

SELF-EDITING STRATEGIES FOR FICTION WRITERS

So you're writing a novel and thinking ahead to when it's complete, or maybe you've already finished it. You're thinking, *What's my next step after the writing is done?* As an author, you have multiple options:

- Write a query letter and/or proposal to send to agents or to publishers that accept manuscripts directly from authors.
- Prepare a proposal to present to agents/editors at a writers conference.
- Submit the manuscript to a subsidy publisher.
- Publish the book yourself through CreateSpace or a similar platform.
- Contract with a freelance editor to perform a content edit and/or copyedit.

No matter what you decide, before you do any of these, you should self-edit. No one knows your story as well as you do, and even if you don't have a degree in English or journalism (which is most people), you can learn to self-edit your writing. Gaining this ability takes some time and effort (like most everything that's worthwhile), but the time and money saved in the long run will far outweigh the work of self-editing.

SELF-EDITING AS A TIME (AND REPUTATION) SAVER

Self-editing saves you time by taking your writing to the next level. No matter whether you're presenting your manuscript to an agent or publisher, submitting it to a subsidy publisher, or sending it to a freelance editor, self-editing it first will work in your favor. If the manuscript is subpar, an agent or publisher will reject it (meaning you'd have to revise it to resubmit); a subsidy publisher may tell you it's not ready for publication; and even a freelance editor may suggest you read some writing craft books, revise the story, and resend it. Self-editing will also save you time (and possibly your reputation) if you're publishing on your own. Countless authors finish a book one day and self-publish it the next day, only to end up un-publishing it after the critical reviews start piling up. Having your manuscript in the best shape possible will save you time (and face) as a writer.

SELF-EDITING AS A MONEY SAVER

Time is money, so if self-editing saves you time, it's also saving you money. As well, if you're looking to contract with a freelance editor, self-editing is likely to affect the fee you pay. In most cases, the cleaner your manuscript is with regard to content and writing technique, the less money you'll end up paying for editing services. The same goes for if you're subsidy publishing and paying for one of the company's editors to edit your manuscript. Finally, self-editing can save you money if you're self-publishing. About a year ago, I talked with a writer who had self-published, bought one hundred copies of his book to sign and sell at different venues, and then within a few weeks un-published the book due to negative reviews. He was left with over \$400

worth of books that he didn't want anyone to read. Few people have money to burn—especially authors.

WHO NEEDS TO SELF-EDIT?

The short answer is *everyone*. The good news is that it's not as difficult as you might think. With the right tools, anyone can learn to self-edit—and that's what this class is going to teach you. So let's get started. We're going to look at two different kinds of editing—content editing and copyediting—as well as delve into novel formatting and some other important steps to take while you're writing and after your manuscript is finished.

THE CONTENT EDIT

STORY BEGINNING/FIRST CHAPTER

- Does the story open with a hook (a good first line that will catch the reader's attention and make him/her ask questions)?
- Does the chapter **not** begin with an overused plot device (e.g., a dream, a description of weather, a history dissertation, a drawn-out description of the setting)?
- Is the main character introduced in the first scene?
- Is the POV character (or characters, if there is more than one POV character) well introduced? By the end of the scene/chapter, does the reader:
 - know the POV character's name?
 - know the (approximate) age of the character?
 - have a reason to care about the character?
- Is the setting (i.e., time of day, time of year, place, and time period) clear?
- Does the inciting incident occur before the chapter's end (in most cases)?
- Is the main character's goal and motivation clear?
- Are other main characters introduced?
- If a flash-forward was used to start the story, does it compel the reader to keep turning the pages to find out how the character arrived at that point in action?
- Is there conflict/tension (internal and/or external)?
- Is backstory kept to a minimum?
- Does the chapter end with a strong hook that will compel the reader to keep reading?

SETTING

- Is the overall story setting so compelling that it can become a character (either supporting or antagonist) of its own?
- Is the setting appropriately researched and described?

CHARACTERS

- Are character names unique (i.e., do characters have names that aren't the same or too similar)?
- Are character names spelled consistently throughout the book?
- Are secondary characters appropriately introduced?
- Are there an appropriate number of characters (i.e., not too many characters for readers to keep straight)?
- Are there any characters that aren't necessary/could be omitted?
- Are character attributes (e.g., hair color, eye color, clothing) woven into the story instead of described in a list? Do physical attributes remain consistent throughout the story?

- Are the character voices distinct (POV characters and others)?
- Are the characters (especially the MC) likeable? Are the antagonists (and appropriate others) unlikable?
- Does each character's dialogue match his/her background and personality?
- Do secondary characters contribute to the protagonist's story?
- Do characters develop (become three-dimensional) throughout the story?
- Do characters change in believable ways as the story progresses?

POV

- Is the POV consistent throughout the scene (no head-hopping)?
- Is the scene written in the POV character's "voice"?
- Is there enough internal monologue to convey what the POV character is feeling but may not be saying?
- Is internal dialogue used sparingly?
- Is deep POV used?
- If first-person POV is used, have sentences beginning with "I" been kept as minimal as possible?

SCENES

- Does each scene move the plot along, introduce necessary information, or contain conflict?
- Is the passage of time between scenes clearly described?
- Is the POV quickly established?
- Does each scene pique interest?
- Is there a good balance of dialogue and narrative?
- Are the five senses (sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste) used?
- In each scene, is the place and the time of day quickly clear?
- In each scene, is the physical setting appropriately described?
- Does each scene have its own arc (is it like a mini-story)?
- Does each scene end with a hook and leave the reader hanging so he/she will want to keep reading?

PLOT

- Does the plot have the necessary ingredients?
- Is the plot believable—and bulletproof?
- Does the plot keep the reader's attention and impel him/her to continue reading?
- Is the plot goal obvious at the beginning of the story, and is it resolved at the end?
- Does each scene support the plot in some way?
- Is the main character continually faced with conflicts that force him/her to make difficult decisions?
- Do each of the conflicts complement the story purpose?

- Is the main character's goal and motivation clear and consistent throughout the story?
- Are subplots introduced, and are they also resolved at the end of the story? (in most cases—think series)
- Are all the loose ends tied up at the end of the story?
- Does the story end with a strong hook?
- Is there a happily(for the most part)-ever-after?

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THE COPYEDIT

WRITING TECHNIQUE

- Is dialogue and narrative balanced, and do both advance the plot?
- Are dialogue tags and action beats used effectively?
- Does the writing show instead of tell (in most cases)?
- Alternatively, has stage direction been avoided?
- Does the tense (past versus present) remain consistent throughout the narrative? (exception for use of internal dialogue in a past-tense narrative)
- Is backstory woven into the story instead of dumped all at once?
- Has over-explanation been avoided?
- Has the overuse of adjectives/adverbs been avoided?
- Have clichés, purple prose, and complex words/sentences been avoided?
- Have paragraphs been kept to a good (short) length?
- In Christian fiction, has “preaching” (in dialogue and in narrative) been avoided?
- Are subjects and verbs in agreement?
- Have weasel words been avoided? Weasel words include:
 - Weak “to be” verbs: is, are, was, were, had, had been
 - Superfluous words: that, very, just, really, rather, kind of/sort of, nearly/almost, quite, like, even, so, absolutely, usually, truly, totally, probably, actually, basically, extremely, mostly, naturally, often, particularly, started to/began to
 - “Telling” words: seemed, knew, thought, felt, wondered, mused
- Is punctuation used appropriately:
 - Exclamation point (!): Used to indicate yelling (in dialogue) or extreme emotion (in narrative). Don’t use more than one (!!), and don’t use it in conjunction with a question mark (!?).
 - Question mark (?): Used to punctuate a question. Don’t use more than one (??), and don’t use it in conjunction with an exclamation point (!!).
 - Em dash (—): Used in several ways, including to offset information, to show an interruption in speech, or to show a sudden break in thought.
 - Ellipses (...): Used to show trailing off of words (in dialogue) or of an idea (in narrative), or to show hesitation in dialogue.
- Semicolon: Used to connect two related independent clauses (complete sentences).

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AFTER THE BOOK IS FINISHED

- Set the story aside for at least a week, if not longer.
- Read the story aloud—and to up the stakes, read it to a spouse, friend, or even the dog (this ensures that you're not simply muttering along). Some computers also include a feature that will narrate for you.
- If you struggle with the punctuation/grammar aspect of writing, consider editing software (e.g., Word's Spelling/Grammar checker, Grammarly, ProWritingAid, AutoCrit, SmartEdit, etc.). Be sure to use it carefully.
- Find critique partners (in person, online, through ACFW—generally done before the book is finished, with most crit groups submitting one chapter per week) and beta readers (who can offer constructive criticism—generally done after the book is finished).

NOVEL FORMATTING

If you're targeting a specific agent/publisher, follow their formatting instructions. Otherwise:

- Use 1-inch margins all around.
- Add a header (above the margin) with the book title, author name, and page number (don't number the title page)
- Double space, and use a standard 12-point font: Times New Roman, Courier, Arial. Don't use fancy fonts or create a fancy layout.
- First page should be a title page including the book title, author contact information, word count, and genre.
- Start each chapter on its own page, about one-third of the way down the page.
- Don't use the tab key (use Word's automatic indent instead—indent 0.5 inches).
- Left-justify only (no right-justify).
- Separate scenes with either three asterisks (***) or hashmarks (###).

WRITER HELPS

BOOKS

Polishing the PUGs: Punctuation, Usage, Grammar, and Spelling, Kathy Ide

Self-Editing for Fiction Writers, Renni Browne & Dave King

Say What? The Fiction Writer's Guide to Grammar, Punctuation, and Word Usage, C. S. Lakin

The Emotion Thesaurus, Angela Ackerman

Rivet Your Readers with Deep Point of View, Jill Elizabeth Nelson

Writing the Breakout Novel, Donald Maass

The First Five Pages: A Writer's Guide to Staying Out of the Rejection Pile, Noah Lukeman

5 Editors Tackle the 12 Fatal Flaws of Fiction Writing, C. S. Lakin et. al

The Art and Craft of Writing Christian Fiction, Jeff Gerke

James Scott Bell's writing craft books

C. S. Lakin's writing craft books

K.M. Weiland's books on novel structure and outlining

WEBSITES

Advanced Fiction Writing (Randy Ingermanson) – www.ingermanson.com

Almost an Author – www.almostanauthor.com

Chuck Sambuchino's Website www.chucksambuchino.com

Helping Writers Become Authors – www.helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com

Jane Friedman's Website – www.janefriedman.com

Live Write Thrive – www.livewritethrive.com

Nathan Bransford's Blog – www.nathanbransford.com

Novel Rocket (Christian Fiction) – www.novelrocket.com

Rachelle Gardner's Website – www.rachellegardner.com

The Book Deal (Alan Rinzler) – www.alanrinzler.com

There Are No Rules Blog (Writer's Digest) – www.writersdigest.com/editor-blogs/there-are-no-rules

Writer's Digest Website – www.writersdigest.com

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