AN EDITING GLOSSARY

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2. Cliches, Conciseness, Conflict, Critiquing, Description, Dialogue.

Clichés

You may have heard that you should never use clichés—that is, words, expressions, idioms, proverbs, short quotations, or other wording that has been used so widely that it has lost its original freshness and punch and may even have changed in meaning. However, there are times when cliché use may be just what you need in your work.

Cliché pros

- Some clichés remain very popular and may even be the clearest way to express an idea. This is especially true of expressions used in dialogue, such as "deja vu" or "go for it."
- Depending on your audience, and the time period and purpose of your piece, the use of proverbs, idioms, or short quotations may be very suitable, helping the reader relate to and enjoy the situation in which you've placed the expression.
- Clichés can be a quick, handy way to precisely communicate an idea or make a point.
- In some situations, a cliché can add humour, especially if you do something unique with it, such as give it a twist to make it a pun.
- Clichés can sometimes be used for repetition of an important idea.

Cliché cons

- Clichés can be dull or trite, leaving your readers rolling their eyes and wondering about your writing ability.
- Some clichés are also redundancies, such as "completely empty" or "a tall skyscraper." Avoid redundancies, especially clichéd ones!
- Many clichés also tend to be exaggerations, which should also be avoided unless you have a specific purpose for them.
- Some clichés are ambiguous, so that the author's point is not clear.
- Many clichés are stereotypes—and you'll definitely want to avoid those.

Conciseness

Conciseness, clarity, and simplicity are key attributes of good writing. In fact, editors and writing teachers often advise authors to aim, after their first draft, to cut at least 1/4 to 1/3 of their manuscript. "Kill your darlings!" is an expression repeated over and over. This can, of course, be a shock to writers who remember their school teachers urging them to add more and more details. Here are some considerations to take into account as you self-edit:

- Remove unnecessary, repetitious words, phrases, and sentences, as well as unnecessary details and description. Make every word pull its weight.
- Replace flat nouns and verbs with vivid, succinct ones that ideally do not require adjectives and adverbs for concise meaning.
- Cut fillers, fluff, and unnecessary modifiers ("There is/are…" "My point I want to make is…" "The enormous, heavy, bull elephant…")
- Delete information that is irrelevant or unimportant to the story. (At the same time, though, you may want to add important action and dialogue which develops your characters, creates tension, and moves the plot forward).
- Cut words and sentences that can be removed without affecting your meaning and message. If your reader won't notice it missing, remove it.
- Follow the "law of simplicity": Don't use a paragraph when a sentence is sufficient; don't use a phrase when a word will do; don't use a high-class word when a concise, easily-understood word makes the meaning clear.
- No matter how well a part of your story has been written, if it doesn't offer meaningful details that meet the purpose of your piece, cut it. But since it is well-written, put it in a file for possible future use in other writing.
- Tighten up your language. Create strong prose that tells a clear story. Don't let the language disrupt your story by calling attention to itself.
- Not every detail of a story's action or every single "um" and "ah" of dialogue needs to be written. Use action to show the key details and minimize the dialogue to what is necessary and makes sense but still sounds natural. Trust your readers and leave some details to their imagination and to their memories of their own related experiences. Only include what really contributes to the story.
- "Pick the best and leave the rest."

Conflict

As an author, you need to be very clear about what constitutes the major problem or conflict of your story—or in a non-fiction piece, the central premise, point, or question. If possible, figure this out before you write the story. Then keep focused on it, and work to solve it throughout

the story. In non-fiction, all your sub-points, details, and evidence need to point back to your central premise.

In fiction stories, there are four common types of conflict, plus a few others that appear in some novels. These include:
● Man vs man (another person)
● Man vs nature (storms, wild animals, earthquakes, wilderness, etc.)
● Man vs society (such as political, religious, cultural and other social issues)
● Man vs self (the character's own attitudes, beliefs, fears, etc.)
● Man vs fate or destiny
● Man vs the supernatural

Sub-conflicts can include related events and problems such as time running out, changing circumstances, changes in social status, handicaps, delays, setbacks, and so on. Since it is the characters that drive the plot of a story, create situations which build strong emotion in the protagonist which the readers will relate to, such as frustration, yearning, fear, or anxiety. Each problem, event, dialogue, and scene in the story needs to relate to the central conflict. If it doesn't, it should be removed. Watch out for tangents where the story wanders away from the main conflict or gets off track and a different main conflict develops. Sub-conflicts should always relate to the main conflict, and while they may temporarily distract the protagonist (main character) for a short while, in the end they should help develop him and point him back on track.

Hook the reader and build tension by creating the central problem as soon as possible in the story. Make the readers care about and empathize with the protagonist's goal(s) and motivation related to the problem. Keep tension strong throughout the story until the protagonist can resolve his or her big issue and, in the process, grow and develop as a person.

Critiquing

Critiquing—helpful feedback on your writing—is an important part of the self-editing process. You may receive critiques from your writing group, alpha and beta readers, writing partner, and of course your editor. In the following comments, we will focus on how to make the best use of your critique/feedback group, but the suggestions will apply well to your other self-editing team members as they too provide helpful feedback.

Your critique group is an important part of your writing team. Whether your critique group is comprised of just you and your writing partner, or is a small group of 3 or 4, or even a group of a dozen (more than a dozen makes it difficult to do critiquing efficiently, even in a 2 to 3 hour period), there are some important things to keep in mind:

Preparing for the group meeting

- Choose a piece from writing you are currently working on. Your group facilitator will give you a maximum length (usually around 800 words, double-spaced, Times New Roman 12 point font), which you must not go beyond. Some groups also give a time limit for the reading (usually 4 to 5 minutes). Practice your reading ahead of time. If you are uncomfortable reading aloud to the group, ask a good reader to read aloud for you, and provide your piece to that person ahead of time so he or she can practice.
- If you need to provide some context for the reading, write it out ahead of time. It should take no more than a minute to read the context information to the group. Practice this too, so you don't go past your time.
- If you have specifics you want help with from the group, write those down, too, to read to them. It should be no more than 2 or 3 points, so people can remember and focus on them.
- Prepare enough photocopies of your piece that each group member will have a copy to write notes on as you read. At the end of the reading and critique session, the copies with notes on them will be returned to you. (Some groups require you to email a copy to each group member ahead of time).
- If you are concerned that your topic or genre might be uncomfortable for some group members, briefly state why so people can temporarily step out of the room during your reading.
- Larger groups usually limit readings to just a few people at each meeting so there is time for good critiquing and discussion about each reading. If this is the case, be sure to sign up with the facilitator well ahead of the date so you'll be guaranteed a reading. On dates when it is not your turn, be sure to attend anyway, and provide good input to other readers.
- Be sure to arrive on time. If you want to get coffee or chat with others, arrive a few minutes early.

At the critique group meeting

There will be a facilitator who will keep the readings and discussion to the required length. If you bring a piece that is longer than the requirement, you may be cut off from finishing it. It is important to practice ahead of time.

- If you are reading:
  - ➢ Listen carefully to people's input. If you don't understand their point or need more explanation, you can ask. But don't get defensive and argue with people. If you disagree with someone's point, you don't have to take their advice. Just be polite, and let it go.
  - ➢ Decide if people's comments really apply to the story. Is there value/wisdom, or do you think it's just a preference?

➢ Remember that it is your writing, not you, that is being critiqued. Don't take it personally. Listen quietly and take it all in. Make notes. Thank people for their comments.

● If you are critiquing:

➢ You don't have to answer all the questions or requests for input that the reader may have presented. Comment on what stands out for you. If you notice something else important, comment on that, too.
➢ Remember there are other members who are waiting their turn to critique. Keep your statements short and concise. If the facilitator says it is time to move on to another member, politely stop speaking. When others are speaking, don't interrupt or jump in the moment they stop. Respect the facilitator, whose job it is to keep things on track and on the time schedule.
➢ If the reader acts nervous or stumbles while reading, don't criticize that. Be encouraging, kind, and supportive at all times during the reading and during the critique time. Word your input carefully.
➢ Don't critique the author, only the writing.
➢ Give feedback that will help the reader improve their piece. Start with positive input first, then suggest items that could improve the piece. Try to suggest solutions. Recommend, if you can, a style guide or other reference that would be useful to study.
➢ Respect the reader's writing style. You can give a couple of constructive examples of how it might be improved, but different writers have different styles, so don't expect theirs to be like yours or like your favourite writer's.
➢ Feel free to share how you "felt" during the reading. Did it make you laugh, or did it move you, or how else did you feel? Be sensitive about how you explain your feeling.
➢ If you felt confused by the piece, be specific about what confused you, so the reader (and other critique members) can respond specifically.
➢ Do not censor the content of a writer's piece. If you aren't comfortable with the topic, you have the right to step out of the room temporarily. If you listen to a reading and don't agree with the content, critique only the writing issues, not the content itself.
➢ Some of the writing aspects to think about if you are critiquing:
  o Characters: Realistic/believable? Depth? Emotion? Motives? Logical, sufficient development?
  o Dialogue: Realistic?
  o Setting: Time, place, mood? Are senses used enough to pull readers into the setting? Are setting aspects placed in appropriate places in the action (not just all at the start)?

- o Point of view: First person or third person (fiction) or second person (usually non-fiction)? Is the POV consistent within scenes/chapters? If more than one POV, are there appropriate POV transitions? Any head-hopping?
- o Action/pacing/events: Does action progress too slowly? Does the reader feel involved/drawn into the story? Does it suit the target audience and genre?
- o Mechanics: sentence structure? Basics of style? Specific examples?
- o Reader's reaction/feelings

After the critique session
- Respect confidentiality. Do not discuss the readings and responses outside of the group.
- Take home the photocopies with the other members' notes, read them, and then make revisions to your piece according to the advice you decide to follow. Final judgment always belongs to the writer, so just use the advice that seems helpful to you.

Description

While description is an important aspect of writing, helping the reader place themselves in the story, it can also be overdone. Here are some points to consider:

- Have I used the five senses in my writing to create detail and description?
- Is there enough description for the reader to visualize the scene, but not so much that readers will be bored and/or the story will move too slowly?
- Have I focused on "showing" more than "telling? (but used telling when appropriate)?
- Are my descriptions well organized?
- Do my descriptions include only necessary and interesting details?
- Are my descriptions reasonable? Do they make sense? Have I avoided exaggeration?

Dialogue

Dialogue is an important part of storytelling but is often difficult to do well. Here are some tips to improve your dialogue writing.

Purposes of dialogue

- Add to and develop the central purpose of the story
- Add to the storyline
- Build the characters: define them; be consistent with their personality, etc.
- Used to give flavour to character(s) or setting through careful, limited use of accent or dialect

Dialogue should . . .

- Relate to the central point of the story
- Relate to the ultimate goal of the character (and story)
- Sound natural
- Provide a distinct voice for each character

Dialogue should not . . .

- Be used as an information dumping ground
- Stand alone. Weave in action and physical gestures, facial expressions.

Things to avoid

- Overusing someone's name in a conversation
- Overusing "he/she said" tags; only use when necessary to identify the character who is speaking. Find other ways to identify the speaker (see "ways to improve dialogue" below).
- Overusing adjectives as tags (he shouted; she screamed; etc.). Show the character's form of speaking through actions, facial expressions, etc.
- Using actions as tags (he laughed, she spit, he complained, she snarled)
- Placing quotation marks around thoughts (interior monologue), as it will confuse the reader with the spoken dialogue. If you feel you must set off interior monologue, you can use italics (but then don't use italics for other purposes in your story).
- Leave out pleasantries and everyday minutiae (Hello; How's the weather?; Nice to hear from you; Um….; etc.) Leave out what feels boring. Avoid introductions and standard greetings; instead, get to the essential information.

Ways to improve dialogue

- Rather than using tags all the time, use details of setting, the characters' actions or physical gestures, facial expressions, distinctive spoken expressions, etc.
- Use correct punctuation. Check your style manual for details. This is very important! Different countries and even publishing formats have different rules, so it is essential you are clear on the rules. Some basics:
  - ➢ Each time a different person speaks, begin a new paragraph, even if they only say one or two words.
  - ➢ If the speaker directly quotes someone else, the quoted material is placed inside single quotation marks.
  - ➢ Make your dialogue interesting and somewhat unique to each character, revealing something of their personality. Use differing speech patterns for different characters.

> ➢ Focus on what's important in the conversation. Dialogue should be realistic, revealing, individualistic, and specific to the story or character development.
> ➢ Use dialogue to reveal crucial information—IF dialogue would be a natural way to reveal that information.

Don't forget to place this exercise in your binder or Duotang. And now go on to part 3 in this series: Endings, Flow & Pacing & Organization, Formatting, Imagery & Figurative Language, Openings, Paragraphs, Plot