

# Self-Editing Your Novel

*a guide by*

 LIMINAL PAGES



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## Who is this for?

If you're a writer with a completed draft and you want to make sure you have a brilliant novel, this is for you. Whether you want to self-publish or submit to agents, self-editing your novel will help you make it the best it can be.

## Why self-edit?

### **Get the most value from your editor**

Self-editing is the first step in the process, but later down the line you might decide to invest in a professional edit. Keep in mind that if your editor is fiddling with simple fixes or grappling with bigger story-telling issues that you could have already addressed, you won't get the most valuable feedback from them.

### **Save money**

Why pay someone to fix what you can fix yourself? The more time your editor will have to spend on your manuscript, the more expensive the process will be.

### **Improve your writing skills**

Writing is your passion, so you want to improve your craft, right? Not only will you learn a lot from the process of editing itself, but if your manuscript is in the best possible shape before you hand it over to your editor, the feedback you'll receive will help you discover further ways to improve your writing – from the next book onwards!

## 1 Get Some Headspace

You've finished your first draft! Hurray! Crack out the champagne (and cake) and celebrate – you certainly deserve it! Enjoy the feeling while it lasts, though, because the hard work's not over yet.

Don't rush into your revisions straight away. You'll want to look at your novel with a fresh perspective (or as fresh as you can get). Instead, leave your draft alone, and stick a date in your diary – at least a month away – for when you'll begin the next stage.

## 2 Do a Quick Read

I'm not going to lie ... this is harder than it sounds. Once you've set your manuscript aside and given it enough time, it's time to start draft two. But don't make any changes yet! Instead, read through the whole book quickly.

I recommend printing it out, sending the document to your Kindle, or using a print-on-demand service (such as Lulu.com – make sure you publish it privately) in order to save your eyes from staring at a computer screen and to give you a more authentic reader experience of your novel.

If there are any major issues that stand out to you (flat characters, plot points that don't make sense, scenes that send you to sleep), jot them down. However, don't fill more than one side of an A4 piece of paper! The point here is to get a full view of your novel, not to pull it apart in detail – yet.



### 3 Find the Core

Now you've read the draft through and made a few preliminary notes, can you summarise the core of your novel? I'm not talking about the plot – I'm talking about the universal theme that resonates throughout your book and pumps life through it.

The core of your novel keeps your plot focussed and drives your characters forward. For example, the core concept of *Great Expectations* might be: 'Self-improvement is defined by affection, loyalty and morality, not social advancement.' The core concept of *Harry Potter* might be: 'Bravery and friendship is more powerful than cruelty and dictatorship.'

If you planned your novel before you wrote it, you might already have a variation of this. If so, is it still the same? The core of your novel may not have been in the forefront of your mind as you wrote it, but it may have emerged naturally. If you're able to identify the core concept, you'll be able to strengthen it in your redraft and make your whole story feel more coherent.

### 4 Poke at the Structure

Once you've found the core concept of your novel, put this aside for a moment. It's time to look at the overall structure of your story, the bones upon which everything else is built. Use a table like the one below to briefly summarise the following: where your story starts, each major turning point (where

the story changes significantly – use more rows if necessary), and how your story ends.

Don't worry about subplots – just think about the main story. Note the page span for each of these points and work out what percentage of the book this takes up ( $100 / \text{total page number} \times \text{number of pages of that section}$ ) and rate the level of tension from 1 to 5 (least to most).

	SUMMARY	PAGES	PERCENTAGE	TENSION (1–5)
Beginning				
Turning Point 1				
Midpoint				
Turning Point 2				
Ending				

Things to think about:

- At the end of your novel, are things significantly different from how they started? (Either your main character, the situation or both must be different. Normality may be restored, for example, but your main character must be changed by the experience.) If not, think about how you could change this.

- Are any sections significantly longer or shorter than others? Does the progression of the plot feel balanced? (The sections don't have to be equal in length, but if your ending takes up only 2% of your story, it might indicate that it's rushed, for example.) If your novel is not balanced, think about whether sections could be reduced or expanded.
- Are all the tension ratings similar? If they're all low, you risk boring your reader. If they're all high, you risk exhausting your reader!
- The tension ratings don't necessarily have to rise consistently, but your ending should have a relatively high rating so that the rest of your novel feels like it's building towards something.
- Keep in mind that contrast increases effect: dramatic tension is more effective when balanced with spells of low tension.
- Novels in different genres will be paced differently. A thriller may have many more high-tension turning points than a literary novel, for example.

## 5

## Make Sure Your Scenes Are Working

Now you've assessed the main structure of your novel, it's time to get a bit closer. It's useful to think of your novel as a sequence of scenes.

Scenes are capsules in which compelling characters undertake significant actions in a vivid and memorable way that allows the events to feel as though they are happening in real time. When strung together, individual scenes add up to build plots and storylines.

— Jordan E. Rosenfeld, *Make a Scene*



Open up a new Word document or take a new page in your notebook. Using chapter numbers/titles as your headings, summarise each scene in your novel. (So you might have three short paragraphs under 'Chapter 2' to describe the three scenes in that chapter.)

Are you using too much summary? Are there lots chunks of explanation, information or backstory that seem disconnected from any sense of place, character or action? If so, consider how you might instead weave these sections into scenes – or perhaps you don't need these bits at all? Alternatively, are you describing too many small and mundane details? If so, perhaps you need more summary.

Do your scenes each have a clear purpose and structure? Do they advance the plot? If not, consider ways you could revise these scenes to make them serve a necessary purpose.

## 6 Check Your Point of View

A novel needs to be told through a perspective. Two characters will never tell the same story; they will tell two different stories. (Simply put, your experience of the world is different to mine .)

POV matters – you can't switch from one character's perspective to another without repercussions. Take a look at your scenes again. Are they told from a specific point of view, or does the perspective jump from head to head? If it does, does this fit with your novel's overall style, or is this a lapse (i.e. the rest of the novel or scene is told from only one character's perspective)?

If the POV jumps around, is there a strong reason for this? You might be losing the opportunity for dramatic tension by doing this, or worse, completely confusing your reader. Rewrite scenes that might need their POV changed.

## 7 Scrutinise Your Characters

Are your characters well-rounded and believable? ... What makes a believable character? Details of appearance, depth of emotion – these things make your characters more vivid on the page. Quirks and differentiation between characters, what they do, the way they move and speak – these make your characters more original.

Think about the personality traits that give your characters strength. Do these have possible negative flip-sides? For example, a confident character might also be brattish and impatient. A loyal character might also be easily fooled. Don't make your characters perfect. Perfect characters are unrealistic and hugely boring.

Do your characters serve a purpose? Have you got any characters that don't add much to the story? If so, can you cut or merge them? Your main character doesn't necessarily have to be likeable, but they need some redeeming features and a noble cause (sometimes even the antagonist thinks they're doing the right thing) so your readers are still able to root for them. Where necessary, rewrite your character descriptions and actions to make them vivid and believable.

## 8

# Interrogate Your Villain

Does your novel *need* a baddie? A Voldemort to your Harry? A Sauron to your Frodo? In short, no. But you still need an antagonistic force that provides something for your protagonist to battle against. An apocalyptic wasteland full of cannibals, perhaps. Or even another side of the protagonist him or herself (think Jekyll and Hyde).

If your novel does have a villain in the classic sense, though, make sure he or she is not simply evil for the sake of it (unless, erm, your hero is Buffy fighting The First Evil, for example). Your villain needs to be just as rounded and motivated as your hero.

What do they want, and why does this pitch them against your protagonist? What personality traits could redeem them in some way? Do they have positive character traits that have been twisted until they are negative, perhaps?

All these things will make the opposing force in your novel all the more compelling, and your protagonist's battle all the more satisfying.

## 9

# Nail Your Ending

You've given your novel a strong sense of theme and purpose, made sure the structure is balanced and satisfying, smoothed out any point of view issues, and spruced-up your characters. Now let's look at the end of your book.

Endings are hugely important. Have you ever read an amazing book only to be bitterly disappointed by a poor ending? Don't write that book. Leave a lasting impression. This is what it's all been building towards ...

Obviously, you must make sure that the main plot is resolved. Your protagonist must achieve (or possibly fail) what they set out to do. Sub-plots, too, must be neatly resolved by the end of your story.

If you're planning to write a sequel, this doesn't mean you can just stop the story in the middle and save the rest for book two. Each book in a series must contain a fully formed story, even if that story is part of a larger narrative.

As mentioned before, raise the tension towards the end of your book and finish with a bang (climax). But don't end there. For a story to feel complete, and for a reader to be left feeling satisfied, there should also be a fall in action (the *dénouement*) after the big finalé.

This allows the reader to once again catch their breath, allows them to see the after-effects of the climax and everything the novel has been building towards, and provides the space for all the loose ends to be explained or resolved.

Read your ending. Does it achieve these things? Does it reach a climax and then fall into a *dénouement*? Is everything that needs to be resolved, resolved? If not, revise.

## 10

## Improve Your Sentences

Now you've done the macro work (wipe the sweat from your brow and have some more chocolate), it's time to get into the nitty-gritty part of editing: the sentences. This is where you go over your draft with a fine-toothed comb. Here are some things to think about:

- Are your sentences fully formed? (Run-on sentences – where a comma is used instead of a full stop – is a common issue among new writers.)
- Are your words specifically descriptive? For example, do you say 'said quietly' when 'whispered' would be a better choice?
- Do you have any unnecessary phrases (especially related to movement)? For example, 'She nodded her head' (what else would she nod?) or 'He reached out his arm' (as opposed to ...?).
- Do your sentences follow cause and effect? Nothing is more disorientating than reading sentence after sentence where the actions are reversed. For example, 'Before he ran down the road, he pulled on his shoes.'
- Are you using 'as' as an incorrect connector? I see this a lot. 'As she stubbed her toe, she cried out in pain.' That's incorrect because 'as' describes two or more things that are happening at the same time. In this example, she cried out in pain *because* she stubbed her toe, so we need one action before the other.
- Do you over-use a certain sentence structure? 'As' sentences is one example. Another could be always starting sentences with 'He' or 'She', or

with –ing clauses, e.g. ‘Thinking it would be a good idea, he stuck his hand in the box. Not realising what was inside, he smiled. Feeling the creature sink its teeth into his flesh, he cried out in terror.’

- Are your sentences constructed for best effect? Do they flow smoothly, vary in rhythm and express your intentions clearly?

## 11 Bring Your Writing to Life

As you revise your sentences, pay attention to what you’ve written as well as the way you’ve written it. Vivid, specific details (e.g. ‘a purple tulip’ rather than ‘a flower’) allow your reader to picture your words more easily.

Engage all the senses – touch, smell and taste as well as sight and sound. Avoid clichés and instead pair unexpected words or ideas together to create originality in your writing. The brain delights in the unexpected, and your readers will enjoy your writing style all the more for it.

## 12 Recruit Your Beta Readers

Now you’ve addressed the macro elements of your novel and gone through the writing in detail, you should have a solid draft. Your closeness to the book means it’s impossible for you to see it from a reader’s perspective. That’s where your beta readers come in.

Recruit some trusted readers (five would be a good number) who are not family or friends. Your ideal reader should definitely be widely read in the



genre of your book. Ask them to read your book and give you their thoughts (in exchange for a favour, chocolate or simply eternal gratitude).

## 13 Collate and Assess the Feedback

Once you've received all your beta reader feedback, take a deep breath. Remember: the very nature of (useful) feedback is constructively critical. But equally important to remember: YOU are the author. You don't have to make any of the changes your readers suggest if you don't want to.

However, think seriously about anything that crops up in more than one person's feedback and consider if there's anything you can do to address common issues.

## 14 Redraft as Necessary

Once you've had a think about what feedback to ignore and what feedback to act upon, redraft your novel again.

This may be painful and take time if there are some big issues you want to address (though hopefully your revision process has ironed out most of these), or you may simply need to rewrite troublesome scenes, or iron out a writing tic.

## 15 Find an Editor

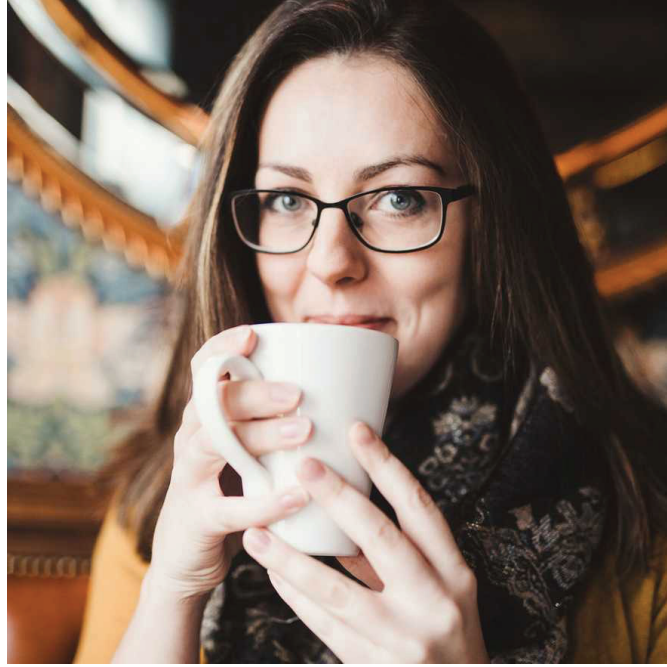
Good work! You've worked hard on revising your manuscript. Now STOP TINKERING. There is no such thing as perfection, and you could even do more harm than good by continuously fiddling with your book at this stage.

Once you're happy that you've done the best job possible, it's time to hire some professional help to get your novel to the next level. Luckily for you, I've written an extensive guide on finding the right editor for you.

Hop over to my blog to read [Everything You Need to Know About Finding and Hiring a Freelance Book Editor](#).

*Thanks for reading*

If you think others would benefit from reading this, please feel free to forward it to them.



**Sophie Playle** is a professional fiction editor. She specialises in copy-editing and critiquing, working directly with authors. Speculative fiction, fantasy, science fiction and literary fiction are her specialist genres. She's an Advanced Professional Member of the Society for Editors and Proofreaders and has a Creative Writing MA from Royal Holloway, University of London. For more writing advice and editorial services, go to:

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