

# EDITING LEVELS

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## 4. Stylistic Editing Checklist

A stylistic edit is sometimes referred to as a “smoothing stage” of editing. It focuses on the reader’s enjoyment and understanding, and it develops the sense and flow of a piece. While the previous editing stages have looked at big picture issues, stylistic editing brings the focus down to the paragraph and sentence levels. This kind of edit works to clarify meaning, smooth language, and deal with other non-mechanical issues (mechanical issues are dealt with in copy-editing). It works on overall readability, and it may consider reading levels as well as writing style. A stylistic edit deals with grammar—the way words are put together and the structure of language. Stylistic editing also watches out for material that may be considered offensive by readers. In fact, a stylistic edit focuses strongly on the reader’s reaction, including how the writer’s “authorial voice” affects the reader’s enjoyment of the piece.

Writers can often do much of the needed stylistic editing themselves—with the help of their self-editing team—before handing the manuscript to an editor. Also, grammar-check editing tools are becoming ever more in-depth and helpful, so be sure to run your manuscript through one or two of these tools that have received good reviews. Just remember that the tools are not perfect, and they tend to “follow the rules” in a technical fashion, so you’ll still need to check their suggestions and decide whether these are changes you need to make, or whether you’ve chosen to write in a certain way for your own purposes and/or effects.

The writer and self-editing team should consider as many of the following stylistic aspects of writing as possible before submitting the manuscript to an editor.

### **Stylistic editing outcomes**

- Readers will be drawn into the story, feel emotionally involved, relate to the characters, and will want to keep reading right to the end.
- The manuscript will clearly feature the author’s voice, but it will not override the story. A clear authorial voice will draw the reader to the author.
- Readers will be immersed in the story’s world and find it so believable that they feel as if they are there experiencing it with the characters.

- Each part of your story (or in the case of nonfiction, each section of your book) will say only what it needs to. Unnecessary information, words, and repetition will be removed.

The tone and style of your piece will be consistent, and the story will flow well with a rhythm and pulse that will keep your readers following along.

### **Content**

- Do the facts you've chosen speak to your authority/expertise and reflect you, the author?
- Do your facts help your readers get into the story, or in nonfiction help your readers clearly understand the message?
- Are your facts consistent?

### **Creativity and originality**

- Are the ideas and wording of your piece fresh, original, and creative?
- Does your presentation provide novel perspectives and insights to ideas already presented by other writers?
- Have you tried using any unusual language, dialects, or humour? (If so, have your beta readers and editor let you know how it works for them).
- If you have quoted other people's ideas, directly or indirectly, have you given them credit, following the rules of the appropriate writing style and avoiding plagiarism?
- Are your opinions well backed up by strong evidence?

### **Dialogue**

- Does the dialogue sound realistic and natural, yet is concise and avoids overusing the fillers ("um ... uh ... How's the weather? ... How're you doing?") that often fill informal spoken conversation? Does it cover the main points of the conversation without dragging it out?
- Have you used correct formatting for dialogue? While this is particularly examined in the copyediting level, it is a basic skill that every author should learn—and it will make the dialogue much easier for your self-editing team and your editor, and of course your readers, to understand your dialogue sections.
- Have you avoided overuse of speech/dialogue tags? Have you used scene description, character actions and facial/body language, and conversation flow to indicate who is speaking? Have you omitted tags when it is obvious who is speaking? When speech tags are necessary, have you mostly stuck with "he/she said"? This simple tag form tends to dissolve into the dialogue and thus does not break the flow or distract the reader.

- While there are times when tags like “whispered” or “shouted” may be necessary, try to avoid overusing them. Use your sentence wording and the dialogue itself, as well as the actions of the characters, to imply these kinds of words. Also avoid using tags which are actions (e.g., “I can’t believe this news report,” Joe choked). If you really want to use action words, rewrite the sentence (e.g. Joe choked, slamming his fist on the table as he watched the news report. “I can’t believe this!”)
- Does the dialogue of the characters fit their personality? At the same time, have you avoided overuse of dramatic dialects, accents, slang or swearing, and other language which is distracting, difficult to follow, or will be offensive to your target audience?

Have you used dialogue to “show” what’s going on, or to develop a character, rather than to simply “tell” (describe)? Character development is a great use of dialogue. By the way, if you have used dialogue to show, then there’s no need to repeat it by telling about it—that’s just repetitious and annoying. This is sometimes referred to as “trumping the dialogue.”

### **Emotion**

- Is the emotion in your piece realistic or simply sentimental? Does it draw in your readers so they feel what the characters and/or narrator are feeling and have empathy for them?
- Will your readers feel that you are writing from your heart? Will they recognize your authorial voice, your personality and passion, your presence?
- Have you allowed self-judgment or fear to make you leave out or water down your truth? Have you avoided allowing your personal voice to speak? (There are times when it is necessary to leave out or tone down certain things which might result in libel charges. If in doubt, research the topic of libel).

Have you used emotion wisely to build a memorable story and characters which will draw in your readers? Or have you overused it to the point that it is annoying or offensive? Don’t be a lazy writer, using excess emotion to grab attention, instead of working hard to create a well-written piece.

### **Imagery and figurative language**

- Have you used a variety of imagery (word pictures) to create vivid description, build emotion in your writing and in your readers, create emphasis, provide clear descriptions and settings, and catch your readers’ attention and leave a lasting impression? Have you used good sensory details (sight, sound, taste, touch, smell, and emotions) to help your reader relate to the piece and feel that they are “experiencing” it?
- Figurative language is most useful in poetry and various genres of fiction—but it is also useful for nonfiction. Have you studied the different kinds of figurative language and do

you understand their purposes? Have you used them effectively in your writing? Some important types of figurative language include similes, metaphors, personification, idioms, alliteration, consonance and assonance, hyperbole, onomatopoeia, repetition, paradox, vibrant words, and sensory language and details. Which of these could improve your writing? Just be careful not to overuse them or use them incorrectly.

### **Voice: authorial and narrative**

- Is your authorial voice clear and consistent? Does it reflect your opinions, emotions, and personality—but not to the point of overwhelming the story or information?
- Have you included interesting and/or unique, creative details that illustrate your personal passion for the topic and help your readers connect to you?
- Could a bit of humour, irony, or similar devices help to develop your voice (especially in memoir and similar writing)?
- What about the narrative voices of your main characters, their dialogue and their points of view? How do their personal voices help to develop them?

### **Paragraphs**

- Does the introductory/topic sentence suggest the main idea of the paragraph and grab/hook the reader's attention?
- Do the middle sentences provide supporting details, explanations, reasons, examples, illustrations, or anecdotes which develop your main idea and provide evidence for your opinion or point?
- Does the final sentence resonate with the reader and provide a sense of completion?
- Different sentence positions in a paragraph are more or less emphatic. Choosing the more emphatic positions can make a sentence stronger and its idea clearer.
- Does each paragraph relate to the main idea or theme of the scene or chapter?
- Does each paragraph describe a single topic or event?
- Are the paragraphs placed in order so as to logically develop the story or topic and make the chapter flow well? Do the sentences in each paragraph also flow logically and smoothly, with good connections?
- While paragraphs may be defined as containing 6 to 9 sentences, there are good reasons for shorter or longer ones. Look at the length of each paragraph. Does it fit your purpose for the paragraph?
- Have you used dialogue paragraphing correctly? Remember, each time a different character speaks you need a new paragraph, even if it is very short, even a single word.

## Sentence construction and syntax

- Is each sentence compelling? Does each sentence flow logically to the next?
- Have you used a variety of sentence lengths? Did you choose those lengths for specific purposes (e.g., short sentences can create excitement and tension; longer sentences can slow down the pace, creating a dreamy or thoughtful atmosphere)? Does the combination of sentence lengths help to keep the readers interested and involved?
- Have you kept your target audience in mind when thinking about sentence length? Do you use highly complex sentences which may be hard for some readers to follow and understand? Are there any awkward sentences? Can you simplify overly long or complicated sentences? Can you break them down into shorter, clearer sentences that flow well? Can you join short, choppy sentences into longer ones that flow better?
- Have you removed sentences with unnecessary material or which repeat words, phrases, and content—unless you're repeating intentionally for a particular stylistic purpose? On the other hand, are there places where you need to add sentences to provide more detail?
- Have you used a variety of sentences appropriately (simple, complex, complex-compound)?
- Have you avoided problem sentences such as sentence fragments, comma splices, or run-on-sentences? If you choose to use fragments, have you done so with a clear purpose in mind?
- Have you focused on active rather than passive sentence construction, unless passive is more effective in a particular situation?
- When you read the work aloud (or better yet, listen to it be read):
  - Do the sentences need to be read twice for understanding?
  - Do they sound natural?
  - Does the reader pause or stumble?
  - Does the reader feel or sound confused? Are your sentences phrased awkwardly making them hard to understand?
- Have you used a variety of starting words and phrases? Have you avoiding repeating names and pronouns as initial sentence words in a paragraph?
- Have you checked to make sure that pronouns belong to the correct antecedent (the noun you mean for it to belong to)? Do they agree in person (The *girls* ate *their* supper) and gender (The *man* ate *his* supper. The *tree* dropped *its* leaves) with the noun or object they refer to?
- Is there agreement between verb and subject (I run; he runs)?
- Have you avoided weak or overly used sentence starters (e.g. there is/there are)?
- While using transitional words and phrases in sentences when necessary, have you avoided their overuse and instead made transitions through the flow of the plot, change of setting, and so on?

- Do you have dangling or misplaced modifiers? Do your modifiers sometimes seem to be associated with a word other than the one intended—or with no particular word at all? (e.g. “At the age of ten, my family went to Hawaii on vacation.” OR “Reaching the end of the trail, the moon shone brightly.” OR “I saw the car peeking through the window.”).
- Would rearranging the sentences in an awkward paragraph improve the flow and the sense of the paragraph?
- Does the sentence length and structure, and the overall language style (especially in dialogue) reflect the historical period?
- Do your sentences reflect your genre as well as the tone and mood of your story?

### **Show vs tell**

- Have you demonstrated your meaning through action, dialogue, sensory description, and so on, rather than depending on just telling/stating your meaning?
- On the other hand, have you overused “showing” when a simple sentence or two of telling will provide necessary information while avoiding long, detailed scenes that aren’t really that important?

### **Word crafting and usage**

- Does every word work hard and earn its place?
- Are your nouns and verbs vivid and concise so you don’t need to use so many adjectives and adverbs?
- Are there words you use so frequently they become annoying to readers?
- Have you used standard usage? Does the wording “sound right” to a native English speaker?
- Is your diction formal? Informal? Literal? Poetic? Why did you choose those particular words? What reaction do you want from your readers? Does unique or unusual diction serve a useful purpose such as developing a character’s personality through his or her speech?
- Have you used varied and interesting vocabulary that is suited to your audience?
- Have you avoided jargon, lingo, buzzwords, and clichés, unless you have used them for a specific purpose?
- Have you avoided overuse of neutral verbs like “to be” and “to have” and replaced them with more dynamic choices? Have you done the same for weak or plain verbs like “walk, go, move”?
- Have you avoided melodramatic, “purple prose” wording?

- Have you repeated words or added synonyms for a specific purpose such as emphasis--or are repetition and extra synonyms redundant and unnecessary and should be removed?
- If you do need to repeat a word, could you use a suitable synonym? Have you avoided adjectives whose meaning is already in the noun (e.g. tall skyscraper) or adverbs whose meaning is already in the verb (e.g. eliminate altogether)? Are extra words obvious and unnecessary (e.g. “armed gunmen”)?
- Are your tenses consistent and correct? If you have changed tense, is it for a specific purpose?
- Have you avoided “weasel words” which are pointless and undermine your authority (e.g., could, maybe, it seems, I think, somewhat ...)? What about unnecessary phrases like “it goes without saying”?
- Have you avoided overuse of common adjectives like “good, big, little”? Does your use of these words make your writing sound flat and boring to the reader?
- Have you avoided words which are vague, ambiguous, or confusing? Do any of your words have multiple meanings which your readers might misunderstand? On the other hand, are any words so “literary” that your reader needs to look them up in the dictionary?
- Can you replace general or vague phrases (as well as individual words) with more specific ones?
- Do your words and phrases fulfill the “C’s of communication”:
  - Compelling: Have you used active word order rather than passive word order (Passive: Candy is adored by children. Active: Children adore candy.)? Does your writing actively draw your reader in so they want to read to the end?
  - Clear: Use words that are precise, exact, and emphasize important ideas.
  - Concise: Use exact words so you can omit unnecessary words and explanations. Avoid complicated words when simple words do the job.
  - Concrete: Are your words definite and specific?
  - Cohesive: Have you avoided shifts in word tense or person unless you have a special purpose for it?
  - Considerate: Have you avoided condescending, patronizing, or offensive words? Is your wording suitable for your target audience? Have you avoided words that may be interpreted as prejudiced, or show negative attitudes?
  - Correct: Does the context of your words make clear their meaning? Have you used the dictionary to make sure of the definition of words you aren’t sure about? Have you consulted a thesaurus to find a word with the precise meaning you want? Have you double-checked to make sure you aren’t using a homophone or a similar sounding word with a different meaning?
  - Creative: Do your words present interesting, unusual images or provide new perspectives to your reader?
- Have you used street language, swearing, slang, or strong accents? Why have you used these words—just for shock effect, or have you done it for a particular stylistic effect such

as developing a character? Have you mostly done this in dialogue rather than scattering it through the text? Is it appropriate for the writing format you're using? Have you thought about your target audience—will overdoing this kind of language make readers toss the book aside and not want to read any more of your writing?

### **Titles, headings, subheadings, captions**

- Do these draw attention and create anticipation? Do they make your audience want to keep reading?
- Have you avoided click-bait headings?
- Do your title and headings show what main ideas will be discussed? Are they thoughtful and well connected to the piece?
- Do they make the work easy for readers to scan? This is particularly important in online writing such as blogs and websites, but also important in traditional nonfiction writing.

### **Punctuation and spelling from a stylistic perspective**

While punctuation and spelling rules are usually left for copyediting (and final proofreading), they may be intentionally used in non-standard or unusual ways for stylistic purposes. For example, positioning and use of commas can change sentence meaning. Capitalization is sometimes used for emphasis or to indicate formal spirituality or important cultural ideas. Your punctuation choices can affect pacing, tension, and clarity. Have you considered using punctuation and spelling in special ways for your unique stylistic purposes?

### **Some notes on non-fiction and academic writing**

- Remember that different writing formats come with different requirements. For example, in academic research papers you are generally expected to remove personal voice and pronouns. Also, while creativity of content (well backed up by researched details) may be admired, you're best to avoid creative language and imagery.
- Does your writing show you know and respect the expectations of your writing format, and that you understand the differences between formal and informal language and tone?
- Non-fiction writing has some aspects that differ from fiction and creative non-fiction writing. Some aspects you should especially consider are:
  - Clarity: Explain what is needed and remove what isn't; avoid clutter and vague expressions; determine how much technical language, basic knowledge, and context is suited to your target audience.



- Keep your readers in mind: Just because it is non-fiction doesn't mean your writing can be dull and heavy. You are communicating—and that means you need to keep your readers involved and interested. Write in such a way that readers can think clearly about and process your information, opinions, and ideas. Give them just as much information as they need; don't overload them.
- While you may well quote others, don't forget to include your own unique perspectives and ideas.
- When writing a persuasive piece, let your readers draw their own conclusions, rather than forcing your ideas on them—persuade, don't preach.
- Soundness: If you present an argument, is it sound? Do your details, reasons, and evidence back up your insights? Are your observations objective? Have you thought of your readers' possible rebuttals, and included your responses to those? Is everything you have written connected to your thesis, your core idea?
- Is your writing logical? By the way, this is important for both fiction and non-fiction—though in fiction, you can be more creative, especially in your world-building, so long as you give enough background details that your readers will accept plot points, settings, and actions that might otherwise seem unbelievable. Generally, content should be logical and make sense.
- Is there anything in your manuscript that might be potentially libelous? Be careful. Even if it doesn't seem like a problem to you personally, remember that you are writing for your target audience and must keep their expectations in mind. Is there anything they might find particularly offensive? If you are including real people in your story or article, keep their reaction in mind; learn about libel laws.

### **Putting these notes into practice:**

When you have completed the Substantive/Structural draft of your manuscript, again set it aside for a week or two or clear your mind. Review the Stylistic checklist above, and then read through the manuscript again, making notes and self-editing aspects you need to improve. Once that is done, you may wish to have a couple other beta-readers read the manuscript—be sure to provide them with the checklist above, so they'll know what kind of advice you are looking for at this stage.

If you find you have had real difficulty with this editing level, you may wish to hire a professional editor who can help you with Stylistic issues.

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