

SELF-EDITING

THE BEGINNER WRITER'S TOOLKIT

Claire Boston



Self-editing: The Beginner Writer's Toolkit

Copyright © 2016, Claire Boston. All rights reserved.

No part of this document may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior written permission of Bantilly Publishing.

Requests for permission to make copies of any part of the work should be submitted to the publisher at Bantilly Publishing, PO Box 8045, Warnbro, WA, 6169.

Cover design by Amygdala Design

Edited by Katy Hamilton

Proofread by Maureen Eppen

Claire Boston www.claireboston.com

Printed in Australia

First Printing: October 2016

Print format: 978-0-9953918-1-9

EPub format: 978-0-9945528-9-1

Mobi format: 978-0-9953918-0-2

Although the author and publisher have made every effort to ensure that the information in this book was correct at press time, the author and publisher do not assume and hereby disclaim any liability to any party for any loss, damage, or disruption caused by errors or omissions, whether such errors or omissions result from negligence, accident, or any other cause.

Acknowledgements

A big thank you to my author friends who offered their tips for the proofreading section. Thanks must also go to my beta readers: Lia, Estelita and Karlene, who gave me some valuable feedback.

Contents

Introduction.....	1
Types of Editing.....	2
Structural Editing.....	4
Beginnings & Endings.....	5
Point of View.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Characters.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Description.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Research.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Show, Don't Tell.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Pace.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Plot.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Flow.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Dialogue.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Copyediting.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Consistency.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Language.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Filter Words.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Repetition.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Spell Check.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Proofreading.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Style Sheets.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Common Things to Check.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
General Tips.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Conclusion.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Further Reading.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Endnotes.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Outline from a version of *What Goes on Tour*
..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Appendix 2 Master List of Names**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Appendix 3 Calendar *Under the Covers* **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Appendix 4 Americanisms**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Appendix 5 Filter Words**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

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 that 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. I want to make this journey easier for you.

I've been writing since 2006 and have written more than eleven novels, eight of which have been published. 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 get it to get a publisher to 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 that a manuscript is marketable, and a polished product is a step towards proving that.

This book aims to help those of you who have finished your first draft and want to make your manuscript shine. It

will cover the different types of editing and suggest what you should look out for. As I'm an author and not an editor, I'll share with you my experiences and the things I've learnt from having my work professionally edited. Many of the examples I give are from my own earlier works, because I made exactly the same mistakes when I started out. While going through the suggestions, please remember that 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

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 they are offering.

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 centre themselves, are the characters' goals, motivations and conflicts strong enough?

Copyediting

This 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 making sure the sentences flow well and the phrasing makes sense. It's also where you check for continuity.

Proofreading

Proofreading is the final read through of the manuscript when all the editing is done. On this read through 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 in order, 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. My most recent editor commented that because my manuscript didn't need too much correction with the copyedit, she was able to focus on the structural edit (my editor does structural editing and copyediting at the same time).

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

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 you can make wholesale changes and if you don't like them, you can revert to the previous version. It also makes it easier to cut sections you love, because you'll always have a copy of them.

If you're happy with how the story is put together, print it out and read through it with a coloured pen, marking up all the places that you think need work and tweaking sentences as required. I recommend a coloured pen because it contrasts nicely with the black ink and makes your markup stand out. I keep the manuscript double-spaced but to save on paper, I print two pages per sheet and print double-sided so that a four hundred page manuscript only uses one hundred pages. I find stepping

away from the computer and using paper gives me a break. It allows me to do a complete read-through without making major changes and getting bogged down in the editing. However, if the thought of printing out the manuscript makes you cry for the trees, then you can always use the comments function in Microsoft Word or the notes section in Scrivener (a program designed for writers).

As I read through, I write words in the margin such as ‘description’, ‘emotion’, ‘deep POV’, as well as the highly technical terms ‘smooth’ or ‘fix’ where I know the story needs more work.

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 which will further develop that part of the storyline. What follows are the areas you should analyse in your manuscript.

BEGINNINGS & ENDINGS

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 might 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 see 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 don't have more than five pages to introduce the main characters and set the scene because a reader's not going to read that much 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? I often cut a scene, or a few pages from the beginning, because I'm not sure how to start. To avoid cutting thousands of words, you should try to start the book as close as possible to the inciting incident, that event that changes everything and causes 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 that 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 that 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.

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*¹, 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 it 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 writer's work (and I've seen it 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 may not be information the reader needs. The best way to combat this is to ask yourself, 'what does the reader need to know?'

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. 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 at once. Backstory can have an important role to play in making the reader want to keep reading. If you hint early on that 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.

I'm currently writing the fourth book in *The Flanagan Sisters* series and 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 now I'm wondering if that is even too early. When I get to the editing stage, I'll ask myself two questions:

1. When will revealing this information have the most impact?
2. Does the story still make sense if I delay revealing it?

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?

Plot Threads

There is nothing more irritating than finishing a book and thinking, 'but what happened with...?' 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*,² 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 wrap up all secondary plot points before the black moment or climax of the main plot thread.

Genre Conventions

Readers have certain expectations from the genre 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 must be caught. In fantasy, the protagonist must have 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 that the cover proclaimed 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 that I'll get a happy ending.

There has been a growing trend with series, especially among young adult paranormal novels, to end a book on a cliffhanger that's not resolved until the next book. Personally, I hate this, and I know many people who agree with me. It's one of the reasons 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. If you're not sure what I mean by this, think about some television series, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Each episode had an issue that needed to be addressed, but the whole season dealt with the recurring 'Big Bad' villain, whose fate was not known until the end of the season. This way something is resolved in each book, but the reader continues the series to find out the resolution to the series arc.

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 early 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

¹ Boston, Claire. 2015. *Into The Fire*. Sydney, Australia: Momentum.

Boston, Claire. 2016. *Blaze a Trail*. Perth, Australia: Bantilly Publishing.