

Editing Your Novel
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Basic Principles:

- I. Do things that make you want to come back and edit some more (You cannot edit an entire 50,000+ word novel in one sitting, so you need to set it up so that you're willing to come back again and again and again.)
- II. You don't have to fix everything on one pass.
- III. Do things that make your novel better with each pass.
- IV. Keep working until you're happy with the finished result.
- V. Think about getting outside input—Critiquecircle.com, Journey Story Walls, other stuff.

Disclaimer: I'm not a writing teacher, nor a best-selling author. But I have edited a NaNoWriMo book every year for eight years in a row. (And other books as well.) And I enjoy editing. I do my plot work before I write, so if you know your plot has huge holes, or doesn't make sense, or the flow is all off, that's more rewriting than editing. Go read stuff on how to plot, and take care of that before getting into editing.

Plot/Character Arcs/Pacing/Theme/Etc.

There are a lot of good ideas to make your story better. Read books, read articles. Read good books and see what makes them good, but always keep in mind item number I of the basic principles. (Do things that make you want to come back and edit some more.) Don't do things that make you give up in despair. If you do that too often, you will never finish editing your novel.

Stuff that works for me.

- a) Run spell-check before printing anything or going over it too much.
- b) Use my Kindle to read through stuff early, and when it's getting close to complete.
- c) Globally get rid of really 'bad words' even if it makes for incomplete sentences. Words like: just, really, very, still. These words aren't bad, in and of themselves, but I know that I overuse them, so after finishing my first draft, I boldly remove them all—and have to put a few back, but not many. Others I go through and remove 85% of them.
- d) Get rid of other 'bad words' (like ly words, up, was, had, etc. (See appendix A) while watching brainless television so I can give the right amount of attention to my novel without becoming bored with the changes.
- e) Improve the first paragraph or two of each chapter (so I'm more inclined to read more.) Make sure I know who is in the scene, where they are, and have them DO something. Reading one or two paragraphs out loud to another person really helps.
- f) Label each chapter with the date and keep these until at least the third draft. So it's easy to be consistent when adding new scenes or moving things around.
- g) Write new scenes, transitions, or anything over 50 words when I'm fresh, not after doing brainless editing. And only after reading the next scene or two so I'm sure I haven't already written it.
- h) Have a daily (or weekly) goal that gets me through the entire novel in a few weeks. It's easier to find plot problems if I don't take too much time to get through the novel.
- i) Know that I'm going to re-edit so I don't have to have it perfect on this pass.
- j) Put chapters up on critiquecircle.com so I get other people's feedback and am motivated to keep progressing on the novel.
- k) Going through the novel twice, then taking a break before coming back for another round or two.
- l) Getting feedback from other people on the complete novel before doing a final polish.
- m) Doing the first revision (or two) online so it's easy to move things around as needed, and to change character names, and do global replace when I realize I used 'stood up' and it could just be stood.
- n) After a couple of edit passes, printing out the novel a few chapters at a time (although I now use my Kindle for this and avoid wasting paper) and marking it up (or making notes on a piece of paper) while walking or biking on the exercise bike, then making the corrections while watching brainless television. (i.e. not a really exciting movie). (Don't print the whole thing out in case you change the character's name, occupation, or something else fairly major.)
- o) Adding specific sensory details, especially using senses other than sight.
- p) Adding to the 'bad word' list (can start with the list of someone else, but after a while you'll know what your own repetitive words are.)

Advice other people give, that I don't follow:

- A) Take a long time off before looking at your novel. (A couple of weeks is plenty for me.)
- B) Read the book through from start to finish without making any changes. (Maybe if it's been years since you've written it, but even then, I prefer to make at least a few changes while reading it.)
- C) Spend time outlining the plot after you've written it. I do it before, or while editing. I find it incredibly boring to focus on just the plot after I've written the book, plus, it takes me a couple of reads to be willing to do radical surgery on a book—and often someone else's opinion before I'm willing to do that. Note, I'm not saying that your plot doesn't need to make sense, just that if I try to start with that, I'd find it much more difficult to edit the book. If you know your plot has problems, then fix that, but that's more rewriting than editing, I think.
- D) Don't worry about grammar and typos until you're doing the final edit. I prefer to read stuff that flows so I fix every error that I see as soon as I see it. I run spell-check frequently since it makes it easier to keep working on the novel if there aren't obvious errors in it.
- E) Save every word you've ever written because you never know when it will be useful. Actually, trying to save multiple copies of a scene just clutters your brain. I make a copy of it early on, and while I make backups constantly, I delete the older versions of these. If I do major character changes, I **may** save a copy, but I've never found them useful later. I prefer to just think about the words I have in the best version of the novel I have, not save an earlier copy 'just in case.' If I delete something that was brilliant, and belongs in the novel, I trust that I'll just write it back in.

Details on Editing

Set up a schedule.

- When do you want to be done? (if you don't know, then pick June 1st for the CreateSpace offer)
- How many passes do you want to do? (If you don't know say two, and the second pass should be quicker, so 1 month for that.)
- So, you want to finish a thorough edit by May 1st.
- Count how many weeks between now and May 1st? (As of March 1st, there are just over 8. So count it as 8 (always undercount so you have extra time in case you need it.)
- If your novel is 300 pages, you'd need to do 40 pages a week, if it's 400, then you need to do 50 pages a week.
- Aim to do ten pages a day. (So you can miss some days and stay on schedule.)

Revise the first 10 pages:

- Just do it.
- If you really can't, then just write the word HERE on page 11 and take a nap with the computer nearby. Don't do other stuff, just sit in a chair doing nothing as long as it would have taken you to revise ten pages. The idea is do NOT reward yourself for not editing except by doing nothing which if it doesn't get boring means you're too tired or stressed so need a nap.
- If you want detailed ideas for the first ten pages, read the next section.

Revising 10 pages a day – requires revising those 10 pages two times in one day.

1. Start where you have the word HERE. (Go back a page if you're in the middle of a scene and can't figure out what is going on.)
2. Read through the words on the page, fixing anything that jumps out at you. Continue until you get to ten pages (or continue on until the next scene break if you want to do more than 10, but don't do less.) This can be grammar, word choice, not sure who is talking, not sure where they are, need a transition between scenes, need to identify who is in the scene, need description, too much description, anything that causes the story to be unclear. Fix that stuff here, but don't get bogged down in it. Where you know you need something else, but are getting stuck, write ADD: X (where X can be transition, brilliant line, action, etc.) and move on. You want to get all the way through your 10 pages at one sitting.
3. Take a break if you need it. (If you want to create an outline or work on plot, summarize what happens in today's scene(s). Either in a separate file or on index cards, not in the novel itself.)
4. Go back to where you have the word HERE. Make sure it is clear whose POV the entire scene is in. (If you're not sure the scene is in the right POV, think about it a bit, then change it if you're pretty sure you'd like it better in another POV.)
5. Make sure you know who is in the scene and where it is taking place.
6. Make sure the major characters have a clear goal for each scene. Have their goals be at odds with other character's goals.
7. Make some action happen.
8. Have the characters do stuff while talking. (People rarely just talk. They talk while—buying groceries, eating dinner, getting dressed, carving up aliens, etc.)
9. Remove every “he commented”, “he remarked”, “he explained”—anything but said and asked stands out in a bad way. You can occasionally have a “he shouted”, or “he whispered”, but not too many.
10. Change words, sentences, paragraphs, whatever the writing needs. (There are tons of books on what to do, and how to do it.)
11. When you notice an inconsistency, or suspect there may be one, either make a note to check later that you used the same name, occupation, day of the week, or go check it right now. (You can always look for the word HERE and start over after you straighten out the inconsistency.)
12. Try to vary your paragraph beginnings. Too many Subject-Verb, Subject-Verb gets boring. Too many paragraphs that start with description is totally boring.
13. Continue until you have 10 pages that you are keeping. (Just deleting an entire chapter doesn't count as revising 10 pages, although it does give you less work overall.)
14. When you get to the 10th page (or the next scene after the 10th page) Write HERE.
15. If you want to make a third pass (say when you had to add a lot of material, or cut a bunch), go back to the beginning HERE and read through and revise again, trying to further smooth out the writing.
16. Once you've been through the 10 pages two (or three) times, go back and remove the earlier HERE.
17. If you want to do more editing, go back over earlier stuff (Like any older ADD: X) or work on global issues (like bad words), but don't push yourself to do more than your goal number of pages. Otherwise, it will be harder to make yourself edit tomorrow (or easier to let yourself not edit).

Things to look at after you've gone through it thoroughly at least once:

1. Make sure your characters sound different when they talk. One way to do this is to take a chapter and highlight each character's speech with different colored markers. Read it out loud (without tags or 'he said', 'she said') and if you can't tell who is talking, change it.
2. Smooth out any rough transitions. (Things like, 'meanwhile, back at the ranch' or '* * *' to skip around.)
3. Did you describe your characters enough so the reader can tell them apart?
4. Make sure the characters have names that are distinctive- not Marty & Mary, or John & Jordan. Try to use different starting letters for the names of the main characters. Think about where your characters are from, and maybe you want some diversity.
5. If you have introduced a lot of characters in the first chapter, go back and avoid using too many names. (The reader won't keep them straight anyway.)
6. Did you start your book with backstory? If so, move the offending chapters to another file and start your book with chapter two or three.
7. Are there any chapters or scenes that add nothing to the book? If so, delete them.
8. Are your chapter beginnings interesting? If not, change them.
9. Do most chapter endings make the reader want to keep reading?
10. Is the ending satisfactory and have you tied up all the loose ends?
11. Are there too many characters? Then combine two into one. (This can make the book stronger, and isn't as disruptive as you may fear.)
12. Is a character not consistent? Maybe the character is really two—one who gives bad advice and one who gives good? Or one who shared part of the past with the MC, and one who is focused on the present.

Editing the Beginnings of Chapters (Something else to try)

- a) find a partner (either live or online) and exchange the first 100-250 words of each chapter with that person. Offer detailed feedback to the other person. (Who does the same for you.) Revise. Resend the first 100-250 words. Repeat another time if more is changing. Work on the who, what, where of the scene with sensory details.
- b) once done with the beginning of the first chapter, move on to the beginning of the next one. You'll be surprised at how much you'll know about the novel even though you've only read the beginning of each other's chapters.
- c) Keep this up for ten or more chapters, doing 1-2 beginnings per session.

Katherine's Bad Word List

(Nothing wrong with using these words some, but these are words I overuse.)

still

just

really

very

But

ly words

realized that

going to

starting to

beginning to

start

begin

felt her

lots of

at least

merely

a few of

about – (can't get rid of most, but can reword)

that – can't get rid of all, but some

silly

noticed

looked

glanced

shrugged

yet

So,

back

to get

a bit

right