

AN EDITING GLOSSARY

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1. Audience, Authorial Voice, Backstory, Capitalization, Chapters, Characterization

Audience

Remember, there is no “general reader.” Words do not mean the same to one person as to another. A reader’s understanding is coloured by background, education, personal experience, language, age, gender, culture, and more.

Your target audience—your ideal reader—is incredibly important to think about before you write, while you write and self-edit, and as you market. There is no such thing as an “everybody” general market. You are better off to aim for a narrow, niche market who are looking for your specific kind of storytelling or non-fiction information; those are the people who are most likely to search out, purchase, and read your work in today’s competitive writing market. So how should you define your target audience?

- Why are you writing this particular story or article or poem? What is it about it that makes you want to write it? Is it something that you would love to read if you weren’t the writer? If so, how is your target audience similar to your own reading interests?
- What one person do you know who you think is the exact kind of person who would love to read your work? Why would that person be so interested in it? What characteristics does this person have that other similar readers might have?
- What do your target readers love to read? Fiction? Nonfiction? Genre? Topic(s)? What do they want to know? What else do they read? How wide or narrow are their reading interests?
- What kinds of publications do your target readers enjoy? Books? What kind? Magazines? Newspapers? Websites and blogs? Social media? What about other media such as films, video games, and radio or podcasts? Will your chosen writing format attract your target audience?
- What books or shorter writings have already been published that are similar to yours? How successful are they? Who is buying and reading them? What do they say in reviews or in letters to the editor in a magazine? What does that tell you about what they enjoy?
- Do you belong to on-line groups that are interested in your topic or your genre? What kind of comments do they make? What do they like—or not like? What about your local writers’ group, or perhaps a book club you belong to? Think about the people who enjoy

the kind of writing you plan to do. What are they like? Age? Gender? Career path? Education? Cultural background? Hobbies and interests? Sports? Location? What else?

- What does your target audience seek out at libraries and bookstores? Have you spent time observing people at these locations choosing books and magazines similar to your writing? What do your observations tell you about your target audience? Do you ever strike up a conversation with someone who is choosing something similar to what you want to write? You can learn a lot that way.

Applying your audience knowledge to your self-editing

Now that you know more about your target audience, are there changes you can make during your writing and self-editing to focus more clearly on your audience niche? Consider:

- What might you need to add, change, or delete? How can you be sensitive to your readers' needs and interests?
- What emotional involvement and other responses do you want from your audience? How should your writing affect their lives in both theoretical and practical ways? Do the answers to these questions fit with the target audience that you've defined? If not, do you need to rethink who your target audience is, or can you make adjustments in your writing to make it appeal to them more?
- What marketing methods will best reach this audience? On-line through your blog and social media? Live presentations at conferences or workshops? Book launches and readings? On-line courses or podcasts or videos? What else?
- Have you run a representative sample of your writing through software that indicates the reading level of your manuscript? Is it suitable for your target audience? Have you kept your reading level suitable throughout the manuscript?

Authorial Voice

What is your authorial voice? It is the lens through which your reader sees your story or article. It reflects you as a distinctive, authentic writer. Your authorial voice is your personal writing style, your personal manner of expression. It is your presence and personality which engages the reader and makes your work uniquely recognizable as being written by you.

Your authorial voice includes your unique ...

- **Characterization:** Your voice lends depth to your characters. Uninteresting characters can be a reflection of an uninteresting writer. Characters reflect the author's personality, imagination, and observations. Your voice can be used to comment about your character and can put unique observations in your character's head.

- Content: Concrete details, facts, and observations that you have specifically chosen to reflect your perspective and to encourage reader participation.
- Diction: Your unique choice of words—not just the denotation (dictionary meaning) but also the connotation which will affect the reader. It includes a choice of poetic, literal, formal, or informal style; word play; and words selected by you for particular purposes.
- Elements of voice: Your word choice (concise nouns, active verbs, more descriptive adjectives, shades of meaning), scheme (parallelism, alliteration, and other word arrangements that deviate from the usual), tropes (figures of speech, rhetorical questions and other word usage or meaning distinctive to the genre or form of writing).
- Emotion and experience: Your personal perspective which then becomes that of your reader.
- Expertise in the subject matter. An authoritative voice reflects the author’s wisdom, compassion, observances, and control.
- Grammar and punctuation: Chosen to create a specific effect, rather than just following the technical rules.
- Genre: While your unique voice is important, it will have more authority by dipping into cultural currents, well-accepted genres, and historical/current factual events for inspiration.
- Imagery: Chosen and used to create vivid experience in the reader’s mind and trigger emotion through the five senses as well as through figurative language. The imagery you choose will transform flat writing and draw the reader to you, the writer.
- Identity and personality: Your personal presence which arises from your life experiences, culture, language(s), education, reading, writing experience and craft, relationships, and more.
- Market: The audience you want to target—which will most likely be similar to you to some degree.
- Passions and themes: The ideas, topics, emotions, and life themes that are especially important to you. In a sense, it is your mind, your consciousness, the energy of your story.
- Personality: The authorial voice conveys the full personality of the author, as it reflects the author’s individual views and personality. To a degree, the author’s voice is his or her spirit, intellectual personality, and vision.
- Purpose for writing: Traditionally, to entertain, inform, persuade, inspire, or influence. Then narrow that purpose down to a niche purpose.
- Syntax: Your word order, rhythm, sentence length, repetition, the way you break grammar “rules” for particular effect.
- Tone: Your slant; your underlying attitude to characters and situations. Through your tone, your readers experience your feelings.
- Unique writing skills: The writing craft areas in which you excel, such as in characterization, dialogue, or humour.
- Voice behind a first-person narrator: even felt/heard more strongly by a reader when used with a third person limited point of view.

- Worldview, beliefs: Your personal truth and values which create authenticity, confidence, and authority.

How can you develop your personal authorial voice?

- Ask beta readers to tell you what they see and hear in your manuscript that identifies the voice as yours.
- Be honest and courageous about your emotions and beliefs.
- Imitate or even copy out the writing style of others whose authorial voice appeals to you; copying in handwriting is more effective than typing. Then try out those “voice” styles in your own writing. Are they authentic to you? Can they add to or develop your voice? When you consciously imitate other authors, you can not only discover new aspects of your own voice but also learn limitations of their voices which you’ll want to avoid.
- Create lists of the things you are most passionate about, the experiences and ideas you know and love. Use them for themes in your writing, and your voice will be reflected.
- Daily journaling can help you learn to express your deep, personal thoughts while keeping them safe in private writing until you are ready to share them.
- Learn about the difference between authorial voice and narrative voice (the voice of each character who is telling the story or speaking in dialogue). Read your own writing and the writing of others carefully, looking for the differences between the two kinds of voice—and the similarities, too.
- Make sure your authorial voice doesn’t become overbearing, intruding on or obliterating the story or the voices of your characters. Your voice should blend into the overall story in such a way that readers feel overall that it is your unique writing yet don’t notice it page by page.
- Observation: Keenly observe your world and your role in it. Close observation involves your value and vision. Listen to what people are saying and what they are doing, wherever they are. Jot down the words they say and their actions which really catch your attention. Read widely and deeply. Then borrow from your observations that resonate with your personality, judgments, and instincts.
- Research: You can write about anything you want to if you’re willing to do enough research. Energetic writing and colour come from research such as using phone books for character names, including authentic business names, and exploring brief histories of your setting.
- Review writing you have done over time. What patterns and themes do you see? What has changed in your authorial voice as time has passed? What life experiences do you think have caused those changes? Consider the writing you are doing currently. Is there an “authorial voice” from your past that might be especially suitable?
- Write regularly. Set a daily writing schedule, or at least set a minimum number of words. If you can’t think of anything to write, get ideas from writing prompts, current events, stories you’ve been reading, walks in nature, and so on.

Backstory

New writers are often tempted to dump, right up front, all the “background knowledge” that will be needed in their story. They may do this with a long, detailed prologue (but unfortunately, many readers don’t bother reading prologues, forewords, and other front matter). Or they’ll dump it in the first few paragraphs, or at least the first few pages of their story. What is the result of that?

Instead of being hooked by those opening paragraphs, your reader will feel bogged down with too much boring information and will close the book. And if the reader does continue to read, by the time he or she gets to the relevant parts of the story to which the backstory refers, that information may have already been forgotten. Another issue is that it can give away too much of the story that is coming.

What is the solution?

- Think about what backstory is absolutely necessary, then include it in as few words as possible to still be clear.
- Include backstory in the story where it is needed rather than at the beginning. If possible, include it in a natural way, such as the character having a flashback, or bringing it up in conversation with another character.

Capitalization

Capitalization follows strict rules. Depending on your style guide, capitalization rules may have some slight variations, but generally (after studying your guide carefully) you should be aware of the following rules:

- Capitalize proper nouns—formal names and titles of people (Dr. James Smith) and places (Sanderson’s Pet Store; Vancouver, BC); specific species of plants or animals (German Shepherd). Do not capitalize common (general) nouns.
- Names of days and months are capitalized.
- The first word of each sentence is capitalized (check your style manual for capitalization of first words in lists, first words following a colon, and other special situations).
- If using a person’s title in a general way, not attached to a particular person, do not capitalize (I went to the doctor’s office).
- Watch out for correct capitalization of family words. (I love my mom. I told her, “I love you, Mom.”) Capitalize if you are using the family term in place of the person’s formal name.

- When capitalizing the names/titles of works (books, songs, story titles, etc.), capitalize the first and last words in the title plus all other major words in the title (*The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland*).
- Note that the “formatting” of names of works (italics, quotation marks) varies according to the type of work; check your style manual for details.

Chapters

Each chapter in a novel focuses on a particular scene (or sometimes two or three closely related scenes). In a non-fiction work, each chapter focuses on a major key point related to the topic and theme/thesis of the work. Whether fiction or nonfiction, each chapter should start with something that hooks the reader’s attention and makes the reader want to continue. The chapter should continue the central theme of the overall work, but it may also include a related sub-theme. Some chapters may contain only one scene, while others may contain two or three closely related scenes. And the chapter should end with a method that creates a good transition to the next chapter or encourages the reader to want to read on (such as using a cliff hanger event or statement). The final chapter should provide a satisfying ending for a story, or a strong conclusion for a non-fiction topic which incorporates the overall theme/thesis and topic of the work and some of the key ideas that have been contained in the work.

Characterization

While characters and plot are intertwined, it is the characters that produce and drive the plot. This is why you’ll often hear writers talk about how a character in the story guided them and gave them plot inspiration while writing. Following are things to consider about character development when writing and self-editing:

- What is the central purpose of the whole story?
- How does each character fit in with that purpose?
- Which character is the protagonist? Which is the antagonist? Which are supporting characters?
- Does every character need to be in the story? If you have a lot of characters and your readers might become confused, could you combine two characters into one, or just remove a character that isn’t important?
- Usually there is one, or at most two, central protagonist(s) and one, or at most two, central antagonist(s).
- Both antagonist and protagonist need to be well developed, though the story focuses most on the protagonist. Your readers will want to see, relate to, and develop empathy for both sides of your main characters.

- The protagonist, even as a hero, needs some “dark traits” (inner conflicts, baggage, moral issues, fears, etc.).
- On the other hand, antagonists, even bad guys, should have some “good traits” too. Be sure to develop your characters’ characteristics by showing them through actions and words. Don’t just tell about the characteristics.
- Names are very important. Are the names you have chosen for your characters realistic, and do they suit each character’s personality and cultural/national heritage? Don’t just use names that appeal to you personally.
- Are any of your major characters “stock”? Develop them to be unique, interesting, and realistic.

Creating strong, interesting characters:

- Be sure to use a variety of methods (such as actions, dialogue, attitudes of other characters to the character, relationships between characters).
- Beware of lengthy descriptions such as overly detailed physical characteristics.
- Personality development through actions and dialogue is more important than physical description. Your readers want to experience emotion in relation to your characters.
- Find ways to make your central character(s) change, develop, grow, and mature during the story (what is your “character arc”?).
- Ensure relationships between characters are clear and realistic.
- Make sure you have been consistent in details about your characters, such as hair or eye colour or age—or clothing worn in a particular scene. Readers quickly notice inconsistencies and lose respect for your writing.

Focus on the protagonist

- What is the protagonist’s identity and inner motivation?
- What personal, internal stakes (challenges, trials) drive the character to push through the conflict/problems to reach a resolution in which the character has grown, changed, and developed?
- What external, public stakes make things worse for the protagonist, requiring him/her to push even harder and become an even more complex, interesting character—as well as build reader empathy for the protagonist? Likewise, what internal stakes will challenge the protagonist, creating tension and crisis within?
- What is the main conflict the protagonist is facing? What does he/she want but can’t have?
- Who or what is working against the protagonist?
- Is this a person-to-person conflict (aka man vs man), or man vs nature, or man vs self?
- What must the protagonist do to resolve the conflict?
- What are the stakes in the different possible decisions? What will make things better—or worse?

- Have you included complications and challenges? Does your protagonist need to fight for wants or needs?
- How does the protagonist change emotionally and in action? What does he/she learn, both throughout the story, and within particular scenes? At the end, how has the hero become master of his or her own fate?
- Make sure the resolution has come from within the character rather than from another character or coincidental intervention by some powerful being or incident.
- What personality characteristics (courage, determination, intellect) has the main character developed and used that have helped overcome the major conflict of the story?
- Does your story keep the readers' attention? It will if the protagonist must continuously take action to overcome life-changing challenges. Readers will want to follow the protagonist and the situation he finds himself in for the whole story.

Focus on the antagonist and any other important characters

- How does the story's conflict affect these characters?
- How do their actions and choices develop the story—and affect the protagonist's journey?
- The antagonist must be a worthy opponent for the protagonist, and must also be a unique and fascinating character, though not necessarily in so much detail as the protagonist

Don't forget to place this exercise in your binder or Duotang. And now go on to part 2 in this series: Cliches, Conciseness, Conflict, Critiquing, Description, Dialogue.