

Fixing as you go

by Wen Spencer

A question on file management triggered someone to comment that in their first draft, they don't worry about those little red and green lines under their words that indicate that things are spelled wrong or not correct grammar. I posted the following words of caution that boil down to this: been there, done that -- bad idea.

When I started to write, I didn't pay any attention to the little red and green lines. I just vomited out onto the page and figured I would come back to it.

This ended up being a horrible mistake.

First it makes you lazy. I wrote an entire novel this way and learned nothing about spelling and grammar. Second time through, I used the spell checker in this method. After seeing what it suggested (and checking with a dictionary that this was the word I wanted) I would close the window without clicking "yes" and try to spell the word correctly. If it said the word was right, I checked again to make sure it was still the correct word I was trying to get to. If it said it was wrong, I once again looked and closed the window without choosing "yes." This was a very slow process but it leaped my spelling ability forward a huge amount. The same goes with grammar. Find out why it's "wrong" and correct it. I had a huge problem with run on sentence that I've since corrected.

This is basic skill building for a career that is going to span decades. It might seem like a pain, but trust me -- it will only help you in the long run.

The second reason that correcting now and not later is that you can send someone your rough draft and get help NOW without doing a polish. My first attempt at a novel was unreadable for most people at the grammar/spelling level so that they couldn't help me with structure, characterization, motivation, or theme or any of that larger stuff.

Ideally, you should be able to print off your rough draft, hand it to a trusted first reader, and think about something else while they read it. Then you do your "polish" with their comments on theme and plot in mind.

The more times you need to do a drastic polish, the more you will come to hate the story because you've been working on it forever. Also you tend to get a tunnel vision, where you can't see how to fix certain mistakes because the story **must** be this way.

I know that working on your basic skills as you fight to find time to write is a pain, but it's an important step in becoming a fast, professional writer.