NONFICTION EDITING 201

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Lesson #1

Introduction and Common Editing Problems

Introduction

Welcome to Nonfiction Editing 201! You may have taken my Nonfiction Editing 101 course. If so, I hope you have applied the skills you learned and found editing nonfiction rewarding.

In Nonfiction Editing 201, we will review a few topics from the previous course as a refresher. Then we will dig deeper into the rules, judgments, problems, and nuances of editing nonfiction, as well as discuss the different levels of editing and even introduce a few nonfiction niche markets you might be interested in specializing in.

According to a *Publishing Perspectives* in the article "US First-Quarter 2021 Print Book Sales Grew 29 Percent" by Porter Anderson, "Today's (April 19 [2021]) executive summary from NPD BookScan on the first quarter of 2021 sees the volume of sales in print books in the United States growing 29 percent over the same quarter in 2020. . . . McLean's report shows adult nonfiction print books selling at a rate of 24 percent higher than in the previous year's first quarter." Anderson broke down the numbers:

- General nonfiction grew 4 million units in Q1, driven by the body, mind and spirit sector—specifically inspiration and personal growth and divination subjects
- Educational titles posted the next largest gains in general nonfiction, up 600,000 units and led by teaching methods and materials
- Religion was up 2 million units in Q1, driven by Christian life and biblical studies subjects
- Reference grew by 2 million units, led by the subject of poetry and driven The Hill We Climb, the work read by Amanda Gorman at the inauguration of Joe Biden[1]

To give you a bit of context, adult nonfiction sales of print books grew 4.8 percent from 2019 and juvenile nonfiction jumped a whopping 23.1 percent in 2020.

These figures demonstrate that nonfiction titles lead the industry sales, even over fiction titles. (Adult fiction showed an increase in sales in this same quarter, but adult nonfiction sales were double those of adult fiction.) What does this mean for you and your business? You are facing a huge opportunity to break into the profitable and exciting nonfiction editing market.

Common Editing Problems

Whether you edit only general nonfiction titles or specialize in a niche market, you will encounter problems common to all nonfiction categories. Don your editing duds and let's wrangle these doggies.

Clarity

As editors, we ensure that our clients' messages are clearly conveyed to readers. We all know what clarity in writing is. But sometimes while editing a paragraph or larger section of a manuscript, we recognize a lack of clarity, yet the solution eludes us. What is obscuring clarity? Look for one or more of these problems:

- over-precise writing—excessive details that dilute clarity
- over-condensed writing—using one overly complex sentence when three or four sentences work more effectively
- reflexive writing—something is so ingrained in the author's thinking that he or she finds it difficult to fully express him- or herself (half what needs to be written is left in their minds)

Correcting over-precise writing is as uncomplicated as deleting extraneous and unnecessary details so that what's left is just enough detail to clearly convey the intent. Fixing over-condensed writing is fairly straightforward—apply the appropriate rules of grammar and sentence structure. Reflexive writing likely requires querying the author and possibly offering suggestions as to how to articulate and thereby clarify the idea.

Purple Prose

Purple prose is ornate, flowery, or hyperbolic writing. Modifiers turn what could be solid writing into wordiness that is distracting, even silly. How do you identify purple prose? The text drips with sickly sweetness so that you want to gag.

> I gasped in shocked horror at the pensive woman peering back at me in the cloudy, cracked reflective glass. Her once thick, silken, flowing auburn locks were but a distant memory. Wild, thin gray wisps now adorned her trembling crown. Oh, where is the young woman so vibrant and carefree? When had youth fled, robbing her of hopes and dreams, leaving in its stead a shriveled hag who stared at me through weary orbs of faded cerulean?

Preachiness

For a long time, I struggled to identify preachiness. Looking back, I think it was because while growing up I was regularly exposed to preachiness in the home and church; therefore, this kind of

speech and writing sounded normal to me. Maybe you face a similar issue.

What is preachiness and how do we correct it?

Authors get behind the pulpit and start "preaching" when they present their arguments or opinions as if only they possess the truth, and they make sure their readers hear it. Preachiness is conveyed through tone and word choice. "You should . . ." "You must . . ." "If you do (or don't) . . ." "You're doing this wrong and this is how you should do it . . ."

I once edited a long and scholarly work filled with great information that readers were sure to benefit from, but much of it was wrapped up in preachiness. I had no argument with what my client was saying, but how he said it put me off—and set my teeth on edge. I was sure many readers would experience the same.

How can we turn off the preachiness and keep the readers tuned in to the author? It's fairly simple. Communicate with your client how much more effectively they can get their message across if they tell a story or give an illustration instead of telling them what they must do: "I'll never forget the time . . ." Tell the tale, then stop. Let the story/illustration make the point. Readers will get the message. They are smart—and they like stories.

(Too) Long Paragraphs

Oftentimes, nonfiction writers create long paragraphs that fill up the printed page, leaving little white space. White space on the page serves many purposes:

A paragraph should be just long enough to fulfill its purpose. Every paragraph requires three things:

- unity—it stays on one topic
- coherence—the development of the topic is easy to follow and uses appropriate transitions
- topic sentence—one sentence that tells the reader what the paragraph is about

No rule governs when a paragraph is too long. Instead, use your good judgment in determining a paragraph's appropriate length. Can you use bullet points to add interest without compromising necessary information? Can you put some information into a chart for increased readability? How about breaking up the text with sidebars, callouts, or insets? (We'll talk about this in a future lesson.) Keep your readers in mind while deciding what to do with a long paragraph.

Pet Words

Pet words are overused words or phrases. Some common pet words are *that*, *there is/are*, *I know*, *very*, *really*, and *actually*. Ninety-nine percent of the time, pet words can be eliminated without changing the sentence's meaning. In fact, their removal tightens the prose. For example:

> There are thousands of red cars on the road.
> The college that you like costs too much money.

Let's rewrite these sentences without the pet words.

> Thousands of red cars are on the road.
> The college you like costs too much money.

The meanings aren't altered, and removing *there are* changes the passive structure to active. Pet words can rob writers of valuable time and effort. Let me explain. Each genre has expectations, including word count. For example, sci-fi can have 100,000 words, but a mystery is typically about 75,000 words. I edited a manuscript that was way over the acceptable word count for its genre. In the first two pages, I eliminated thirty pet and empty words (see below), or 6 percent of the 500 words. Extrapolate that to the entire 100,000-word manuscript, and that is 6,000 useless words—equal to twenty-four pages!

It takes some writers a week to write twenty-four pages. Not only do unnecessary words adversely affect word count, but they also cost time. And factoring in editing fees, what do you charge per page or word? Multiply that by twenty-four or 6,000, respectively, and it's a chunk of change your client must pay you just to remove those unwanted words.

Some words are uncommonly specific and stand out as descriptive. Don't use them more than once or twice in a manuscript because they lose their uniqueness, and overuse weakens their impact. One year a Christy Award nominee's pet word was *discombobulation*. How did I know? She used it three or four times. She should have used it only once. I read the book over ten years ago, and *discombobulation* is what I remember. Books should be remembered for their great stories or timely messages, not by their overused words.

Empty Words

Empty words take up space but don't add meaning to the sentence. Empty words indicate weak writing. For example:

> It is very important that I talk to you.
> He was very late for work.

Active, precise words do a better job:

> It is urgent that I talk to you. (Or the less formal: I must talk to you.)
> He arrived an hour late to work.

The first sentence in the corrected form conveys a sense of urgency, which is lacking in the original. The second eliminates the passive voice and tells how late he arrived.

Other common empty words are *just*, *only* (unless it indicates *one*), *really* . . . you get the idea. These intensifiers fail to express the degree of the verb/adjective they modify and leave readers questioning how much, how long, or to what degree.

Clear, concise writing takes work. Vivid and precise words are descriptive and show action.

Echoes

Echoes are identical words used too close together. For example, if *hurried* is used in the second paragraph of a page and then again in the fourth paragraph, the second use is an echo. You or your

client must decide whether to use *hurried* in the second paragraph or the fourth then change the duplicate use.

Verb Tense Sequence

Proper verb tense sequence has the power to confound even the most prolific writers—not because of their function but because of confusion over which tense to use and how to structure tense sequence. Also, some people insist that a good writer is never to use the *be* verb (*am*, *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*, *be*, *being*, *been*), which makes the sentence passive. But passive is correct when the subject of the verb is unknown, indefinite, or unimportant. (Do you see that I used *is* in that sentence—twice!? I hope the passive police don't get me!) According to Amy Einsohn 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 passive should be used in the above-mentioned situations. And you will find them far more often in nonfiction writing than in fiction. In fact, the more academic the manuscript, the more often you'll find passive sentences. (But always check if the active structure can be used.) Thoughtful use and placement of passive gives a welcome break to constant active voice. In addition, sometimes a sentence requires a *be* verb when the subject is linked with the predicate.

With that being said, let's dive into the expansive world of verbs. The tense of a verb indicates the time of the action or condition expressed by the verb. English has six tenses. Study the conjugation chart on the next pages.

VERB TENSES Indicative
Mood, Active Voice
Conjugation of the Verb *See*
Principal Parts

Present	Present Participle	Past	Past Participle
see	seeing	saw	seen

PRESENT TENSE

Action that is occurring (or a condition that exists) now

First person:	I see	we see
Second person:	you see	you see
Third person:	he, she, it sees	they see

Present progressive:* I am seeing, etc.
Present emphatic: I do see, etc.

PAST TENSE

Action that occurred (or a condition that existed) at some definite time in the past

First person:	I saw	we saw
Second person:	you saw	you saw
Third person:	he, she, it saw	they saw

Past progressive: I was seeing, etc.
Past emphatic: I did see, etc.

FUTURE TENSE
(will or shall plus the present tense)

Action that will occur (or a condition that will exist) in the future

First person:	I will (shall) see	we will (shall) see
Second person:	you will see	you will see
Third person:	he, she, it will see	they will see

Future progressive: I shall be seeing, etc.

PRESENT PERFECT
(have or has plus the past participle)

Action (or a condition) that was begun in the past and is completed at the present time or is continuing into the present. The past action has some connection with the present.

First person:	I have seen	we have seen
Second person:	you have seen	you have seen
Third person:	he, she, it has seen	they have seen

Present perfect progressive: I have been seeing, etc.

PAST PERFECT
(had plus the past participle)

Action (or a condition) that was completed before some other past action (or condition).

First person:	I had seen	we had seen
Second person:	you had seen	you had seen
Third person:	he, she, it had seen	they had seen

Past perfect progressive: I had been seeing, etc.

FUTURE PERFECT
(will have or shall have plus the past participle)
Action (or a condition) that will be completed before some other future action or
condition

First person:	I will (shall) have seen	we will (shall) have seen
Second person:	you will have seen	you will have seen
Third person:	he, she, it will have seen	they will have seen

Future perfect progressive: I shall have been seeing, etc.

*Progressive: Action that continuously extends over a period of time

Present Infinitive: to see
Present Gerund: seeing
Perfect Infinitive: to have seen
Perfect Gerund: having seen
Perfect Participle: having seen

Just about anything you read—or write—contains verbs in different tenses:

> I *sat* in the quiet of our family room. The ceiling fan gently *hummed*, *staving* off the desert heat already stifling that May day. Twenty-month-old Sarah *played* contentedly with her Duplos, while three-month-old Will *napped* in his playpen, *surrounded* by crocheted blankets and his cuddly stuffed puppy. I quickly *dismissed* the thought that I *should clean* the house. I *wanted* nothing more than *to revel* in the unmitigated pleasure of the family God *had blessed* me with. Norman Rockwell *could* not *have resisted painting* our contented scene.

The trick is knowing which tense(s) should follow another. A logical relationship must exist between dependent and independent clauses, as well as between verbals and main verbs.

> **Wrong:** When my grandfather *died*, I learned how much he *did* for the community.

> **Correct:** When my grandfather *died*, I learned how much he *had done* [before his death] for the community.

Let's begin with the sequence of tenses in dependent clauses. I can't give you any rule to follow to know what tense must be used in which sequence. You'll have to use the sense of the sentence as your guide. I'll give you some examples that demonstrate the possibilities.

MAIN VERB IN PRESENT TENSE

> *The car stops when [every time] I press the brake.*

Both the main verb and dependent clause verb are in the present tense because the sentence states two recurring actions.

MAIN VERB IN PAST TENSE

> *The car stopped when I pressed the brake.*

When the main verb is past tense, the dependent clause verb is often also in past tense. The sentence gives the sense of two actions that happened and concluded very close to the same time in the past.

> *The car stopped after I had pressed the brake.*

Here the main verb is past tense, but the dependent clause is in past perfect. In this case, the action of the verb in the dependent clause took place before the action of the main verb.

> *The car stopped working, even though it is brand-new.*

The main verb is in the past tense, and the dependent is in the present. The dependent clause states a condition that is true regardless of the time. This is sometimes referred to as timeless present.

MAIN VERB IN FUTURE TENSE

> *The car will start when I turn the key.*

The verb in the independent clause is future tense, and the dependent clause verb is present tense. The sense is that if I do [present] something, then something will happen [future].

> *The car will start once I have turned the key.*

Again, the main verb is future tense, but in this example, the dependent clause verb is present perfect, have turned, and indicates an action that will occur before the action of the main verb.

MAIN VERB IN PRESENT PERFECT TENSE

> *The car has started because I turned the key.*

A present perfect main verb usually indicates that the independent clause verb will be in the past tense. The past tense *turned* indicates a past action that was completed in the past—it does not continue into the present—but the main verb, *has started*, is a past action that has continued into the present.

MAIN VERB IN PAST PERFECT TENSE

> *The car had started before I turned the key.*

A past perfect verb in the independent clause usually requires a past tense verb in the dependent clause. In the above sentence, *had started* indicates past action that happened before the action *turned* in the dependent clause.

MAIN VERB IN FUTURE PERFECT TENSE

The car will have started by the time I turn (or have turned) the key.

If the main verb is future perfect, the dependent clause verb is usually present or present perfect tense. In this sentence, the action of the independent clause happens before the action of the dependent clause.

LOGICAL TIME RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VERBALS AND MAIN VERBS

Use present infinitive (*to see*, etc.) to express action that occurs at the same time or later as that of the main verb.

Summary

We breezed through several common editing problems and ended with verb tenses and tense sequences.

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LESSON #1 ASSIGNMENT

To receive a Certificate of Completion, you will need to complete one assignment from each lesson, unless otherwise noted.

Please download Lesson 1 Assignment. Copyedit the selection using Track Changes and commenting as necessary.

Note

1. Porter Anderson, "US First-Quarter 2021 Print Book Sales Grew 29 Percent," *Publishing Perspectives*, April 19, 2021, https://publishingperspectives.com/2021/04/us-first-quarter-2021-print-book-sales-grew-29-percent-covid19/.
NPD is an American market research company.