’re already worried and the second sentence ups the tension with more sensory detail, “his heavy work boots scuffing the gravel.”

Compare the next sentences. “I didn’t want another beating,” in the original finally relates the character’s fear. In the rewrite, we already fear for the character and more sensory details *show* why we should fear, “...split lip felt huge.”

Now compare the ending. In the original, the final anxiety is whether Bragg will look under the car. In the rewrite, this anxiety is where we began, which escalated to “what will [Bragg] do?”

Take any scene in your story and apply the following exercise. Only by recognizing where you’re off can you rewrite effectively.

### **Exercise**

Record the scene on audio and play it back while you jot words that describe what you want the reader to feel at each point in the passage.

<b>EMPATHY</b>	<b>MILD HUMOR</b>	<b>EXCITEMENT</b>
<b>SYMPATHY</b>	<b>LAUGHTER</b>	<b>PASSION</b>
<b>CONCERN</b>	<b>EMBARRASSMENT</b>	<b>SADNESS</b>
<b>ANXIETY</b>	<b>IRRITATION</b>	<b>GLOOM</b>
<b>FEAR</b>	<b>ANGER</b>	<b>JOY</b>

Play the scene again and ask a reader to do the same. See how your notes compare.