The PEN Institute

Equipping Editors

Since 2007

NONFICTION EDITING 101

Instructor: Erin K. Brown

LESSON #5

Specialized Nonfiction

Introduction

Nonfiction includes several genres and specialized fields. Consider this brief list:

Business
Cooking
Economics
Education/Curriculum
Family, Parenting
Finances
Gardening
Healthcare
IT
Law
Manufacturing
Marketing/Advertising
Media

Medical/Pharmaceutical
Biotechnical
Memoir
Philosophy/Psychology
Photography
Science (several fields)
Self-Help
Spirituality
Sports
Technical
Telecommunications
Tourism/Travel

Within each of these categories are further divisions and crossovers. For example, under self-help, you will find books on how to change some aspect of your life: lose weight, set personal boundaries, manage anger . . . the list goes on. Visit https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_writing_genres to view additional subgenres (this site includes fiction and nonfiction genres and subgenres).

Editing any form of literature requires a solid knowledge of grammar, spelling, punctuation, usage, and sentence structure, as well as a thorough knowledge of organization, structure, and substance. Also, you must look for the appropriate takeaway; ensure that every sentence, paragraph, and chapter flow; make sure the organization is logical; and edit the syntax, word choice, etc.

If all that weren't enough, specialty nonfiction requires additional knowledge and familiarity not

only with the topic but also with the style manuals particular to the field. Of course, you'll need

to understand who the audiences are and the expectations of the genre.

If you read a wide variety of nonfiction titles, you already have a good knowledge base to work from. But if you want to break into a particular field, it's wise to study several titles within that discipline.

Editing Nonfiction Basics

No matter what your specialty, you always want to partner with your clients, helping them produce the best product possible.

Previous lessons have covered elements specific to nonfiction. In this lesson, we'll address the following:

- Matching TOC with book chapters
- Matching lists of illustrations and the like with their counterparts
- Sequential numbering in questions, points, quoted material, etc.
- Fact checking (limited)
- Precision
- Clarity
- Structure
- Flow/Progression/Transitions
- Organization
- Active versus passive

We've got a lot of ground to cover, so let's get at it.

> *Editing is like pruning the rose bush you thought was*
> *so perfect and beautiful until it overgrew the garden.*
>
> Larry Enright

First Things First

Let me suggest a process when beginning to edit nonfiction manuscripts. (Adjust this to fit your style.) Once you've prepared the manuscript (see Lesson 1), print a copy of the TOC (table of contents), any lists as stated in the TOC, and the notes section.

While editing the manuscript, check the titles on the printed TOC against the chapter titles in the manuscript. You'd be surprised how many times the TOC and the actual chapter titles do not match. If the author has simply failed to include a chapter title in the TOC, you'll need to add it. If there's a discrepancy in the title name, query the author on both the TOC and the chapter title. Ultimately, the TOC and chapter titles must match—in order, exact wording, capitalization, and punctuation.

Follow a similar procedure as you check the graphics/tables/figures against any lists provided as front matter.

In the same way, check the superscript numbers after quotations to make sure they match the same-numbered note or reference in the notes section you printed off earlier. Jot the page number of the quoted material next to the documentation. This helps if you have to find the keyed material for any reason. Also, ensure that the reference numbers are sequential.

Sequential Numbering in Questions, Points, Etc.

If the manuscript contains numbered questions, points, or any numbered elements, make sure the numbers are sequential, with no gaps in numbering. Also, make sure numbered lists are parallel in structure.

Let's recall what we learned in Lesson 3 about editing tables. Follow this list while editing tables. You may have to make more than one or two passes because you must look for several things.

- The table has to make sense. It should stand on its own without any explanation from the text.
- The table must be relevant to the text.
- The table contents must not conflict with the text.
- Check for any inconsistencies between the text and table.
- The table should be near the relative text.
- Check that all tables within the manuscript are formatted consistently.
- The table number should match the reference in the text.
- All spelling is correct.
- Make sure math content is correct.
- Sources should be correctly marked and formatted.
- The legend must match the variables.

If you discover that the content of a table could be clearly stated with the desired effect in a sentence or two, then certainly draw the author's or the PM's attention to it. And if textual material could be better presented in a table, mark the text to be converted to a table and add your comment.

Fact Checking

Though accuracy is the author's responsibility, the editor needs to know which facts to verify and which facts seem "off" and should be queried. I can't teach you how to do this; rather, it's an instinct you must develop over time. Acquiring an extensive, general-knowledge base is invaluable. If you've ever thought of yourself as a storehouse of seemingly useless trivia, take heart! That "useless" trivia will become your interior radar when it tells you that a "fact" in the manuscript you're editing doesn't seem quite right.

The editor must spot potential legal problems: libel, plagiarism, and invasion of privacy. One of the first manuscripts I edited was for a gentleman who'd written the history of an organization. One of the original members of this organization was, shall we say, a colorful character who said whatever came into his head, no matter how hateful or hurtful. My client, along with several other people within the organization, found it difficult, even impossible, to work with this man. Long story short, the author teetered on libel when he wrote about this man, truthful as it was. I

had to caution my client more than once about his portrayal of the man. I didn't want my client to get caught up in legal issues if this man decided the book damaged his reputation or misrepresented him.

Several years ago, I edited a manuscript for a major publisher. In the manuscript, the author talked about a study conducted by Stanford on delayed gratification in children. Nothing was quoted within the text, but I wanted to know if the author meant Stanford University, so I did an internet search. Yep, Stanford University, but I also discovered that she'd copied *word for word* several pages of the report, yet hadn't put it in quotation marks or cited the report. I found two other instances of plagiarism. I immediately contacted the PM. It was her job to work out the solution. Had I not caught the plagiarism, the author and publisher could have faced serious legal issues. Several plagiarism scanners are available to check a manuscript.

Precision

To be precise is to be clear in details. For example, to say "Cats are hunters" is not precise because it is too broad a statement. It allows for too many questions: What kind of cats? What do they hunt? But if you say, "Pet cats are good mousers," you are being precise. No one will mistake your intent.

Precisely conveying ideas and using specific words makes for clear and pleasurable reading. Following is an exchange that is full of imprecise language. Nothing is grammatically wrong with the sentences, yet you'll catch on quickly how imprecision causes trouble:

> "Let me see your ID."
> I took my wallet out of my pocket, opened it, and held it up. There's a plastic window with my ID beneath it, clearly visible.
> The guard sneered at me and through gritted teeth said, "Take it out! I didn't ask for your wallet, I asked for your ID."
> I answered, "You asked to *see* my ID."
> His scowl deepened. He looked like he wanted to punch me.

The guard had one outcome in his thinking, but his imprecision didn't convey it. Though this is a fictitious verbal exchange, the principle holds true in writing. Watch for these kinds of things, but remember that it isn't the copyeditor's job to make the writing more precise. Instead, query the author with something like this: "Can you make this more precise? For example: . . ." and make your suggestion. However, if you're doing a substantive edit, you could correct it.

Clarity

On the heels of precision is clarity. Clarity is the opposite of ambiguity. If writing is precise, ambiguity should not be a problem. So be on the lookout for ambiguity. You'll likely need to query your author and state the problem. If possible, suggest clarification.

Probably the biggest problem with new authors who know their subjects well is a lack of clarity in that they leave half their ideas in their heads. They think they've made their point, when they've written only part of it.

A manuscript I edited on financial management was written by a banker who'd been in the business for years. This guy knew his stuff. Back in the savings and loan crisis in the '80s and '90s, his job involved going into several S&Ls and getting them back into running order. That was no small task, and it required complex skills and knowledge. I was confident this man knew his material, but his knowledge was such a part of his thinking that he failed to get onto paper enough detail for his readers to be able to follow his train of thought. I had to keep reminding him that bankers were not his audience but men and women from all walks of life who wanted to know more about personal financial management.

Then there's the problem of adding so many details that readers can't wade through the morass to grasp the main idea. They get lost or, even worse, confused.

How do you address this multilayered problem of too little or too much detail? First, identify the audience; second, state the manuscript's theme and the takeaway; third, ask, What does the reader need to know to come to the desired takeaway? Defining these three items will dictate the essential content.

Dialogue in Nonfiction

Sometimes nonfiction includes dialogue. Depending upon the genre and theme, the manuscript can have a little or a lot. But many times I create a better flow by converting narrative into dialogue. The most extreme case was a book by then-teenaged Erin Merryn, *Living for Today*. It is her story of coming to terms with her abuse. It was heavy with this kind of structure: "he said that . . .", "then she said that . . .", and "I told her that . . ." Sometimes this went on for pages. I got the okay from the PM to create dialogue. I used beats and tags—just as you find in fiction. What a difference it made! Her story came alive, it flowed, and it was far more interesting to read. (This book and her previous one, *Stolen Innocence*, helped her make Erin's Law a reality in eighteen states, with nineteen more states set to consider it.) Even if it's just a few lines of "she said that . . . ," put it into dialogue.

If you encounter dialogue in nonfiction manuscripts, begin a new paragraph with each new speaker—just as you would in fiction. Too many times I find dialogue between two people packed into one paragraph.

Singular/Plural Issues

A common issue in nonfiction manuscripts is this kind of phrasing: "Our heart and soul need care, for they are what make us beautiful!"

Did you catch the problem? The author and the audience do not share one heart; neither do they share a soul. Therefore, it should be: "Our hearts and souls need care, for they are what make us beautiful!" Watch out for this kind of error.

Singular "they" has become acceptable: "Your child needs to understand that they can come to you with any problem." *The Associated Press Stylebook* has added it as a singular gender-neutral pronoun, and an increasing number of publishers are accepting it too. Whenever possible, I rewrite the sentence to

keep "they" plural. (See *CMOS* 5.48 and 5.255–6 for more discussion on singular "they" and gender pronouns.)

Flow/Structure/Organization

Flow depends on structure, which depends on organization. So let's start with the organization. Before writing the first word of any manuscript, the authors must know their books' themes and the takeaways (what the readers need to know/do), as well as have a plan how to logically get the readers there. Typically, they have developed an outline as a guide to get from the introduction to the conclusion.

I recall a manuscript I edited early in my career. The author knew her subject matter, but she failed to use any kind of outline to order her material presentation. Her manuscript was an organizational nightmare. In particular, one chapter was so bad I couldn't even create an outline for it. Maybe now, with many years of experience under my belt, I would have an easier time of correcting the order, but at the time I did what I thought would be the best-easiest-fastest way of making sense of the chaos: I printed out the chapter and cut it apart by the paragraphs. I laid the loose paragraphs out on the floor and began piecing them together (eliminating some). I'm happy to say that this hands-on method worked and the author was thrilled with the result.

The outline provides the basic organization/structure of the book. It helps the author to visualize how the parts (chapters) will fit together to present the material in a way that makes sense to the readers. When mentoring new writers, I always tell them to develop an outline. Some try to avoid this step, thinking they can keep everything in their heads rather than writing it down. Nine times out of ten, these are the writers whose manuscripts lack organization. It's difficult for me to help them without that outline, which is a kind of visual representation of their manuscript's organization. So, kicking and screaming (them, not me), they create the outline. More times than not, once they "see" their outlines, they quickly spot problems with their organization, or lack of it, and fix it, sometimes with my help. And, of course, they'll use these outlines as the basis for the outlines included with their proposals.

If I'm doing a developmental or substantive edit, I work closely with the author to help build the manuscript. One of the first things we do is create the outline.

The subject will, to some degree, dictate the structure: whether a chronological approach is best (some memoirs) or by steps (how-to books) or by the level of difficulty (learning a new skill).

I like to watch *Fixer Upper* and other similar shows on HGTV. The hosts comment frequently about a house's flow. A good flow, one that logically leads from one part of the house to the next, is pleasing. Some houses have a "wonky" flow, which isn't true flow: the way to the back patio is through a bedroom, the powder room is off the kitchen or formal living room, or the washer and dryer are on the back porch. And some houses are said to be chopped up—isolated rooms separated by walls and doors.

In a manuscript, the "wonky" flow is the lack of organization, and the choppy problem is caused by the outline being obvious within the text—topics change abruptly. An outline is rather cut-and-dried—you have a main point, then subpoint A, subpoint B, and so on. You want to avoid the done-with-that-point-move-on-to-the-next-point approach. It's like the studs that hold up the

walls of a building. But when we move through a home and "feel" the flow, we don't see the studs—only their effect. Like a pleasing flow in a home, one sentence flows into the next. One paragraph flows into the next. One idea flows into another. Proper structure allows for logical transitions to create flow.

Active Versus Passive

As a general rule, active voice is preferable over passive voice, even in nonfiction. Passive voice in nonfiction is easy to slip in. Most times you'll change the sentence from passive to active. But passive voice has its place. Amy Einsohn wrote the following in *The Copyeditor's Handbook*:

> The passive is also preferable when the result of the activity is more important than the performer . . . Unpleasant messages are often framed in the passive.
>
> Active is preferable over passive, but . . . thoughtful use and placement of passive gives a welcome break to constant active voice. In addition, sometimes a sentence requires a *be* verb [am, is, are, were, be, being, been] when the subject is linked with the predicate.

Consistency

All chapters in nonfiction need to begin the same way. If one or two chapters of the manuscript you're editing begin with a chapter-opening quote, *all* chapters need to begin with a chapter-opening quote, or there should be no chapter-opening quotes. All or none: make them all begin alike. In the same way, do not begin a chapter with a subhead. Introductory matter must follow the chapter number and title. *But* consistency is the key. If it's imperative for one or two or three chapters to begin with a subhead, then *all* chapters must begin with a subhead.

Specialized Fields

At the beginning of this lesson, I listed just a few nonfiction subgenres. I encourage you to visit a brick and mortar bookstore (Barnes & Noble is my go-to bookstore) and browse the aisles—you'll see a vast number of nonfiction subgenres.

What's your passion? Education? Marketing? Self-improvement? Whatever it is that gets you excited, visit this section. Take note of the titles, authors, and subjects. Grab a few and settle into an easy chair. Note the front and back matter. Study the layout, including any graphics. As you browse through several books on the same subject, does anything stand out as being constant with all titles? For example, Bible studies often have thirteen chapters. Why? Because they are based on quarters—thirteen weeks—making them appropriate for Sunday school classes.

Style Manuals

If you've edited fiction manuscripts, you are likely familiar with *The Chicago Manual of Style*. We've referenced it in previous lessons. This is the standard style manual for general titles in the United States. But each discipline has its preferred style, and it's not always *CMOS*.

If you want to specialize in a particular field, you'll be expected to edit according to that field's style manual. And it's quite possible that each publisher of titles within that field will also have its unique house style.

It's beyond the scope of this course to go into all the particulars of each nonfiction field, but I've compiled a limited list of several popular style manuals for your convenience. Please note that some of the edition numbers may have changed in the last year or so.

General
The Canadian Style: A Guide to Writing and Editing, rev. ed., Dundurn Press, 2004.

The Chicago Manual of Style, 17th ed., University of Chicago Press, 2017. See also: Chicago-Style Citation Quick Guide.

A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations: Chicago Style for Students and Researchers, 9th ed. University of Chicago Press, 2018. (Commonly known as "Turabian," it is intended for "students at every level—from first-year undergraduates to dissertation writers.")

New Oxford Style Manual, Oxford University Press, 2016.

General Christian
The Christian Writer's Manual of Style, 4th ed., Zondervan, 2016.

Business and Technical Communication
The AMA Style Guide for Business Writing, Amacom, 1996.

Franklin Covey Style Guide for Business and Technical Communication, 4th ed., Franklin Covey, 2008.

Government
U.S. Government Printing Office Style Manual: An Official Guide to the Form and Style of Federal Government Printing (also cited as *GPO Style Manual*), 301st ed., Claitor's, 2017. See also: U.S. GPO Style Manual.

Humanities and Languages
The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 7th ed., Modern Language Association of America, 2009. (The Modern Language Association publishes two books on its documentation style: the *MLA Handbook* is intended for high school and undergraduate students; the *MLA Style Manual* is for graduate students, scholars, and professional writers.)

MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing, 3rd ed., Modern Language Association of America, 2008.

MLA Handbook, 8th ed., Modern Language Association of America, 2016.

Journalism and Other Media
The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law, Basic Books, 2017. See also: AP Stylebook.

[The BBC News Style Guide](#).

The Canadian Press Stylebook: A Guide for Writing and Editing, 14th ed., Canadian Press, 2006. See also: [Canadian Press Stylebook](#).

The Economist Style Guide, 11th ed., Profile Books (UK) and Bloomberg Press (US), 2015.

Guardian Style, Random House UK, 2010. See also: [The Guardian, Observer and guardian.co.uk Style Guide](#).

The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage, 5th ed., Random House, 2015.

UPI Stylebook and Guide to Newswriting, 4th ed., Capital Books, 2004.

Law
ALWD Citation Manual: A Professional System of Citation, 4th ed., Aspen, 2010.

The Bluebook: A Uniform System of Citation, 20th ed., The Harvard Law Review Association, 2015.

Science, Medicine, and Technology
The ACS Style Guide: Effective Communication of Scientific Information, 3rd ed., American Chemical Society, 2006.

AMA Manual of Style: A Guide for Authors and Editors, 10th ed., Oxford University Press, 2007.

The Manual of Scientific Style: A Guide for Authors, Editors, and Researchers, Academic Press, 2008.

Scientific Style and Format: The CBE Manual for Authors, Editors, and Publishers, 7th ed., Council of Science Editors, 2004.

Social and Behavioral Sciences
Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (commonly known as the *APA Style Manual*), 6th ed., American Psychological Association (APA), 2009.

Style Manual for Political Science, rev. ed., American Political Science Association, 2002

If you edit for clients who live in foreign countries or who will be publishing outside the United States, you will need to find out which style manual should be used. In the past few years, I've edited several manuscripts for Australian and British authors whose audiences are Australian and British, respectively, so I had to use the appropriate style manuals. Never assume your author is writing for a US audience. Always ask. Actually, you should always ask about a book's audience

so you can ensure that content and presentation is appropriate for that audience and that the author has effectively reached the intended audience.

Summary

Whew! This has been a busy lesson! I hope you gleaned a lot of help from it. We considered several subgenres under the nonfiction label. Then we quickly covered nonfiction editing basics, regardless of the specialty. We ended with a list of popular style manuals particular to various fields. You've worked hard, so I'm easing up a bit on your assignment. But I hope it will trigger some good ideas for you!

* * *

Resources

Amy Einsohn, *The Copyeditor's Handbook* (University of California Press, 2000).

LESSON #5 ASSIGNMENT

1. What three nonfiction specialties are you considering breaking into?

2. What interests you about these fields?

3. What style manual(s) would you use within each field?