

# SELF-EDITING

## THE BEGINNER WRITER'S TOOLKIT

Claire Boston



Self-editing: The Beginner Writer's Toolkit – Second Edition

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# Introduction

Some people think the hardest thing about writing is finishing the first draft, and that can be true. For me, the most difficult part was realising the manuscript I had written wasn't good enough to be published, but having no idea how to fix it. It took me a long time to learn what to look for when editing my work and I did this through finding a fantastic critique group, learning through organisations such as Romance Writers of Australia, and reading a whole heap of blogs and craft books. Although this learning process never ends, (hence this second edition) I want to make this journey easier for you.

I've been writing since 2006 and have published twenty-six novels. During this time, I've taken writing courses, read hundreds of blog posts, swapped ideas with other authors, and provided critique on many manuscripts. Over time, I've come to recognise the common mistakes beginner writers make.

Occasionally a writer will ask me, 'Why should I edit my manuscript? Isn't that what publishers are for?' Yes, a publisher will edit your manuscript if they accept it for publication, but you need to make sure it's as good as you can make it to have a publisher even consider offering you a contract. You aren't giving yourself the best chance if you don't deliver the most polished product you can. A publisher needs to be able to see a manuscript is marketable, and a well edited novel is a step towards proving that.

If your aim is to self-publish, you may be saving yourself money by self-editing your manuscript. I know of editors who will charge significantly more if the work is a hot mess, or will simply not accept the job.

This book aims to help those of you who have finished your first draft and want to make your manuscript shine. It covers the different types of editing and outlines how to analyse your work. As I'm an author and not an editor, I'll share with you my experiences and what I've learnt from having my work professionally edited. Many of the examples I give are from my earlier works, because I made the same mistakes when I started out.

While going through the suggestions, please remember there are always exceptions to the rules. Make sure you don't stifle your own voice trying to follow everything in this book to the letter. The aim is for you to be able to analyse your work and recognise what you're doing. Then you can decide whether to keep it, reword it or delete it.

## TYPES OF EDITING

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There are three types of editing and different terms are used to describe them. When I was fact-checking this book I found some of the terms being used interchangeably, so if you do decide to hire an editor, make sure you clarify what you want from them.

### **STRUCTURAL, DEVELOPMENTAL OR CONTENT EDITING**

This is, as the name suggests, when you're looking at the structure of your story. It's the big picture elements: characterisation, plot, description, etc. Is your story arc smooth, do your characters develop throughout the story, do you have enough description, is there enough

information for the reader to be able to immerse themselves in the story, are the characters' goals, motivations and conflicts strong enough?

### **COPYEDITING**

Copyediting focuses on sentence structure, turns of phrase, spelling, grammar, style guides and the like. This phase of editing is all about tightening the writing, and ensuring the sentences flow well and the phrasing makes sense.

### **PROOFREADING**

Proofreading is the final read of the manuscript when all the editing is done. On this pass you're looking for spelling and punctuation mistakes that have slipped through the other editing phases. You shouldn't be making any significant changes at this stage of the process.

A writer should complete all three phases before submitting their manuscript to a publisher or before sending it to a professional editor. If you haven't polished your manuscript until it shines, you're doing yourself a disservice. You want your editor to focus on the things you can't pick up yourself.

That said, there also comes a time when you have to let go of your manuscript and send it out. Don't use editing as an excuse to never finish your manuscript. It's never going to be perfect, but this book aims to help you get it as polished as possible.

# Structural Editing

Congratulations! Finishing the first draft is an accomplishment in itself. You should be proud of yourself, so make sure you take a moment to bask in your achievement. Give yourself a couple of days' break before you dive into the editing. This gives you a bit of thinking time. Are there any sections or plot points that aren't working? Is the beginning gripping enough? Is the ending strong and satisfying? Is something niggling at you, telling you that you should change it even if you don't want to? Are the characters well rounded? Make a list of the answers to these questions as a starting point.

Before you begin editing, make sure you keep copies of each version of your manuscript. After I finish my first draft, I save it as version one and then I copy the file and save it as version two before starting my editing. This way I can make wholesale changes and if I don't like them, I can revert to the previous version. It also makes it easier to delete sections I love, because I'll always have a copy of them.

My process is to print out the whole manuscript, because I like to get away from the computer and focus on the story. I read it as quickly as possible so I can get the full feel of the story, and if I sit in front of the computer, it's too tempting to start editing there and then.

If printing your story seems wasteful, there are other options like tablets which will allow you to markup your

manuscript and I've been watching the advancements of colour e-ink tablets with interest!

During this stage I take a coloured pen (so it stands out) and mark corrections and comments in the margins. My manuscript markups are full of words such as 'description', 'emotion', 'deep POV', as well as the highly technical terms 'smooth' or 'fix' where I know the story needs more work.

Because I write series, I highlight things to add to my series bible like the colour of someone's hair, or the car they drive. Just recently I discovered I made a character's hair red in book two, and blonde in book four, so in book five I made a point of her saying she'd tried dyeing it red, but it hadn't worked for her! Whoops!

In this editing pass I also keep my eye out for continuity errors – names of places, what day of the week it is, whether the character was picked up by a friend and therefore doesn't have a car to drive away later.

If the story really isn't working, try writing an outline. Describe each scene in a line or two: what is happening and what is the point of the scene? If a scene doesn't have a point – it doesn't further the plot or develop character – then this may indicate it's not needed. Your outline will be a few pages long and you'll be able to see an overview of your manuscript. I often highlight my outline in different colours: the heroine's arc, the hero's arc, the romance, the sub-plot, the main plot. If the colour is sporadic it may mean I need to add a scene to further develop that part of the storyline, or I should cut the plot thread completely.

Following are some of the common issues or mistakes beginner writers make so you can analyse whether these are problems in your own manuscript.

## BEGINNINGS & ENDINGS

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There's a saying that a beginning sells the book and the ending sells your next book. If you think about how you read, you'll probably find it's true. The cover might attract you and you'll read the blurb. You read the first page and if it hooks you, you'll buy it. If you get to the end of the book and loved it, you'll race out and find what else that author has available.

### **BEGINNINGS**

So how do you get a good beginning? It needs to hook the reader right from the start. You generally have one or two pages to introduce the main characters and set the scene because a reader isn't going to read more if they aren't hooked, and an agent or publisher certainly won't.

So the first thing you need to check is: have you started the story in the right place? When I first started writing, I often cut a scene, or a few pages from the beginning, because I was never sure how to start. To avoid cutting thousands of words, try to start the book as close as possible to the inciting incident, that event which changes everything and causes the character to make a decision for the story to occur. There are some common pitfalls to avoid when setting the scene. Examples of rambling include:

- Getting ready for the day: details about getting dressed, having breakfast, driving to work etc.
- Telling the reader all about the protagonist's childhood or major life events that happened before the story begins (also known as backstory)
- Having several chapters of the protagonist's life before getting to the inciting incident.

Beginner writers are often under the misapprehension

the reader needs to be introduced to the world before they get to the story. This isn't necessarily true. Your reader is intelligent and will catch up quickly, especially if you're writing a contemporary novel or in a historical time period many people are familiar with. If you're writing speculative fiction, you do need to introduce the reader to your world, but it may not have to be at the very beginning, and the introduction can be gradual.

I used to give my readers far too much information, not wanting them to be confused, but all it did was make the beginning dull.

One technique to try is to start in the middle of a scene. Skip all the information about Frank driving to the coffee shop, ordering a cup of coffee and paying for it, and get straight to the part where he turns, bumps into someone and spills coffee all over them. It can be difficult to cut large sections, but your story will thank you for it (and so will your reader). If necessary, do it gradually. By the final version of *Into the Fire*<sup>1</sup>, I'd cut the first four pages of my novel.

It started with Piper at work, showing the reader she was overworked, and then being called to her editor's office to be given a new assignment. Then it detailed her calling her friends to see who was available to go out. When I was editing it, I cut the two-page editor scene, but the start still wasn't particularly punchy. I thought I needed a bit more detail about Piper's life, and I didn't want to lose another five hundred words from the beginning of my manuscript. It wasn't until my fourth edit that I finally confronted what I knew had to happen and I cut another two pages. The book now starts with Piper walking into the bar where she meets the hero.

## **Backstory**

A common mistake I see in beginner writers' work (and I've

seen in my own early manuscripts), is the tendency to give a whole lot of backstory at the beginning of the novel. Backstory is information about events that happened prior to the start of the story.

This might be information the author needs to know, but does the reader need it right now?

If your protagonist has a morbid fear of the dark because his father used to lock him in a cupboard for being naughty, then the reader might not need to know this immediately. If he's an introvert because of this treatment and it's affecting his future relationships, this might be more relevant. You only give your reader enough backstory for the story to make sense, to justify an action or a motivation.

In saying that, it's also not a great idea to tell the reader everything straight away. Backstory can have an important role to play in making the reader want to continue the story. If you hint early on there is something more to the character's response, it's going to intrigue the reader and they'll keep reading to find out what it is. However, if you give the reader all the details straight away, it's going to bog down your pace and leave nothing intriguing behind.

In *Place to Belong*<sup>2</sup>, the fourth book in *The Flanagan Sisters* series, one of my main characters has had a bad childhood. I added the backstory in chapter two and then realised this was too early and changed it to chapter five, and finally moved it even later in the novel. When I'm not sure when to add relevant backstory, I ask myself three questions:

1. When will revealing this information have the most impact?
2. Does the story still make sense if I delay revealing it?
3. Will the delay tease my reader into having to continue reading?

I'll then put the information where it's most needed.

## ENDINGS

I will admit that, by the time I get to the end, I just want to finish the manuscript. It's tempting to write, 'The End' or 'They Lived Happily Ever After'. One of the reasons I struggle with endings is because I've had the least amount of practice with them. You might be the same. How much time do you spend perfecting the beginning, reading it over and over again as you read through your manuscript? If you're anything like me, it will be a lot. Now think about how many times you read the ending. It might only be a few and each time you get to the ending you're sick of the manuscript and just want to get it finished.

If this sounds like you, you might like to start your editing process from the last chapter and work backwards to the beginning. When reviewing your ending, ask yourself these questions:

- Have I wrapped up all the plot threads?
- Does the ending obey the genre conventions?
- Is the ending emotionally satisfying?

If your reader is disappointed when they finish your story, they're not likely to buy your next book so you want to make it excellent.

### Plot Threads

There is nothing more irritating than finishing a book and thinking, 'but what happened with X?'. If you've raised an issue or introduced a plot thread, you need to make sure you provide a resolution for it. In my novel, *Blaze a Trail*,<sup>3</sup> there is a secondary character who is fourteen and she has a baby. It's a minor plot point but the question is raised at the beginning as to whether she will keep the child or give it up for adoption. When I finished the first draft of the manuscript I realised I hadn't actually resolved that issue. In the rewrite I added a small scene to answer the question.

If you've got a lot of plot threads, try not to wrap everything up in the last chapter as you might leave your reader exhausted. I try to conclude all secondary plot points before the black moment or climax of the main plot thread.

Then there's the age-old debate about cliff hangers in series.

There was a growing trend with series, to end a book on a cliff hanger that's not resolved until the next book. It's one reason why some readers won't buy series until all of the books have been released.

If you are writing a series, I would recommend you have a series arc and a book arc.

For example in my romantic suspense series, Aussie Heroes: Retribution Bay, each book focuses on a couple. They have an enemy to conquer before the end, and they must fall in love. However, the enemy is part of the 'big bad', a crime syndicate called Stonefish Enterprises which throws a different issue at my characters in each novel. Sometimes I'll hint at what the conflict will be for the next book in the epilogue of the current story, but the syndicate won't be vanquished until the last novel of the series.

### **Genre Conventions**

Readers have certain expectations of the genres they read. In a romance, the couple must end up together, and if it's not a happily-ever-after, it's at least a happy-for-now. In crime novels, the crime must be solved and generally the culprit is caught. In fantasy, the protagonist has usually changed the world.

If your story doesn't obey the conventions, be prepared for reader backlash. People read fiction for entertainment and to escape. If you destroy the reader's trust by not obeying the rules, they may not read another of your books, no matter how good a writer you are. I once read a book

where the cover proclaimed it was a gorgeous romance. When the hero died at the end, I was devastated and furious. I won't pick up another book by that author because I can't trust I'll get a happy ending.

### **Emotionally Satisfying**

This does not mean your story has to have a happy ending. I've read plenty of books where I've been a sobbing mess at the end, but I've been satisfied because the resolution has suited what the characters needed. Part of having a satisfying ending is addressing the two earlier points: making sure the plot threads are resolved, and making sure you obey genre conventions. You also need to ensure that what happens to your characters is satisfying for where they are in their lives.

### **Want to read more?**

Buy it now on [claireboston.com](http://claireboston.com)

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<sup>1</sup> Boston, Claire. 2017. *Into the Fire*. Perth, Australia: Bantilly Publishing.

<sup>2</sup> Boston, Claire. 2017. *Place to Belong*. Perth, Australia. Bantilly Publishing

<sup>3</sup> Boston, Claire. 2016. *Blaze a Trail*. Perth, Australia: Bantilly Publishing.