

SELF-EDIT CHECKLIST

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Pass #1: Overall story (developmental edits)

1. Characters

a. For all characters

- i. Is every character needed, or can some be dropped?
- ii. Examine character sheets and revise as needed, then look for personality inconsistencies, etc. in the story.
- iii. Are the characters given appropriate weight considering their story role?
- iv. Does the character have discernible goals, motivations, and obstacles?
- v. Are the characters believable? Do they act like real people? Are they complex?
- vi. Are the characters complex? Compelling and intriguing? Do they “jump off the page”?
- vii. Is the character making the best moves they can from their point of view?
- viii. Any stereotyping?
- ix. Do the characters grow or change?
- x. Are the characters better revealed by the story’s end?

b. Protagonist(s)

- i. What does the protagonist(s) yearn for?
- ii. Make it clear at the beginning what the protagonist(s)’s goal is, and what the stakes are. Then periodically remind the reader.
- iii. Is the main character threatened with “death?” (physical, professional, and/or psychological)
- iv. Does the protagonist actively pursue their goals? Are they passionate about them?
- v. Does the protagonist solve their own problems? (They should not be passive or rely on coincidences.) Are they resourceful?

c. Antagonist(s)

- i. Make it clear early on what the antagonist(s)’s goal is, and what their stakes are. Then periodically remind the reader.
- ii. Does the antagonist actively pursue their goals?
- iii. Is the opposition more powerful than the protagonist(s)? Does the opposition have the power to kill your protagonist, crush their professional pursuits, and/or crush their spirit?

2. Plot & Structure

- a. Does enough happen in the story? Are the stakes high enough?
- b. Does it start and end at the right time?
- c. Is the story well structured, with appropriate weight given to different components?
- d. Can key events/turning points be identified?
- e. Are flashbacks or back story details essential and well placed? Any of them unnecessary? Anything missing?
- f. Don’t help the main character with coincidences.
- g. Does the end feel like the natural culmination of all that’s gone before? Is there a twist that’s unexpected, but hinted at enough to make sense?

3. Theme

- a. What is this story really about? Should this be expanded on?

4. Plausibility

- a. Does anything seem unrealistic? (not plausible enough to suspend disbelief?)
- b. Are additional explanations or important details needed anywhere?
- c. Is the chronology internally consistent? Identify the date and time of each scene.
- d. Is everything else internally consistent? (see scene edits)

5. Pacing

- a. Is there enough “worry factor”?
- b. Don’t bore the reader! Is the pace appropriate throughout the story? Where does it drag?
- c. At what point could a busy editor put the book aside and not really care when they came back to it? Cut those parts out.
- d. Are there unnecessary explanations?

Pass #2: Scene edits

1. **Every scene should move the plot forward and reveal characters.** Every scene should have conflicts and obstacles. Ask of each scene:
 - a. What happens?
 - b. What changes?
 - c. Is the POV character worse off?
 - d. Proactive scenes: Goal → Conflict → Resolution
 - e. Reactive scenes: Reaction → Dilemma → Decision
 - f. How does the POV character change? Is he/she worse off?
 - g. What do we learn about him/her?
2. Is the scene an appropriate length?
3. Describe the setting at beginning of each scene (establishing shot) and identify the POV character.
4. End chapters in a cliffhanger, a question, etc.—something to compel the reader to turn the page.
5. Add periodic details that pop out, something that the POV character would notice, and reveals the POV’s personality. Rule of thumb: three details. (Only 1 needed about background characters.)
6. Are the facts straight? Is the placement of people and objects, movement through space, and timing internally consistent?
7. What’s the weather like? (if the scene is set outdoors).
8. Are the descriptions adequate? Need to engage all the senses, make the scenery fill the reader’s head. Don’t get too wordy and obnoxious, but a couple sharp details will do the trick.
 - a. Use of light and darkness
 - b. Colors
 - c. Sound
 - d. Smells (<http://www.neversmell.com>)
 - e. Touch
 - f. Taste
 - g. Temperature
9. Are there spots where characters can talk about other characters? (but don’t add anything unnecessary)

10. Show, don't tell (except when needed for brevity and to rush past boring parts)
11. Are the tone, mood, and style appropriate?

Pass #3: Line edits

1. Language should be crisp and clear, not drawing attention to itself but occasionally beautiful. Should be consistent with the POV character.
2. Imagery should connect to the reader's emotions and memories. Dig for less obvious comparisons and connections.
3. Include telling details and exclude those that are unnecessary.
4. Limit narrative summary (but don't eliminate entirely)
5. Write character POVs in their thoughts and words. (Note: people often talk in short sentences and phrases, rather than in long drawn-out sentences with big words.)
6. Show (don't tell) more emotional reactions and responses from the POV characters, and their impressions of other characters' facial expressions and body language.
7. Beef out the dialogue. Include body movement, posture, expressions, etc. Not empty words like "she sighed" or "he scoffed." Find a great detail, a significant gesture, a sharp thought – something that adds to the story/character. Build on the tensions and relationships between characters, and make the drama more poignant with their behavior and thoughts while they speak to one another.
8. Beats should be original and help illuminate characters. Should fit the rhythm of the dialogue.
9. Pronouns are your friends!
10. Provide character reactions, including emotions. When something is said or done to a character that is out of the ordinary, have the character respond. Don't forget to show the responses of characters before moving on with the plot.
11. Does any wording need changing?

Pass #4: Copy edits (I use AutoCrit for this)

1. Vary sentence and paragraph lengths if needed.
2. Limit passive voice and adverbs.
3. Replace telling words with showing phrases, if appropriate.
4. Search for cliches and remove or replace (unless it fits a character's dialogue).
5. Search for redundancies and unnecessary filler words.
6. In prose (not necessarily dialogue), search for generic descriptions and improve.
7. Search for repeated words and phrases.
8. Make sure readability is consistent with the audience (esp. for children's books).
9. Look for punctuation errors, typos, etc.