

✓ A Self-Editing Checklist for Writers

*(Compiled from advice posted by editors on the Ask a Book Editor Facebook Page. Definitely *not* edited for typos ... because I'm busy and editors are humans, too.)*

- ✓ Look at every choice your character makes and ask if their reasons for making that choice are clear, compelling and believable. No character should ever do something just to service the plot.
- ✓ Before you send your manuscript to your editor, run Word's Spellcheck. It's super dumb at times, but it does catch things. Double words like the the. Character name typos (use Ignore All, and if the name is flagged again, look carefully). Extra spaces. Commas in the wrong spot ,like this. I can always tell when someone hasn't run it.
- ✓ Check to make sure you don't change POV within a scene. It's okay to do if you've structured it well (chapter-by-chapter or scene-by-scene), but within scene it should be a single character's point of view, whether writing in third or first. Otherwise it makes things really confusing for the reader and it disrupts the flow of the story.
- ✓ Read it out loud (or set your computer functions to do it). This will help you catch some things where it may not make sense, a possible shift in POV, incorrect grammar choice, or places where it seems too slow. (E)
- ✓ Don't strive for perfection in your first draft. Only minimal editing allowed! Listen to your Muse, let the words flow, get it all on paper. Then take a tropical vacation. Give your brain a break. Let your perspective settle in. When you come back, you'll be ready to revise and edit like a beast!
- ✓ Make sure your sentences aren't all starting with the same word.
- ✓ Watch out for inadvertent changes in tense. It's fine to change tense if it's planned but must be handled with care.
- ✓ Learn how to punctuate dialogue, and the difference between a dialogue tag and an action beat. (<http://melaniecard.com/for-writers/dialogue-tags-vs-descriptive-beats/>)
- ✓ Look for repetitive words and sentence structure. Variety brings rhythm and texture to writing.
- ✓ Make a style sheet for yourself. It will make self-editing so much easier if you make decisions and stick to them. Include a character sheet too.
- ✓ As Hemingway said, write drunk, edit sober.
- ✓ Show don't tell and let the reader fill in the minutiae.
- ✓ Acquire software like "SmartEdit" and "PerfectIt" to run through your manuscript and catch errors. They do not replace a flesh and blood editor, but they can catch a lot of niggly errors and small things so that an editor is freed up to focus on bigger issues. Also, while you're at it, put copulas (to-be verbs) and "that" into the lists SmartEdit has to help you find them and remove them when possible. Copulas are often indicative of telling and passivity. "That" often sneaks in uninvited and is often unnecessary and can damage pacing by making sentences wordier than necessary.
- ✓ Study the difference between "that" and "which"--it will save you a headache later!
- ✓ Cull out laundry-list descriptions of characters or scenes when possible. Laundry list descriptions are long strings of adjectives or description of a character or place. (The big, bright, blue sky was dotted with huge, white, fluffy cumulus clouds with billowing tops and dark bottoms.)

- ✓ I'd totally recommend PerfectIt especially to fantasy authors or anyone else who might deal with a lot of capitalisation - it will highlight when you've written Dragon Knights/dragon knights/dragon-knights so you can decide which one you actually want.
- ✓ Review your dialogue, read it out loud, check that it sounds natural. Don't have your characters refer to one another *by name* too much (we don't do this in real life). But also don't try to write out real-life speech: Eradicate as many wells, ohs, ums, uhs etc. as you can.
- ✓ I tend to find that less is more. In first draft my characters talk too much. 'On the nose' dialogue where the characters tell the reader what's happening is sort of embarrassing to read. Sub text can be achieved through action.
- ✓ In addition to making a style sheet, like [Sara](#) suggested, make a calendar for your story. You can just create a new calendar in Google Calendar or iCal or whatever you're using, or print out some blank calendar sheets. Keep track of when your scenes are taking place and anytime you mention something involving time. Be sure to note holidays and other important days, too! I almost *always* find an error in timeline when editing. Examples: Mentioning four weeks until Christmas at the beginning of the book, and then having six weeks of scenes. Starting your book's action in November and not having an all-American family with a big family celebrate or even mention Thanksgiving. A very religious churchgoing Christian family doesn't go to church on Sunday. Having six or eight or twelve weekdays in a row when people go off to an office job, without thinking about weekends.
- ✓ Not really "something you should be looking for when revising", but, if I'm allowed to subvert the thread slightly, a vital precursor to that process:
You need to get some objective distance between you and the book. You wrote it *as an author*. You're revising it *as a reader*. It's really hard, obviously, to completely forget that it's your book (that's why people hire editors), but you can get some objectivity in a number of ways:
Put the book away for a month, three months, six months if you can bear it. When you come back to it, you'll notice all sorts of clumsy sentences and dramatic non-sequiturs that you'll wonder how you missed before.
Edit it in a different format to how you wrote it. This could be listening to it instead of reading it (which others have mentioned above), editing a paper copy instead of on-screen, using a different computer, even something as simple as changing the font to an unfamiliar one, or sitting in a different chair in a different room. All of these will trick your brain in to thinking that the text in front of you is unfamiliar, and therefore you'll hopefully read it with the same eye as some overly pedantic Amazon reviewer. 😊
- ✓ Using 'that' far too often. Using 'then' as a conjunction. Using unnecessary qualifiers: 'really', 'quite', 'slightly' etc.. Learn the proper use of commas.
- ✓ Using flowery dialogue tags. Forgetting that the reader does not know your world and sometimes you have to explain it to them.
- ✓ Take out all the looks, feels, sees, thinks, watches, touches, and started and vegans. Replace them with the actual actions. I felt scared. I was scared. I saw Jim leave. Jim left.
- ✓ Does each scene reveal something about your characters or move the story forward? If not, cut it out. Be ruthless. You can always save it for a different book.

- ✓ Are your main characters likable? Are your romantic interests full of chemistry? Are your antagonists obviously evil from the beginning, complex, or a surprise betrayal? Do they function in the story like you intended?
- ✓ Check and double check every story arc. Is every one resolved? Is there clear conflict for each story line? Are the stakes high enough to provide the necessary tension?
- ✓ Probably the most common problem I see with new authors is writing one big, epic story, breaking it into thirds, and calling it a series. This is fatal to your reputation as an author. Each book must stand alone and resolve its own conflict. If it does not, your readers will feel cheated, and your books will frustrate people instead of satisfying them. A series is a collection of complete stories in the same world with the same (or related) characters; it's not just the beginning, middle, and end of one story.
- ✓ Check for consistency in character and place names (i.e., create a style sheet with this as the first element).
- ✓ Look at physical action within dialogue runs. Does it advance character or story? If it's there merely as a pause between words, lose it.
- ✓ Don't use tools that "improve" your writing by helping you spot and remove passive voice and too many adverbs, adjectives, etc. They'll mess your writing up.
- ✓ Don't sacrifice a natural storytelling voice to being "correct" the way your seventh grade English teacher wanted you to be correct. Too many Miss Thistlebottomisms and zombie rules are hiding behind the shrubbery to ambush your lively writing and turn it to pap. Resist! (Don't resist good advice from your editor later, but resist the temptation to overcorrect yourself now.)
- ✓ Stay away from using similar-sounding names in a story (another person asked a question and had two characters named Lily and Lia.) My personal preference is actually to stay away from using the same first letter completely and also to make the names sound different. (So out of Lily and Lia, maybe one can become Jennifer or something.)
- ✓ ADVERBS. Search for words ending with 'LY' and most of them can be removed. Minimize use of these.
- ✓ Ask yourself how realistic your dialogue sounds. If one character speaks for a long time without a break, and that character isn't supposed to be a conversation hog, consider having the other character break in. For expository dialogue, are characters telling each other things they already know? Does the information they're conveying fit comfortably within the rest of the dialogue, or does it come across as a non sequitur?
- ✓ Really study the comma rules of CMOS before tackling your editing. Take some tests online if you need to so you have a clear picture of how commas work. Comma errors are the vast majority of corrections needed in a manuscript.
- ✓ And developmentally, make sure you have some action within your dialogue. Straight dialogue sections with no movement or body language is like the screen going black while you are watching a movie. (E)
- ✓ On top of all the suggestions to remove "that" when unnecessary, please leave them in when they are.
- ✓ No manual tabs or double spacing.
- ✓ I caution against the overuse of "as." As he opened the door he found her sitting on the couch smiling as she ate crackers. It's peevy, but I've found replacing or removing "as" strengthens the sentence.

- ✓ Objectively check every single pronoun to make sure no reader will stumble in quickly and correctly connecting that pronoun to the right noun. Please study and understand pronoun antecedents.
- ✓ Other weasel words to watch out for are 'just' and 'actually'. We all say these all the time, but they don't need to crop up quite so often in your novel...
- ✓ Narration can often contain a lot of “looking” and “turning” instances. To keep these default verbs from getting repetitive, try to replace these actions with something stronger and more original.

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