

REPPING YOUR MANUSCRIPT FOR SUBMISSION

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You only get one chance to make a good first impression. Before submitting that manuscript to a prospective agent or editor, make sure it's the best that it can be, using these revision, editing, and proofreading tips from a multi-published author/editor.

WHAT YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND ABOUT REVISION, EDITING AND POLISHING (REP):

1. It's a necessary part of the writing process, whether you do it yourself or hire someone else to do it for you. Agents and publishers will expect you to have performed these activities before submitting the manuscript for consideration. In other words, they'll be assuming that what you've sent them is your very best version of the text. Even multi-published professional authors have to go through this post-writing process.
2. It engages the left side of your brain – is critical rather than creative.
 - left and right brains speak different languages: verbal vs visual. It's why they're so often at odds.
3. Revision, editing and proofreading are three separate steps in the post-writing process.
 - Revision – rereading up to several times to test for and correct weaknesses in the characterization, conflict, plot, setting, style
 - Editing – rereading up to several times to tighten your writing and improve its clarity, emphasis, and coherence (flow)
 - Proofreading – rereading a final time to ensure everything looks and sounds perfect
4. Post-writing is most effective if you have the following:
 - Objectivity – more important for revision than for editing/proofreading (playing with scenes as opposed to playing with words and sentences)
 - Solitude – because you're going to be reading your work aloud—important! The ear catches what the eye misses.
 - A feel for words – comes from being a voracious reader PLUS working at your craft
 - A balanced state of mind – that is, you're not tired (and missing things) or upset (and being hypercritical)
 - A thesaurus and a good dictionary close at hand—for checking definitions of the "synonyms" you've chosen from the thesaurus (they're not all interchangeable)
5. There's no rule that states you must begin each editing pass at page 1 and move forward from there to the end of the manuscript, any more than there's a rule that you have to finish reading every book that you start. You can focus your editing lens on individual chapters or scenes, or groups of chapters—whichever ones strike you as needing more attention at that particular moment. There are, however, rules that I've put in place for myself over the years and will now share with you:

RULES FOR REVISING YOUR MANUSCRIPT

1. Always give yourself a cooling off period to regain your objectivity. Your right brain and your emotions need to disengage before the left brain sets to work. This may take weeks, even months.

2. Reread the manuscript from the point of view of someone reading it for the first time. Do this as often as necessary, focusing on the major aspects of storytelling each time. Whenever you spot a weakness, make a note of it (I use Word, Track Changes and put comment bubbles in the margins). After each rereading, scan the list of problems and plan how to remedy them (and what further changes will be needed as a result, elsewhere in the story). Attach comments to that effect on the text. Then go on to the next pass. Here are the aspects you need to assess:

- Characterization: Are your characters behaving consistently 'in character'? Is your hero/heroine a likeable character, your villain ultimately an unlikeable character? Are there any minor characters trying to steal the show? Are your main characters realistic? Do your characters speak in their own voices? Does the hero/heroine change and grow between the beginning and the end of the story? Have you clearly shown the motivations of the main characters? Do they come alive and carry the story with their actions and reactions?
- Dramatic conflict: Are all the pieces present and strong? (protagonist, goal, motivation, antagonists) Are there multiple antagonists, creating texture? Is the climax emotionally satisfying for the reader? (i.e., is there justice in some form—rough, poetic, promised?)
- Plot: Does it hang together logically, or are there unexplained coincidences and loose ends? Have you 'hooked' the reader with a strong beginning? Is there suspense in your story right from the beginning?
- Setting: Or rather, the integration of the setting into the story. Have descriptive details been seamlessly interwoven, or are there passages that sound like spliced-in excerpts from travel brochures? Are all the setting details you've provided significant to the story?
- Style: This is the overall impression that the story makes. Does your story have a great beginning? Plenty of action? Some humour? Mystery? Fascinating characters? A decisive climax? Does the story seem to flow, or is it choppy at times? Have you been showing rather than telling? How is the pacing? Does the story seem to drag in the middle? If you have used flashback, is it securely anchored to the rest of the plot?

3. After critiquing your story in these five areas, you will have a list of improvements to make. Revision means significant change, so don't be afraid to:

- delete a character who isn't pulling their weight or a subplot that seems to be dragging the story down (be sure to save this material in a file for possible use later on)
- add a character or a subplot
- rearrange plot events to make scenes flow more logically
- change a character's scene goal, or hand it off to a different character
- pick a different starting point for the story
- change the point of view character, for a scene or for the entire story
- recast the hero/heroine and villain/villainess in each other's roles

4. Allow yourself plenty of time to revise. Revision can be massive, and there will be a 'pyramid effect'. Changing one thing in the first chapter will require you to change two things in the second chapter, and three things in the third chapter, and so on, until by Chapter 15 you are practically rewriting the story.

5. Do not become discouraged if your first revision does not iron out all your problems and you must do it again...and again. The average number of revisions by professional novelists is 3 to 5.

After plugging the holes in your plot and strengthening the conflict and characterizations in your story, you're ready to examine how well you've used language to communicate with your reader -- to EDIT your manuscript.

RULES FOR EDITING YOUR MANUSCRIPT

A major difference between revising and editing is that with revising, identifying and solving the problem are two separate operations. With editing, you pounce on the problem and make the necessary changes immediately. Still, you should be prepared to make several passes at your manuscript during the editing process, one for each of the following:

1. Trim away the fat: First drafts are always in need of tightening. By eliminating the extra words from your manuscript, you will direct your reader's attention to the important words and ideas in your writing.

- Take out unnecessary duplication of meaning (e.g., "a pair of twins")
- Take out drone words (which occupy space but aren't necessary for meaning, e.g., "What you mean is that..." should simply be "You mean...")
- Get rid of "cuckoos" (they crowd other words out of their rightful place of emphasis, e.g. "The month of June" should just be "June")
- Change passive verbs to active wherever possible (e.g., "A sunset was seen" should be "(someone) saw a sunset") unless the doer of the action is unknown or the passive voice puts an important idea at the end of a sentence.
- Shrink clauses to phrases and phrases to single words wherever possible without distorting or sacrificing the meaning of the text. (e.g., "a day when it rained" should be "a rainy day")

2. Sharpen the focus: Making a reader work to figure out what you are trying to say is a good way to lose their interest. Bring your message into sharper focus by eliminating the ambiguity and confusion arising from:

- Unclear or unexpressed pronoun references (e.g., "When she arrived, Joan hung up her coat." Who just arrived? Whose coat?)
- Misplaced modifiers (e.g., "bunk beds for hyperactive children with guardrails on them")
- Dangling constructions (e.g., "Having eaten our lunch, the bus departed.")
- Missing or misplaced commas (e.g., "He plays his radio often without listening to it.")
- Unexplained "then", "there" or "that" (e.g., "The subject isn't mentioned in the book since there were no airplanes at that time." When? When the book was published? Or during the era described in the book?)
- Mixed verb tenses (e.g. "If you could do that, I'll be grateful." This should be either "If you can do that, I'll be grateful." OR "If you could do that, I would be grateful.")
- Misleading punctuation (e.g., a semi-colon where there should be a period)

3. Smooth the read: Readers and editors are looking for a 'smooth read', meaning prose that flows from one sentence to the next, without any bumps or jars from awkward sentence structures such as:

- Faulty parallelism (e.g. "Weight training gives one strength, confidence, and builds muscles.")
- Separated sentence (subject and verb so far apart that the reader forgets what the sentence is about)
- Faulty ellipsis (missing words that need to be there, e.g., "...as short or shorter than Bill" should be "...as short as or shorter than Bill")
- Faulty placement of correlatives (either/or, neither/nor, both/and, not only/but also. E.g., "being neither stubborn nor wanting to make trouble")
- Weak passive voice (see #2, point 4)
- Rambling sentences (aka run-on sentences)
- Sentence fragments (when not used deliberately for emphasis or found between quotation marks in dialogue) (e.g., "He's going to London. A place I've wanted to visit.")
- Comma splice (comma in place of a period) (e.g., "Don't do that, it makes me nervous.")
- Circumlocutions (tortured, roundabout ways of saying simple everyday things)
- Jarring or excessive word repetitions (not done deliberately for emphasis or effect)
- Sentences or paragraphs that seem disconnected from the ones in front of and behind them. They may be in the wrong place, or some rewording may be necessary to couple them to the rest of the paragraph or scene. This will create stronger coherence.

4. Choose positions of strength: Put your most important word, thought, or idea at the end of its sentence, paragraph or chapter, and your second most important word, thought, or idea at the beginning to give them the proper emphasis in your writing. Make strategic use of:

- The passive voice
- Periodic sentences (front-end loaded with modifiers, then the subject and verb)
- A short, powerful statement following a series of longer sentences

5. Use calculated repetition: Editing isn't only about eliminating what weakens your writing; it's also about adding things to strengthen it. Deliberate repetition is an effective way to stress your main ideas. By repeating key words or phrases, you bring them into much clearer focus for the reader.

6. Paint vivid word pictures: To communicate thought-images from your head to the reader's, you need to paint pictures with words. Strong images are painted with bold verbal brushstrokes. As you edit your work, look for weak, colourless words and phrases that you can exchange for more vivid and energetic ones.

- Use the thesaurus (and a dictionary) to find "flavourful" words
- Include specific, concrete details
- Make figurative comparisons (using simile and metaphor)—but beware of mixing metaphors (e.g., "He mowed the enemy down like a row of sitting ducks.")

7. My final editing pass is one I call the "bobblehead pass". I use the Word Find function of Word to find all the places where I've used generic words to indicate an emotional reaction: smile, frown, sigh, nod, shake, and so on, and I replace as many of them as possible with more colourful, descriptive words and phrases... or delete them if it turns out they're not necessary. Typically, I'll reduce 60 or more instances of a single bobblehead word in a novel down to 25 or fewer. (I also have "go-to" words that I tend to overuse when drafting. A second bobblehead pass takes care of those.)

EDITING DIALOGUE

Here are some things to remember as you reread your work:

- spoken words and related punctuation are enclosed in double quotation marks ("); a point-of-view character's direct/present thoughts should be italicized; indirect speech or thoughts are coming from the narrator and should be in the same tense as the narration. Compare:

"That's pretty harsh," he said.
That's pretty harsh, he thought.
 That was pretty harsh, he thought.

- use single quotation marks ('') when a speaker is quoting someone else
- each time there is a change of speaker, begin a new paragraph
- tags (he said, she replied) should be used sparingly, to clarify who is saying what when there are no other indications in the text. Tags can be avoided by describing what a speaker is doing, feeling or thinking at the same time as they're talking.
- descriptive tags (she wailed, he murmured) should be used when the words themselves do not indicate a speaker's emotion or sound of voice
- speaking verbs involve the forming and expressing of speech: "shouted" is a speaking verb; "giggled" is not. Same goes for "smiled" and "laughed".
- When breaking a long speech of dialogue into paragraphs, put opening quotation marks at the beginning of each new paragraph, but closing quotation marks only at the end.

LARGE TARGETS: A Quick Reference

The following should be eliminated from your writing if possible:

- "Suddenly" at the beginning of a sentence (instead, use "without warning", "all at once", or "just then" OR simply say what happened)
- "It is" or "There is/are" at the beginning of a sentence
- Most adjectives and adverbs (choose strong, descriptive nouns and verbs instead)
- "see", "hear", "feel" (if you're inside a character's head, just tell the reader **what** the character is seeing, hearing, and feeling, not **that** they're doing it)
- "seem" or "appear" followed by something that the narrator/POV character knows is true or actually witnesses (this includes the adverbs "seemingly" or "apparently" followed by the past or past perfect tense) e.g., compare "It changed before my eyes" and "It seemed to change before my eyes". BUT "He seemed sad" is correct because it's an unconfirmed observation—"that's what it looked like but I could be mistaken."
- Semi-colons in speeches of dialogue.
- "begin" as an ongoing action when it's a single point in time. E.g. "She was beginning to worry" should be "She had begun to worry" OR "She was worried" (Exception: in dialogue or internal monologue)

PROOFREADING: THE FINAL TOUCHES

As you go over your manuscript one last time, be on the lookout for:

1. Typos. Correct all the spelling or typing mistakes you can find. If in doubt, consult a good dictionary. Do NOT rely on SpellCheck or GrammarCheck to do this for you! A spellchecker doesn't know the difference between "again" and "a gain", or between "stranger" and "strangler". Also, ensure that only the correct words are capitalized—proper nouns, the pronoun "I", important words in book or story titles, people's names and their titles, and the first word of every sentence.

2. Agreement of subject to verb and pronoun to antecedent. While you were making all those editorial changes earlier on, you may have changed a subject from singular to plural but forgotten to change the verb. Or, you may have changed a noun but forgotten to make the same change to the pronoun that followed it.
3. Parentheses and quotation marks. Have you remembered to close them all? If using "smart quotation marks", have you got them all pointing the right way?
4. Paragraphing. Are all your paragraphs properly indented? Have you started a new paragraph for each new speaker in a dialogue?
5. Empty spaces. Are there still any spaces or space-holding strings of letters in your text where you meant to insert information after you'd looked it up?
6. Cosmetic changes of vocabulary. As you read the text aloud, you may encounter words or groups of words that don't look or sound right, or that suddenly strike you as being unintentionally comical. Change them.
7. Unintentional word repetitions. If you didn't purposely repeat the word for emphasis, replace one of the occurrences with a synonym, or reword to eliminate it.
8. Inconsistencies. If you revised your heroine from blond to brunette, be sure that there aren't any forgotten references to blond hair buried in the text. Also look for right-handed people who suddenly turn southpaw, eyes that change colour from one chapter to the next, rings that move from one finger to another, and so on. (Also, make sure your characters' names and other proper nouns are spelled the same way throughout the manuscript.)
9. Pay special attention to punctuation. Extra periods or stray commas are small and can easily be overlooked.