



Editing: The Other Half of Writing

By Cyndi Hughes

Editing is the other half of writing. It's where the magic happens.

It's the behind-the-scenes process writers and editors use to improve or polish your story. The process of editing hones the message or theme that you want to convey. Editing removes distractions for readers that can undercut your credibility as a writer. It makes the story clearer and more concise. It checks for adherence to grammar, spelling, punctuation, and style guidelines.

What Is Editing?

Editing involves “big-picture” and “small picture” facets.

The “big-picture” editing process is often called developmental, structural, or content editing. It includes reviewing:

- the theme or premise
- the narrative structure to determine whether it provides a solid foundation for telling the story in a compelling way
- the plot
- the narrative voice for the story
- character development and motivations
- the supporting facts and events to ensure that they build a clear case for the theme and the type of story the author is telling.
- missing scenes, plotlines, characters, or other information that create gaps in the story or book.
- Adherence to expected tropes for the story's genre

This type of editing is like putting together the pieces of a story puzzle.

“Small-picture” editing involves two other forms of editing: copyediting and proofreading.

- Copyediting ensures that grammar, spelling, punctuation, and tenses are correct and that your story conforms to style guidelines. It also watches for factual errors, missing information, or continuity problems. It can often include what is called line editing, which is a line-by-line examination of syntax, continuity, “clunky”

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phrasing, or word choice (yes, “clunky” is an official editing term!), transitions, voice, tone, etc. I’ve always thought of it as being like running a comb through tangled hair to get it all smooth and shiny.

- Proofreading is a final pass (or review) to catch any remaining errors and includes checking embedded links, page breaks, chapter headings, and double-checking basic facts such as dates, names, and titles.

How Do You Learn Self-Editing?

As a writer, one of the best skills you can learn is how to self-edit your work before submitting it to your editor, agent, or publisher. Yet editing yourself is one of the hardest things to do.

Learning how to edit can happen by osmosis: If you read enough good stories and work with good writers, editors, mentors, and professors, you will start developing an innate sense of story structure. To become a good editor, you need to put in your time. Remember the 10,000 hours rule, popularized by Malcolm Gladwell in *Outliers*, and invest the time required to develop and hone your editing skills.

One way to start learning is to pay attention to the feedback you get from other experienced writers or editors. Understanding the feedback you receive will improve your writing and your skill set over time.

When you begin, remember this: Don’t take feedback or criticism personally. Editing is a team sport, and you, any writers you work with, your agent, and your editors all work together to put out the best book or article for your ideal readers.

Over time, you’ll start thinking like an editor whenever you’re reading stories by other reporters, reading books, listening to podcasts, or watching television news and even movies and television shows.

The Self-Editing Checklist

Here’s a self-editing checklist you can use:

- Start by being kind to yourself. The first (or even the second or the third) draft of your book or story is rarely your final draft. And that’s okay. From then on, you’re editing and rewriting.
- Be sure your book or story answers the question “So what?” For a book, that can be a question to ask with key points or actions in the story. If the answer is “Who cares?” consider revising or deleting the offending point, action, or character (dare I mention Jar Jar Binks from *Star Wars: The Attack of the Clones*?)
- Make sure your story or book has covered the five Ws and one H:
 - Who?
 - What?
 - When?
 - Where?
 - Why?
 - How?

- Examine your story or book’s structure and make sure it aligns with the story-structure expectations for the type of book you’re writing or for whatever news outlet you’re working for.
- Double-check all facts and sources and do not take any facts for granted. Remember the famous journalism maxim: “If your mother says she loves you, check it out.” It never hurts to find one or two other sources.
- Make sure all verbs and subjects agree. Examples:

Agatha Christie and Ellery Queen is my favorite mystery author. (*No, they ain’t.*)

Facebook is changing their algorithms again. (*No, they are not.*)
- Be ruthless with adjectives and adverbs. As author Stephen King says in his classic book *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, “The road to Hell is paved with adverbs.” Just for the heck of it, let’s add “adjectives” to that! When in doubt, delete adverbs and adjectives. Example:

Bill deceptively stepped back and then carefully took a shot from 6 meters away.
- Avoid passive voice and use active voice. Polish your prose and use simple, direct language with strong nouns and active verbs. Example:

Curiosity killed the cat” instead of “It was curiosity that caused the cat to be killed.”
- Eliminate wasted words. Rewrite any sentences starting with “There is” or “There are.” Delete words like “now,” “currently,” “presently,” “really,” “very,” or other redundant words.
- Always, always, always check spelling. The dictionary is your friend!
- Check punctuation. A magazine once printed this comma-deficient headline: “Rachael Ray finds inspiration in cooking her family and her dog.” Let’s hope she didn’t actually do that!
- Make sure all quotations and facts include correct attribution.
- Make sure verb tenses are consistent. Don’t jump back and forth between past and present tenses.
- Review your story for compliance with preferred style guidelines. For journalism, the go-to stylebooks are the *Associated Press Stylebook* and *The Bloomberg Way: A Guide for Reporters and Editors*. For books, most publishers use *The Chicago Manual of Style* or the *MLA Handbook*.
- Use placeholders for anything you need to track down or confirm. If you’re editing and keep stopping to find missing information, that interrupts your editing flow. Finish your editing pass first, then go back and add those missing pieces. Journalists often use an old typesetting abbreviation of “TK” to indicate details or text “to come.” Professor Rick Dunham uses “TK” for details that are “to come.” Others use “xxxxx” for missing facts and “00” for missing numbers. Make sure to fill in those facts before submitting your book or story to your editor.

- Check continuity for details. If a character’s eyes are blue on page 17, they shouldn’t be brown on page 52. If a character’s name is consistently spelled “Cyndi” in chapters 17 through 23, it should not be “Cindi” in later chapters – but be sure you know which one is correct!
- Watch for transitions, especially missing transitions. The story should flow naturally from section to section. Avoid lazy transitions such as “meanwhile,” “but,” “on the other hand,” or “in other business.”
- Before submitting your work, proofread it one more time. Here’s my favorite trick: Read it from the bottom to the top or from right to left (or left to right, depending on your preferred language) to look for typographical errors and final small problems.

Perhaps the single most-important editing skill you can develop is paying attention to your own Inner Reader. You have one; you might not yet be aware of it. Whenever you’re reading a book or magazine or watching movies or television, notice that tiny voice in your head commenting on what you’re reading or seeing.

- Where do you get bored and catch your Inner Reader yawning?
- Where does the story or book zip along for you?
- Where do you stop reading? What brought you to a halt?
- When does your Inner Reader start screaming in delight, “Whoa! I didn’t see that coming!”
- When does your Inner Reader say, “This is just ridiculous!” right before throwing the book or magazine across the room or hitting “stop” on your remote?
- When do you get to “The End” and immediately turn back to the beginning to start rereading the book or re-watching the movie again?

At first, you might think you don’t have an Inner Reader, but just keep listening for it. The more you read, your Inner Reader will eventually appear.

One final tip: Find a mentor! Working with an experienced writer or editor and reading behind him or her can be one of the best ways to learn about editing.

This article is adapted from Cyndi Hughes’s lecture to Professor Richard S. Dunham’s Basic News Writing course at the Global Business Journalism program at Tsinghua University in Beijing in October 2020.

About Cyndi Hughes

Cyndi Hughes is the founder of [Booktique Consulting](#), a firm that advises new and established authors on writing, publishing, and marketing their books so they’ll find their perfect readers as well as helping authors establish and upgrade their author careers.

Hughes is the former deputy executive editor and copy chief at *Texas Monthly*, the founding director of the Texas Book Festival, and the former executive director of the Writers’ League of Texas. Her experience includes writing, book editing and production, publishing consulting, book publicity/media campaigns, book tours, author speaking engagements, and special events for authors. She has a bachelor’s in journalism from the University of Kansas and lives in Austin, Texas.