

Six Simple Steps to Sensible Editing

by Mervyn Love

O.K., so you've finished your story or article, you've breathed a sigh of relief and are just about to reach for the envelope and stamps when the Good Writers' Fairy raps you smartly on the head and whispers "What about editing, numbskull?"

"But it's perfect as it is. I've read it through carefully and it's great!"

Good Writers' Fairy is not impressed. "Go and lie down," she says caustically, "preferably for three days, then come back and read it again."

You reluctantly concur, as too many whacks with the fairy wand give you a headache. In three days you smugly start reading again. The smug quickly turns to shock. Gracious me, you say, or words to that effect, did I really write 'timber' instead of 'timbre'? And why did I change the heroine's name from Charmaine to Charlotte in paragraph three? The list lengthens.

6 Simple Steps to Sensible Editing

1. Spelling and grammar. The first thing to do is run the spell checker and grammar checker. It's a pain, but do it. Make any changes remembering that computers are stupid and don't know everything. Of course, you should really have your software set to show errors as you type. In which case under some words or phrases you will have coloured squiggly lines. Ask yourself why they are there, and correct them if they need it.

2. Three days grace. Now do as the Good Writers' Fairy says. Put your new work of art away for three whole days. Agony!

3. Read it through. But I've already read ... Shush! Yes, you have but this time you're going to read it in a detached and positively cold-hearted manner. This is really important. Emotion and affection make your eyes go blind. Imagine you're Mrs Sneersby the English teacher, who only read your work to find fault with it. Do the same.

3a Did you notice the deliberate mistake above? The phrase 'who only read your work' should read 'who only read **your** work'!

4. Paragraph faults. Ask yourself, is it too long? Depending on your audience, today's dumbed-down readers may not cope too well with paragraphs that take up most of a page, or even half a page. See if you can split them up. Next, does it really hang together? Is each component sentence adding something of value to the whole? Can you remove a sentence and lose nothing of the meaning and intent of the paragraph? If the answer to this last question is 'yes' delete the sentence.

5. Sentence faults. Now go back and read each sentence with the same critical eye.

Is each sentence grammatically correct without being stilted? Have you used five-syllable words when a two- or three-syllable one would do? Do your narrative lines flow naturally or do they sound wooden? Have you used too many 'he said's' and 'she said's'? Take some of them out. If you do take them out can you tell who's talking? O.K. then, substitute with 'said Dominic', etc.

6. The whole thing. Now that you have a slimmer, healthier version, hopefully, than the original, read it through one final time, but this time look to see if there is anything that you haven't explained fully, or any vital piece of information you have left out. This isn't a licence to fill the word count up with drivel, but just make sure the reader is not left in the dark by a careless omission.

Your publisher and your readers will love you if you follow these simple steps. I wish you every success with your writing.

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