

Writing and Self-editing tips

By Tammy L. Hensel

When writing your first draft of your book, just let your thoughts flow. Then go back through it to catch mistakes and make it read better. It will save you money if you send to your editor as clean a copy as possible by double-checking your manuscript for common errors. However, remember that you still can benefit from the trained eyes of a professional editor.

Below are some tips for things to look for in your manuscript before you send it to an editor or agent.

1. **Engage your reader.** Even with non-fiction, readers want imagery. Thanks to television, video games, and the Internet, we live in a visual society. So double check your manuscript for word pictures. Do you have enough? Can you make them better? Are you engaging all five senses? Do you have a dynamic beginning for each chapter or section? You want to compel your reader to continue.

2. **Use editing tools with skill.** Engage the "search/find" feature on your word processing program to hunt for weak or overused words. You can also use editing programs and websites, but only as a tool to identify possible problem areas. The "track changes" feature on most programs can help you keep up with revisions. However, be wary of anything that automatically makes changes. I don't recommend using the "replace" feature, because sometimes it alters something you don't want changed. Remember that these tools don't have the same perspective of a human editor. You can focus so much on the technical side of writing that you to lose your unique author voice.

3. **Make it active.** Paint word pictures by using active voice and strong action verbs. Avoid passive sentence constructions that put the subject at the end rather than the beginning of the sentence.

Example: (active) "I wrote the book." (passive) "The book was written by me."

Avoid overuse of linking verbs such as "is," "was," etc. Search for each of those verbs and review your sentences. Remember to include contractions such as "I'm," "you're," etc. in your search. Ask yourself, "is this the best way to say this or can I do better?" Only use them when you can't think of an action verb that accurately communicates what you want to say.

4. **Avoid overuse of helping verbs.** One of the most common mistakes I see is overuse and misuse "auxiliary" or "helping verbs." When describing a flashback or anything that happened in the past, use "had" once, then continue in straight past tense. The same goes for "would" in talking about future possibilities. Common auxiliary verbs include: be, can, could, do, had, have, may, might, must, shall, should, will, would. When used as an auxiliary, their purpose is to "help" the main verb of the sentence. But if you choose a strong action verb, it

doesn't need a helper. Most of these verbs also have other jobs, so check to see how you use each verb in a sentence.

5. **Write strong sentence beginnings and endings.** Avoid starting sentences, especially lead sentences, with words like: there, this, that, and, then, now, it, etc. These words almost always refer back to something, so they shouldn't be the lead sentence and definitely not the first word of the story. Start with words that grab the reader's attention. While ending a sentence with a preposition is becoming more accepted, it still sounds weak and sloppy. Try to avoid it unless there is just no other way to phrase what you want to say.

6. **Don't write like you talk.** In conversation we often filter out poor grammar, incomplete sentences, etc. We know what the other means, even if it wasn't stated correctly. But the same is not true in written communication, despite the present trend toward incorporating "texting and tweeting" shorthand into writing. Clear, well-structured sentences with a subject, verb, and object remain essential to communicating through the written word.

7. **Keep it short.** Short sentences and paragraphs generally have more impact than long ones. If you have a lengthy paragraph, make sure you haven't digressed from your point. Each new point deserves a new paragraph. Most sentences joined by the conjunction "and" can be stronger if made into two sentences. Again, do a word search for conjunctions and look at your sentences. Is it better as two sentences or one? Vary your sentence structure so that you don't bore your reader. You can start with phrases from time to time, but don't make them too long.

8. **Avoid redundancy.** Watch for repeated words, especially in the same sentence or two sentences in a row. We all have a pet word or phrase. If you find yourself using something over and over, then do a search for it. Keep your thesaurus handy, but don't choose words that are not in your normal vocabulary or appropriate for your character or audience. Also look for repetition of ideas. Be sure you're not saying the same thing over and over with different words.

9. **Avoid over use of adverbs and adjectives.** Some editors suggest eliminating "-ly" words altogether. I don't go that far. But consider that the sole purpose of an adverb is to modify a weak verb. So instead of using it; strengthen your verb. Rather than a string of adjectives, modify through devices such as actions, similes, comparisons, and personifications. But don't be cliché or trite.

10. **Be specific.** Avoid ambiguous words like "things," "stuff," etc. unless it's obvious to what they refer. Your book audience can't read your mind. Be specific without being repetitive or too wordy.

11. **Check for homonyms.** Sometimes our brains betray us by typing the wrong word. Check your manuscript for words that sound the same but are spelled differently like, "there, their, and they're; "here and hear"; etc. Spell checkers don't catch these because they are real words, even if not the word you want.

12. **Read aloud.** Find a critique partner or group and take turns reading pages aloud. Or record yourself reading it and play it back. Listening engages another part of your brain and will help you pick up on things you missed while reading.



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