

How to Edit

Checklists and Guidance
for Fiction Writers



Janalyn Voigt

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How to Edit: Checklists and Guidance for Fiction Writers

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Contact Information:

Janalyn Voigt
P O Box 2293
Redmond WA 09073
janalynvoigt@janalynvoigt.com

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Introduction

It takes time and energy to develop a plot and create a first draft, but writing a novel doesn't end there. A writer tells the same story over and over again through each of its revisions. In light of the need to produce excellent manuscripts quickly in order to survive in the publishing wilds, learning to edit well is imperative.

I once worked as a field laborer at an organic farm to receive a share of the crops raised by a local farm. The first morning I showed up with no idea what to do. Someone had to teach me which crops required attention on a given day, where the tools were, how to use them, and even how to apply different styles of weeding. My skills as a home gardener wouldn't see me through working on an agricultural farm. Editing is a lot like farming. Much as a farm crop requires cultivation, planting, watering, weeding and harvesting; bringing a written work to the table doesn't happen without hard work and commitment. Untrained editing skills are inadequate for refining a publishable work. It takes more.

In these pages I offer my best advice on how to self-edit your fiction, gleaned from my experience as a novelist, literary judge, book reviewer, and avid reader. *Dawn Singer*, book one of my *Tales of Faeraven* trilogy, released with [Harbourlight Books \(Pelican Book Group\)](#) in 2012, with *Wayfarer*, the second book, to follow in 2013. I am represented by [Wordserve Literary](#) and hold memberships in [ACFW](#) and [NCWA](#). I blog for writers at <http://LiveWriteBreathe.com> and for readers at my author website: <http://JanalynVoigt.com>

1

Five Ways to Edit

Terminology varies, but editing divides into five categories I'll call content editing, technical editing, copyediting, proofreading and hard editing. It's important to work on these categories in the order listed.

1. **Content editing** involves reading through your work while ignoring small lapses in order to evaluate its structural soundness.
2. **Technical editing** is where you check facts and verify details.
3. **Copyediting** your manuscript (also known as line editing) is when you pay attention to usage, punctuation, grammar, style, and spelling. Putting this earlier in the process, when so much else is in flux, wastes your time.
4. **Proofreading**, when you see it as a scavenger hunt for typos, can be fun. Go over your manuscript, but then get others you trust into the act. This is where multiple sets of eyes come in handy.
5. **Hard editing** usually comes from an editor *other than the author*. Trust me when I tell you that you are too close to your work for objectivity. It's hard to spot your own errors and vulnerabilities. You may automatically take certain details for granted and thus omit informing the reader. Only someone who is not you can catch these things.

I'll cover each of these topics in detail, so read on.

2

Content Editing

Also known as substantive or developmental editing, content editing involves reading through your work in order to evaluate its structural soundness. Ask yourself if your novel is coherent, logical and complete.

Content Editing Checklist:

Plot

- Is it believable?
- Is it predictable?
- Are all needed elements included in your first chapter?
- Are there plot holes?
- Could you tighten tension and pacing?
- Have you included twists?
- Does your story evolve naturally?
- Have you included enough subplots?
- Does everything weave together smoothly?
- Does it resolve well?
- Is something missing? If so, what?
- Have you proved your theme?
- Does it drag on too long or conclude too abruptly?
- Have you tied up every thread?

Characterization

- Are your characters' believable?
- Do their motivations ring true?
- Are their fears realistic?
- Do their personalities have depth?

- Do they speak differently or all sound the same?
- Is all speech appropriate to the time period?
- Is the dialogue natural?
- Do they have distinguishing characteristics?
- Does the plot flow from their desires and fears, and are these consistent in proving your theme?
- Are your characters' reactions missing or implausible?
- Have you made your main characters' deepest fear come true in the black moment?
- Is there definite growth on the part of your main character toward a personal epiphany?
- Do any other characters experience epiphanies? If so, do they grow toward them?
- Does the climax and resolution evolve from your characters' motivations?

Setting

- Is your story's setting dominant or nonexistent?
- Is it believable?
- Is there something missing? What?
- Have you anchored well enough in the time period?

Areas to Revise or Delete

- Instances of telling you should change.
- Inconsistencies
- Retellings
- Back story dumps.
- Scenes that don't take the story forward or that seem weak.
- Anything that might work better at a different place in the story.

Content editing isn't the easiest part of the editing process, but keep in mind that how well you handle this first process determines the ease with which you'll go through the others.

3

Technical Editing

Editing some types of books includes checking graphs and calculating totals, but novels call for a different kind of technical editing. Settings, historical facts, and professional information are just some of the details that need researching. Check more than one source, and be careful when verifying facts on the Internet, where misinformation can be posted and reposted.

Technical Editing Checklist:

- Verify the accuracy and rights availability of any quotes or poetry you may use in the body of your novel or to head chapters.
- Check continuity within the story. Are there any objects that disappear or suddenly appear? Does someone mention an upcoming event that never occurs? Do characters receive injuries that then vanish? Have you introduced characters you then forgot?
- Check for consistency. Do you describe a character with blue eyes in one scene but as having brown eyes in another? Do your characters stick to their particular lexicons throughout the entire book? Does a character's habitual action show up for several scenes but then disappear for the rest of the book?
- Are logistics accurate? Is it really possible for action to take place within the time frame described in each scene? Do all characters have the realistic ability to get from the location of a previous scene into a new scene? Do you allow too much or too little time for travel?
- Verify that all events are plausible. Step back and, with as much objectivity as you can muster, ask yourself if you buy all elements of your story. If you're not sure, ask someone you trust to read your manuscript with believability in mind.
- Check your manuscript against the stylebook your publisher uses for punctuation, grammar and usage. If you don't have a publisher yet, pick a stylebook to follow. The [Chicago Manual of Style](#) is a popular resource.
- Check historical facts for accuracy within the time period. To avoid annoying any readers, it's best to change the story rather than dates.
- Do your settings pan out? Do you need to verify details like street names, ferry schedules, and cell phone coverage?
- Are there professional details like what a doctor would call a stroke or a detective would do at a crime scene that you need to verify?
- Are there sounds you need to hear to describe? For instance, what does a gunshot, buffalo stampede, or meadow lark singing sound like?

Technical editing is a small part of the entire editing process, but it can make a big difference in producing an excellent manuscript.

4

Copyediting

Of necessity, copyediting a manuscript for punctuation, usage, grammar and style comes after completing content editing and technical editing. Some writers dislike copyediting because it requires great attention to detail, but its benefits far outweigh the challenges.

Copyediting Checklist:

Punctuation

- Are commas correctly used and not gratuitous?
- Do you need colons or semi-colons instead of commas?
- Are colons or semi-colons misplaced or unneeded?
- Have you left any quotes or brackets unclosed? Is punctuation placed correctly around quotes or brackets?
- Is there a period where a comma should go?
- Did you forget any question marks?
- Are dashes and hyphens used appropriately?
- Did you omit any apostrophes?
- Is spelling correct?
- Do you spot typos?

Usage

- Do you find an over-abundance of participial phrases?
- Are there passive-voice verbs that active verbs can replace?
- Are certain words or phrases overused?
- Do you find duplications of specific words on the same page?
- Would pruning adjectives help ideas flourish? Beginning writers tend to load on adjectives, but less is usually more.
- Does the imagery work? For example, the above sentence works because the words *pruning* and *flourish* both relate to plants. If I'd used *take flight* instead of *flourish* in this sentence, it wouldn't have had the same impact. Make sure your symbolism lines up.

- Do ideas follow a cause-and-effect sequence to bring immediacy? For example: “He saw the girl as he walked the dog” has less immediacy than “While he walked the dog, he saw the girl.” Why? Because walking the dog is the event that causes the effect of seeing the girl.
- Are there any words that distract by rhyming?
- Does any usage devolve into cliché?
- Do you detect any weasel words (overused, unimaginative and usually unneeded words)?
- Is any phrasing awkward?
- Are there any run-on sentences?
- Do sentences contain correct parallel structures? Incorrect: Amy ran, jumped and was laughing. Correct: Amy ran, jumped and laughed.
- Are sentence structures varied?
- Do paragraphs break logically and include transitions?
- Does the story flow?
- Are there unneeded attributions (he said, she exclaimed)? Use beats, references in dialogue, or unique patterns of speech to identify the speaker instead.
- Do unnecessary beats (he smiled, she nodded) used in place of attributions slow dialogue?
- Search for flaws you are aware of in your writing. For some reason, I want the past tense of lead to also be spelled lead (instead of led), so until I get this straightened out in my mind, I search my manuscripts for lead. Maybe you overuse was or certain favorite words. If so, search them out. In making corrections, just be sure not to introduce new errors.

Grammar

- Do you use participial phrases correctly? For example: “She ate a cupcake, licking the plate” seems to imply that she ate a cupcake at the same time as she licked the plate. Since that is a physical impossibility, this sentence is incorrect. “After eating a cupcake, she licked the plate” is plausible.
- Do any subjects disagree with verbs? Incorrect: “He listened to the news and eats dinner.” Correct: “He listened to the news and ate dinner.”
- Are verb tenses correct?
- Do you detect any dangling participles? For example: “While walking along the street, a car radio played his favorite song” seems to imply that the car radio walked along the street. Correctly cast, this sentence would read: “While walking along the street, he heard a car radio play his favorite song.”
- Are there split infinitives? For example: “She went to often see the ocean” splits the infinitive: “to see” with “often.” The sentence reads correctly when cast, thus: “She often went to see the ocean.”
- Do pronouns and antecedents agree?
- Are there incomplete sentences that need correcting?
- Do any sentences end with verbs or prepositions?

Style

Have you followed your publisher's or your own chosen editorial style guide for use of abbreviations, measurements, treatment of numbers, spelling, italics, bolding, quotations, commas, and capitalization? Consider using the [Chicago Manual of Style](#).

Don't know the answers to questions that arise during copyediting? Research them, and you'll strengthen your writing.

5

Proofreading

By the time you've combed through your manuscript using content editing, technical editing and copyediting techniques, you may wonder how there can possibly be anything left to fix. And yet, if you've ever read a published novel with sentences containing missing words, misspellings, duplications, typos and the like, you understand that errors can slip past the keenest of eyes.

If you plan to submit your work to an agent or editor you'll want to ensure you've done all you can to present a professional manuscript. It would be a shame to win the editing battle but lose the submission war with a manuscript that reflects poorly on your attention to detail.

If you plan to self-publish, proofreading is essential. While some readers take mistakes in stride, others will abandon a book because of them. At best, errors throw the reader out of the story and make it harder to engage.

Proofreading Checklist

- Print your manuscript so you can see it in a fresh way.
- Go through the text backwards, starting with the last sentence and ending with the first. Reading out of context disconnects your mind from the natural flow of the story and causes you to catch more errors.
- Read your manuscript out loud to help you discover problems you might otherwise miss. Listen as you read for problems like unintentional rhymes, sentences that end abruptly, or for sentence fragments. You might want to take this a step farther and have someone else read your manuscript to you. Or you can do as I do and use the [text-to-speech functionality found in Adobe Reader](#).
- Microsoft Word underlines grammatical errors within sentences. Sometimes it doesn't know best, but you do want to go through your manuscript and check for underlined sentences. It's saved me more than once.
- Run spell check, but don't automatically change anything. Spell check can do unexpected things when you use its automatic feature.
- For that matter, don't rely upon spell check, which will skip over valid words. For example, in a manuscript I'm reading at the moment I found *feinting* used in place of *fainting*. If you have trouble spelling (and even if you don't), consider having someone else proofread your manuscript.

The more eyes you have checking your manuscript at this point, the better. Just make sure you enlist those you trust to give you good advice. If you follow these steps with care, you should minimize errors in your manuscript.

6

Hard Editing

To make sure your novel is all it can be, as a final step use the services of a qualified editor knowledgeable about editing fiction for publication. Be sure and screen the person you are thinking of hiring by asking for references. Be careful to [check out the editor](#) and inform yourself of [reasonable rates](#).

Here are some places to look:

- ★ Acknowledgment pages in well-edited books
- ★ Some publishing houses offer editorial services.
- ★ Search for active members of the [Editorial Freelance Association](#), an established association for editors, proofreaders, and other publishing professionals run by volunteers.

There is nothing as humbling as slaving to perfect a manuscript only to be told by someone whose opinion you respect that it's not quite the gem you thought it. If you're self-publishing, you probably have paid for that criticism, making it doubly painful. It's natural to want to avoid such a situation by not having your writing professionally edited. In a competitive marketplace where it's essential to stand out for quality, that's a mistake.

Conclusion

Completing a novel is a huge accomplishment, but it's only the first step on the road to publication. Whether you seek a traditional contract or plan to dive into the publishing waters solo, learning to effectively self-edit your manuscript gives you a competitive edge. Much has changed in the publishing realm in recent years, but the gatekeepers have really always been readers. The wise writer is interested not just in seeing a publishing dream to fruition but in connecting with an audience. Providing a story that captures the imagination with the minimum of errors is the best way to do that.