



EDITING YA FICTION 101

Instructor: Kelly Anne White

LESSON #5

Tying Up Loose Ends in YA

They were all thinking, “Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed.” But I prayed, “Now strengthen my hands.”

Nehemiah 6:9

In this final lesson, let’s look at additional elements that might help tighten and strengthen a YA narrative. These are predominantly issues that might be noted in comment bubbles or in the editorial letter, since it’s recommended that an editor avoid a hefty overhaul to a manuscript that is assigned for a copyedit or line edit. It is, however, important at any level of editing to provide utmost professional editorial guidance to an author or publisher, so here we look at further solidifying the state of a YA narrative.

Shaking Up Syntax

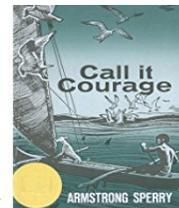
Varying syntax throughout a narrative is helpful in giving the content that upbeat and engaging pace that is so desirable to a YA demographic. If in the course of your edit you notice that sentences are structured too similarly, you might want to suggest that the author go through and spiff up by varying the syntax. This can be addressed in an editorial letter that includes examples of various recommended sentence structures.

Opening Adjectives

Begin with one or more adjectives, and follow with a more detailed description.

Bloodthirsty and brutal, the giants brought themselves to the point of extinction by warring amongst themselves during the last century.

Call It Courage by Armstrong Sperry



Opening Adverbs

Lead with information about an action—how, when, or where it occurs.

Silently we made our way upriver, the ripple of the water and the rhythm of the oars the only song that was sung.

I, Coriander by Sally Gardner



Appositive Phrases

A noun phrase identifies a person, place, or thing, often beginning with “a” or “an” and set off with commas.

The proprietor, a little gray man with an unkempt mustache and watery eyes, leaned on the counter, reading a newspaper.

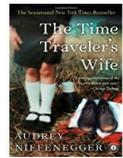
The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck

Prepositional Phrases

Phrasing describes where, when, or under what conditions something occurs.

Throughout dinner, Lucille has been careening wildly from sadness to elation to despair.

The Time Traveler's Wife by Audrey Niffenegger



Text Treatments

Generally speaking, applying text treatments, such as all caps, bold, or lots of exclamation points, is generally not advised as it usually comes off as aesthetically unprofessional in the final layout of a traditional book. But there are many exceptions to this “rule” when editing YA fiction, since font treatments often add punch to content for this audience.

In *The Secrets of Tree Taylor* by Dandi Daley Mackall (Random House/2014), several areas in the book feature journal entries, quote callouts, homework assignments, anonymous notes, and school newspaper articles, which are effectively treated with different font styles to stand out from the main body of the narrative, such as the italicized treatment in the block of text below to represent a writing assignment for class.



I decided to approach things from a different angle. In English, we had to pick out figures of speech in different novels. But my favorite assignment was to make up my own similes and metaphors.

Mrs. Kinney was as stiff and sinewy as the cottonwood beside her house. She clutched her baby, a rifle, hers alone for now. She was a faded dishrag, wrung dry but left twisted.

“Tree, are you still here?” Eileen stopped in the kitchen doorway.

She had a giant textbook pressed to her chest.

If you spot passages of text that should be placed in a different font or perhaps a block of text that might be better treated as a sidebar or with a scored line around it, by all means, bring it to the author’s attention:

Your use of a smaller font size for e-mail messages works well, as does your application of the same smaller font in italics for handwritten messages. For any text referred to as appearing on storefronts and other signage, I left your all-caps treatment, but you might want to consider instead setting that content in italics with only first letters of primary words capitalized.

The Chicago Manual of Style does not prefer double punctuation marks, such as ending a sentence with both an exclamation point and a question mark, but again, as long as it's not overdone, an occasional deviation from this rule *might* be effective in a YA manuscript. Be sure to make note of it to the author by highlighting relevant text and addressing in comment bubbles and noting the issue in an editorial letter or style sheet:

Please note that *The Chicago Manual of Style* advises against double punctuation marks, which you apply throughout your manuscript. My recommendation is that it's fine to occasionally deviate from this rule and treat the text as such in areas where you really want to make an impact, but because this treatment is applied so often in your narrative, it actually tends to lose its effectiveness due to overuse. I do not feel it's necessary that you eliminate all double punctuation marks, but I suggest that you be more discriminative in choosing just a few sentences to treat in this way—those you want to be most impactful to your YA reader and preferably only in characters' text messaging or e-mail communications.

Formatting Issues

It's typically not an editor's job to directly deal with overall formatting in a manuscript or book galley since such issues are best left to a professional graphic designer. However, it is appropriate to fix or point out to the author or publisher anything problematic such as inconsistent font sizes or types, margins or indentations that do not match up, and incorrect line or word spacing. If you spot a formatting problem that is an easy fix—for example, a block of text that is inaccurately a point size larger or smaller than the rest of the narrative—by all means, adjust the font size in that area or highlight the passage with a comment bubble. If issues related to a manuscript's format are more complex, provide a note in the editorial letter or style sheet:

There are many formatting issues throughout your manuscript, and I recommend that you be mindful of consistency in graphic treatment of your text. These are the primary problems:

- Some chapter headings are all caps while others are not; please choose a style and apply it consistently.
- Many paragraphs were way too long, so I simply cut paragraph breaks where necessary to turn them into smaller, more digestible shorts.
- The dinkuses (***) you've placed throughout are largely unnecessary and trip up the thread of your narrative. I suggest that you go through and mindfully eliminate most of them and leave them only in spots where scenes shift.
- I found several “widows” and “orphans.” Go through your final layout to be sure no single words are dangling at the end of a sentence or a stray line from a previous paragraph hanging out solo at the top of a new page. I marked those throughout your

manuscript.

If you're working with a self-publishing author who has a particularly sloppy manuscript that is supposed to be in final layout and press-ready, consider recommending that he or she hire a professional graphic designer.

Best-ever Comment Bubbles

Comment bubbles in the track-changes feature of Word can be an editor's BFF, especially within the scope of a line edit or copyedit. It's a great tool for pointing out to the YA author specific issues such as *formatting concerns*, *clichéd terminology*, *repetitive content*, or *characters prematurely dropped into the narrative*. These are some notes a copyeditor or line editor might reasonably make in comment bubbles throughout the course of editing a YA narrative:

Contradictions in terms

She had lovely **soft** dark cocker-spaniel eyes, which turned instantly into the fierce piercers of an eagle if we weren't careful.

Mother was a **"liberal"** and did all she could to instill in us what she perceived as proper values.

Lack of detail

My first meeting with him was at a **large** Hollywood party.

The **house** was built among the treetops. We sat outside on a wooden porch, which wrapped delicately around the house to evade trunks of other nearby trees.

Sketchy time frames

Late on a Monday afternoon, we excitedly boarded a train for Spain.

She was **old** enough to understand death to some extent, but she wished she were younger like her sister.

Too-vague terminology

I knew in that instant, **it** would be with me all my life, silently watching over me.

Henry loved **good** art, good music, and good thinking.

Weak transitions

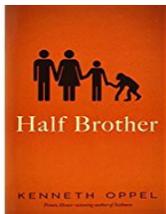
Chale grabbed Beatrice's hand as the blast from the propellers lifted them into the **air**. Once the plane landed, they took a taxi into New York.

In **1984**, I was sent to a Baltimore-area boarding school carefully chosen by a psychiatrist my mother had hired to treat me.

Pop Culture References

As touched on in the previous lesson, authors of YA material should choose words that best paint vibrant scenes for the reader. One way to create content that is as vivid as it is relatable is to artfully drop pop culture references into the YA narrative. This applies to stories that have a historical bent just as much as to those with contemporary settings. Placing pop culture visuals into a scene not only helps give clear imagery for the reader but also provides points of reference as to places and eras.

Note how author Kenneth Oppel deliberately places his narrative in the 1970s by alluding to familiar era-specific brands and such in this passage from his YA novel *Half Brother* (Scholastic, 2010):



Sometimes, instead of sitting up front, I sprawled across the backseat, reading Spider-Man comics and Ray Bradbury, or just listening to the radio. Dad let me choose the stations at least, tuning in to new ones when the old ones evaporated with the cities, and provinces, and time zones we left behind. The Rolling Stones belted out “Angie” over and over again, and Dad watched the road, lost in his own thoughts. I sucked on orange Freezies, and the car smelled like french fries and ketchup and the Fresca I’d spilled outside Thunder Bay.

Be mindful, however, of inserting trendy items that might stamp an expiration date on a book that has a contemporary setting. Unless the narrative is set in a specific era, strive to include pop culture branding that has reached iconic status—such as the Snoopy and Hello Kitty references made in the previous lesson—so the content does not become prematurely outdated.

A Note about Trademarks

Some authors have asked me about the legality of using trademarks in YA narratives, and this is not usually an issue in fiction writing as long as they are being used in a descriptive nature, but know that some publishers prefer to avoid dropping brand names in narrative text. I maintain that pop culture references are often an extremely effective means of connecting with the YA reader, so I continue to recommend such content if it helps boost scenes.

For more information, see the “Brand Names and Trademarks” section of *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Also, here is a link to a terrific article on the topic by an attorney who specializes in intellectual property law: <https://www.sidebarsaturdays.com/2017/05/20/httpwp-mep7vddb-hr/>.

Plot Flow

A big-picture critique of a manuscript falls more in the scope of a macro edit, but it’s still important to let the author know if you find poor threading or holes in the plot. This is an example of how an editor might address, in an editorial letter, issues related to plot flow:

I like your story and its intriguing, twisted plot. However, the flow is off in certain areas because of the sketchy time line. It starts in the present day and fast-forwards to the future and then back again. I highly recommend flowing your narrative chronologically, but even the ending that lands back in the present is confusing. Tripping back and forth through time within a book’s narrative is indeed a tricky feat to accomplish, and it does not work well in your story.

Was your protagonist hallucinating that he was in the future, or was he time-traveling? I am also confused as to what the end twist actually indicates. Is the protagonist in fact mentally ill, or has he been brain-controlled into believing he is a mental-health patient? This leaves a gaping plot hole at the end of your book. I know your intent is to surprise the reader with its unexpected ending, and you meet that goal effectively, but it needs to be refined so there are not so many loose ends.

Interestingly, your book’s twisted ending is its best creative element, but at the same time, because it does not wrap up well, it’s creating your manuscript’s biggest problem. You don’t want to leave your reader scratching his or her head, so your story’s conclusion needs to be anchored and better detailed. It’s okay to have an ending that leaves the reader wondering if an event went one way or another, but yours leaves far too many unanswered questions.

And Finally . . .

Because the author might inadvertently introduce errors into a manuscript while making last-round revisions after a line edit or copyedit, I always recommend a professional proofreader for the final draft.

That was one reason I liked writing so much. Stories had a beginning, middle, and end. No matter where you were in the process, you knew where you stood. How far you had to go. And when you did finish, you got this total sense of accomplishment, writing “the end.”



Princesses, Inc. by Mari Mancusi (Aladdin, 2017)



LESSON #5 ASSIGNMENTS

To earn a Certificate of Completion you must complete both assignments.

Assignment #1: Shake, Shake, Shake

In the spirit of shaking up syntax, pluck sentences from any of the YA reading material you chose in the first lesson and restructure them according to the following types of sentence structure:

1. ***Opening Adjectives***
Begin with one or more adjectives, and follow with a more detailed description.
2. ***Opening Adverbs***
Lead with information about an action—how, when, or where it occurs.
3. ***Appositive Phrases***
A noun phrase identifies a person, place, or thing, often beginning with “a” or “an” and set off with commas.
4. ***Prepositional Phrases***
Phrasing describes where, when, or under what conditions something occurs.

Assignment #2: Infinite Fine-tuning

Even respected works of literature are sometimes published with typos and grammatical errors that editors overlooked. Provide comment bubbles or edit the following lines to correct errors or other problems:

Not being very tall, all I could see were skirts and legs coming toward me and pushing past me.

I, Coriander by Sally Gardner

He made the door in two easy strides, paused, and turned back to face me. “I’d keep that picture you found out of sight. Somewhere safe where no one can get to it.”

Ghost Flower by Michele Jaffe

I decided to approach things from a different angle.

The Secrets of Tree Taylor by Dandi Daley Mackall

There is an art to using a quill, and it took me many sheets of paper and much spillage of ink before I could write my letters.

I, Coriander by Sally Gardner

Dark, velvety, the beauty of his mustache was enhanced by his strong clean-shaven chin.

Beloved by Toni Morrison