

# SELF-EDITING

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## 2. Some Practical Self-Editing Tips

If you have difficulty self-editing, or even the thought of it seems overwhelming, here are ways to change things up and gain new perspective on your writing at any level of the self-editing process:

Read your manuscript in a different order. For example:

- Read from the beginning to the end of your manuscript to get an eagle-eye view before detailed editing.
- Later, read from the end to the beginning by chapters if it's a fiction work. If nonfiction, try perusing the manuscript by sections, but out of sequence.
- Scroll backwards through the manuscript, scanning what you've written. Necessary changes will stand out.

Read aloud and listen. This helps you pick up on clarity, cohesiveness, readability and other similar issues. Some ideas:

- Tape yourself as you read, then listen to the tape. Or read some parts aloud to a listener and pay attention to their reactions; do you need to change some parts to make them more interesting or understandable?
- Ask a helper to read aloud representative sections (description, dialogue, action). What does the helper stumble over? Are you surprised at how the reader "interprets" the section with his or her voice? Is it different from what you expected? How can you improve the writing so readers will interpret the book the way you planned it?
- You can also listen to software that reads aloud what you have written.

Speak, then write. If you are having a hard time rewriting a sentence or paragraph, try saying aloud what you mean, and then write it. You can even tape your spoken voice, then type it, or use good quality software like Dragon to speak right into your computer and have it type for you. (If you're going to use that kind of software, be sure to practice with it first as it takes a while for the software to "understand" your voice and write accurately what you've said.)

Change your physical location to give you a fresh new viewpoint while you write. Or change your physical position: sit, stand, walk. It will change the way you interact with your words.
Listen to music that contains rhythms and language notably different from your text. This engages your brain differently and helps you reset and see your work from a fresh perspective. If you want to play music while you are writing, choose music without lyrics.
Set your manuscript aside. Have a good sleep, then review it again next day with fresh eyes and mind.
Take regular breaks while self-editing. Set a timer for a limited time period that works for you, perhaps half an hour, or at most an hour. Take brain breaks of five to ten minutes (get up, move around, have a healthy snack). Focus on one chapter, section, or scene at a time.
<p>Change the appearance of your manuscript. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Convert it to a PDF file.</li> <li>• Take it offline by printing it out, then mark any problems you notice with a highlighter.</li> <li>• Or stay online but change the font style and size to something that is visually quite different.</li> <li>• Try changing the spacing or margins.</li> </ul> <p>To “revise” means to “see again.” When you look at your manuscript in a variety of ways, errors stand out.</p>
You can also read your manuscript on a different device such as a phone, tablet, or laptop. It will look different on each one and you will notice a larger variety of issues, especially when you get to the stages of self-editing mechanical details.

Here are some tips that will be most useful at the stylistic and copyediting levels.

<p>Focus on paragraphs. After you’ve read through the full document and then read through chapters and/or sections, try reading by paragraph by paragraph:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does each have one key idea or topic?</li> <li>• Does everything in the segment relate to the topic?</li> <li>• Do the paragraphs have varied lengths and are they connected with transitions that make a logical, seamless flow?</li> <li>• Have you used dialogue or other techniques to make your manuscript more interesting?</li> <li>• If you have used dialogue, have you used correct punctuation and paragraphing?</li> </ul>
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Then focus on individual sentences.

- Are they varied in length and style?
- Do you need to split long sentences to make them more reader friendly?
- Do you need to fix run-on sentences and sentence fragments?
- Do you use brief sentences to build tension?
- Do you sometimes “break sentence rules” for specific purposes?
- Are there short, choppy sentences that you can join to make a smoother sentence?
- Have you avoided using too much passive construction?

Examine words and phrases. You don’t need to use fancy, clever, or literary language which is hard to follow. Avoid clichés and jargon. Think of your readers. How can you humour, delight, and even surprise them?

- Have you used concise, vivid nouns and verbs, and avoided overuse of adjectives and adverbs?
- Have you used strong words to communicate emotion rather than depending on exclamation marks?
- What unnecessary qualifiers (words like “very, little, quite, just, indeed...”) do you use that you could delete? Use Microsoft Word’s “find” feature to locate them and decide if you can delete them altogether and/or replace their accompanying nouns and verbs with stronger ones.

Cut, cut, cut.

- Remove everything you can that doesn’t affect the meaning and message of your piece. If a reader wouldn’t miss it, remove it.
- Make every word carry its weight. Tighten your prose and eliminate repetition.
- Don’t worry; if you later decide you really needed something you’ve already cut, since you’ve been saving your file updates one by one you’ll be able to go back and find that part you cut earlier. Aren’t you glad you’ve been saving your file changes regularly?

Add extra materials when needed and helpful.

- Are there places in your manuscript where extra information or detail would interest some of your readers, but you don’t want to include it directly in the main text as it might overwhelm general readers?
- Especially in nonfiction, is there any bonus material you could add to make your book more helpful to your readers or more detailed information which may interest a certain portion of your target audience? Consider adding appendices, audio or video extras (in e-books), links to your site and other useful sites, and extra bibliographic references.

You can even provide extra value to your books by inviting readers to sign up for your website's email newsletter in which you will provide them with links to new downloadable checklists or updated information, and notifications about your manuscript's progress. And don't forget to add regular blog updates to your author's site. Later, when it's time to publish an updated edition of your book, or you have new books you are writing, you can let your readers and followers know about those through your newsletter and blog, too.

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

And now go on to part 3 in this series: Overcoming Fear of Self-Editing