AN EDITING GLOSSARY

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3. Endings, Flow & Pacing & Organization, Formatting, Imagery & Figurative Language, Openings, Paragraphs, Plot

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Endings

There's nothing more annoying or disappointing to readers than a book with a great story line that then has a disappointing ending. Here are some tips for your ending:

Good endings:

- Are inevitable and believable—yet unexpected. They tie up the ideas and give a feeling of completion.
- Answer the central story question—the protagonist's emotional quest, the solution to a mystery, etc. The climax provides the protagonist with a pivotal, life-changing event/realization. The opposition/antagonist is vanquished.
- Other characters can react to the resolution of the plot and any subplots.
- Can have twists/surprises that seem at first to be totally unexpected, but on second thought are realized to have been foreshadowed.
- Usually have the hero solve the problem (though in some stories he or she may suffer or even die in the process).
- Have your hero overcome personal, interior issues as well as exterior challenges and difficulties.
- Solve the story's essential questions and themes.
- Wrap the story up relatively quickly, with both the main conflict and other loose ends resolved.
- As in real life, should be neither too perfect nor too bleak, but be a satisfying ending, somewhere in between.
- Should leave your reader feeling emotion appropriate to the story—and be sorry to see a great story end.
- Wrap up the story by showing how the protagonist has grown and changed in attitude/feeling and behavior, and the lessons learned through the experiences in the story.
- May resolve the problem by referring back to the introduction.
- Bring the reader some insight and understanding, and/or lead to a shift in awareness. Reflect the purpose of the story.

- As a general rule, endings (including the climax) should be about 10 to 15 percent of the total word count.

Things to avoid in endings:

- "Trick endings" that don't have anything to do with the plot and characters.
- "And they lived happily ever after" (unless you're writing a fairy tale). (Also, don't write "the end").
- A surprise statement like "it was all a dream."
- Don't tie up the story too tightly; a few small loose ends can leave the writer and readers open to more stories in the series.
- A speech or sermon at the end that explains or moralizes/preaches. Trust your readers to piece together your theme or message from the story itself.
- Do not use flashback as an end device.
- Avoid "Deus ex machina" endings in which a god or an otherwise unlikely, contrived event suddenly solves the major conflict in a way that is unexpected and difficult to believe.
- Don't go on too long. But also, don't sum up the story in one closing line or even a short paragraph. Your ending must be long enough to fulfill the story's promise.

Flow, Pacing, and Organization

The following tips for organization, flow, and pacing include ideas for both fiction and non-fiction writing.

Organization

- In non-fiction, ideas are grouped logically. For example, start with the familiar, then introduce the new; move explanations that will be of interest to only a few readers to a sidebar or an appendix or remove altogether; use headings and sub-headings in longer works; prepare the reader with a well-laid-out Table of Contents. Use sections as a framework.
- Create emphasis of ideas by careful choice of order of importance so the strongest arguments stand out to the reader. Remove or improve arguments that are not effective.
- In both fiction and non-fiction, avoid stray or random ideas. Start off strongly and keep everything in an appropriate order/sequence.
- Watch out for lapses in logic or vague language.
- Use some sequencing/transition words and phrases when appropriate, but don't overuse them. Use a variety of other transition forms such as change in action, dialogue, a new character entering the scene, or chapter endings.

- In fiction, the story is divided into logical scenes and chapters. While foreshadowing and flashbacks may be used when necessary, don't overuse them and don't make them long and distracting.

Flow and Pacing

- Thoughts and ideas flow in a way that makes sense.
- Pacing moves the story forward well.
- Scenes are set up quickly, with only enough setting and description as is absolutely necessary.
- Action is not interrupted by long explanations or descriptions. Omit long, boring sections of narrative.
- Watch out for sections where action is delayed too long—and correct that.
- Point of view is maintained.
- Watch out for and correct any thoughts that are confusing, unfinished, or awkwardly worded. Rewrite sentences/ideas that are unclear.

Formatting

Before you present your work to your self-editing team members and then to your editor, make sure that the following formatting basics are followed. Especially in the case of non-fiction, you may want more complex formatting, but unless you are skilled at formatting, you will be wise to hire a skilled designer to help you with that, once the self-editing and formal editing is completed.

- Choose a style that is suited to your genre or topic. Microsoft Word (which is the publishing standard) and some other word processing software offer "Styles." Use these for consistency of formatting, including indenting, margins, line spacing, etc. Note that when it comes time for pre-publishing formatting, the designer may "strip" the formatting previously used in order to use a more suitable formatting, and it is easier and more efficient if a standard Style has been used rather than a mishmash that includes things like using the "Tab" key.
- Use a consistent font and font size. The publishing standard in Microsoft Word manuscripts is Times New Romans size 12 font, though once the self-editing and editing process is complete, your designer (along with you) may choose another "serif" font such as Garamond, Palantino, or Baskerville. If you are submitting to a publisher, use Times New Roman 12 unless they specify another font and/or size.
- Use consistent formatting for emphasis and for headings. Try to choose different formatting for different purposes. For example, you could use bold for headings and italics for foreign words. Try not to use the same kind of formatting for several purposes, as that can be confusing for the reader. Let your beta readers, editor, and designer know the

choices you have made. Ideally, avoid the need for emphasis by rewriting sentences in a way that doesn't require emphatic formatting.

- Avoid headings and line breaks in stories, if possible. On occasion, you might use a blank line or two (ideally, without asterisks or other decorative markings) if there is an important change in the storyline, but you don't want to start a new chapter. Whenever possible, try to make good transitions with your writing instead.
- For poems, lyrics, and long quotations, use block indent, and single space (rather than using quotation marks).
- In non-fiction writing, use correct formatting for footnotes and citations. Carefully follow the instructions in the appropriate style guide for your type of non-fiction writing.

Imagery and Figurative Language

While we often think of figurative language and imagery in terms of poetry, it can also be used to advantage in prose writing, though usually not as much as in poetic language. Use of your five senses is important for description (as in settings) and in some action scenes. Metaphors are sometimes used as a through-line in prose writing. Here are some imagery-related points to consider:

- Do my sentences "paint a picture" in my reader's mind so they can clearly visualize what is happening in the story?
- Have I used the five senses so my reader can "hear, taste, smell, touch, and see" what the narrator is experiencing?
- Is my imagery clear but not overdone?
- Have I used literary devices with intention? (But also have avoided "verbal glitter, purple prose, and pretty description"?)
- Have I used a variety of figures of speech/figurative language (similes, metaphors, alliteration, consonance, allusion, etc.) occasionally to add reader interest and provide sound and rhythm in appropriate situations in my writing?

Openings

If you don't have a great opening, there's a good chance your potential readers won't read any further. While most of the suggestions here are for fiction, there is also a list of useful ways to start a non-fiction piece.

Do:

- Start where the story starts, not before. Begin with the inciting incident that disturbs the protagonist's life, setting up the story's problem/conflict which the main character must resolve.

- What's the story about? Get right to it. Don't beat around the bush. Introduce your story goal through the opening incident.
- Your opening sentence and/or paragraph must "hook" the reader, making the story compelling enough that the reader can't wait to read the rest.
- Include the protagonist quickly and involve this main character in a way in which the readers will immediately engage and begin to develop empathy. Action should happen soon in the narrative. The protagonist's problem should include both external and internal conflict: you want to develop a complex, interesting protagonist.
- There's a good chance the antagonist will also be involved quickly, especially if involved in the inciting incident.
- You may also include one or two other important characters at the start, but if you do, the purpose should be to establish important relationships and draw the readers into the story emotionally.
- Develop the setting within the first couple pages (time and place).
- Set the mood/atmosphere and tone from the beginning. What kind of a story is it? Struggle against odds? Triumph of courage? Dark, noir? Mystery? Amusing (light-hearted, humorous)?
- Have conflict from the start. No conflict = no story.
- Aim for clarity and simplicity. Get right into the story.
- Think about your target audience. Relate your story to their interests. Pique their curiosity. Understand your genre and fulfill your audience's expectations for that genre.

Don't:

- Don't include too much back story or flashbacks. Avoid info dumps. If background information is truly needed, slip it in or hint at it just where it is needed in the story rather than at the beginning. Dumped at the start, it slows down the momentum and pulls the reader out of the story.
- Don't include a prologue (usually)—readers often skip over front matter like the prologue, foreward, or introduction anyway. If this story is part of a series, you may use a short prologue as a synopsis of previous stories in the series. An alternative is to include snippets (flashbacks) from past stories in the series at the points where they are necessary in the current story.
- Don't include clutter, such as too many characters, too much inner action (thoughts), description, and background information.
- Avoid clichéd openings such as "It was a dark and stormy night" or "Long ago and far away" or "Once upon a time."

Some useful non-fiction openings/leads:

- Anecdote: an incident (true or fictional) that illustrates the topic.
- You are there: draw your reader in the scene; put him or her on the spot.
- Quotation: what someone said about this topic.
- Statement: provocative, astonishing, paradoxical or otherwise attention-catching facts.
- Question: addressed to your reader, regarding the topic.

Paragraphs

Generally:

- Paragraphs focus on one main idea and/or specific action in a scene.
- Transitions between paragraphs (and sometimes within) may include transition words and/or phrases, but if possible, use good writing to make transitions smooth and logical.
- Check for exceptionally long paragraphs that can be shortened or split into separate paragraphs at appropriate points (e.g., change in action, change in character, etc.).
- If paragraphs are so short that ideas seem chopped off or incomplete, think of ways to complete the idea.
- Vary sentence structure with a combination of short, medium, and longer length sentences. Short sentences can create tension; long sentence can slow down the pace of the flow. Use occasional sentence fragments for effect, and occasionally have interrupted dialogue.

Especially for fiction:

- Use proper paragraphing and punctuation for dialogue. Remember that you must start a new paragraph for each change in speaker. If a character is speaking for a long time (though try to avoid this, or at least break it up with actions or with responses from other speakers), and changes topic/idea, start a new paragraph with an opening quotation mark, but don't use an ending quotation mark until the long "speech" is completed.
- Start new paragraphs when different characters become involved in the action; when the setting changes; or when there are other changes in the story. Consider starting a new chapter when a scene changes, unless it is a minor scene change or the scenes are closely related.

Especially for non-fiction:

- Paragraphs start with a topic sentence, followed by details and/or examples, and end with a concluding sentence. There should be one main idea per paragraph, good transitions, and proper paragraphing and punctuation.

- Use the emphatic positions of beginning and ending sentences in each paragraph to good effect.
- Use transition words (however, moreover, nevertheless, on the other hand, etc.) when appropriate to create a smoother flow. If you are writing a how-to or other piece that uses chronological order, you can use transition words such as "first, second, third, to begin with, next, then, finally"—but be careful not to overuse them. They can make your writing choppy and sound childish. Consider use of bullet points if appropriate.

Plot

Three Act structure

Most stories are built upon a "three-act" structure which forms a framework for the particular plot/storyline:

- The first act—indeed, the first chapter or even the first page or two, establishes the main characters, the setting (time, place, mood, tone), the theme, the inciting incident or situation which introduces the main problem/conflict, and it hooks the reader with a gripping story line.
- The second act develops the plot, which becomes ever more complex. The main character's actions or inaction creates rising conflict and tension. The antagonist's actions and other aspects of the conflict increase the stakes and push the main character to act decisively. Other sub-plots may be introduced to create even more conflict.
- The third act builds up to the climax, the pinnacle point of the conflict. The protagonist must act. This climactic point changes the protagonist who finally overcomes the conflict. Through the main character's experiences, he or she not only resolves the external problem(s), but also undergoes personal/internal changes or has an epiphany/realization that changes his or her life, and often the lives of other characters and their world.

Developing and self-editing the plot

Within this framework, the particular plot of a story is developed. Here are some points to consider when developing and/or self-editing the plot:

- The story is believable.
- There are no plot holes. (This is often difficult for the writer to notice—your beta readers can be a big help here).
- There have not been changes related to characters or particular settings (e.g. changes of names, hair or eye colour, change of location, change of description).

- All or most issues (sub-plots, sub-conflicts) that were introduced at various points in the story have been resolved by the end (unless intentionally leaving small issues which will lead to future stories in a series).
- There is enough conflict to keep the story flowing smoothly and keep the readers engaged.
- The story has a strong climax and a sufficient resolution and ending.
- The order of events makes sense.
- The plot has a good blend of description, narration, dialogue, and other story elements.
- The plot avoids minute details which slow down the flow or which make the story sound like a police report.
- Everything in the story advances the plot and the character development.
- Alien movements of body parts have been avoided ("Her eyes flew to the other end of the room."), as have clichéd or overused descriptions of physiology (rolling eyes, growling stomach, etc.).

Don't forget to place this exercise in your binder or Duotang. And now go on to part 4 in this series: Point of View, Purpose, Punctuation, Scenes, Sentences