



Tips for Self-Editing Your Fiction

I've put together the following tips sheet to help you make your manuscript one that I Publish Press would be happy to publish.

I've broken it down into three sections covering three different levels of editing, all of which are indispensable. The first section deals with Style—those fundamentals that make a novel or short story more enjoyable to read than a cereal box or car manual. The second section deals with the Mechanics of a good manuscript—the nitty gritty details that separate a sloppy amateur from a careful professional. The third section addresses Formatting—the elements that make the manuscript ready for reading and for being laid out in book format.

I recommend editing for Style first, then for Mechanics, and finally for Formatting.

I. Style

A. *Show, Don't Tell*

Make sure that:

- ✓ you don't have long expositional passages about how characters are feeling or reacting
- ✓ you don't have long, narrative explanations about events that occurred before the action of the story
- ✓ when the story can be told through action or dialogue, you're not telling it via narration.
- ✓ you don't have any passages that go overboard with 'showing' and end up explaining the action with exhaustive detail

B. *Vocabulary & Syntax*

Make sure that:

- ✓ you are using a variety of words and phrases, not the same stock of words over and over again
- ✓ you haven't overused your thesaurus; in other words, be careful about using many obscure or over-inflated words when simpler ones will do just as well
- ✓ you've maintained a distinctive and consistent voice for the narrator and for each character
- ✓ you haven't used words that you don't know the meaning of; look up in a good dictionary even common words to ensure you've understood their subtle connotations
- ✓ you have been careful and deliberate about every word you have used
- ✓ you've used proper terminology or jargon for the situation, setting, or character; if the reader has to look something up in the dictionary, that's okay
- ✓ you're not employing the same syntax for all of your sentences
- ✓ you haven't used unnatural syntax, especially for figures of speech, except by design

C. Point of View

Make sure that:

- ✓ you've used the point of view which best serves the telling of the story
- ✓ you use point of view consistently: a third-person narration with an obvious focus on one character shouldn't abruptly jump into the minds of other ones for a sentence or two in a haphazard way
- ✓ a first-person narrator isn't knowledgeable about things impossible for them to be aware of
- ✓ you've treated internal monologue consistently whether paraphrased or reported by the narrator; in the character's own voice and treated as dialogue without quotation marks; or in italics

D. Verb Tense

Make sure that:

- ✓ you've written consistently in the tense you've chosen (i.e. narration shouldn't jump from past tense to present tense to relate events that take place at the same time)
- ✓ you've followed the sequence of tenses: if narration is in past tense, things that happened before the action of the story should be in past perfect

E. Dialogue

Make sure that:

- ✓ your dialogue is realistic, not stilted or overly formal
- ✓ your dialogue is appropriate for the characters given their educational backgrounds, upbringing, and context
- ✓ you've let dialogue speak for itself without use of a multitude of unsubtle dialogue tags
- ✓ your dialogue is proper to the setting without use of anachronistic slang or regionalisms
- ✓ you've been extremely careful when writing in dialect or accents (or avoided doing so altogether!)

F. Redundancy

Make sure that:

- ✓ you've removed all the redundancy that you can; generally you only need to say things once (if you show, you don't need to tell also; if the reader has the message, move on)
- ✓ you've removed all the redundancy that you can (did you think you've just done that? do it again; look for repetition at every level: chapters, paragraphs, sentences, words)

G. Rhyme, Alliteration, Parallelism

Make sure that:

- ✓ you read your manuscript aloud to ensure any rhyming or alliteration is

- ✓ deliberate and the rhythm is smooth
- ✓ there are no broken parallelisms or busted series

H. Sentence Length

Make sure that:

- ✓ you're using a variety of sentence length: if all your sentences are short, it will sound like a first-grade primer; if they are all long, it will seem like mountain-climbing
- ✓ that the length of the sentences correspond with the mood of passage: shorter sentences can increase tension while longer ones slow down the action and give time for contemplation

I. Reality & Consistency

Make sure that:

- ✓ descriptions and actions are realistic and true to the time and setting (even one that you've created yourself)
- ✓ actions are possible given the laws of physics as we know them (or given the laws of physics as you've determined for the world in which the story takes place)
- ✓ there is a consistency of description of setting and characters throughout the manuscript from beginning to end

J. Paragraphing

Make sure that:

- ✓ your paragraphs aren't too long (if your paragraphs run consistently to three-quarters of a page or more, that's too long)
- ✓ you don't have too many very short paragraphs (i.e. don't think that every sentence needs its own paragraph)
- ✓ each paragraph contains a single dialogue-and-action segment (i.e. a character's speech and their action surrounding that speech should be together; one character's dialogue-and-action can extend over more than one paragraph; more than one character's dialogue-and-action can be included in a single paragraph as long as the dialogue-and-action of the two characters are so closely related that it forms a single conceptual whole)

K. Clarity

Make sure that:

- ✓ what you say in the text is enough for the reader to follow what's going on, and to understand everything you've said by the time they get to the end of the book—remember, the reader will not have you standing over their shoulder to clarify things for them
- ✓ every sentence is unambiguous—that the reader knows who is speaking to whom and what action is happening when

II. Mechanics

A. Spelling

Your word processor's spellchecker is not a substitute for a dictionary, so you must do a manual reading of your draft to check for spelling errors. Use the same dictionary as your publisher. (I Publish Press uses Merriam-Webster's Collegiate 10th edition for American spelling, the Canadian Oxford 2nd edition for Canadian spelling, and the Oxford English for British spelling.)

- ✓ look up every word that you are not 100% sure of
- ✓ beware of homophones and mondegreens
- ✓ hyphenate compounds according to the policy of the dictionary
- ✓ capitalize proper nouns, use lower case for everything else
- ✓ be consistent by choosing one of either American, Canadian, British, or Australian spelling

B. Fact-Checking

Proceed as if the most influential reviewer of your book will know the factual elements contained within it better than you do. Do your research and don't be lazy. Check and then double-check:

- ✓ names of people, places, and things
- ✓ titles of people, works of art, and events
- ✓ historical facts
- ✓ geographical details, including street names, travel times, terrain, directions, buildings, views
- ✓ for appropriate flora and fauna for the setting
- ✓ for appropriate distances for the action described
- ✓ for anachronisms
- ✓ for physical possibility
- ✓ accuracy and attribution of quoted material

C. Grammar

Make sure that:

- ✓ subjects and verbs are in agreement with respect to both number and person
- ✓ you haven't any misplaced modifiers
- ✓ you don't have any dangling modifiers
- ✓ you've used apostrophes to indicate possession or elision, not to indicate plurals (there are a *very* few exceptions to this rule); and that you haven't used 'its' when you meant to say 'it's' or vice versa
- ✓ you haven't used 'of' instead of 'have' with verbs such as 'would have', 'could have', 'should have'
- ✓ you haven't got a profusion of pronouns without antecedents
- ✓ you've used commas where you need them and not where you don't
- ✓ you haven't fallen into the trap of hypercorrection (i.e. making something more grammatically correct than the situation calls for)

D. Usage

Watch out for usage pitfalls, making sure that:

- ✓ you've used 'that' for restrictive clauses and 'which' for non-restrictive clauses (unless using British English)
- ✓ you have not confused verbs 'to lie' and 'to lay'
- ✓ you have not qualified absolutes such as unique or impossible
- ✓ you haven't any ambiguous pronouns or pronouns without antecedents
- ✓ you haven't used 'you' as an indefinite pronoun
- ✓ you have used 'that' to begin subordinate clauses when necessary in order to avoid misreadings
- ✓ when making comparisons you've compared like things to like

III. Formatting

- ✓ use paragraph styles not tabs or spaces to indent your paragraphs
- ✓ be spare in the use of fancy fonts or typographic bells and whistles
- ✓ use italics for emphasis only when the emphasis could otherwise be misplaced to a degree that the meaning of the word or sentence is lost
- ✓ use ellipses only when trailing off, when indicating something is missing, or during faltering speech; don't use ellipses in place of periods
- ✓ only one space (not two) should follow end punctuation
- ✓ use em dashes to indicate interruption or a strong break within a sentence
- ✓ use quotation marks to indicate spoken dialogue