

Editing for Impact



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Introduction

All my novels get sent for content editing (one to three rounds), line editing and proofreading, simply because I am too close to my book to evaluate any of these areas objectively. However, I clean up my manuscript as much as I can before I do so. If you want to know how, then read on.

Please note that, while written as a call for action (“you should...”), these steps are entirely my own. Just because they work for me doesn’t mean they will work for you. You might be at a different stage in your writing journey. If you’ve only just started writing, the terminology might confuse you, or maybe you are simply looking for different solutions. If you’ve been doing this for many decades, there’s a good chance you will have incorporated these check lists in your writing already.

Why do I have my own editing guide? Because once you’ve spent months writing, you approach the editing task with a blank slate. Where do I start? Have I forgotten anything? By creating my own check list, I was able to formulate a unified approach with the various steps in a logical, time-saving manner. This check list eventually evolved into this guide, which changes and grows with each book I edit.

CONTENT REVISION

Your first draft should include all the smiles, nods, shrugs and frowns you need. Don't worry about 'pretty.' 'Pretty' is what editing is about.

But before the editing stage, step back and look at your MS (manuscript) as a whole. Does it have a compelling arc? The following questions help you assess for yourself how solid your plot is. This only applies if your plot is character-driven.

What is the inciting incident? This is the moment when the hero's life is thrown into chaos. This scene should appear in chapter one (or no later than chapter two, if your book has more than 90,000 words).

What is your hero's character flaw? The character flaw determines your hero's actions, so you must be able to express it succinctly. Does she have trust issues, bad judgement, too much pride, a sheltered upbringing? Look back at your inciting incident and check that it aligns with your hero's character flaw. E.g. if your hero has trust issues, maybe she is forced to partner up with a new partner, maybe even her ex-boyfriend who betrayed her? Or say she has a sheltered, black-and-white worldview, but to protect her sister from prison, she must skirt the law, and possibly even commit a crime.

Some well-known character flaws are these:

- puts work before family or happiness
- lack of self-belief
- doesn't trust others
- arrogance
- lack of maturity
- too serious
- too reckless
- too pessimistic about life and people
- living in the past

What is your hero's moment of weakness? The weakness I'm referring to relates to her character flaw. If she doesn't trust easily, show her lowering her guards. If she's black and white, show her breaking the law. The greater the discrepancy between her flaw and her moment of weakness, the more impact.

What is your hero's early triumph? If a character's journey is only downhill, it's tough to keep a reader's interest. A reader wants to see your character succeed, so dangle something good in front of your hero's nose, if only to yank it away later. It is important that her triumph should confirm her character flaw. For example, if she doesn't trust easily, let her mistrust pay off.

What is your hero's huge downfall? This is the moment that her character flaw costs her dearly. If she had trusted her partner and followed his lead, he would not have been injured. If she hadn't rejected the help of a thief, her sister would not have been kidnapped.

If you have trouble answering these questions in simple, one-line sentences, your plot might be muddled. Do not start editing until you have revised your MS in a way that allows you to clearly identify your answers.

To learn more about character flaws, look out for Laura Baker's courses and lecture packets.

Editing—Stage 1

And so we turn our attention to our first edit. This will be your most extensive edit and requires you to re-read your entire manuscript.

The first edit focuses on the impact your language has and on gathering information. Don't slavishly follow the seven rules below, but consider them an ideal version. Reality and time constraints will often dictate that it may be more expedient to break these rules.

In the present context, the term action refers not specifically to fights or derring-do, but more generally to the act of doing something.

The Seven Rules of Your First Edit

1. The scene's main character

Every action, movement, gesture and facial expression of the **scene's main character** should have meaning. A smile is a dime a dozen. Only let her smile if she does so deliberately. Give her shrugs context. Make sure that she wants the narrowing of her eyes to be seen. Better yet, move away from your usual phrases of action and write fresh and with impact. Consider if her internal thoughts or memories might paint a clearer picture of her affection for her nan than a smile. Or let her catch a spider, despite her own arachnophobia, so her nan doesn't have to.

Make your main character's actions count! If you are able to, allow your character to interact with their environment. Let her slap a dainty table instead of her thigh, or the arm rest of a sofa, which then releases a musty smell; seek stability from a rusty shelf; let her roll down her window to catch some fresh air; use a folder to shield her eyes from the sun.

As for voice cues, make sure you mention your main character's tone only if the character aims for a particular pitch or pronunciation, or if the tone is different from the one she intended.

At the same time, examine your MS for your character's intent and for your own. Set the tone. It's easy to get lost in a scene, but in a romance, the heat should be there from chapter one. In a crime novel, get the tension going early.

2. The scene's secondary character(s)

Describe the scene's **secondary character** every time his mood changes or when dialogue does not already indicate a change in mood. Do not interpret any description you give for the reader if you don't need to. In other words, do not say 'he shrugged helplessly.' Once again, keep it fresh. We tend to notice actions that are not commonplace. The last conversation you had with someone, how many times did they smile or shrug? In fact, do you remember them doing so at all? How many times did you smile?

However, you might recall a broad grin that was given in place of a reply.

- “How did your date go last night?”
- He gave a closed-mouthed smile that punched dimples into his cheeks.
- “Oh, you liked her then?”
- His smile opened into a toothy grin. “She’s all right.”

From your own last conversation, you possibly remembered your friend’s gaze drifting a fraction to the side, giving him a glazed look, while you were speaking. Or the way he pressed his hands against his waist and pushed his belly forward when he told you about being presented with the ‘Employee of the Month’ plaque. Perhaps his tone was unusually high. Or maybe he kept his hand on the door handle for most of the conversation, or he yawned repeatedly. These are things you *would* remember.

At their core, actions must fulfill a supportive role. Use them to punctuate dialog (internal and external), mood, and narration, and—if you can—setting or time of day.

3. During your read-through, add the weather and time of day to each scene, either after the chapter number or as a “comment” using track changes.
4. Note the character descriptions you have given and enter them in this table:

Name	Age and looks	Distinguishing physical features	Distinguishing voice features

5. Note your settings, at least the important ones, in a similar fashion.

Setting	Geographical location	Distinguishing external features	Distinguishing internal features

‘Distinguishing features’ are literally the features that distinguish this person or setting from another. Your character may speak slowly, with trailing sentences, or issue clipped orders without adjectives. They might use visual vocabulary (e.g. “I see” instead of “I get it” or “I hear you”) or vocabulary that is influenced by their hobby (e.g. nautical terms or refer to TV shows). One person uses “ohs” and “I means” or tends to state facts rather than ask questions. Locations also have their own character, and we notice those elements that stand out: the retro jukebox in the corner, the dorky costumes of the waitresses, the horseshoe tables.

6. Once you have entered your information in this table, fill in the blanks and supplement your data with new data, if your original description is on the thin side. How does a place smell? What’s the air quality? What do you hear? And don’t forget to distinguish between the urban areas and the rural areas. There will be more traffic or construction noises in inner cities, bird song in the woods, and perhaps the typical “country air” around cattle. Road surfaces might differ, and the number of people around won’t be the same either.

7. Include a recurring theme in your story and mention it three (or four) times.

Your character could make reference to a TV series her partner has never seen. He stares at her without understanding, or she might have to explain herself. Later, she makes reference to the same TV series, and once again she must explain her comment. At some point, she makes him watch an episode while they are holed up at home during a storm, so the next and third time she refers to it, he gets it. Better yet, he may be the one who mentions it.

Or maybe she spots a scar on her partner's neck that itches constantly. The next time he scratches it, she could ask him about it, but he changes the topic. Eventually, he confides in her the harrowing event that gave him his physical memento.

In my novel *Moon Promise*, my main character, Kensi, is in Drake's car, trying to get the ventilation slits to blow air into her face, but it's not working. At this time, they're not getting along well. The next time, she keeps rolling the window down, but he uses his controls to override her and wind them back up. This back and forth goes on during their conversation.

After they have warmed to each other, Kensi rides with Drake again. This time, the ventilation is fixed. I'm using a car's air-con to mirror the change in their relationship, from being at odds at the start, to being "in it together."

In Book 3 of *The Silverton Chronicles*, Taylor and Rollo must work together. After a while, they discover they like similar kinds of movies, especially one movie franchise, and they take a photo of themselves in a pose taken from one of the movies. They print the photo as a memento. When they have their first fight, the photo is knocked to the ground. Later, when Taylor is considering leaving, she glances at the photo and cannot decide whether to take the photo or not. The photo becomes a prop in their relationship.

Readers love 'payoffs.' These recurring themes are the kind of in-jokes only your reader will get. You may even pepper them across your series, like Easter Eggs in computer games or movies.

Editing—Stage 2

In your second edit, you will flesh out your descriptions.

1. Settings

Each new scene and chapter should give the reader an idea of who is present and where it takes place. Don't spend more than a couple of sentences on establishing a scene. Instead, flesh out the settings through interactions between characters and their environment. If a scene pops up again, make reference to your earlier distinguishing features to establish a quick connection in your reader's mind, and feel free to add new elements.

For example, if your character is kidnapped and held blind-folded in a moldy basement, the next time she heads underground, a similar smell could throw her back to that moment. Who knows, it might even be the same basement.

Settings can also be fleshed out by using them in fight scenes. Let your characters use props—the bucket on the ground, a spanner from the tool box etc.

2. Characters

In the early scenes, pay particular attention to your characters' looks and set up their tics, and find situations later where you can repeat this information. Once we know your character is blond, how about letting the sun filter through her light hair in Chapter 8?

Flesh them out by adding to their distinguishing features, e.g. a vein that pops out when angry; use of metaphors and similes in their dialog.

However, there is a fine line between reinforcing traits and merely repeating information. Don't step over that line.

3. Time and Weather

Each scene should include a reference to time and the weather. This is how readers track the progress of time. If it's sunny today and it rained yesterday, the days are easily distinguishable. If the shadows draw long, it's late afternoon or early evening.

If you can tie this information to a character's action, it won't stick out.

I should mention that my stories often play out within very short periods of time. The advantage is a relatively fast pace. On the downside, I have to find ways to explain how love can develop over the space of a few days.

4. Scenes of high emotional impact

The dark moment of your book, or in love scenes, strip back your character's emotions. Paradoxically, this creates strong emotions in your reader.

I used to get this wrong, and it wasn't until I looked into Show Don't Tell that I understood my mistake. The more you make your reader work to glean the emotions, the more impact your scene will have.

In a love scene, you may describe the beating hearts and heavy breaths and sparks and explosions all you like. Alone, they will not get your reader in the mood.

First, make the physical symptoms count. Instead of listing all five or seven physical symptoms a person experiences in a situation, pick one, but make it memorable. If your character is terrified, her breathing will accelerate. If she's alone on the streets in the dead of winter, she may see her fear in the form of white puffs of air that dissipate more slowly than she makes them. Her beating heart will be audible to her in an empty space, but how much more powerful would it be to contrast it with the noise of a busy shopping mall?

One of the most effective tools at your disposal for getting across emotion to the reader is to add external dialog or internal dialog. External dialog in love scenes, for example, gives readers an idea of how comfortable the two are, which may heighten the experience.

And internal dialog could reveal just how much this connection means to your character, without resorting to butterflies in the stomach. Dialog must give the reader a little extra, not rip them out of the moment.

Let me share a scene from one of my books, *Moon Promise*.

He stroked my back, teased my spine, and with a swift flick, unclasped my bra.

Too much skill was in that motion. Too much practice. How many women had benefited from his dexterity before me? Did he still see them around town, wave at them, and exchange knowing winks?

This is internal dialog that keeps the reader in the scene. It reveals more about my character's state of mind than clichés could, and therefore provides context for the reader. In order to uncover the true emotions in the absence of "telling," the reader needs context. The pay-off could be huge.

I often write my emotional scenes simply by way of actions and external and internal dialog. Next, I layer in settings—a bouncy mattress or a cold stone floor. Right at the end, during my last real editing stage, I add in emotional cues where needed—the beating heart or the fast breath.

To learn more about evoking emotions during emotional peaks, I've found Alicia Rasley's books and website highly useful.

And as always, to learn about writing emotions in a fresh way, you might want to take Margie Lawson's courses.

Content Editor

At this point, you are ready to pass your MS to your content editor.

After she or he returns your book with their comments, work through the comments only. Remember to include descriptions and settings as before, and do not resort to the use of nods and smiles too easily.

There is no need to re-read your entire manuscript at this point.

Once your content is fine, double check your fight scenes and/or your love scenes. Track the movement and environment carefully. If her back is turned on the hero in one sentence, yet in the next she notices a facial expression, while two lines later she turns around to him, something has gone wrong. Make doodles on a piece of paper if it helps.

Editing—Stage 3

In this edit, you will focus on tightening your text. This will involve using the “Find” function of your writing program. A lot. In effect, this is about nixing words we overuse. Each writer has her own staple vocabulary, but here are some of the more common ones.

This round mainly applies to text that isn’t dialog.

1. That

In many cases, this word can be deleted.

2. Just
3. Really
4. Very
5. Little
6. Large/huge
7. Pretty/rather/quite
8. Feel/felt
9. Think/thought
10. Walk/walked

By specifying the manner of walking (amble, limp, march, saunter...) you add detail without adding unnecessary adverbs.

11. ly (followed by a space)

I don’t vilify adverbs, but if you can find a more striking verb, use it.

12. I mean (in dialog)
13. Before

Do not delete this word, but rather check your events occur in the correct order. “He sat before ordering a drink” makes sense. However, our brain stumbles at “Before ordering a drink, he sat.” While not grammatically wrong, it requires our minds to leap back in time.

Beta Readers

If you use alpha readers, or beta readers who will provide useful comments and add track changes to your document, this is the time to send them your MS.

Editing—Stage 4

Hooks

This one's going to be a quick edit. Before I send everything off to the line editor, I make sure my book has the best possible hooks.

The first line (or two) of chapter 1 should be a killer line. Make it clever or witty or shocking. This isn't about re-writing your scene, but often is down entirely to your choice of words. Drop "The day we buried my gramps, it was raining." in favor of "The moment my gramps was lowered into the ground, lightning struck him."

If possible, keep your hooks coming for the first few pages. The aim is to draw your readers into your spell. Once they've identified your book as eminently readable, you have achieved your first goal.

Next, check the beginnings and in particular the endings of your chapters. End on a witty line or a new revelation, or use foreshadowing to increase anticipation. You want the reader to read "just one more chapter" at four in the morning. But if they must put the book down, make them want to pick it up again. If your chapter ending reads like the end of a book, that's how their brains will think of it.

Mary Buckham has written extensively on the topic of hooks, and I highly recommend her books.

Line Editor

Time to hand your work off to your line editor. Make sure your line editor pays attention to the ending ‘-ing.’ First, ‘-ing’ sentences should be few and far between. If you do use them, ensure the correct chronology. “He ran down the stairs to answer the door, pulling up his pants” is just plain confusing, because not only is it impossible to do both at the same time, if anything, he’d pull up his pants before he opens the door. I hope.

Make them highlight ‘big words.’ Everyone’s definition of ‘big words’ is different, but as a rule, if you can simplify the language, do it, unless a character is notable for his use of ‘big words.’

Ideally, you didn’t use clichés in your MS, but once again, your line editor should spot them.

If you have any other known weaknesses, discuss them with your editor. Better yet, give them a list of things to pay attention to in addition to their usual thorough work.

Final Proofread

Once you have addressed your line editor's comments, it's time for the final proofread. Once your proofreader returns your book and you have included their changes in the text, give it a last read through yourself. Kick back, have a cup of coffee, and read it in one sitting. If you can, print it out. It's amazing how many more mistakes you spot in print. Keep a notebook by your side to write down any concerns or thoughts that occur to you.

Once this is done, pass your finished book to beta readers, or more precisely, to "early readers." Don't forget to send them a quick questionnaire to see which bits they liked and which fell flat. Once they return their comments, hopefully in the form of praise that makes you blush, you're ready to submit your book to your agent/editor/formatter.

Well done.