

Self-Editing Strategies for Fiction Writers

THE CONTENT EDIT

STORY BEGINNING

- Does the story open with a hook (a good first line that will catch the reader's attention and make them ask questions)?
- Does the chapter **not** begin with an overused plot device (e.g., a dream sequence, description of weather, a history dissertation, drawn-out description of the setting)?
- Is the main character introduced in the first scene?
- Is the POV character (or characters, if there is more than one POV character) well introduced?
- By the end of the scene/chapter, does the reader
 - know the POV character's name?
 - know the (approximate) age of the character?
 - have a reason to care about the character?
- Is the setting (i.e., time of day, time of year, and place) clear?
- Does the inciting incident occur before the first chapter's end (in most cases)?
- Are the main character's goal and motivation clear?
- Are other main characters introduced?
- If a flash-forward was used to start off the story, does it compel the reader to keep turning the pages to find out how the character arrived at that point in action?
- Is there conflict/tension (internal and external)?
- Is backstory kept to a minimum? (Recommend no backstory in the first thirty pages.)
- Does the first chapter end with a strong hook that will compel the reader to keep reading?

SETTING

- Is the overall story setting so compelling that it can become a character (either supporting or antagonist) of its own?
- Is the setting appropriately researched and described?

CHARACTERS

- Are character names unique (i.e., do characters have names that aren't the same or too similar)?
- Are secondary characters appropriately introduced?
- Are character names spelled consistently throughout the book?

- Are there an appropriate number of characters (i.e., not too many characters for readers to keep straight)?
- Are there any characters that aren't necessary/could be omitted?
- Are character attributes (e.g., hair color, eye color, clothing) woven into the story instead of described in a "laundry list"? Do physical attributes remain consistent throughout the story?
- Are character voices distinct (POV characters and others)?
- Are the characters (especially the MC) likeable? Are the antagonists (and appropriate others) unlikable?
- Does each character's dialogue match his/her background and personality?
- Do secondary characters contribute to the protagonist's story?
- Do characters develop (become three-dimensional) throughout the story?
- Do characters change in believable ways as the story progresses?

POV

- Is the POV consistent throughout the scene (no head-hopping)?
- Is the scene written in the POV character's "voice"? (man vs. woman)
- Is there enough internal monologue to convey what the POV character is feeling but may not be saying?
- Is internal dialogue used sparingly? (no long paragraphs of ID)
- Is deep POV used?
- If first-person POV is used, have sentences beginning with "I" been kept as minimal as possible?

SCENES

- Does each scene move the plot along, introduce necessary information, or contain conflict? (Having at least two of the three is best.)
- Is the passage of time between scenes clearly described?
- Is the POV quickly established?
- Does each scene pique interest?
- Is there a good balance of dialogue and narrative?
- Are the five senses (sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste) used?
- In each scene, is the place and the time of day quickly clear?
- In each scene, is the physical setting appropriately described?
- Does each scene have its own arc? (Is it like a mini-story?)
- Does each scene end with a hook and leave the reader hanging so he/she will want to keep reading?

PLOT

- Does the plot have the necessary elements? (possible plot options: Snowflake method, Three-Act Story Structure)
- Is the plot believable?
- Does the plot keep reader's attention and impel them to continue reading?
- Is the plot goal obvious at the beginning of the story, and is it resolved at the end?
- Does each scene support the plot in some way?
- Is the main character continually faced with conflicts (each more difficult than the last) that force him or her to make difficult decisions?
- Do each of the conflicts serve the interest of the story (i.e., they're not just written into the story for excitement)?
- Is the main character's goal and motivation clear and consistent throughout the story?
- Are subplots introduced, and are they resolved at the end of the story? (In most cases—with a series, there's more leeway.)
- Are all the loose ends tied up at the end of the story?
- Does the story end with a strong hook?
- Is there a happily(for the most part)-ever-after?

THE COPYEDIT

WRITING TECHNIQUE

- Is dialogue and narrative balanced, and do both advance the plot?
- Are dialogue tags and action beats used effectively?
- Does the writing show instead of tell (in most cases)?
- Alternatively, has stage direction been avoided? (This is one of the times telling is acceptable—example, getting out of a car and going in the house.)
- Does the tense (past versus present) remain consistent throughout the narrative?
- Is backstory woven into the story instead of dumped all at once (or in multiple places)?
- Has over-explanation been avoided?
- Has the overuse of adjectives/adverbs been avoided?
- Have clichés, purple prose, and complex words/sentences been avoided?
- Have paragraphs been kept to a good (short) length? (Readers love white space.)
- In Christian fiction, has “preaching” (in dialogue and in narrative) been avoided?
- Are subjects and verbs in agreement?
- Have weasel words been avoided? Weasel words include
 - weak “to be” verbs: is, are, was, were, had, had been

- superfluous words: that, very, just, really, rather, kind of/sort of, nearly/almost, quite, like, even, so, absolutely, usually, truly, totally, probably, actually, basically, extremely, mostly, naturally, often, particularly, started to/began to
 - “telling” words: seemed, knew, thought, felt, wondered, mused
- Is punctuation used appropriately?
- Exclamation point (!): Used to indicate yelling (in dialogue) or extreme emotion (in narrative). Don’t use more than one (!), and (in most cases) don’t use it in conjunction with a question mark (!?). Publishers tend to discourage its use (some want no more than two or three exclamation points in an entire manuscript). The exclamation point encourages weaker writing since the author can use it alone to indicate emotion. Instead, stronger dialogue or narrative will better convey that emotion.
 - Question mark (?): Used to punctuate a question. Don’t use more than one (??), and (in most cases) don’t use it in conjunction with an exclamation point (!?).
 - Em dash (—): Used in several ways, including to offset information, to show an interruption in speech, or to show a sudden break in thought.
 - Ellipses (. . .): Used to show trailing off of words (in dialogue) or of an idea (in narrative), or to show hesitation in dialogue.
 - Semicolon: Used to connect two related independent clauses. Typically, semicolons are used sparingly in fiction. It tends to be more accepted in literary fiction.

AFTER THE BOOK IS FINISHED

- Set the story aside for at least a week, if not longer.
- Read the story aloud—and to up the stakes, read it to a spouse, friend, or even the dog (this ensures that you’re not simply muttering along). MS Word’s Read Aloud is a great feature that will narrate a document for you.
- If you struggle with the punctuation/grammar aspect of writing, consider editing software (e.g., Word’s Spelling/Grammar checker, Grammarly, ProWritingAid, AutoCrit, SmartEdit, etc.). Be sure to use these carefully since all the recommendations may not be correct.
- Find critique partners (in person or online—generally done before the book is finished, with most crit groups submitting one chapter per week) and beta readers (who can offer constructive criticism—generally done after the book is finished).