Self-Editing Tips for Writers

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Your book is written! Congratulations! You have a beginning, a middle, and a climax, within your genre-specific wordcount. You have poked at proofing a here and there, but you never let it bog you down. You officially have your **F I R S T D R A F T.**

Susie's first draft sat on the cluttered desk, aglow with promise and typos.

Now is the time for SELF-EDITING. Let us begin.

1. Declutter: look for places you are overwriting. Say it once – effectively – and move along. **Eliminate adverbs** everywhere you can and beef up those verbs instead.

> **Tony smiled reflexively, but this time, it was only skin deep.** (cliché! See #4!)
> OR
> **Tony smiled but didn't mean it.** *(From 11 words to 6)*

> **Inside, he was still anxious and he reminded himself repeatedly that according to the Lord, he should worry about nothing.**
> OR
> **As anxious as before, he reminded himself that Jesus said he should worry for nothing.**

2. Eliminate Passive Voice – Weed out "to be" verbs. Look for *was* and *were* and see if you can rewrite to make the sentence more active. The simplest way to explain this is you want your action to be ACTIVE:

> **Julie was trying to climb the rope, but it seemed to be covered with oil.** (15 words)

> BETTER: **Julie attempted to climb to rope, but it <u>was slick</u> with oil.** (12)

> BEST: **Julie could not climb the slick rope.** (7)

3. Remove Words Editors Hate - Search for "just" and "seems/seem/seemed" in your document. 99% of the time, **these words weaken action and clarity.** Take your time. Search for the term "just" in your manuscript and fix those. Then search "seem, seemed, seems" one by one and do your best to turn them from passive to active. Now, search "knew," as in "he knew," "she knew," "they knew," etc. (The POV character *knows*, so don't overwrite and say so.)

> **Harry knew the choir practiced late into the night, so he told the ladies to be careful walking to their cars if it happened again.**
> OR
> **The choir often practiced late into night, so Harry told the ladies to use caution walking to their cars.**

4. **Eliminate clichés.** Make sure your language isn't trite. If you've heard it said before, it's probably a cliché.

Hot as hell, Cool as a cucumber, hit you where the sun don't shine, dumb as a box of rocks…

5. **Check your Flow** to tighten the book's language and strengthen the narrative. We do this with **Show, don't tell.** (use word pictures, not describing directly. This way the reader will imagine the scene vividly.). Ex. Your character is sad. Don't say, **Kelly was sad.** Instead, **Kelly lowered her chin with a sigh.** *Instead of telling, show what sad looks like.*

6. **Eliminate Redundancies.** Are you repeating yourself without meaning to? Some writers lean too heavily on certain turns of phrase. Some of my personal ones, *adoring gaze, bit her lip, tucked her cheek.* The secret is to use a phrase once and after that, find a new way to say it. **Also, keep an eye out for tautologies**, phrases that unnecessarily repeat themselves, such as *baby kitten, future predictions, little child, dilapidated ruins.*

7. **Pace Action and Rest Periods -** If you have twelve pages of intense action (or exposition), the reader can grow weary. Break it up. Think of when you watch a movie—the action is intense, and then the scene switches to another character involved in a slow-paced activity. Balancing this is a skill you can learn.

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8. **Clean-Up your Dialogue** – good dialog moves the plot along. Bad dialog causes the reader to cringe and skip/skim pages. Reading it aloud is a fine way to test it. If it makes you roll your eyes, the reader will, too. Also, **eliminate excess dialogue tags (attributions).** If it is evident who is speaking, do not tag. Move along.

Kelly leapt to her feet. "I won't do it!"
"You will," Billy countered.
"I will NOT!"
"I said you WILL!"
"You're impossible!" Kelly barked and left the room.

9. **Remove Adverbs from Your Dialogue Tags -** We all do it, but no editor likes it.

"Stop looking at me," he whispered shyly from the stairwell.
"But you're so handsome," she cooed coyly, batting her eyelashes.

Kelly sewed Bill's button, all the while wondering if she'd have time after dinner to work on her novel.

*NOTE: Some editors are adamant that the only dialogue tag you should ever use is "said," and not descriptive ones, such as, "whispered," "barked," "cooed," etc. Other editor's feel that the delicate and artistic use of these rounds out the reader's mind-movie. Use with caution and when seeking traditional publication, err on the side of industry standard (or ask the editor).

10. Punctuation – The rules of grammar and punctuation are sacrosanct to editors. That said, some contemporary editors allow variations with the caveat that you perform the variation the same way throughout the entire manuscript. I call this, "I did that on purpose," and "If it is done incorrectly throughout the book then it becomes correct. I do not work this way but have been in the business long enough to know the trend is growing. As stated earlier, use the industry standard. If the editor wants to water down the rules, let him/her do it. Not you!

Here it is, your **S E C O N D   D R A F T !**

Now you can begin editing and proofreading the entire document.

You will have "read it all the way through" on your computer many times by now. You still have errors and foibles because this is your creation and your brain fills in words as you read. Here are ways to find mistakes that your brain cannot see.

1. Print a physical copy of the book. Grab your red pen and get comfortable. Use the pen to jot corrections, suggestions, and cross-out junk you hate and wonder why you included it. When you've done the entire book, go to your working copy and make the changes. (Rename your drafts, periodically or a lot; this way if you ever wish you had a previous version of a scene, it is there in the pile somewhere!)

2. Read it aloud. This can be done with the printed version above. You will be amazed at the errors of word-flow and clarity discovered when reading it aloud. Make notes of your changes and when finished, put them in your digital working copy.

3. Let a device read it aloud.
KindleFire – this Kindle will read Word docs that you email to its address. Let this AI voice read your entire book. When you hear an error, pause it and then by pressing your finger over the word, the device allows you to make a note to yourself or highlight to come back later. This is my very favorite way to edit because I can be driving and listen, working out, walking, or simply playing solitaire and the book reads to me, revealing errors. (It does not reveal punctuation errors, so remember that is done by your eyes.)

ReadAloud – downloaded for free from the Microsoft Store, this allows you to upload a word doc or PDF and it will read it for you. If you search the internet for "read my document aloud," you can find more programs of varying aid.

4. Enlist a trusted friend - Print it out again and this time, hand it over to a trusted friend or family member who has agreed to help you by reading it and marking errors. This should be

someone who will encourage you. **Note: This is not critique time,** so use only someone who wants you to succeed. This person can correct you (as in, I don't think a paramedic would say that), but at this point and for this purpose, do not use anyone who delivers negative and hurtful feedback. **Make all fixes.** Take back the copy or copies that you handed out for editing, fix all of them on your master document.

5. As always, keep learning to improve your writing.

- study the craft of writing by reading reference materials from experts
- attend writer's workshops
- join writer's groups
- read bestsellers in your genre
- read poetry

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SOME OF MY FAVORITE WRITING HELPS:

EATS, SHOOTS & LEAVES by Lynne Truss (punctuation primer with history of the language, the way it is headed, and humor)

THE PLOT THICKENS 8 Ways to Bring Fiction to Life by Noah Lukeman (fiction writers PURCHASE NOW!)

KEYS FOR WRITERS by Ann Raimes (everything you need to know about writing and punctuation in a very friendly format)

WRITING TOOLS 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer by Roy Peter Clark (invaluable for fiction and non-fiction writers)

SELF-EDITING FOR FICTION WRITERS, SECOND EDITION: HOW TO EDIT YOURSELF INTO PRINT Renni Browne and Dave King, William Morrow Pub.

Some ideas for this teaching were gleaned from https://www.autocrit.com/ and www.writing-bytes.com.

EXERCISES

In the example below, the first draft had 68 words. The author is trying to convey the character's trepidation concerning awaking with his bedroom on fire. BETTER shows how she got the message across more succinctly, making word pictures that do not clutter the reader's mind-movie. *By the way, read the editor's suggestions in the bubbles—they are gold for every writer of fiction!*

He crawled weakly for the shimmering image of the exit before him. It seemed to glow with unnatural appeal. The dark age-stained doors attracted the priest as sure as a moth to a flame and he knew that an angel of the Lord must be showing him the way out. He knew with his entire being that the heavenly hosts were actually rescuing him from a fiery death. (68)

BETTER:

He crawled for the shimmering image of the exit. The brass door handles glowed with unnatural appeal. A spark of hope flared as the priest peered into a fluid vision of haze and shadow. (34)

Comment [ecm1]: PASSIVE, do not use "seemed" or "seems"

Comment [ecm2]: CLICHÉ, do not use clichés

Comment [ecm3]: DO NOT end a sentence on a preposition or adverb unless you simply must do so.

Comment [ecm4]: The character under scrutiny right now is the only one with a POV, so don't say "he/she KNEW" anything, it is understood WHO knows what you're saying at the time.

Comment [ecm5]: PASSIVE and just icky.