

EDITING LEVELS

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3. Substantive or Structural Editing Checklist

A substantive (aka structural) edit helps a writer reorganize and reshape the structure and clarify the content of a first-draft manuscript. These issues will often have already been identified in a developmental level edit, and appropriate revision can now take place. If a writer (and the self-editing team) are having difficulty with structural and content issues, a substantive editor may be required who can not only suggest changes, but may also provide examples of ways to rewrite parts of the draft. If a writer has already had a freelance developmental editor take a look at the manuscript (or has personally done a developmental edit and needs help revising the issues discovered), a substantive editor can work in more detail on the items the developmental edit has identified. As you will see, there are similarities and overlaps between developmental and substantive edits, and the issues identified in the developmental edit level can be further resolved in the substantive level.

A substantive edit of a manuscript with several major issues can take quite a lot of time and work, including rearranging the organization of the manuscript, deleting or adding details or even whole sections, rewriting entire pages and chapters, removing excess background information or placing it at more appropriate moments in the plot, correcting major plot issues, or working on character development. There may also be focus on developing the writer's voice, creating a strong beginning-middle-end flow, sorting out the point of view, and locating and correcting plot inconsistencies and holes.

Usually, rather than trying to do a once-through of all issues at the same time, since these tend to be quite major issues, a substantive editor—or a writer doing his or her own substantive self-edit with the help of the self-editing team—will focus on one or two issues at a time. Therefore, the substantive edit level may require several passes.

If there are a substantial number of major issues, it is possible the manuscript may require an entire rewrite. Basically, that would involve going back to define the foundations of the work (purpose, audience, theme, etc.), and then create a detailed, workable outline based on what was included in the original manuscript but in a much better organized layout/structure. Some parts of the original manuscript might be able to be shifted and reinserted at the appropriate parts of the outline, while other parts might need to be written afresh or from scratch.

A writer should, ideally, try to sort out his or her writing issues as much as possible before hiring an editor. Remember, a key reason for editing and revising is not to simply have an editor step in and fix the manuscript, but rather to have the writer personally work through the entire process, self-editing as much as possible with good critiquing and advice from the writer's self-editing team—which will result in one becoming a much better writer. Isn't that a goal well worth pursuing and achieving?

The following are areas a substantive edit will cover—and which an author and the self-editing team should work on previous to a professional edit. If you do as much self-editing as possible, with the help of your team, then your editor can help you with issues you still struggle with, and help you make your manuscript polished and ready to move forward to the publishing stage, whether that will be traditional or self-publishing. As you go through your manuscript again, with this checklist, try to fulfill as many of these requirements as you can.

Audience and purpose

We have already mentioned this topic in the Developmental level, listing issues you might be having difficulty with. Now that you've identified your personal issues, it is time to work on revising your manuscript to solve those issues.

- Define your audience and purpose/message if you had not already done so. Then, make sure your manuscript lines up. If it doesn't, think about ways you can revise your manuscript to make your message clear and reach out to your audience.
- If your writing doesn't suit both audience and purpose, find ways to remedy the situation. This may include rethinking who your audience might really be, and it may require you to narrow down your audience to a specific target or niche.
- You may need to consider if your topic/subject is narrow and manageable enough (or alternatively, detailed enough) for a work of the length you have chosen. Does your document have a clear focus? Or is it actually more than one story or topic? If so, how can you separate the stories? If it isn't a topic that is detailed enough for a long document such as a book, perhaps you need to consider writing it as an article or a chap book, or a series of related posts in a blog.

Details and description

- Will the details and descriptions be interesting and relevant to your target audience?
- Are each of the descriptions and details placed where they belong? Or do they need to be moved to a more appropriate location in the manuscript?
- Are they on-topic? Or have you gone astray in places?
- Do any details need to be clarified or expanded on? Is there enough basic information—or too much?
- If writing nonfiction, do the details provide evidence to show why your thesis is true? Have you reached a clear conclusion that fits with the thesis, main points, and details?

- Are the facts in your piece accurate? Do the facts and language fit with the time period, culture, setting, and characters? Are they historically and scientifically viable?
- Is your piece believable? Even if you're creating an unusual new world, you need to provide foundational facts (for example, different scientific principles compared to those on Earth) that make it believable to your readers.
- Have you used anecdotes, interesting facts, and humour or other emotions to encourage your readers to think more deeply and then respond? Do you need more details? Or do you need to delete some of your details that aren't relevant or are repetitive?
- Have you written anything that is obvious and redundant (e.g. "She took her gloves off her hands")?

Organization and Flow

- Does the organization of your piece at its various levels (the entire story, chapters, scenes, paragraphs, sentences) make sense?
- What kind of organization have you used? Chronological? Thematic? Physical? Traditional story arc? Does the form of organization you have used fit your piece? Or do you need to consider using another form of organization?
- Does your organizational structure develop and clarify your meaning and ideas? Would rearranging the sequence of your piece make it more logical?
- Does your piece stay focused on your topic or storyline, or are there rabbit trails you need to remove?
- Do you have a clear beginning, middle, and end, and does the whole piece flow smoothly? What about in each chapter?
- Does your opening provide a strong hook to compel your reader to carry on reading? Does it set the stage and introduce the main idea? Does it create a mind picture which sets the theme, tone, and slant of the piece?
- What method have you used to make a strong and intriguing opening (start with an important active scene that introduces the protagonist and main conflict, ask a question, tell an anecdote, clearly state your thesis/main idea, give a viewpoint/opinion, use an anecdote, introduce interesting related information)? Is that method appropriate for the writing format you are using (i.e., fiction or nonfiction)?
- Does the middle of your piece follow up on the expectation you created for the reader in the beginning?
- Does the closing of your non-fiction work sum up your points, restate your thesis, and tie your ideas together? Will your reader agree with you and take action based on it?
- If your work is fiction, does the closing provide a sense of completion? Will your readers find it satisfying or will they feel puzzled or annoyed by it?

Transitions and bridging

- Do your transitions and bridging create a smooth flow for your piece?
- Have you used a variety of transition words or phrases within paragraphs, but not overused them?
- How have you made transitions between paragraphs, between scenes, and between chapters? What methods have you used (e.g. new settings, change of scene or action, transitional sentences, cliff hangers, leaving an extra line or two of space, starting a new chapter, introducing a different main character)?
- Have you linked your book's opening, middle, and closing with methods like through-lines, themes, keywords, circular opening and closing events, or thematic repetition?

Putting these notes into practice:

When you have completed the Developmental draft of your manuscript, again set it aside for a week or two or clear your mind. Review the Substantive/Structural 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 of 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 Substantive/Structural issues.

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