

An Editor's Quick Guide to Better Writing



*Simple Edits for Clearer,
Stronger Writing*

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Meet the Editor

REBECCA HOLMES

As an editor, I believe strong and clear writing is the cornerstone of creating a piece of art that will stand the test of time. From blogs to novels, every piece of writing is unique. Editors serve as guides to bring out the best in each writer, helping to transform rough drafts into publication-ready work.

What do I offer?

I offer developmental editing, line editing, and proofreading across many genres, including children's books, sci-fi, fantasy, horror, thrillers, mysteries, young adult, dystopian, and romance (inc. dark and all subgenres).

I also offer non-fiction editing in the health/wellness niche with my degree in children's nursing.

This booklet is the culmination of the most common mistakes I see in fiction writing. I've designed the booklet to be applicable to many types of writers from all different backgrounds and writing expertise. I guarantee there will be something in this booklet that will help to elevate and refine your writing.

About Rebecca

Years Editing:

4

Favourite Genre:

Dystopian/Fantasy

Editing Philosophy:

Every word and scene choice should serve a specific purpose.

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What to Expect in This Booklet

Clear, Professional Advice and Tips

Clear, professional, and relevant advice to directly improve your writing techniques. Alongside an editing Q&A at the end to answer your questions about the different types of editing.

Writing Samples

Writing samples of some mistakes in action, followed by examples of how incorporating the tips can improve your writing. All writing samples are from real authors who have given me permission to include them in this booklet.

Info Dumping

HOW TO WEAVE INFORMATION ORGANICALLY

Have you ever read a book with three pages of exposition? How long did it take before your eyes glazed over and you lost interest? Info dumping tends to overwhelm readers and risks losing their attention, no matter how long you spent crafting the perfect backstory. Fortunately, there are ways of sharing every vital piece of information about your world's depth and characters' histories without unloading it all at once. Learning to weave information naturally into your story is a skill every writer should develop and I'm here to give you practical tips to help you master it.



Show, Don't Tell

Show how characters behave in certain situations through their actions.

“She stormed off.”

We now know this character is angry without having to be told.

Top Tips

Drip-feed Information

Reveal information gradually through action and dialogue. Don't overwhelm readers.

Use Character Perspective

Only reveal information through the point of view of your character. When do they find this out? That's when the readers should, too.

Only Share What's Relevant Now

Do your readers really need to know 200 years of your world's history in the first five pages? What do they need to know right now to understand the current scene?

Flawless Characters

CRAFTING BELIEVABLE CHARACTERS

Before

Eve had the sweetest smile and could brighten even the gloomiest room. Her hair was magical, always styled neatly, even if she had just jumped out of bed.

After

Eve had the sweetest smile, and could brighten even the gloomiest room. Though she'd never truly believe it herself, no matter how much her friends praised her.

At times, it can be difficult to imagine your characters as real people with real flaws. Many writers are skilled at inventing perfect characters. Their descriptions are top notch, they have shining personalities, a rich social life and hobbies, but they don't have any noticeable flaws, so readers struggle to relate to them.

Is there anyone in your life who doesn't have at least one noticeable flaw? Probably not. Humans are messy, and to make your characters believable, they should be messy, too. Flaws are what make each of us, and your characters, unique.

Maybe they bite their nails when they're anxious, maybe they are too stubborn for their own good. Whatever it is that will make them human and believable as a character.

Top Tips

Make Flaws Visible in Action

Don't just tell the reader your characters' flaws, show them through their actions. Instead of saying they overreact, show them overreacting in specific scenes.

Tie Flaws to Plot Consequences

Force characters to make difficult choices that highlight their flaws but drive the plot forward. Do they need to get over their stubbornness to save another character?

Balance Flaws With Strengths

On the same theme of messy characters, all humans have strengths as well. Make sure these are highlighted in your characters. Maybe they're stubborn but caring, jealous but empathetic, hot-headed but loyal.

Overexplaining

WHY LESS IS MORE



Remember to
trust your
readers!

When writing, it's easy to fall into the trap of explaining every little thing to the reader, especially when you feel they're important details. However, letting readers connect the dots themselves can be half the fun, particularly in genres like thrillers and mysteries. If a reader can infer who the killer might be, it doesn't need to be explicitly stated or repeated.

Overexplaining only weakens your writing, slows your pacing, and creates clunky, heavy prose. All things you want to avoid!

Trust that readers know the genre, are smart enough to follow the plot, and can pick up on subtle clues without being spoon-fed information.



Top Tips

Trust the Reader

Readers are capable of picking up on subtle clues between the lines. They can plot, scheme, and theorise to their hearts' content. Don't spoon-feed them.

Remove Redundancies

Redundancies weaken your writing. Remove them. Examples: "She nods her head." "She waves her hand." "He stands up."

Read your writing aloud to find redundancies and repeated phrases.

Don't Use Dialogue Tags to Convey What Has Already Been Said

"I hate you!" she shouted angrily.

Readers can already infer that this character is angry.

Monotony

HOW TO NOT BORE YOUR READERS

Before

The monster was very hungry. It decided it wanted a meal. This meal would be something tasty. Something it hadn't had in a while. It was going to eat a human.

After

The monster was ravenous. It wanted something tasty for dinner, something it hadn't had for a while. Sure, the berries and wild mushrooms had sufficed for a couple of months, but nothing could shake this hunger. This deep, gnawing hunger. This compulsion to hunt. To maim. To ravage. Today, it was going to eat a human.

Having monotonous sentence lengths throughout your story is likely to bore your readers. It also means you've not given any thought to pacing. Pacing is crucial for effective storytelling. How quickly or slowly details are revealed to the reader can impact how the story is understood. Effective pacing can build tension and suspense, enhance clarity and flow, and control the emotional impact of your story.

Shorter sentences can speed sections up to increase tension, suspense, or action. Long sentences can slow the reader down, create a sense of safety, and give readers time to absorb important details. Having a mixture can create a rhythm to keep the story interesting and your readers ... well, reading!

Top Tips

Vary Your Sentences

Use a mixture of shorter and longer sentences to play with rhythm and pacing to keep your story interesting.

Vary Sentence Openers

Vary your openers using adverbs, prepositional phrases, or even questions to maintain reader interest.

Read Aloud

If you can't say each sentence aloud comfortably, break them up to maintain clarity and readability.

Too Much Fluff

HOW TO CUT FLUFF AND WRITE WITH IMPACT

Fluff refers to all the unnecessary words, filler phrases, or irrelevant details that can creep into your writing and drag it down. When your writing is full of fluff, it quickly loses clarity. Readers have to wade through extra sentences just to understand your main idea, which makes your message feel scattered and reduces its impact. When every sentence feels padded or meandering, readers quickly lose interest. They might even get confused about what they're reading!

Removing fluff isn't just about making your writing shorter, it's about making every word and phrase earn its place in your story. Every word and sentence should contribute to advancing the plot, illustrating a concept, or persuading the reader. It means choosing your words carefully and letting the reader fill in the gaps.



Clutter Words to Remove

- Very
- That
- At this moment
- Literally
- Suddenly
- Began to
- Started to
- Then
- Next
- Rather
- Quite
- Just

Top Tips

Be Specific

Swap lengthy descriptions for concrete details that actually matter to your story.

Repetition and Redundancies

Don't say the same thing multiple times in different ways. Remove redundant phrases that only clog your writing.

Ask yourself, "Does this add value?" for every sentence you write. If the answer is no, revise it until it does.

Passive Voice

STOP HIDING THE ACTION

Before

The windows were left open overnight. A strange noise was heard outside the house. The lights were turned off. The front door was quietly closed by someone.

After

Tina had left the windows open overnight, enjoying the cool breeze through the house.

Crash!

“What on Ear—” The lights went out, shrouding her in darkness. The soft click of the front door echoed in the silence. She was no longer alone.

Using active voice can make your writing clearer, engaging, and direct. In active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action, rather than having the action done to them (passive voice).

Because active voice focuses on who or what (the subject) is doing the action, it pulls the reader into the moment, making the writing feel more immediate. It also keeps your sentences concise, improving the overall pacing and helping readers stay immersed in your story.

If the subject is doing the action, you're writing in active voice. If the subject is having the action done to them, you're writing in passive voice.

Top Tips

Place the Subject First

This isn't a strict rule for all sentences, but it can help you use active voice more accurately. When you place the subject first, you'll automatically write using active voice.

Action-Oriented Openers

Instead of starting sentences with “There was...”, change the opener to the action.

For example: “There was a loud noise coming from the alley.” becomes “A loud noise echoed from the alley.”

Hooks

HOW TO GET READERS HOOKED

Using effective hooks is a fundamental skill for writers. Grabbing your reader's attention from the very first page, and keeping them engaged throughout, is what every storyteller aims for. A strong opening hook pulls readers into your story immediately. Strategic hooks at the end of chapters encourage them to keep turning pages.

Do you need a hook at the end of every single chapter? Not necessarily. When you vary your pacing, some chapters will naturally conclude without a high-tension hook, and that's okay! As long as your faster-paced sections use compelling hooks, readers will stay eager to read on.



Begin In the Middle of Action

Drop readers straight into an action scene, movement, tension, or conflict so they're instantly engaged.

Top Tips

Start With Intrigue or Mystery

Open with a puzzling scenario, a rhetorical question, or something slightly “off” that makes readers curious.

Strong Opening Lines

Craft an opening line that plays with emotions, be it shock, beauty, horror, or humour.

Establish Emotional Connections Quickly

If you can get readers emotionally invested from the start, they'll want to continue reading to the end for that payoff.

Self-Edits/Revisions

FROM DRAFT TO DONE

Before

Sonw fell from the sky, forming a blanket of snow on the ground. As the ground filled with snow, the air became chilly, and breath became visible in the air. The people huddled together, knowing this could be their last night together. They held each other and huddled for warmth hoping to make it through the nihgt.

After

Snow fell, forming a blanket. The air had become so cold that each exhale was like steam. The people huddled together, holding each other for warmth, hoping to make it through the night.

So, you've finished your first draft. Yay, go you! This is a time for celebration, not publication. Once you have finished your first draft, the first thing you should do is take a break. Close your laptop and focus on something else for at least one week (preferably longer). This break is intentional and helps you to come back to your writing refreshed, with new ideas and perspectives. If you try to self-edit your writing straight after finishing, it's unlikely you will edit effectively.

Self-editing is the process of going through your first draft and putting these tips into action. Tighten sentences, make sure every word or phrase is impactful or moves your plot forward, revise dialogue to ensure it's natural, and restructure scenes so they make sense. Only when you are completely happy with your edits should you send your work to a professional editor.

Top Tips

Read Aloud

Reading your work aloud can help you to identify redundant phrases, awkward constructions, or lengthy descriptions.

Get Feedback

If possible, send your work to friends, family, critique partners, or beta readers who can be honest with you about the quality. Check out my booklet on alpha readers, beta readers, and advance reader copies for more information.

Repeat

Repeat the process of self-editing as many times as you need until you are 100% sure your writing cannot get any better. Then, send it to a professional editor who will show you how much better it can actually get.

Types of Editing

WHICH DO YOU NEED?

Type of Editing	Description	When It's Needed
Developmental Editing	This is big-picture editing using the three-act structure as a foundation. Your manuscript's structure, pacing, and character development will all be analysed. You should receive a detailed editorial report outlining what's working, what needs improvement, and actionable steps to strengthen your story while maintaining your unique voice.	You need this if you are unsure if your plot really works. You are unsure if your characters develop as they should. You are unsure if there are plot holes or major inconsistencies in your writing.
Line Editing	This refines your writing for clarity, style, and readability to ensure smooth and engaging storytelling while ensuring correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation use. You should receive a style sheet to help maintain consistency in language, tone, and formatting throughout your book.	You need this when you are happy with your plot and characters. You are unsure how to cut the fluff, remove redundancies, tighten sentences, or how else to improve your writing. You are unsure if your spelling, grammar, or punctuation use is correct throughout.
Proofreading	This is the very last stage before publishing. This ensures you have an error-free, publication-ready copy of your manuscript. It refines the spelling, grammar, and punctuation without any edits to content.	You need this when you want an extra pair of eyes on your manuscript to ensure spelling, grammar, and punctuation use is correct throughout as the last step before publishing.