

TOP 25 SELF-EDITING TIPS

For Self-Published Authors

No self-published author should publish their work without paying a professional to edit it first. But what if you don't have the money to pay for an editor? Or what if you want to keep your costs down by doing as much editing on your own as you can?

The Bible for authors who wish to self-edit (which should be, like, all of you!) is *Self-Editing For Fiction Writers* by Browne & King.

Before you spend money on an editor, work your way through this 25-point checklist. Because the better you can make your novel on your own, the better your editor can help you make it together. Think of it like football: Get the ball as far down the field as you can, then pass the ball to your editor. Together you can go for goal.

SELF-EDITING TIP #1:

Does the world need this book? If so, why?

Every year, millions of books get published. Most get ignored. Ask yourself: Why does the world need *your* book?

This is not an argument to self-censor. Rather to think about what you're publishing and why. Talking to hear the sound of your own voice may be amusing, but does little to attract an audience. Talking, writing, speaking—it's all about the audience, not about you.

Sharpening your focus at this stage will make self-editing much easier. Because if you don't know what you have to say or why you're saying it, then how can you sharpen your prose to achieve those goals?

SELF-EDITING TIP #2:

How's Your Hook?

Readers have short attention spans these days, and an ocean of ebooks to choose from. You need a strong hook in your opening pages to persuade readers to cross your palm with silver.

Pretend that you're a reader, and ask yourself: Why should I care? Why

should I invest my money—not to mention my time, which is even more valuable—in reading your novel? I could be watching *Game of Thrones*. Are you telling me your novel is more entertaining? Make me care!

And hooking the reader doesn't end after the first five pages. There is no point at which you can relax and rest on your laurels (either within the pages of a book or during a literary career). Every word sells the next. Every sentence sells the next. Every paragraph sells the next. Every chapter sells the next. Every book sells the next.

Because as a reader? I owe you exactly squat. Zilch. Make me care. Make your writing so irresistible that I can't *help* but want to read on.

That's how you write a book. That's how you build a career.

SELF-EDITING TIP #3:

Who's Your Hero?

Reading a novel means donning an avatar's skin. When we enter the pages of your book, we become, in our imaginations, at least, your hero. And we're not going to be very comfortable if your hero is a jerk.

Your hero needs to be someone we can relate to, who we can understand. We don't necessarily have to like him, but we have to care. This doesn't mean your hero should be a goodie two-shoes, because that's equally irritating. Instead, write flawed heroes and complex villains. Hannibal

Lector may be a cannibal, but boy can he keep me turning the pages!

SELF-EDITING TIP #4:

What Does Your Hero Want?

A novel is just this: Who is your hero? What does he want? What's stopping him from getting it?

Character is just another word for *what the hero wants*. Give us a sympathetic hero with a goal we can relate to, and the strength of will to pursue that goal at all costs, and you've got the makings of a great story.

SELF-EDITING TIP #5

Who's Your Villain?

You needn't go all Hollywood here, but your hero needs obstacles. If your hero wants a ham sandwich, and all he has to do is go to the fridge and make one, that's not a very exciting story, now is it?

Note that by "villain" we mean the opposing force working to prevent the hero from achieving his goal. The villain and hero are sometimes the same character—for instance, a story of an alcoholic or drug addict fighting to

get the monkey off his back. Or it could be nature—sailors fighting to stay afloat during a hurricane.

If you go with a human villain, be sure to give the character a touch of goodness. Evil is not cartoonish, but rather a misguided attempt to do good. Melodrama went out of fashion when the last vaudeville hall closed its doors.

SELF-EDITING TIP #6

Structure, Structure, Structure

The human brain digests story in a certain form, and stories that do not satisfy that form will drive your audience away.

To wit: Stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end; thesis, antithesis, synthesis; boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl; Act One, Act Two, Act Three.

There are many books on structure out there, and varying theories about the precise form story structure should take. But you must have the basics down, or your novel will not be successful.

For further reading on structure, you may like to read *Three Uses of the Knife* by David Mamet and *Save the Cat!* by Blake Snyder. These are just my personal favorites, there are hundreds more out there.

SELF-EDITING TIP #7

Yes. No. But wait!

Good stories must have suspense. When we go to a ball game, we don't want to watch our team trounce the opposing side, run up the score, and then go home. How boring would that be?

We want to see our hero struggle, to succeed, to fail, the end goal always in doubt. We want to watch the ball game come down to a nail-biting, edge-of-our-seat, who-is-going-to-win, oh-my-God-can-he-do-it thriller.

Not that your book has to be a thriller. It could be a story about cats. But if the cats were sympathetic, wanted something we could relate to, and faced sufficiently interesting opposing forces, then the yes-no-but wait! formula works just as well.

SELF-EDITING TIP #8

Chapter Breaks

Knowing where to begin and end your chapters is an art. Every chapter should begin with a hook. Every chapter should end with a cliffhanger.

Some of you at this point are probably thinking, "But I'm not writing a thriller! This doesn't apply to me!"

Um, actually, yes it does. If you want people to read your work, you have to *make them want to read your work*. Readers owe you nothing.

Do I need to repeat that? *Readers owe you nothing*. Your job as an author is to *make them care*. My job as an editor is to help you make them care.

End of story.

SELF-EDITING TIP #9

Whose Head Are We In?

A common mistake some authors make, especially those that come to fiction from the theater or film, is omitting internal monologue. The strength of the novel is that we spend the book inside people's heads. We don't just watch the action. We are *inside* of the action.

Fiction is a window into someone else's soul. A good author gives the reader an intimate personal experience not possible in any other medium. This experience can be deep or shallow, depending on the needs of the genre. But it must be there. A dry account of some events that happened may make a fine biography or history, but the goal of *fiction* is to connect

with your readers at a subconscious level.

SELF-EDITING TIP #10

Head-Hopping

Have you ever seen prose that looks like this?

"Oh my goodness, what a giant turtle!" exclaimed Martha. *I do so love turtles*, she thought. *They remind me of my dead grandmother.*

Jake harrumphed. Can we go home soon? I'm sick of the beach. And none of the girls are wearing bikinis.

Do you see the problem here? We're jumping from Martha's head into Jake's head from one paragraph to the next. This jars us out of the story. If your story requires you to use multiple POVs (Points of View), then the easiest thing to do is to separate POVs into separate chapters. A more advanced technique is to separate POVs using section breaks:

[... several pages of Martha POV ...]

"Oh my goodness, what a giant turtle!" exclaimed Martha. *I do so love turtles*, she thought. *They remind me of my dead grandmother.*

Jake harrumphed. Can we go home soon? I'm sick of the beach. And none of the girls are wearing bikinis.

[... several pages of Jake POV ...]

SELF-EDITING TIP #11

Dialogue

Authors with experience in theater or film tend to write better dialogue. Why? Because acting and writing dialogue are one and the same craft.

What do I mean by that?

Well, why do characters speak? They speak because they want something from someone else. Remember our definition of a story: Who is our hero and what does he want? And what's stopping him from getting it?

The conflict in a scene could be a sword fight. Or it could be two people fencing with words. Think of writing dialogue as though it were a fight sequence: parry, thrust, advance, retreat, attack. This will give strength and verve to your dialogue, and make your characters pop off the page.

If dialogue is a struggle for you, consider taking an acting class or two. This will dramatically improve your dialogue-writing skills.

SELF-EDITING TIP #12

Conflict, Conflict, Conflict

In real life, constant tension is exhausting. We look for a way--any way, good or bad--just to end the tension, and let life return to normal. So it goes against our natural inclinations to write a story of constant tension, constant conflict, constant suspense.

But...we don't read fiction to watch the paint dry. We read fiction because we want *drama*. There must be conflict on every page. Before submitting your manuscript to an editor, consider doing an editing pass looking at every single page, and ask yourself: Is there conflict here? Is there tension? Is there a war of words--or an actual battle--on every single page?

Because readers are looking for any excuse to put your book down. (Did you get that bit above about how readers don't owe you anything?) A couple of dead pages, the reader starts to yawn, and they move on to the next book in their TBR pile.

SELF-EDITING TIP #13

Go Easy on the Exposition

Once upon a time Queen Victoria sat upon the throne of England, and it was acceptable to engage in pages of detailed exposition of what your

characters looked like, description of the grounds of their country manor, the peculiarities of the servants, and the peccadilloes of the local clergyman.

My how times have changed.

Audiences now expect a more cinematic, punchy story. You can rage all you want, but this is the commercial reality. If you want to be a commercially successful author, you have to write for how the times actually *are*, not how you would like them to be.

Keep the exposition to what is necessary to advance the plot, no more.

SELF-EDITING TIP #14

$$1 + 1 = 1/2$$

This valuable tip comes from Sol Stein's *Stein on Writing*.

Say a thing once. And only once.

Repetition seduces us into thinking it offers power, when in reality it offers only weakness.

We, your readers, are paying attention. Trust me on this one. We really are. And being told the same thing over and over again just annoys us.

Let me give you an example. Suppose it is important that we understand your serial killer does what he does because his great-aunt Margaret used to spank him with a poker. Whatever. Tell us that once. And only once. We read looking for the clue, the significant detail.

To quote David Mamet, "I have never met an audience who was not collectively smarter than I am, and who did not beat me to the punch every time."

That.

SELF-EDITING TIP #15

The Rule of Three

If you're writing comedy, you probably know this rule already. Repetition is acceptable--and indeed, desirable--to make a punchline funnier.

The first time we hear the joke? Funny.

The second time--the callback? Funnier.

The third time? The big payoff, serious laughter.

BUT:

The fourth time? Umm, OK, now the joke is just stupid.

The Rule of Three is real. Ask any comedian. Not two. Not four. Three.

SELF-EDITING TIP #16

Be Unpredictable

Nothing delights readers more than being surprised. So many of the stories we consume these days are formulaic. When was the last time you watched a Hollywood movie and *couldn't* see the ending coming a mile away?

At each plot pivot, ask yourself: What would readers expect to happen next? Then consider doing the opposite. Not every time. Just enough to keep your readers off balance, on the edge of their seats, never sure what you're going to do next.

SELF-EDITING TIP #17

Do Not Patronize the Reader

This is a tough one, sometimes expressed as "Show, Don't Tell." But it's more than that. It's about having respect for the reader.

Don't tell me how to feel. Don't tell me what to think. The goal of great fiction is to create an emotional experience for the reader. But how do you

achieve that?

Some authors take a short cut and just tell us. That doesn't work so well. Consider:

Martha was in anguish. She wept bitter tears for grandmother, wildly convulsing over the coffin. *If only that savage turtle hadn't eaten poor grandma!*

Does that make me care? No. Martha and her dead grandmother mean nothing to me. So how about this:

Martha stood silent over the coffin. Her grandmother looked so peaceful. A cold rain began to fall. She wondered where the turtle was. Did it have a family, too? Did it understand what it had done? She doubted it. *All the same, I plan to have turtle soup if it's the last thing I ever do.*

This is a silly example, but I hope it makes my point. A good story well-told is the same as " $2 + 2 =$ ", in which you let us do the math ourselves. *Telling* is patronizing us and tacking on a "4", as if we're too stupid to figure it out on our own.

Writing fiction is about what to leave out just as much as what to put in.

Respect the intelligence of your reader, and they will love you for it.

SELF-EDITING TIP #18

Adjectives and Adverbs Must Die

You have no doubt heard this one already, but I want to emphasize the why. Go back to Tip #17. Adjectives and adverbs patronize the reader.

This may seem unintuitive at first. Think of it this way: A novel is not a complete emotional experience. It is a skeleton of an emotional experience which, when digested by the human brain, *produces* an emotional experience.

We, as readers, provide the flesh to your story with our own imaginations. *Which means you must leave big chunks of the story to our imagination!*

Adjectives, and especially adverbs, patronize the reader. You don't have to tell us everything, and in fact we don't want you to. You only have to give us enough to put the pieces together in our imaginations.

SELF-EDITING TIP #19

Avoid Clichés

Remember Tip #16? Being unpredictable is just as important at the sentence level as it is at the story level. Readers are hungry for metaphors

that help us understand the world, but stale and hackneyed imagery does nothing for us except, perhaps, cure our insomnia.

Startle readers with a new way of looking at the world, fresh imagery, striking metaphors.

Remember George Orwell's famous essay, "Politics and the English Language":

A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus: What am I trying to say? What word will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?

Because you want your writing to have an effect on the reader. Right?

SELF-EDITING TIP #20

Avoid Politics

One of the hardest things for a beginning fiction author to accept is that storytelling is not a useful form of activism. Nobody likes to get preached at. What's more, nobody will pay money for the privilege of being preached at.

The problem here is simple: Creating a story to communicate a political message comes from your conscious mind, and gets digested by our

conscious mind. But we don't consume stories to satisfy our conscious mind. We consume stories to satisfy our subconscious mind.

That's not to say you have to give up writing about subjects you're passionate about. Far from it. Your world view infuses everything you write. Instead of consciously writing a novel to prove your point, focus on writing on the most commercially popular fiction you can. Why? *Because your subconscious will automatically select plot, character, and villains that support your world view.*

This was a massive insight for me once upon a time, and I hope this realization will help you as much as it's helped me.

SELF-EDITING TIP #21

Sex Scenes

Unless you're writing erotica, leave something to the imagination. As we've already discussed, leaving something to the imagination is one of the key maxims to writing great fiction.

But when it comes to sex scenes, however, this is critical. There is nothing more boring or off-putting than a poorly-written sex scene. Nor are detailed descriptions of what goes where particularly titillating.

The goal here, as in all fiction, is to evoke a sex scene in our imagination. The key to creating a steamy sex scene is what you leave out, not what you

put in.

SELF-EDITING TIP #22

What Comes from the Gut, Speaks to the Gut

The goal of fiction, as we've discussed, is to produce an emotional experience for the reader. But how do you do that?

What comes from the brain, goes to the brain. What comes from the gut, speaks to the gut. Is your manuscript visceral, primal, emotional? Or is it intellectual?

If the latter, you may like to start over. No editing in the world can take an intellectual exercise and give it an emotional *oomph*.

SELF-EDITING TIP #23

Evoke Emotion by Withholding Emotion

As we discussed in Tip #17, describing your characters' emotional reactions has zero effect on our heartstrings. Think of it this way. Ever watched a movie where someone breaks down and starts crying?

What do you think at that moment?

Do you think, ah, the poor dear, it's so horrible what she's going through? Or do you think, "Gee, that's great acting. What does she use, I wonder? Garlic? Onion? Or can she produce tears on demand? Now where'd that popcorn get to..."

You see? You produce emotion by what, in film, would be called montage: Martha and her grandma spending quality time together, followed by grandma between the jaws of a giant killer turtle. You don't *need* to tell us how Martha feels. We are capable of putting two and two together on our own--and that is the only way to make us feel her loss.

SELF-EDITING TIP #24

Your Booming God Voice

It take a couple of books to find your "booming god voice." What do I mean by that? The confidence that exudes from the prose of a master. It says, "I am in control. I am a master of this story. I have something to say, and *BY GOD I MEAN TO SAY IT.*"

Readers pick up on this confidence. It is a form of seduction. The words don't matter, grammar ceases to have meaning, there is only you and me and the story. And we are in love.

So how do you self-edit to achieve your booming god voice? Well, you don't. Not exactly. You may have to start over from scratch. Or you may decide to learn what you can, publish what you have, and do better with your next book.

SELF-EDITING TIP #25

Read it Out Loud

If you only take away one self-editing tip, make it this one.

Before you publish your work, or submit your work to agents, print out your entire manuscript. Single-sided, double-spaced, twelve-point font.

Now put your manuscript on a table or a desk, your palms flat on either side, and read the entire book *out loud*. Keep a pen handy, make notes when necessary, but put your palms back flat on the desk when you continue reading.

Do not rush it. Read every word in a normal tone of voice, as though you were telling the story to a friend.

This is an amazing technique, and I cannot recommend it highly enough!

About the Editor



Jens Porup has more than fifteen years of experience as an editor, author, journalist, copywriter, and proofreader. He's edited hundreds of books over the years, both fiction and non-fiction, and loves working with self-published authors. He hangs his shingle at BookButchers.com and NextLevelEditing.net.

8 MISTAKES TO AVOID

The first 25 tips focused on cutting out the bad writing (or replacing it with better writing). They are the things a skilled copy editor would comment on. But when I read self-published books I often notice even more basic things: typos, poor grammar and spelling. For a writer, these are *inexcusable*, and yet very common.

Everybody makes mistakes. Even you. And unfortunately it's usually the little, stupid ones that slip your notice. But you've got to find them so you can exorcise them. I listed 8 down below (a few of them were mentioned already, so this is just as a reminder).

1. Build sympathy first, show your good/bad characters (conflict)

Your book needs conflict, and your main character has to be sympathetic from the beginning. We need to root for, pity and bond with the main character, and hate and loathe the opposition. There must be a villain, or a source of conflict, or a foil – somebody who for some reason makes the protagonist feel bad.

The protagonist should doubt him/herself, so that through the story they can gain self-confidence and existential security.

This needs to be done quickly. No matter how cool the action scenes are, if we don't know who to root for, if we don't feel an emotional connection to

the outcome, we just don't care. Before I know which characters are good or evil, when they're all strangers to me, I wouldn't care if any of them got hit by a bus. Which means I'm not invested in your story. Before you blow crap up and have shoot outs, readers need to know, love and care about your protagonist.

2. Start with the action

Almost all scenes/chapters need to start in the middle of the action. Cut out all the lead up stuff. Cut out the explanation, back story, exposition and description of the scene. Start in the middle of a tense dialogue. Start with an attention hooking line. Start with close-up, in focus zoom in of drops of blood, sweat and tears. Hook attention first – then back up, fill in the details, slow down and set up the next major conflict (then cut the scene and start over with the next one).

3. Believable characters don't flip flop or show ridiculous emotions

Normal people laugh when they're happy. They might be short-tempered and snarky when they are angry. But they rarely "sob hysterically", "shriek uncontrollably", or "shake visibly." People don't let their emotions run wild – especially around a whole group of other people. And they don't flip flop between happy and deathly depressed at every unexpected catastrophe. People usually don't react at all when bad things happen – they are in shock.

They hold it in, do what needs done, and only let it sink in when they have

time to process their grief. So check how often your main character (or any characters) cry, sob, scream, shriek, etc. You might allow them one emotional display per book (although I wouldn't allow them any. Cut all that crap out, replace it with subtle melancholy, emptiness, inability to experience joy).

4. It's/Its...There/Their/They're

It's the easy stuff we tend to miss. Even if we can spell big words correctly backwards, you're going to mess these up a lot: use the search/find feature to search for these one by one and check them all. If you notice something else simple you screwed up, search for it – you probably did it more than once. Also, we tend to have 'bad batches' – so if you find any errors, super-edit that section, because there are likely to be more errors nearby.

5. Adverbs: -ly

Adverbs are bad. They are lazy writing. Anytime you express what someone did and how they did it by adding an -ly (said excitedly, left resolutely, prayed devoutly...) you're missing the chance to write well and picking something easy. A lot of these phrases will be meaningless (like "laughed happily"). Or they will be confusing. So use your search/find button for "ly" and track them all down. Does it need to be there? Is there another way you can show how they did something without using an adverb?

"Said excitedly" = "said, a grin spreading at the corners of his mouth and his body quivering with expectation."

“Left resolvedly” = “stamped out of the room, slamming the door behind him.”

Seriously: search every one and try to get rid of them all.

Edit: Ok, not *all*. Some adverbs are acceptable. But get rid of the really bad ones that don’t mean anything. Please.

6. Exclamations

Now use the find/replace feature to search for “!” and “?!”. People aren’t usually very excited, and we don’t shout a lot. That means you really don’t need to use exclamation points, like, hardly ever. But a lot of indie authors have a bunch of characters saying things like “How dare you!!!” or “Are you crazy?!?!?”

Lots of punctuation is no substitute for good writing. Not only is it unnecessary, it’s often used to mask over very bad dialogue – so searching for your “!” can indicate poor dialogue that you need to strengthen.

7. 1 space after a period

I know it’s a raging controversy, but I don’t care. Use find and replace, hit the space bar twice in the first field, and once in the second field, to replace all your double spaces to single spaces. You don’t need any double spaces, anywhere. (Unless you are submitting a manuscript to a publisher/agents, and they specifically request double spacing because it gives them more space for notes – but if you’re self-publishing, you don’t need them).

8. No fancy words

Unless you're writing a first-person narrative, the narrator should be invisible. So when you use big, strange, fancy, unusual words, it interrupts the action and draws attention to the narrator.

This especially happens with repetition – a novel I read recently used “purchase” in the sense of “to gain traction.” The first time I thought it was a bit odd. The second and third time I thought it sounded stupid. You are likely to have favorite words that you like to use, but when you pick a fancy word instead of a common word, it will stand out. Characters themselves can use them in dialogue, but you shouldn't use them.

Here's a cool online tool you can use to check the frequency of all the words you used in your book:

<http://textalyser.net/>

Just paste all your text there and look at the most common words, to see if you have any bad habits you should break.

About the Editor



Derek Murphy is getting his PhD in Literature, and was a book editor before specializing in making books beautiful (cover and interior design). He's been self-publishing since 2004, and helps indie authors sell more books through a variety of tools, resources and platforms, centered around his main blog, www.creativindie.com.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

Don't be in a hurry to send off your manuscript hoping someone else will fix it for you. The big problems are almost always story issues, and an editor can't write your story for you. Getting reader feedback and fixing the story is your first hurdle. After your story is good, improve the writing. The further you take it, the better the final result (after editing) will be.

But if you've done that and you're sure it's ready, send a sample to us for a free trial edit, and we'll help you find the right brilliant editor to work with.