

American Beauty

Use of *lies* and *lays*

Deciding when to use *lie* and when to use *lay* can be tricky. For me, the reason it's tricky is that the past tense of *lie* is *lay*.

Lie means to recline. **I *lie* down. Last night, I *lay* down. I *have lain* down every night.**

Lay means to place. **I *lay* the book on the table. Last night, I *laid* the book on the table. I *have laid* the book on the table every night.**

So if any of your characters recline in the present tense, they **lie** down. If they reclined in the past tense, they **lay** down <last night>. But if your characters place something on a table in the present tense, they **lay** it on the table.

Here are a few examples of **lays** being used incorrectly in *American Beauty*.

INT. FITTS HOUSE - RICKY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

On VIDEO: JANE BURNHAM **lays** in bed, wearing a tank top. She's sixteen, with dark, intense eyes.

Angela **lays** on the bed, in bra and panties, reading a magazine. Jane, in an oversized T shirt, plays a video game on her computer.

On VIDEO: A DEAD BIRD **lays** on the ground, decomposing.

On VIDEO: Jane **lays** in Ricky's bed, wearing a tank top. She glances at us.

They LAUGH. She **lays** back on the bed.

In dialogue it might be okay to use the incorrect word. It depends on how your character would normally speak. Does it make sense for Ricky to use the wrong word in the example below? That's something the writer has to decide.

RICKY

No, but I did see this
homeless woman who froze to
death once. Just **laying** there
on the sidewalk. She looked
really sad.

Below is an example of **lies** being used correctly in *American Beauty*.

LESTER BURNHAM **lies** sleeping amidst expensive bed linens, face down, wearing PAJAMAS. An irritating ALARM CLOCK RINGS. Lester gropes blindly to shut it off.

Use of comma with identifying nouns

Deciding when to use commas can be tricky. The following examples deal with when to use a comma with a noun that identifies another noun. If you want to impress your friends (or annoy them), you can tell them that this kind of noun is called an appositive. Now let's look at the example.

LESTER (V.O.)
That's my **wife Carolyn**. See
the way the handle on those
pruning shears matches her
gardening clogs? That's not
an accident.

At issue here is whether Lester has more than one wife. As written, without the comma after **wife**, Lester is singling out Carolyn from a group of wives. He's just identifying which wife is using the pruning shears. For accuracy, the writer should add a comma after **wife**. In that case, Lester would essentially be saying, "That's my wife, whose name is Carolyn."

Bottom line: The appositive **Carolyn** used without the comma means Lester has more than one wife. The appositive **Carolyn** used with the comma means Lester has only one wife.

A comma is not used in the example below because Lester has more than one next-door neighbor. Lester is singling out this neighbor from the others.

LESTER (V.O.)
That's our next-door **neighbor**
Jim.

A comma is correctly used in the example below because Jim has just one lover.

LESTER (V.O.) (CONT'D)
And that's his **lover, Jim**.

Commas are correctly used in the example below because the writer is essentially saying, "Buddy Kane, who is known as the Real Estate King, joins her." Without the commas, the writer would be singling out Buddy Kane the Real Estate King from another Buddy Kane who is not the Real Estate King.

Carolyn sits at a table, lost in thought. There are two menus on the table. After a moment, Buddy Kane, **the Real Estate King**, joins her. Carolyn immediately becomes warm and gracious.

The dreaded comma splice

If you separate two sentences with a comma, you create a comma splice. Not good. Two sentences can be separated with a semicolon if they are closely related. Normally, you just use a plain old period.

In the example below, two sentences are separated with a comma. You can tell these are sentences because they each have a subject and a verb, and they each express a complete thought.

The Mercedes-Benz pulls into the Burnham driveway.
Carolyn drives, Lester is in the passenger seat.

To fix the mistake, the sentence could be rewritten.

The Mercedes-Benz pulls into the Burnham driveway.
Carolyn drives, **and** Lester is in the passenger seat.

The Mercedes-Benz pulls into the Burnham driveway.
Carolyn drives, **with** Lester in the passenger seat.

Or the comma could be changed to a semicolon or period.

The Mercedes-Benz pulls into the Burnham driveway.
Carolyn drives; Lester is in the passenger seat.

In the example below, the writer correctly uses the semicolon.

Carolyn and Buddy are deep in conversation. Christy has wandered off. Carolyn is nervous; Buddy seems amused.

The example below uses a comma correctly. **Jane in the passenger seat** is not a sentence (no verb).

INT. ANGELA'S BMW - CONTINUOUS

Angela is behind the wheel, **Jane in the passenger seat**.
They're passing a JOINT back and forth.

The example below also needs a period instead of a comma. This is because the fragment **I just ... I'm ...** is the beginning of a sentence. The rules of grammar are sometimes harder to follow in dialogue, but they still apply, unless you intentionally decide to have your character make grammatical mistakes.

LESTER (CONT'D)
I'm sorry I haven't been more
available, I just ... I'm ...

Serial comma

This isn't really a mistake in the script for *American Beauty*. But it is something to be aware of from the standpoint of consistency. A serial comma can be used before a conjunction (like **and**) when one of your characters does more than two things in succession. The serial comma is optional. Many newspapers don't use it. You just have to decide whether or not to use it and then stay consistent.

In the example below, Jane does three things. She rolls her eyes, crosses to the door, and lets Carolyn in. If you're going to use the serial comma, put it after **door**, before the conjunction **and**.

Jane rolls her eyes, crosses to the door<,> and lets Carolyn in.

Direct address

A comma is needed after **Hey** in the example below because of the rule of direct address. If you say, "Hey, Les" or "Hi, Les" or "Look, Les" or even "Shut up, Les," you need to use the direct address comma.

BRAD
Hey<,> Les. You got a minute?

Missing periods

It's easy to miss or accidentally delete punctuation marks like commas and periods. Your brain just seems to add missing punctuation marks as you're reading, and you don't notice they're missing. Try to catch all missing punctuation marks.

Missing periods weren't noticed in the examples below.

Lester turns around, smiling perfunctorily<.>

On VIDEO: We're looking through GREENHOUSE WINDOWS at Lester and Jane in the kitchen<.> We can't hear what they're saying, but it's obvious it's not going well.

Missing conjunction *and*

When one of your characters does two or more things in succession, you might need to use the conjunction **and**. **He dries his hands *and* tosses the towel on the counter.** The word **then** is not a conjunction. It's an adverb.

The use of **then** as a conjunction occurs frequently in the script for *American Beauty*. Adding **and** before **then** fixes the mistake.

In the examples below, the word **and** is needed.

Jane puts her plate in the dishwasher and leaves. We FOLLOW HER out the door, <and> then the camera JERKS back to Lester calling after her.

Lester turns off the faucet, dries his hands, <and> then tosses the towel on the counter on his way out, where it lands next to a framed PHOTOGRAPH of Lester, Carolyn, and a much-younger Jane, taken several years earlier at an amusement park.

Jane does so, surprised and intimidated by the power in his voice. Lester gets up, crosses to the other side of the table to get a PLATE OF ASPARAGUS, <and> then sits again as he serves himself.

In the example below, the writer correctly uses the words **and then**. A comma should be added after **page** because a comma and a conjunction should separate two sentences.

CLOSE on an ADDRESS BOOK: A man's hand flips to the H page<,> and then his finger stops at the name Angela Hayes.

Adverb at the beginning of a sentence

Adverbs can be placed almost anywhere in a sentence. Where you place an adverb depends on how important it is in your sentence, how much stress you want the adverb to have.

In the example below, the adverb **suddenly** is placed at the start of the sentence. This position in a sentence puts the stress on the adverb. Here are a couple of other ways the sentence could have been worded. **Angela suddenly looks right at us and smiles.** **Angela looks right at us suddenly and smiles.** In this case, **suddenly** seems to work best at the start of the sentence. Just remember that an adverb used this way should be followed by a comma.

His POV: Jane performs well, concentrating. Dancing awkwardly next to her is Angela. Suddenly<,> Angela looks right at us and smiles ... a lazy, insolent smile.

Clarity

Clarity is everything. If you use a pronoun to refer back to a character, be sure the reader can tell whom the pronoun refers to. Don't make the reader go back and reread to find the character's name.

In the example below, Jane speaks, Lester speaks, and then Carolyn speaks. But in the action after Carolyn's dialogue, the writer uses the pronoun **she**. Does **she** refer to Jane or Carolyn? Readers won't really know until they get to the word **parents**. For clarity, **she** should be replaced with **Jane**.

JANE
Oh shit, they're still here.

Her POV: Lester and Carolyn stand at the edge of the parking lot.

LESTER

Janie!

CAROLYN

Hi! I really enjoyed that!

She <Jane> crosses reluctantly toward her parents, followed by Angela.

Sense

In the example below, **and then** should be added for sense. This is because Ricky is essentially doing two things. First, he's smiling. Second, he's shutting and locking his door. As written: First, he's smiling. Second, he's shutting <something>. Third, he's locking his door.

He disappears down the hall. Ricky smiles, <and then> shuts and locks his door.

Or

He disappears down the hall. Ricky smiles; he shuts and locks his door.