

15-POINT SELF EDITING CHECKLIST

*For all fiction and non-fiction genres, memoirs, travelogues, blogs,
and magazine feature articles*





#1

START AT THE BEGINNING

Start at the beginning. Make sure your lead sentences and paragraph grab the reader. The opening paragraph of your story, essay, novel or non-fiction narrative will convey the spirit and tone of your piece, with a detail or two that grabs the reader's attention. If you open anecdotally, make sure the storytelling is crisp and the details accurate.

#2


THE FIRST FIVE PAGES MEAN EVERYTHING

Make sure we feel the tone of the story, understand the direction it takes—at least the first part of the story—and we hear your voice. Paint a picture into which we want to jump. Waste no words. Edit the first page over and over again until you have exactly what originally poured through your mind when you conceived the piece.

#3

MAKE SURE ALL VERBS AND NOUNS ARE STRONG

Also make sure there is noun/verb agreement throughout. Action verbs should reflect the traits and motives of the characters, and the plot of the story. Use action verbs whenever possible, but when you describe passivity or laissez faire attitudes, go with passive verbs.



#5 MAKE SURE THE SEQUENCE OF EVENTS/SCENES IS EXACTLY AS YOU ENVISIONED


Cut up your first draft into pieces and rework them like a jigsaw puzzle if necessary. If something is missing, write a new scene. Sequencing is vital. Everything else follows.

#4 MAKE SURE ALL ACTION AND MOVEMENT IS CRISP

When a scene or piece of action plays out, exit the scene as two actors would exit the stage. Edit out redundant or superfluous words and sentences; edit everything that carries a dawdling or lingering feeling, unless it speaks specifically to a character or the movement of the scene or event (i.e. a hostage negotiation that drags deeply into the night).

#6 CUT OUT UNNECESSARY FIRST-DRAFT MATERIAL THAT YOU WROTE

You will recognize this—extra backstories, flashbacks, exposition, segments and descriptions that help you get to know the characters. In many cases, first draft is about the author getting to know the story; now, your job is to clean up the manuscript so the reader not only gets to know the story, but plunges in with both eyes, both feet and all his/her senses.





#7

TRIM YOUR SENTENCES

Get rid of adverbs and unnecessary adjectives. Let your nouns, verbs and dialogue run the show. Work again on noun/verb agreement.

#8

FICTION WRITERS:

Talk out your dialogue, aloud. Talk it out as you “hear” your characters speaking in your creative mind. If something doesn’t sound right, or sounds incongruent to the character that is saying it, change or remove it. Be sure that all dialogue is “spoken” in the voice of the character that said it. This is a vital editing step, because your reader will know very quickly if your French perfume shop owner has a Kentucky accent, or if the wizard in your fantasy sounds more like an uptight big brother/sister than a relaxed carrier of ageless wisdom. Readers read with their eyes but “hear” the story with their inner ear.

#9

NON-FICTION WRITERS

Double-check all quotes with your interview transcriptions. No room for deviation here. Also make sure you’ve described the subject’s tone of voice, accent, mannerisms and figures of speech accurately, so we can put a voice to the words when reading what the person says. If the comments are sensitive or controversial, you might want to check with the subject to make sure the statement was rendered exactly how he/she meant to say it.



#11

IF YOU START A CHAPTER IN FIRST, SECOND OR THIRD PERSON, CARRY IT THROUGH IN FIRST, SECOND OR THIRD PERSON

Early drafts almost always mix between first, second and third person, because we start with a different tone than we finished the day before, or we simply move through a highly personal, or impersonal scene, and we write according to our degree of feeling and attachment to that scene. Go through your manuscript, and make sure you're consistent.

#10


MAKE SURE YOU ONLY HAVE ONE POINT-OF-VIEW IN ANY GIVEN PARAGRAPH

Preferably one POV per scene, and that your POVs are consistent throughout the piece. Nothing confuses the reader faster than constantly changing POVs in the middle of a scene.

#12

MAKE SURE TRANSITION SENTENCES AND PARAGRAPHS ARE SEAMLESS

Well-written transition should glide the reader to the next section of your story, requiring no effort on their part.



#13

CHECK PUNCTUATION, TAKE ONE:

Aspire to grammatical perfection—except in dialogue or interior monologue (see Take Three, below). Editors and readers will appreciate it. Make sure periods and commas are inside quotes, en dashes and ellipses have proper (non) spacing before and after, run-on sentences and dangling modifiers are eliminated, commas are used properly in series, sentence fragments are used only for dramatic effect, and colons and semi-colons are used properly. Two style books are used more by editors than any others: Strunk & White's *Elements of Style*, and the *Chicago Manual of Style*. Every working writer would do well to own and wear out both.

#14

CHECK PUNCTUATION, TAKE TWO:

Punctuation marks also create emphasis, pace and emotion in your story without overusing words—a great effect that editing can bring out more fully. Periods denote the end of a moment. Exclamation points denote drama. Ellipses denote contemplation or “pregnant” pauses. Colons call the reader to be aware of what follows. Question marks are exactly that. See that your punctuation conveys the pace of your scenes and the moods of your characters.

#15

CHECK PUNCTUATION, TAKE THREE:

Dialogue and interior monologue have their own punctuation guide—the voice of the character(s) involved. Write to the character(s)’s manner of speaking. Does he talk in sentence fragments? Does she speak in heart words? Does he overtalk when he gets excited? Do they argue with respect for each other or do they get down & dirty? Show this when you edit the dialogue, so that we can hear their voices—words, tones, insinuations, the works. Likewise, interior monologue should read more like a rush of feelings or thoughts—or a slow progression of thoughts, if the character is a deep, contemplative thinker—than well-polished narrative. Actually, interior monologue that paints the picture of the crazed scientist in bursts of fragment, exclamation points and double colons is polished.

Reference:

Bob Yehling and Word Journeys

