

# SELF-EDITING

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## 1. Self-Editing Your First Draft

Congratulations! You have finished the first draft of your manuscript. Time to pass it over to an editor and get it ready to publish—right? Actually, you’ve only started your masterpiece. No other fine art—and yes, writing is a fine art—leaves the finishing of a product up to someone else. An artist may work with other artists as a team, but must, in the end, successfully complete his or her personal part of the project. Self-editing is part of the art of writing. It will make you a complete, accomplished writer (the kind who gets published and recognized). And self-editing is an artistic endeavor in which, while you can take lessons and seek help from a self-editing team and an editor, good writing is best learned by doing.

Follow the checklist below and you’ll be on your way to a successful writing, self-editing, and publishing adventure.

### **Put that manuscript away:**

What? Yes, indeed. You need to give yourself some space between writing that initial draft and the beginning of the self-editing process. So go off and do something else to clear and reinvigorate your mind. Take at least a week—or a month or two. Do something else creative—draw, make music, go hiking in nature. Reorganize your writing office so you’ll enjoy every moment spent there. Take a vacation. Even start a new writing project—maybe the next book in the series you’ve already started or write in a different format such as short stories or poetry. Importantly, share your exciting progress with your fans on social media and on your website/blog—marketing starts now, if you haven’t already begun.

### **Okay, now you can get your manuscript out again:**

It’s time to read your first draft right through—without doing active self-editing. Imagine you’re reading someone else’s book. Be as objective as you can (the fact that you haven’t looked at it for a few weeks will help). Enjoy the story as if it’s the first time you’ve seen it. Try to get an intuitive feel for the story; ignore your inner critic and judge. If you notice something important that really needs work, put an X beside the spot or highlight it and maybe jot down a comment to remind yourself what needs improvement, but then keep on reading. You want to see the big picture first. When you finish reading your document, note important issues you’ve noticed. If someone else had written this manuscript and asked you for your advice, what would you honestly tell them? Write a report to yourself!

### **Your first self-edit draft:**

Now it's time to start your first self-edit draft. What's a self-edit? Just like it sounds, you're going to go through your original written draft and start making changes—important ones (ignore the minor mechanical issues for now). In fact, you're going to go through it several times. Each time, you will consider one or two of those concerns you noticed and recorded at the end of your initial read-through.

### **Some ways to self-edit your manuscript:**

You can self-edit your manuscript in a variety of ways. For example:

- Print out your document and write on the printout. Use traditional editing marks or scribble notes, draw arrows to rearrange parts, write in extra material, and so on.
- Self-edit on your word processing software file. If you've created your manuscript on Microsoft Word, use the "Track Changes" and "Comments" editing tools or do rewrites directly into the file (once you have made a copy of the original for your records). Other word processing programs have similar self-editing options.

Choose a method that will work for you.

### **Staying on track with your plans:**

Before you look at the major issues you identified in the read-through you did after you wrote your first draft, re-check your original plans and make sure you've stayed on track with them. This is part of the "developmental editing" level. Ask yourself the following questions and jot down notes. If you find major problems with any of the following, add them to the list of issues you already identified when you did the read-through of your first draft.

- Purpose: Re-read your style sheet and remind yourself of your purpose for this manuscript. Then ask yourself:
  - Have I fulfilled the purpose I planned for this manuscript?
  - Does the entire story provide my readers with the understanding or insight or shift in awareness I intended?
  - Does each section/chapter have an obvious purpose and are all sections clearly related to the central purpose and the thesis or theme?
  - Does this manuscript reflect my experience, personality/authorial voice, and purpose?
- Themes/Thesis:
  - Do my intended themes (or thesis, if I'm writing nonfiction) carry through the story?
  - Have new themes popped up as I wrote?

- **Target Audience:** Review your target audience details again. Imagine your readers. Even among your target audience, there will be differences between your readers. Think of three or four people you know who could represent each type of reader. Read through a chapter or two of the manuscript repeatedly, each time trying to read from these different readers' perspectives. Ask yourself:
  - Have I kept my target audience in mind so the topic/story is suitable for them?
  - What are my readers' needs and interests? Have I written what they expect and/or hope for? If not, what changes do I need to make?
  - Is the readability level suited to my audience? You can check your document's readability level online. Here's one place to do that: <http://www.readability-score.com>
  - Is the depth of details suitable?
  - Is the language and content appropriate? Have I written anything that might not sit well with my readers, or might make them feel confused or patronized? If those things are important to the story, how can I rewrite them in a more acceptable way?
  - What will my audience enjoy about the book? What might they dislike?
  - Will readers be able to tell immediately what kind of entertainment and/or information they'll get?
  - Do my points and insights matter? Have I made it clear how my audience can apply those to their personal lives in practical ways? This is more applicable to nonfiction writing, but even fiction writing often has insights the author wants to share with readers. Fiction "suggests" them indirectly through plot and character development, and readers draw their own conclusions. In nonfiction, the author provides insights and points more directly, and often includes practical ways readers can apply them to their own lives.
  - Will the writing inspire and intrigue my readers?
- **Genre or subject:** Review the genre or subject you chose before writing. Ask yourself:
  - Have I followed the accepted elements of my fiction genre? Or have I actually written the story in a different genre than I intended? If so, what should I do? Rewrite the story? Or rethink about who my target audience and purpose is? What else could I do?
  - If I have written a nonfiction piece, have I stuck to my subject/topic, or have I wandered off from it? If I've gotten off-track, what parts of my manuscript do I need to delete? Are there topic details I need to add or develop?

Okay, now on to the practical steps you can use to self-edit your initial draft.

### **Saving and filing your drafts:**

Before you make changes to your manuscript, save your original draft file, just as it is, in a folder created especially for this manuscript project. Then, as you go through the self-editing stages, keep file copies of each of your new drafts (see details below). You may need to return later to see when, where, and why you made certain changes, and check what you'd written

originally. This process sounds like a lot of work, but it only takes a few moments each time, and can save you from big headaches, even disasters down the road. Oh! And don't forget to make regular back-ups of your saved folder and files somewhere other than on your computer—it would be dreadful to lose your manuscript files, right?

### **A possible method for keeping track of your drafts:**

Here's how I keep track of my drafts (you might have a method that works better for you):

- Label a folder with the name of your project (probably your working title for the book, story, article or other writing) and place the file of your first draft in the folder. Label that file as “first draft, [date].”
- Then make a new copy of that file on which to start self-editing. Label it something like:
  - first draft edit #1, reorganization, March 20
  - OR perhaps: first draft developmental edit, reorganization, March 20
- Each time you work through the first draft (which could be several times, depending on how many big picture issues you have to deal with), save each newly completed go-through in your folder with a brief description and the date. Then make a copy of that most recent file and start the next go-through, relabelling it in a way that shows what you focused on, along with the new date, such as:
  - first draft edit #2, cutting and revising, March 25
- Take a break after each go-through—ideally at least a day, or even a few days, depending on how complicated the go-through has been. This is a big job and you need a fresh, clear mind to do each stage properly.

### **Developmental self-editing: your “overall manuscript issues”:**

As you work on the first-draft edits described above, go over that list of important big issues you listed when you finished your initial manuscript read-through. Choose one or two of the issues at a time and reread your manuscript, keeping an eye out for places in your manuscript where those problems stick out. Try to rewrite those sections.

If you're not sure how to make improvements, make specific comments in the margin of your file, and make a separate file which lists the items for which you need help. Label it something like “developmental problems I need help with.” File this list in your project folder and add to it as you come across other things you need assistance with. You'll be able to use this list to get guidance from your writing team and, farther down the road, from a professional editor.

Note that some of these developmental level issues might require major changes. If so, deal with them one at a time, saving the file for each set of changes, and starting a newly labeled file from a copy of the previous one. When you've finished self-editing these overall issues to the best of your ability, it's time to move on to the next editing level.

### **Substantive self-editing: your “big picture” issues:**

The “substantive editing” level deals with things like story arc, subject matter, plot holes, character development, and setting. Realize that you are not yet dealing with smaller, more detailed issues like sentence structure and grammar. If you don't get your big difficulties straightened out first, it won't matter how polished your minor fixes are; the story itself, or the subject matter in nonfiction, must be dealt with first. If you correct those small details now, you'll be wasting time as you still need to rewrite, delete, and add during your self-editing—which may make many of your small mechanical changes irrelevant.

With each substantive issue (you can work on them separately or perhaps two or three at a time for the ones you're fairly good at), read through a new copy of the most recently edited file of your manuscript, locate places where you need to make changes, and work on them. After each substantive pass through your manuscript, label and put the file in your folder, make a new copy of it, and work on the next issue(s) with an appropriate new file name and date.

Once you've completed your substantive self-edit as well as you can (though there are still more editing stages to go through—notably stylistic and copyediting levels, and proofreading much later), now is a good time to take a break from your initial self-editing and reach out to your self-editing team for help. But before you do that, consider the following.

### **Some final first self-edit draft considerations:**

You are almost ready to pass your manuscript over to your alpha-reader, a self-editing team member who will be your first reader. This person is someone you trust to be encouraging about what they like, but also honest about any major problems they notice. Before you share your manuscript with your alpha reader, though, here are a few other things you should consider. Some of these you might already have worked on, but for now, read through the entire manuscript once again. As you do, think about each of the following and make notes of needed changes. You'll work on them in upcoming editing levels.

- **Opening:** Carefully read your opening page or two—and then the rest of the first chapter. Is this a lead that will draw your readers in and “hook” them? Are they going to be interested enough to continue the story or learning experience? Have you provided details

that will invoke their interest? Or is there perhaps a different way to start the story that would hook your readers more completely?

- Ending: Does your ending solve the major problem your story's principal character (protagonist) faces, or wrap up the information you've presented if you've written a nonfiction piece? Will your ending satisfy your readers? Is there any way you can improve the ending?
- Voice: Does your writing sound like you? Does your personality show, especially in fiction?
- In nonfiction, have you avoided plagiarism by clearly rewriting research information in your own words? Direct quotes must follow the accurate citation method required for your type of writing. Note anywhere you have borrowed ideas that aren't from your own experience, even if you haven't directly quoted from those sources. If you aren't sure about citations, study your style guide carefully.
- Miscellaneous questions to ask yourself:
  - What are my major strengths and weaknesses in this first draft?
  - What can I do to strengthen my writing?
  - Are there parts I need to make clearer? More exciting? More interesting?
  - Can I use the five senses and emotion more to appeal to my readers?
  - Should I do more active showing and less telling?
  - What anecdotes (in nonfiction) could I use to illustrate my points in a more interesting way?
  - Is the pace too fast or too slow?
  - Do transitions between scenes and/or chapters make sense?

**Don't forget** to place this exercise in your binder or Duotang.

And now go on to part 2 in this series: Some Practical Self-Editing Tips