

SELF-EDITING

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5. Writing and Self-Editing Tools and Resources

While self-editing might seem like a daunting process, there are many great tools available to help you improve both your writing and self-editing skills. Let's look at what's available.

Courses and workshops: What skills do you need help with? There are all kinds of learning opportunities in the writing community. These include:

- *Writers' conferences:* Conferences and festivals are available that range from small regional ones for a few dozen people to large international ones with thousands of people attending, as well as online conferences (some of which are free). These are great places to meet professional writers, editors, illustrators, designers, publishers, and more. Many of them present workshops or take part in panel discussions.

You can often bring along a piece of your writing (or submit it ahead of time, depending on what the conference planners prefer), and personally meet with writing and publishing professionals during the conference to discuss your writing. Conferences are also a great place to network with other writers, chatting with them over meals, between workshops, and at conference events. Do an online search for "writers' conferences" and you'll be amazed at what is available.

- *Writers' retreats:* These are smaller events (usually ranging from about 5 to 15 or 20 people) where the focus is a weekend or a week spent focusing on writing. There are usually professional writers and/or editors in attendance who can help you with your writing. Often workshops are available for those who want to take them in. Some retreats include events such as local tours, kayaking and other outdoor activities, wine and cheese evenings, and many other options, depending on the location. You can also find retreats in amazing, exotic locations which make a perfect writer's holiday. Do an online search for "writers' retreats." Of course, you can create your own personal retreat, alone or with a couple writing friends.
- *Writers' group workshops,* either at writers' group meetings, or as special events: Search for writers' groups in your city or region. Many writers' groups meet monthly, or even

weekly, and offer a variety of meeting activities, including writing critiques, special speakers, short workshops, and networking. They may also offer special events periodically, including workshops on aspects of writing and publishing.

Some writers' groups are general, with a wide variety of types of writers, while other groups may focus on a particular genre or form of writing, such as poetry, nonfiction writing, children's writing, or a particular genre of fiction writing.

There are also groups that focus on a particular writing skill, such as feedback/critique groups or publishing groups. If you are looking for help with your self-editing, a feedback/critique group may be especially helpful. Do an online search for "[name of city/region] writing and publishing groups" to find groups in your area. If you cannot find local groups, online groups can be a good option.

- *Courses available from writing-related websites and organizations:* An excellent resource is the annual Writer's Digest 101 Best Websites for Writers list which is published in the May/June issue of the magazine (which itself is worth every penny of its cost). The Write Life (thewritelife.com) website also publishes an annual list, usually in January, of 100 significant sites for writers. Reedsy (blog.reedsy.com) has a list of 50. And several other sites put out lists of their favourites. Just search for "top sites for writers" and you're sure to find some excellent sources for courses, podcasts, webinars, books, and more that will help you with every question you have. There are also websites that offer a wide variety of courses, including ones related to writing and publishing.
- *Courses offered by colleges and universities.* Almost all colleges and universities offer writing-related courses, ranging from continuing education (a.k.a. night school) courses through to certificate, bachelor's degree, master's, and doctorate programs. For self-editing purposes, it is unlikely you'll need the higher level courses—though once you get involved in writing and publishing your own work, you might make writing a career, either as a freelancer or an employee of a writing-related business. In those cases, you might extend your education. But for a good start, consider continuing education or early college-level courses. There are also equivalent courses offered online, through universities and colleges, including quality MOOC courses which are often free.
- *If you are interested in a program like an MFA in Creative Writing,* but find it impossible to attend or afford classes, check out the DIY-MFA website (diymfa.com) which lays out a clear, step-by-step, do-it-yourself writing program which is in many ways equivalent to those offered by universities though without a certificate at the end. You'll need to be motivated and self-disciplined, but this might be a great option for you if you want a more

in-depth writing program. The site also includes excellent podcasts, blog articles, and a community of like-minded writers with whom you can network.

Gather a resource library:

Check the following books out from your public library, writers' group collection, or college library, or borrow copies from other writers to see if the books will be helpful for your needs. When you find useful ones, purchase a copy for your own resource library. Some of them might cost a bit, but they are a solid investment as you can use these materials for many writing projects.

Study the materials. Keep them handy so you can refer to them often. While almost all these resources are available as traditional books, many are now also available as e-books or by subscription on websites, which constantly update them so you don't have to keep buying new editions. The major style guides are updated fairly often because of language and technology changes; thus, be sure to get the most recent edition.

Many institutions and publishers (book, academic, magazines and journals, etc.) have their own in-house guides which you must be sure to follow; don't just depend on the more general guides. Keep in mind that style and usage also reflect geographical/regional differences, so be careful to choose appropriate guides.

The following are books I personally use and recommend, but there are many others available. Read reviews and ask other writers what they've found helpful.

- *The Elements of Style* (by William Strunk Jr. And E. B. White) is a great little book to begin building your personal library. It is frequently updated and will get you off to a good start.
- Style guides: Depending on what kind of writing you do, you'll want to choose and use an appropriate guide (or two or three). Some well-known ones for fiction and general nonfiction include:
 - *The Chicago Manual of Style: The Essential Guide for Writers, Editors, and Publishers*. University of Chicago Press. North American standard style guide.
 - *New Hart's Rules: The Handbook of Style for Writers and Editors*. Oxford. British style guide.
 - *Butcher's Copyediting: The Cambridge Handbook for Editors, Copyeditors and Proofreaders*. Also British style.

- Specialized style guides:
 - *Associated Press (AP) Style-book*. For journalistic and feature writing.
 - *APA Style*: for writing in the social sciences. Publication manual of the American Psychological Association.
 - *AMA Manual of Style: A Guide for Authors and Editors*. Style guide of the American Medical Association.
 - *MLA Handbook*. Writing resources from the Modern Language Association, for various types of academic writing such as essays.
 - *Elements of Indigenous Style* by Greg Younging—an important guide for any writing that deals with Indigenous topics and issues.
 - *Turabian's Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*.
 - *Scientific Style and Format: CSE Manual for Authors, Editors and Publishers*.

- Specialty regional style guides: These guides focus on regional/national spellings, idioms, abbreviations, government usages, and other specifically regional information. The following are Canadian examples; you can search for guides specific to your nation or region.
 - *The Canadian Style: A Guide to Writing and Editing, Revised and Expanded*. Dundurn Press.
 - *Oxford Canadian A to Z of Grammar, Spelling, and Punctuation*.

- Dictionaries: You'll want a top-notch, up-to-date dictionary featuring the form of English suited to your audience. For example, the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* is suited to a Canadian audience. There are also specialized dictionaries that may be helpful, such as *The Dictionary of Canadianisms*, which is a great help if you're planning to write dialogue from a particular Canadian region and time period. Many quality dictionaries are now available online by subscription and are frequently updated.

- A quick-reference spelling guide such as *50,000 Words* is handy—but make sure it has spellings suited to the location of your audience. Different nations have variations in the way they spell certain words.

- *Roget's Thesaurus* or another quality thesaurus of synonyms. Many thesauruses include antonyms, which can also be helpful. Thesauruses come in a variety of formats, so check out a few and see which one would work best for you. If you're a poet, you might want a copy of the *Merriam-Webster Rhyming Dictionary*. There are also specifically regional/national thesauruses such as the *Oxford Canadian Thesaurus*.

- A writing handbook or grammar guide such as *The Little, Brown Handbook* in an up-to-date edition. The exercises in these handbooks can really help you improve your writing skills. Pick out areas in which you struggle, and practice, practice, practice.
- If you find self-editing intriguing and think maybe you'd like to become an editor, or even if you plan to do lots of future writing projects, consider purchasing a copy of *The Copyeditor's Handbook: A Guide for Book Publishing and Corporate Communication* by Amy Einsohn. University of California Press. Good for learning to edit, self-edit, and improve writing skills.
- There are also some rather amusing and entertaining guides available for various self-editing topics. One of my favourites is *Punctuation Without Tears* by Dominic Selwood. Who knew punctuation could be this much fun? Another popular guide is *The Deluxe Transitive Vampire: The Ultimate Handbook of Grammar for the Innocent, the Eager, and the Doomed, Revised Edition*, by Karen Elizabeth Gordon.
- Books on writing by famous writers: Many well-known authors and editors have written books about how to write well. Read reviews and ask other writers what they suggest reading. Here are some I recommend checking out:
 - *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (Stephen King)
 - *The War of Art* (Steven Pressfield)
 - *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (Anne Lamott)
 - *The Artist's Way* (Julia Cameron)
 - *Steering the Craft* (Ursula Le Guin)
 - *The Faraway Nearby* (Rebecca Solnit)
 - *Writing the Breakout Novel; The Fire in Fiction; The Emotional Craft of Fiction; Writing 21st Century Fiction* (Donald Maass)
 - *Fire Up Your Fiction; Captivate Your Readers; Writing a Killer Thriller* (Jodie Renner)
 - *The First Five Pages* (Noah Lukeman)
 - *On Writing Well: An Informal Guide to Writing Nonfiction; Writing About Your Life; The Art and Craft of Memoir* (William Zinsser)
 - *Now Write! NonFiction; Now Write! Fiction; Now Write! Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror* (Sherry Ellis, editor)
 - *Writing Life Stories* (Bill Roorbach and Kristen Keckler)
 - *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* (Natalie Goldberg)
 - *The Writing Life* (Annie Dillard)
 - *The Sense of Style* (Steven Pinker)
 - *Zen in the Art of Writing* (Ray Bradbury)

- *Crafting the Personal Essay* (Dinty W. Moore)
- *Edit Proof Your Writing* (Don McNair)
- *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* (Rennie Browne and Dave King)

Remember to read widely in your genre and/or subject area, checking out the works of successful authors. Include both written and audio versions and even view film versions.

Computer writing tools:

Get to know your word processing program well. For example, in Microsoft Word (or iWork Pages for Mac/Apple), learn to use the “Track Changes” and “Margin Comments” editing tools, and other tools like the “Find and Replace” feature, the handy built-in “Styles” feature, and the many helpful macros and add-ins that are available. Or in Scrivener, learn to use the many unique features such as its outlining system, the management system for metadata and notes, and the corkboard. Other word processors, such as Google Docs, WordPerfect, or OpenOffice, have their own special features that various writers love—including the fact that some are free.

Note that almost all publishers prefer (or even require) Microsoft Word 2010 as the industry standard for submitted manuscript files, usually with Times New Roman 12 font size. If you plan to self-publish as an e-book, you’ll need to convert to appropriate e-book file types. There are useful tutorials, in both text and video format, for most word processors. Become competent in using the writing and editing software on your computer, and, if you are planning to print out your manuscript and edit on the printed-out copy, become proficient with handwritten editor’s/proofreader’s marks.

Grammar and spell check editing programs:

Use online editing tools/apps such as grammar and spell check software programs. Check out reviews (by respected independent reviewers, not by the companies who produce the software—a good example is <https://thewritelife.com/automatic-editing-tools/>) and find a top-quality program that will serve your specific needs.

Editing tools use algorithms, based on thousands or millions of documents, to compare your writing to accepted standards such as readability level, inconsistencies, sentence length, repetition, tenses, vocabulary and word choice, transitions, plagiarism, sentence structure—and basics like spelling and punctuation.

Catching these kinds of issues manually (using your brain) takes a lot of time and knowledge, while an editing tool can help catch them in seconds. Your editing tool can improve writer productivity and help you do your best work before submitting to an editor. You may need two or three editing tools to get thorough coverage, depending on your writing format and personal writing problems.

But while many of these software editing tools are superior to the built-in spell check and grammar check tools that may come with your word processing software, all auto-checkers can still make mistakes and miss errors. Some editing tools are much more thorough than others—so check good independent reviews to see what each tool does and compare it to your needs. For example, does a particular tool take into account: Homonyms? Stylistic preferences and purposes? Dialects and foreign words? Context for word accuracy? Your own commonly made errors? Also, sometimes in your writing you are “breaking the rules” for a purpose those rigid technical tools don’t understand, so you need to decide whether the tool’s recommendations are right for your piece of writing.

Human eyes and minds are still necessary for feedback on things like character development, manuscript structure, argument logic, and overall style and feel. Learn to self-edit these more complex matters, then ask for more help from your writing team members, and finally hire an editor to help you with your remaining concerns. Of course, as a writer you will always need to research, write well, provide quality content, and continuously work on improving your skills through writing practice, workshops, and so on.

You can tighten up and refine your writing by using self-editing tools before you submit your work to an editor, and you’ll not only save time and money, but you’ll be making the best possible use of a knowledgeable, experienced editor instead of bogging the editor down in errors you can easily fix yourself. Improve your writing and self-editing skills as you examine what the editing tool shows you, both in your personal errors, and in the tool’s summary reports which provide a bird’s-eye view of your writing issues. Flagged items are suggestions; consider each one based on your manuscript’s own context, purpose, and audience. Then decide whether to accept the advice they provide in each instance. You’ll also be less likely to make those same writing mistakes in future.

Following is an overview of some current (2020) self-editing software programs, but there are also other worthwhile spelling and grammar check programs. Most of the existing programs are upgraded fairly frequently, so check out recent reviews before choosing what will work best for you. Some programs are free, and almost all have free basic levels or offer a free trial period, so you can try them out to see which you find most helpful. The programs listed below are in alphabetical order, not in any order of preference.

- *After the Deadline*: free grammar checker for personal use. Highlights potential issues in your writing and explains its reasoning. Useful for final proofreads, but not as sophisticated as tools like Grammarly.
- *AutoCrit Editing Wizard*: analyzes for areas of improvement (e.g., pacing, strong writing, dialogue, word choice, repetition). Paid membership. Especially useful for fiction writers. Helpful for the initial self-editing stage and for developmental editing and rewrites. Aids in avoiding common writing issues.
- *Grammarly*: grammar check and proofreading software which searches for common mistakes such as punctuation errors and spelling. Limited free version; more in-depth paid options include word choice, text that needs to be simplified, colloquial phrases, and wordiness. Decent general-use tool for most writers; may be useful for corporate and some academic writing. Offers some free services such as a plagiarism checker. Good for final proofreading stage and learning about technical aspects of grammar.
- *Hemingway App*: provides a readability score (the lowest reading level needed to understand your text). Also identifies areas needing improvement (e.g., passive voice, -ly verbs, etc.), and quality and phrasing which affects readability. Provides a breakdown of how many words, sentences, paragraphs, and characters you have used. Identifies difficult-to-understand sentences, and rates complexity of writing. Free online or a small fee for the desktop version. Not meant to catch grammar and spelling mistakes.
- *PerfectIt*: can adapt English level to US, UK, Canadian, and Australian standards. Checks consistency of writing and writing style rules. Free trial period, then pay.
- *Phrase Express*: especially for technical writing or when specific phraseology is used. Can save specific phrases to use again. Free test version available.
- *Proofread Bot*: grammar, spelling, punctuation. Highlights weak areas that need to be tightened up. Provides detailed explanations which help improve writing skills. Rates readability according to US reading grade levels and Flesch Kinkaid Reading Ease scores.
- *ProWritingAid*: analyzes your writing and produces reports (e.g., on overused words, sentence length, repetition, grammar, and writing style). Basic free option plus a fee-based premium option which includes interactive editing and more types of reports. Useful in the self-editing stages to guide your edits; also useful in helping you improve your writing skills. Keep an eye out for specials on the premium option; you can sometimes get a lifetime subscription for half off the usual cost.

- *WebSpellChecker*: grammar and spelling checks for a variety of languages. Allows you to create a personal dictionary. A thesaurus option in six languages is available. Highlights misspelled words. Includes both UK and USA English.
- *WordRake*: an add-in for Microsoft Word and Outlook, it uses Track Changes to suggest edits, especially unnecessary words or phrases that bog down writing. Useful for bloggers, email writing, and copyediting. Helpful for verbose writers.
- Others to check out: *Correct English*; *Style Writer*; *Ginger*; *Clear Editing*; *Language Tool*; *The Writers Diet*; *Paper Rater*; *Edit Minion*; *Reverso*; *Online Correction*; *Sentence Checker*; *Spell Check Plus*; *Virtual Writing Tutor*; *White Smoke*; *Writer's Workbench*.
- What about auto-correct on e-phones and tablets? I don't recommend auto-correct as an editing tool, other than perhaps a quick check for texting and for social media tweets and statuses. It often introduces even worse spelling errors—including ridiculous words and phrases. Always double-check before hitting the enter/post/publish button. You might actually do better, especially if spelling is a big problem for you, to turn off auto-correct and download a good spell checker app to your device. Auto-correct is not an excuse to be careless and in a hurry.

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

And now go on to part 6 in this series: Your Self-Editing Team