

# Step By Step Novel Editing

Hopefully, while you were writing your first draft, you kept a few notes about things you needed to check, spots you weren't sure about, or research you needed to do. You should also have at least basic character sketches to refer to and lists of any "facts" peculiar to your novel and setting.

You'll want to keep those notes handy as you begin to edit your novel. With those in hand, go through these steps one at a time, taking as long as you need to do a good job with each step.

It looks like a lot. It *is* a lot. But don't be hasty or impatient. In the long run, it won't help you sell your novel.

Do the sections of editing in order. You're working from the larger picture down to details, and it's no use fixing details in scenes that might disappear from the novel.

Then, track your progress. I've made a spot beside each step so you can check it off as you're done. So you'll get a sense of accomplishment and be able to see what's left to do.

Ready? Here goes.

## Plot and Overall Structure

\_\_\_\_1. Put the novel aside for at least one week. Preferably two to four. You need a break from what you've slaved over, and time to step back and get an objective perspective about it.

\_\_\_\_2. Read the entire novel through, making notes (not changes, yet) anywhere the plot seems to get lost or goes off on a useless tangent. Anywhere it seems to slow down when it shouldn't, or hurry when it shouldn't.

If you haven't already, create the story timeline and check to see you've followed it throughout the story. Make notes of anywhere it seems to be out of order.

This is where you figure out which scenes need to move around, what holes are in your main plot and sub-plots and need filling. Check any notes you made while you wrote the first draft, too. Then, using all those notes:

\_\_\_\_3. Got scenes in the wrong order? Rearrange any scenes that need it. Make sure they're in logical order, according to your story timeline. Make sure you didn't use any flashbacks unless they were *absolutely* necessary. Back-story should be woven into the main story in small increments if at all possible, not as flashbacks.

\_\_\_\_4. Do you have plot holes? Add any scenes that are needed to complete the main plot or any sub-plots you created. You're filling any holes where you left something vital out. Don't add fluff!

\_\_\_\_5. Remember the fluff mentioned above? *Remove* any scenes that don't move the plot along. Be merciless. You want your novel to sell, don't you? Then don't fall in love

with your words and scenes. They're disposable. If they need to be cut, cut them.

\_\_\_\_6. Do any and all sub-plots support the main one? Have you tossed any in just because they intrigue you, but they don't help the novel flow? If not, rework the sub-plots you want or need to keep, take out the ones that don't add to the main plot.

*Put the novel aside for one week. Yup. Again. You need a break. Those first three editing steps (not counting your first break from the novel) are tough ones, and time-consuming. You need another break.*

\_\_\_\_7. Read the whole thing through again to see if the plot now flows smoothly, beginning to end, and that it follows the timeline correctly. Be sure all your subplots flow well, too, and aren't jarring the main plot anywhere along the line.

\_\_\_\_8. Look really hard at your opening. Do you pull readers right into the story? Did you introduce the protagonist and the conflict in the first few pages? Give the first page to someone to read. No more than one page. Ask them if they want to read more. If the answer is no, rewrite it. Have them read it again. Repeat this process until your reader says, "What happens next! Can I read it?"

(If you don't have anyone who'll read your novel to give you their opinion, see if you can find an online forum or local writer's group to critique your work. You *need* a second opinion!)

\_\_\_\_9. Read the end of each chapter. Have you created a mini-hook or cliffhanger for each one? Do you compel your readers to keep reading to find out what's going to happen next?

If the answer is no, see if you can break the novel somewhere different for those chapters that don't end with enough tension. Don't add scenes unless you *absolutely* need to. Just rearrange them, if you can logically. You want your readers to have trouble putting the book down.

\_\_\_\_10. Next, read your ending. Is the climax climactic enough? Have you rushed past it to the resolution and it doesn't sing? Is it believable, or does it need fixing? Work with this the same way you worked with your opening, until it feels right. If you have someone who can read the whole novel to give you an outside opinion, you can do this now, or come back to this step when you have more of your editing done.

## **Edit Characters & Characterization**

*After you've corrected your plotting errors and made the overall novel structure tight, it's time to look at your characters. Don't forget to give yourself another break first. Then, start with your protagonist. Find every scene he or she is in and read it carefully, checking for:*

\_\_\_\_1. Conflict - Is the main conflict deep enough to carry an entire novel? Have you created smaller conflicts to keep tension at the level the novel needs (and your protagonist struggling to move forward)? Do you keep your protagonist blocked from the overall goal until the climax? If any of these have no for an answer, go back and fix them.

\_\_\_\_2. Goals - Is your protagonist's main goal worthy of a novel-length story? Does it

matter enough to the protagonist to persist until he or she wins or loses ultimately? If the goal is not large enough, figure out how you can change it to give the protagonist enough motivation to continue striving for success when he or she keeps failing.

\_\_\_3. Motivation - Does your protagonist have plausible motivation to keep overcoming all obstacles, or does he or she seem to be acting without reason at any time? Change any scenes or sections that don't show believable motivation.

\_\_\_4. Believability - Is your protagonist "real"? Do we believe he or she can really exist? Is your protagonist too perfect? Too weak? Someone we can't really like?

Be sure your protagonist has flaws as well as strengths. Make him or her human. And strong enough to overcome any blocks to his or her success, without being superhuman. Don't try to use an unlikable character as your protagonist unless you're prepared to have the book lose readers. Not many readers will put up with a character they dislike.

\_\_\_5. Have you used internal dialogue and introspection to enhance our understanding of your protagonist? Have you refrained from overusing either? Change any of those sections which have too much or too little.

\_\_\_6. Does your protagonist change due to the conflict he or she is embroiled in, and if so, is the change believable? Fix any parts that seem implausible.

*Continue editing the protagonist, first, but use the rest of these steps for all your characters one at a time.*

\_\_\_7. Unless it's a very minor character, does the character's dialogue sound different than the rest of your characters? Does it fit *this* character? Does the character's overall "voice" remain consistent throughout the novel? If not, fix the scenes that need fixing, or give the character a more unique voice.

\_\_\_8. Is the description of the character woven gently into the novel in small portions, rather than large chunks? Is it consistent (no accidental changes of eye color, for instance)? Do we see the character (if important enough) from more than his or her own perspective? Do you refrain from repeating character details more than a few times throughout the novel? Again, if you answer no to any of these, go back and rewrite any scenes that don't comply.

\_\_\_9. Have you created any characters with exaggerated traits, and if so, are they still plausible? If not, tone those down or change them.

\_\_\_10. Are your characters "described" more through their actions and dialogue than through plain prose? If not, change it so they are.

\_\_\_11. Are all characters acting consistently and believably throughout the novel, rather than just because you need them to act a certain way to fit the plot?

\_\_\_12. Are all the necessary "good" and "bad" characters well enough developed to support the protagonist and the novel?

\_\_\_13. Does your dialogue have tags where needed, and none where they aren't needed? Have you refrained from "screaming", "hissing", "chortling" and other ridiculous tags? Go fix any errors.

\_\_\_\_ 14. Is every dialogue and every sentence in every dialogue necessary to the plot or characterization? If not, cut them out!

\_\_\_\_ 15. Does your dialogue flow, like two people having a real conversation without all the boring details of what they had for breakfast? Is it believable, or do you have talking dictionaries and bumbling fools conversing? Fix any of it needing fixing.

\_\_\_\_ 16. Are you consistent with the "person" you chose, either first person POV, or third person POV? Have you chosen just one or two point of view characters and stuck with them throughout the novel? Is it clear who's POV we're seeing at all times? Unless you're writing in third person omniscient view, have you refrained from jumping from one person's head to the next in the middle of scenes?

### **Edit Setting**

*Next we'll make sure the setting is well chosen and properly described throughout the novel. Take a break from editing again, first, then continue with setting.*

\_\_\_\_ 1. Does the overall setting enhance the plot? Setting is like another "character" and should fit the story you're writing.

\_\_\_\_ 2. Do both the overall setting and any smaller settings (like the protagonist's home) work well to help define and characterize your protagonist? Again, setting should be carefully chosen to fit the main characters of your novel.

\_\_\_\_ 3. Does the setting help create some of the conflict or any of the obstacles along the way? This isn't necessary, but it certainly adds to the depth of your novel to use the setting this way.

\_\_\_\_ 4. Are any descriptions of the setting doled out a little at a time, and not in huge lengths of descriptive prose? If not, correct this. No one wants to read pages of description.

\_\_\_\_ 5. Do you reveal setting details through the eyes of your viewpoint character in each scene? Details noted should be the ones your point of view character for a that scene would find important and take note of. Unless that character is one who constantly takes in every detail, we better not be reading every detail.

\_\_\_\_ 6. Have you evoked the five senses when describing places (and characters, if appropriate)? Don't go overboard and use all five in one place, but bring your settings to life by using more than just sight to describe them.

### **Edit the Style and Details**

*You're down to the wire now, so to speak. Now we'll look at the details of sentence structure, language usage and such to polish your novel till it sparkles! First, take another break from the novel for a week. You've been slaving away at making it perfect, and need to take a step back again.*

*Then, do these next steps a page or chapter at a time, taking breaks when needed. You may be able to check each page for several of the following points at a time. As long as*

*you can keep track, feel free to do so. Ready?*

\_\_\_\_ 1. Check the notes you made while writing your first draft. If there's research you need to do to correct facts and authenticity, do it now, and insert them into the appropriate places in the novel.

\_\_\_\_ 2. Check your transitions. Does each chapter or section flow smoothly from the last? Are we confused about when we are at any time? Fix any sloppy transitions.

\_\_\_\_ 3. Are you "showing" the most important scenes? "Telling" the less important ones? Make sure you've balanced your showing and telling, unless you're using only one or the other for a specific reason.

\_\_\_\_ 4. Have you used passive voice or colorless verbs anywhere you could avoid it (is, was, were, have been, etc)? If so, switch to active verbs like "leaped" to replace "got up", or "raced" for "he was going".

\_\_\_\_ 5. Check each page and chapter for any repetition of words that will stand out. If your character is constantly "annoyed", find some synonyms to replace "annoyed" with. Otherwise, your readers will be annoyed! So unless it's being used for a specific impact, avoid repetition.

\_\_\_\_ 6. Are all your sentences the same length, or do they vary in length and construction? Do you have any marathon sentences? Ones that will confuse your reader? Any words you don't need? Be sure you vary lengths and structure, or you'll put your readers to sleep. And don't make them pant before they reach the end of a sentence, either. Don't forget to cut the extras out.

\_\_\_\_ 7. Scour each page for adjectives and adverbs. (Many adverbs can be found using your word processor's "Search" or "Find" tool and searching for "ly" endings.) Remove as many as possible by using more vivid nouns and verbs in their place.

\_\_\_\_ 8. Unless you've got a very good reason (like writing a historical novel where the people absolutely would not speak informally), make sure you've used contractions where it's appropriate. No one wants to read a book that sounds stiff.

\_\_\_\_ 9. Have you overdone it with the thesaurus? Is your novel full of flowery, exaggerated word choices, in a false attempt to make it fancier? Ouch! This is a definite no-no.

If you can say "he used it" instead of "he utilized the technological wonder", you'll have many happier readers. Unless of course you're writing it in *grandiloquent* style to be humorous.

\_\_\_\_ 10. Do you have any places where "it" is confusing, or you can't figure out who "he" was supposed to be? Fix those.

\_\_\_\_ 11. Scan all your dialogue. Have you used short, choppy dialogue anywhere besides a scene of extreme suspense? If so, fix this.

*You might want another break after this step.*

\_\_\_\_ 12. Check your grammar, spelling and punctuation next. Use your spell checker (if you have one), but also be wary of using incorrect forms of words like "two, too, to" and such.

Many word processing programs also have a grammar checker. You may want to use that for overall grammar, but keep in mind, your dialogue and character thoughts may not always pass that test. Just be sure you haven't screwed up grammar where it isn't deliberate.

If you aren't sure of proper punctuation, get a book such as Strunk's *The Elements of Style*. Or have it read by someone who offers editing services.

\_\_\_\_ 13. Look for clichés and replace them with your own descriptive phrases.

\_\_\_\_ 14. Check all the "facts" that are particular to your novel, such as limits of magic, authentic historic details and setting details. Fix any errors.

\_\_\_\_ 15. Go through the novel one word at a time. Yes, this is a long task, but if you really want the book to shine, it's all in the details. Take one page at a time, if you need. Is your word usage both appropriate to the novel and vivid rather than mundane?

For instance, rather than "old car", use "1956 Aqua Chevy Bel Aire", so your readers can really picture it. Is there anywhere you used a word your characters wouldn't have known or used that way? (No "web" unless it's a spider web in a Western, for instance.)

*You may need another break here.*

\_\_\_\_ 16. Read the entire novel through again to see if the plot, characters and setting all mesh well now. If not, tweak those areas where they don't.

Don't get lazy now. You're nearly done. Check at the same time that you've created enough emotional impact so your readers experience the same emotions your main characters do.

\_\_\_\_ 17. You can take another break while you "do" this next step. Have someone read the entire novel once more now. Ask them to tell you *anywhere* they were confused, bored, or any other reason they might have put the book down. If so, fix those spots (there shouldn't be many now). If not, it's time for your last step!

\_\_\_\_ 18. One more time, you're going to read your novel beginning to end. This time, *out loud*. Yes, I did say read it out loud. Probably just a chapter at a time. You're checking now to be sure you have no rough spots, nothing to trip your readers up, no awkward construction or confusion.

Really, this is an important step, one I doubt many authors do. *You'll* be one of the few who took the time to truly see if your novel will pass muster, beginning to end.

Only then is it ready to send off to be published!

Done? Great. Give yourself a reward. You've done a lot of work and deserve it. Go congratulate yourself on a job well done.

Then start writing your next novel.