

# The fiction writer's self-editing checklist

You've finished the draft. Now comes the work of turning it into a story you can stand behind. The key is not to try to fix everything at once. Work from the biggest questions to the smallest. There's little point polishing a beautiful sentence in a scene that ultimately needs to be cut.

You may not need every question below. Think of this as a set of prompts to help you look at your manuscript with fresh eyes. You will need to do a number of passes of edits as it is difficult to try to do it all at once.

## The passes

Pass 1: The story

Pass 2: Scenes and chapters

Pass 3: Characters

Pass 4: Plot, tension and pacing

Pass 5: Point of view and voice

Pass 6: Read for the reader

Pass 7: Prose

Pass 8: Dialogue

Pass 9: Description and detail

Pass 10: Continuity and fact-checking

Pass 11: Copyediting and proofreading

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## Before you begin

- ☐ I've put the manuscript aside for a while before starting the edit.
- ☐ I've read the manuscript all the way through at least once without stopping to fix every problem.
- ☐ I have a sense of what I think is working and what I'm uncertain about.
- ☐ I'm prepared to make changes, including cutting or moving material I've become attached to.
- ☐ I'm editing to make the story stronger, not to make every sentence perfect.

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## Pass 1: The story

### The big picture

- ☐ Can I describe what this story is about beyond its basic plot?
- ☐ Is there a clear central conflict, question, tension or idea?
- ☐ Does the story develop and change as it progresses?
- ☐ Does the ending feel connected to what comes before it?
- ☐ Are there any major questions or promises I've set up but failed to address?
- ☐ Are there parts of the story that could be cut without affecting the whole?
- ☐ Is there anything the reader needs that I've failed to give them?

### **The beginning**

- ☐ Have I started the story in the right place?
- ☐ Does the opening give the reader a reason to keep reading?
- ☐ Is there enough information for the reader to orient themselves?
- ☐ Have I given them too much information too soon?
- ☐ Does the story actually begin later than I thought?

### **The ending**

- ☐ Does the ending resolve what needs to be resolved?
  - ☐ Does it feel earned by what has happened earlier in the story?
  - ☐ Have I tied up the right threads?
  - ☐ Have I left anything unresolved accidentally?
  - ☐ Have I continued beyond the natural ending?
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## **Pass 2: Scenes and chapters**

### **Look at every scene**

A scene doesn't necessarily need dramatic action. A quiet scene can be doing important work. The question is: what work is this scene doing? For each scene, ask:

- ☐ Who is the point-of-view character?
- ☐ What does this character want in the scene?
- ☐ What gets in the way?
- ☐ What changes during the scene?
- ☐ Is there a reason this scene needs to exist?
- ☐ Does the scene reveal something about a character, relationship or situation?
- ☐ Does it move the story forward?
- ☐ Does it repeat work another scene is already doing?
- ☐ Does the scene end in a way that makes me want to continue?

### **Chapters**

- ☐ Does each chapter have a clear purpose?
  - ☐ Does the order of the chapters make sense?
  - ☐ Are there chapters that could be combined?
  - ☐ Are there chapters that need to be broken up?
  - ☐ Does the pacing vary appropriately?
  - ☐ Are chapter endings doing what they need to do?
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## **Pass 3: Characters**

### **Your main characters**

- ☐ Do I understand what each major character wants?
- ☐ Do I understand what motivates them?
- ☐ Do their choices make sense within the story?
- ☐ Do they have something at stake?
- ☐ Do their actions create consequences?
- ☐ Do they change, reveal themselves or develop over the course of the story?

- ☐ Does their behaviour remain believable, even when they make surprising choices?
- ☐ Have I given different characters distinct personalities, perspectives and ways of seeing the world?

### **Character continuity**

- ☐ Are ages, appearances, relationships and other important details consistent?
  - ☐ Do I remember what each character knows at each point in the story?
  - ☐ Have I accidentally given a character information they couldn't possibly know?
  - ☐ Have I changed a character's motivation or behaviour without meaning to?
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## **Pass 4: Plot, tension and pacing**

- ☐ Does one event lead to another, or do things simply happen one after another?
  - ☐ Do characters' choices have consequences?
  - ☐ Are the stakes clear?
  - ☐ Do the stakes increase, change or deepen as the story progresses?
  - ☐ Are there sections where nothing much changes?
  - ☐ Have I repeated the same conflict several times?
  - ☐ Are important developments given enough space?
  - ☐ Have I rushed important moments?
  - ☐ Does the middle of the story maintain momentum?
  - ☐ Do subplots contribute to the story rather than distracting from it?
  - ☐ Are subplots resolved, deliberately left open, or simply forgotten?
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## **Pass 5: Point of view and voice**

### **Point of view**

- ☐ Is the point of view clear?
- ☐ Is it consistent where it needs to be?
- ☐ Have I accidentally moved into another character's thoughts?
- ☐ Does the reader have access to information the viewpoint character couldn't know?
- ☐ Are changes in viewpoint clear and intentional?

### **Voice**

Every story has its own voice. And characters have their own voices too. Don't edit them all into the same polished version of 'good writing'. Instead, ask:

- ☐ Does the narrative voice suit this particular story?
  - ☐ Does the language suit the setting, period, genre and tone?
  - ☐ Does the voice feel deliberate?
  - ☐ Do different characters sound and think differently?
  - ☐ Could I identify a character from their dialogue without their name attached?
  - ☐ Have I accidentally flattened a distinctive character voice while editing?
  - ☐ Have I changed something that feels unusual simply because I'm not used to writing that way?
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## Pass 6: Read for the reader

Now put yourself in the position of someone who knows nothing about the manuscript.

- ☐ Where might a reader become confused?
  - ☐ Where might they lose interest?
  - ☐ Where might they want more information?
  - ☐ Where might they feel I have explained too much?
  - ☐ Where might they wonder why something is happening?
  - ☐ Where might the story feel rushed?
  - ☐ Where might it feel slow?
  - ☐ Are there moments where the emotional response I'm hoping for isn't actually supported by what's on the page?
  - ☐ Am I trusting the reader where I can, while giving them what they need?
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## Pass 7: Prose

Now, and only now, get closer to the sentences.

### Clarity

- ☐ Can I understand what is happening?
- ☐ Is the action easy to follow?
- ☐ Are pronouns and references clear?
- ☐ Have I accidentally created ambiguity?
- ☐ Are there places where I need to be more specific?

### Rhythm and repetition

- ☐ Have I read the manuscript aloud?
- ☐ Are there sentences that make me stumble?
- ☐ Have I noticed repeated sentence structures?
- ☐ Are there words or phrases I use too often?
- ☐ Does the rhythm suit the moment?
- ☐ Have I kept distinctive or deliberate stylistic choices rather than editing them out automatically?

### Unnecessary words

- ☐ Have I removed words that don't add anything?
  - ☐ Have I looked for redundant phrases?
  - ☐ Have I checked my habitual words and phrases?
  - ☐ Have I looked at adverbs and asked whether each one is earning its place?
  - ☐ Have I avoided changing perfectly good writing simply because someone once told me a particular kind of word is 'bad'?
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## Pass 8: Dialogue

- ☐ Does the dialogue sound appropriate to the character and situation?
- ☐ Does each character have a distinct way of speaking?
- ☐ Are characters saying things they genuinely need or want to say?

- ☐ Have I included dialogue simply to give the reader information?
  - ☐ Does the dialogue move the scene forward or reveal character or relationship?
  - ☐ Have I removed unnecessary small talk?
  - ☐ Have I read the dialogue aloud?
  - ☐ Have I checked that the dialogue tags and accompanying action are clear?
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### **Pass 9: Description and detail**

- ☐ Are there enough specific details to make the world of the story tangible?
  - ☐ Have I chosen details that tell us something rather than simply filling space?
  - ☐ Are descriptions filtered through the viewpoint character where appropriate?
  - ☐ Have I relied on familiar or clichéd descriptions where something more specific would be stronger?
  - ☐ Have I over-described places, people or objects?
  - ☐ Have I given important moments enough sensory or emotional detail?
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### **Pass 10: Continuity and fact-checking**

Create a simple style sheet as you go.

- ☐ Character names and spellings are consistent.
  - ☐ Character ages are consistent.
  - ☐ Physical details are consistent.
  - ☐ Places and locations are consistent.
  - ☐ Dates and timelines work.
  - ☐ Travel times and distances make sense.
  - ☐ Seasons and weather are consistent.
  - ☐ Objects don't mysteriously appear or disappear.
  - ☐ Characters know only what they could reasonably know at that point.
  - ☐ Any historical, geographical, scientific or other factual details I've included have been checked.
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### **Pass 11: Copyediting and proofreading**

Only once you're happy with the manuscript should you spend serious time on the technical details. Use spellcheck and other tools to help you, but don't rely on them to do the thinking for you.

- ☐ Spelling
- ☐ Grammar
- ☐ Punctuation
- ☐ Capitalisation
- ☐ Dialogue punctuation
- ☐ Paragraphing
- ☐ Italics
- ☐ Numbers and dates

- ☐ Chapter headings
  - ☐ Scene breaks
  - ☐ Page numbers
  - ☐ Formatting
  - ☐ Double spaces and stray spaces
  - ☐ Missing or duplicated words
  - ☐ Opening and closing quotation marks
  - ☐ Commonly confused words
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### **Before you send it**

- ☐ I've read the manuscript in a different format from the one I normally write in.
  - ☐ I've read the final version after making my last changes.
  - ☐ I've checked the submission requirements.
  - ☐ I've saved a final copy.
  - ☐ I've kept a backup.
  - ☐ I've asked for feedback from at least one appropriate reader, if that's useful at this stage.
  - ☐ I've considered the feedback rather than automatically accepting or rejecting it.
  - ☐ I've stopped editing.
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### **One final question for you**

Am I still improving the manuscript, or am I trying to make it impossible to criticise?

There will always be another sentence you could change. At some point, your job is to decide that you've done enough.

Your manuscript doesn't have to be perfect. It has to be ready.

If you'd like to have more assistance with your writing, please check my website for ways I support writers. You might like to [start here](#).

Yours in creativity, Meg

**Meg Dunley**  
**Writer, editor and creativity coach**  
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