

SELF-EDITING CHECKLIST



Edits
by Stacey



Self-Editing Checklist©

Instructions:

Apply these standards to your manuscript before you send your manuscript to make the most of your editing process.

This checklist will in no way replace an editor's expertise.

Keep in mind that there are liberties that can be taken when writing fiction or varied styles. The key is to be consistent and intentionally make those decisions.

Use a style guide to help you organize and share your style choices between editors.

Before You Begin:

TAKE A BREAK!

Whenever you take a little breather from your work it allows you to form a distance and give yourself an outsider's perspective. If you have written a book, take at least a few weeks before you begin editing that work. For shorter projects take shorter breaks. Do something during that time that is completely unrelated to the work that you have been working on.

Do NOT rely on your memory or feelings.

Readers can't read your mind, so your manuscript must communicate the following items.

Ask yourself, "How do the readers know?"

Be sure you can point to specific examples inside the manuscript when you are going through this list.

Evaluate the Big Picture.

Readers are looking for an engaging story that is fully developed and meets genre conventions.

- ☐ Do the readers know who the main characters are?
- ☐ Do the readers know what the main characters need to work out or solve? Do they know their flaws and strengths?
- ☐ Does your story paint a picture with action, reaction, interactions, and behaviors?

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- ☐ Is there a clear character arc (internal goal)?
- ☐ Are the characters just moving through the plot or do they get pulled and/or pushed by their internal struggles?
- ☐ What are the characters' goals, and do they accomplish them?
- ☐ Is there a purpose to every scene in your book or are you filling time?
- ☐ Do we know what the characters are going to gain or lose?
- ☐ Are your stakes high enough to keep the reader engaged?
- ☐ Is the pacing slow or does it drag in any places?
- ☐ Do you get your character into trouble, and then more trouble? Is there a ticking clock or a deadline that adds tension to the story?
- ☐ Are the challenges realistic?
- ☐ Do the characters react appropriately or according to their personalities?
- ☐ Do the setbacks and wins move the character or move the protagonist's arc?
- ☐ Are there any non-essential scenes?
- ☐ Did you eliminate any unnecessary points of view?
- ☐ Delete unnecessary scene settings, backstories, background information, or anything else that slows the story.
- ☐ Ensure all antecedents are clear.
An antecedent is a word that a pronoun refers to.

For example:

Clear: When you see our boss, please tell her that I will be late.

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The noun "boss" is the antecedent to the pronoun "her."

Unclear: When writers are sloppy, it means that they are rushed.

It does not refer to any specific word in the sentence so the sentence isn't clear.

- ☐ Did you resist the urge to explain? Let the reader experience the story and inject their feelings. Lead them through the emotions with tone and expressions through the characters. Don't tell the reader how they should feel. DO NOT over-explain.
- ☐ Avoid flashbacks and detours (minor character deviations, and plot side stories).
- ☐ Do you have any plot holes or loose ends?
- ☐ Do you have unanswered questions or loose ends?
- ☐ Does the story flow and take the reader through the journey from point A to point B?
- ☐ Does your reader have an opposing force (antagonist or villain) that is strong enough to prevent them from accomplishing their goal?
- ☐ Do you reveal too much? Do you fail to trust the readers?
- ☐ Does your story remain consistent in tone and is correct for the genre?

Evaluate the Microelements

The details within the story are going to help keep your reader engaged.

- ☐ Avoid Info Dumps – These will slow the reader down and many times it is information that you do not need to fill in.
- ☐ Do not use too much description.
- ☐ Eliminate too much inner dialogue, broken dialogue, or extraneous language.

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- ☐ Look for transitions and make sure you have enough of them. Be sure that everything flows smoothly.
- ☐ Look for and eliminate clichés.
- ☐ Delete unnecessary stage direction. You are not writing a screenplay.
- ☐ Avoid similar character names or even the same first initials to keep characters distinct.
- ☐ Include details to make the story more real, but do not fill it with too much.
- ☐ Maintain a single Point of View per scene.
- ☐ Use the correct verb tense for the chosen genre.
- ☐ Use the same name for the character throughout the story. Do not change the character's name.

Fine Tune the Prose

- ☐ Be sure you have sufficient dialogue tags to not lose the reader in conversation. Do not use too many. Said becomes an invisible word but if you overuse it, in back-and-forth conversation, it will become a nuisance.
- ☐ Used strong nouns and verbs. Use them to set the tone.
- ☐ Avoided hedging verbs, such as smiled slightly, almost laughed, etc.
- ☐ Deleted the terms literally and really.
- ☐ Avoided quotation marks around words used in another context. If you want to emphasize a word, use italics. If the reader will "get it" avoid it.

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- ☐ Deleted subtle redundancies, such as "he kneeled ~~down~~" or "she nodded ~~her head~~."
- ☐ Deleted *that*, except when necessary for clarity.
- ☐ Choose the simple word over the complicated one. Avoid wordiness.
- ☐ Delete needless words.
- ☐ Check for Active Voice: You want to make sure your sentences always have a purpose. Do not use "be" verbs.
Active voice means the subject acts upon its verb.
Passive voice means that the subject is a recipient of a verb's action.
Active: "The lion chased the zebra."
Passive: "The zebra was chased by the lion."
- ☐ Check your spelling. Use spell check. However, remember that spell check will not pick up on misused words, just misspelled ones. Be sure it is set to the correct language.
- ☐ Check grammar. Grammar checkers are a great tool (like Grammarly) but they do fail to hit all the marks. They miss nuance and they often miss genuine mistakes.
- ☐ If you are using a thesaurus to help you with word choice, be sure you are using the correct connotation. Many times, words have a negative or positive connotation, and you need to be sure that the nuance of the word is appropriate for your usage.

Finally

- ☐ Ask yourself, "Is this the best that I can do?"
- ☐ Read it aloud. If you get hung up on a sentence, maybe your reader will too.
I advise you to have someone else read it aloud. It will allow you to hear whether your rhythm and meter of the language are universally understood.

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- ❑ Avoid lazy writing and choose words that are not over complicated or that people don't usually understand or can't pronounce.
- ❑ Before you turn your manuscript over, format your manuscript correctly.
 - Use Times New Roman or Calibri font ONLY.
 - The font size should be 12.
 - Spacing: 1.5 or 2.
 - Use page breaks between chapters.
 - Remove all double spaces after a punctuation mark. There should only be one space.
 - Remove all double spaces between paragraphs.

When indenting a paragraph, use the tab key on your keyboard. Do not use the spacebar to indent your paragraphs.
 - Remove ALL odd formatting, including strange font choices, footers, headers, and section breaks.
 - If you are using Google Docs or any other program to write your manuscript, your editor will use Microsoft Word and you will be required to use that format going forward to keep the document clean of legacy formatting.
 - If you fail to remove and clean your document before sending it, formatting will be lost, and the document will be scrubbed of legacy formatting before it goes to the final proofread.

When you are ready to hire an editor or want more information

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