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An Essential Guide
from Literature Wales

How to Self-edit and Proofread Your Own Work

Whether you're preparing to send your writing to an agent, publisher, or competition, strong self-editing and proofreading skills are essential to ensure that your manuscript is as polished as possible.

Before we look at how to develop your editing and proofreading skills, it might be useful to distinguish between the two.

Self-Editing refers to honing your narrative by modifying it. These modifications might include correcting inconsistencies, condensing, or expanding the material, or altering the structure. Your concentration while self-editing is on the flow and success of the story.

Proofreading involves reading for and correcting errors in the work. These errors might include spelling mistakes, incorrect punctuation, or formatting issues.

Self-Editing

You've finished drafting your piece of fiction and written THE END. Congratulations! Now **take a break**. A long one if you can. You won't be able to edit your writing effectively until you've given yourself some distance from it.

When you feel you can see the work clearly again, **read your work all the way through.**

You might want to make notes as you read at this point; you might prefer to hold the narrative in your mind. Writers will take many different approaches to editing. Some might make extensive notes and lists; others will make changes more instinctively as they re-read. Some will print the work out or change the font to help them 'see' it with fresh eyes (this is a common and useful piece of advice). There is no right or wrong in terms of approach, and trial and error will lead you to your preferred method as you undertake your main <u>structural edit</u>.

But **what should you be looking for while you read?**

There is a useful 'How to Edit Your Novel' guide on the Curtis Brown Creative website which details what you should be thinking about on your first read-through, including:

- **Genre** – are you giving the reader what they expect from a particular genre?
- **Pace** – is your reader interested? Is the action always moving forward?
- **Plot** – is the plot balanced and believable?
- **Character** – how likely is your reader to invest in your characters?
- **Tone/Voice** – are you being true to your own voice? Is the tone consistent?
- **Narrative** – what narrative choices have you made and are they consistent?
- **Dialogue** – do your characters sound authentic?
- **Place/Setting** – does your setting feel like a particular place?
- **Visual/Physical Structure** – what does your writing look like on the page?

- **Off the Page** – what happened to your characters before the narrative started?
- **Facts** – check them and double check them!
- **Sensitivities** – are the opinions you're including in your story palatable or offensive? How will your reader react to them?

The guide elaborates on each of these points, with tips such as the following, relating to what is happening **Off the Page**:

'Keep the back story of your characters and their history firmly in mind – this should hopefully avoid unintentional unexpected plot turns, and odd actions. I often ask – but what is happening off the page? When did this happen in the past? Why is this character doing this now? You need to be an armchair psychologist sometimes, to make sure that the actions in the narrative feel believable and well-timed…'

Read: How to edit your novel before submitting

There are a number of other great 'How to' guides on the Curtis Brown Creative website.

What's Next?

You've read through your entire manuscript. You've considered the above points, perhaps made some structural changes, or tweaked some characters, and you feel the overall shape is there…

Now is the time to get down to the real nitty-gritty: the line-edit. This time, you're going to be concentrating on ensuring that every sentence is as good as you can make it.

Here are some tips you could keep in mind:

- **Read the work out loud.** This will help you to hear sentences which are clunky, confusing, or too long. Where the writing is baggy, you will usually find yourself stumbling.
- **Be specific.** Presenting your reader with a rich and well-realised world doesn't necessitate great chunks of description. Where you are using description, being as specific as possible will make your writing much more evocative. For instance, 'The room was warm' is far less interesting than 'A crackling log fire warmed the room'. This is also true when describing character behaviours. For example, saying 'he gave an animal-like scream' could be interpreted in a number of ways, whereas saying 'he roared with the ferocity of a lion' is a much clearer image.
- **Have you used two words where you might have used one?** Rather than using a verb and an adverb (e.g., 'she ran quickly'), you might use a more specific verb (e.g. 'she bolted', 'she charged', 'she galloped'). Not only is this more concise, it's also more interesting for the reader, as it gives them a better idea of your character's movements.

- **Vary the rhythm of your writing.** It is easy to fall into repeated rhythms as you draft, but it is important to keep in mind two considerations when you edit your work:
    - How does the length of your sentences effect the way in which the reader reads them? For instance, if you are writing a high-tension scene, you might choose to write a series of short sentences, which will encourage the reader to pick up speed. Longer sentences, with more clauses, might persuade the reader to slow down. Think about when you need your reader to alter their pace and shape your sentences accordingly.
    - Is the reader being offered rhythmic variation? Too much of one approach or the other will inevitably become monotonous.
- **Avoid repeated words.** This is another problem reading aloud often helps with. Where you have repeated a word too many times in a sentence or paragraph, restructuring that sentence or paragraph will usually help. If you cannot avoid the repetition, consider a synonym which might work just as well.
- **Remove uncertain language.** It is tempting to qualify statements in your writing by introducing words such as 'almost' or 'seem'. For example, 'Jessica almost looked scared'. There is very rarely any need to hedge your bets like this. It's fine to say 'Jessica looked scared' if your character thinks she does, even if that assumption proves to be wrong.
- **Use strong adjectives.** If you are describing a noun or pronoun and find yourself using words like 'really' or 'very' to strengthen the description, there is probably another adjective you could employ to better effect. For example, instead of saying 'she was really scared', you might say 'she was petrified'.
- **Delete filler words.** Strip out words such as 'however' and 'actually' which don't add anything to your sentences. 'Suddenly' is a word which can often be cut. Consider which of these sentences feels more sudden: 'Suddenly, he turned around' or 'He whipped around.'
- **Cut, cut, cut.** In *On the Art of Writing* (1916), Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch wrote: 'Whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing, obey it – whole-heartedly – and delete it before sending your manuscript to press. Murder your darlings.' Many writers have adapted this message. In Stephen King's popular *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, he writes, 'Kill your darlings, kill your darlings, even when it breaks your egocentric little scribbler's heart, kill your darlings.'

The [How to Edit Your Own Writing](#) article from Harry Guinness in *The New York Times* references this advice, and contains useful links to more on the topic of editing.

In the article, Guinness offers this useful reminder that a good (ruthless!) edit will produce a much stronger piece of writing:

'Overwriting is a bigger problem than underwriting [...] It's a lot easier to throw words at a problem than to take the time to find the right ones. As Blaise Pascal, a 17th-century writer and scientist [...] wrote in a letter, "I have made this longer than usual because I have not had time to make it shorter."'

Proofreading

You've worked on ensuring your story is as strong as you can make it. Next comes the last part of the process to ready your manuscript for its first readers.

Though there is some overlap between editing and proofreading, you can think of proofreading as a more mechanical process. You're looking now only for errors. Here are some common mistakes which might be useful to keep in mind as you proofread your manuscript:

- Spelling mistakes
- Confused homophones (e.g., there/they're/their)
- Misused, missing, or overused commas/semicolons
- Incorrect use of apostrophes
- Incorrectly used definite and indefinite articles (e.g., the/a/an)
- Missed or unnecessary capital letters (other than sentence starters, titles, and acronyms, only proper nouns need capitalisation)
- Consistent presentation of numbers (have you used words or numbers? If you have used words, have you hyphenated compounds?)
- Consistent formatting (e.g., line spacing and indentations)

Good luck!

References

On the Art of Writing (1916), Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch

On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft. Stephen King

Further resources

[How to edit your novel before submitting](#) guide on the Curtis Brown Creative website

['How to' guides on the Curtis Brown Creative website.](#)

[How to Edit Your Own Writing](#) article by Harry Guinness in *The New York Times*

This blog [What's the difference between copy editing and proofreading](#) (amongst others) on the [Grammarly website](#) is useful in helping to distinguish between editing and proofreading and offers some handy tips, too:

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