



NONFICTION EDITING 201

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Lesson #7

Creative Nonfiction, Textbooks, and Technical Works

I hope you've caught your breath from the last two lessons on developmental editing and you're ready for our next three topics on editing: creative nonfiction, textbooks, and technical works. Each of these requires certain skills, but I am confident that you can develop whatever knowledge and proficiencies you're lacking if you desire to expand your business into any of these areas.

Creative Nonfiction

The “creative” in creative nonfiction does not mean fabricating what didn't happen, embellishing events, or taking license not to tell the truth. Sometimes called literary nonfiction, creative nonfiction is just what the term implies: a mixture of devices, elements, and literary craft—techniques of fiction—applied to nonfiction, which is factual prose about real people and events. The marriage of art and facts creates a vivid, compelling, dramatic nonfiction narrative.

I cannot recall but a handful of creative nonfiction titles that have crossed my desk in the past several years. The majority of my work is with nonfiction, so I've worked on numerous titles. But as I was writing this lesson, it occurred to me that these few creative works stand out in my memory because of their dramatic impact. The last creative nonfiction title I worked on still haunts me. The author presented the setting, full of conflict and terror, and developed the characters, with their longings and deprivation yet deep trust in God, so that I was drawn into the “story” as if I were reading a well-crafted fictional tale. I still feel a call to pray for some of the people the author introduced to the readers.

You're probably thinking I'm getting off track into writing rather than editing nonfiction. As I was working on this lesson, that's kind of where my mind was going. I reminded myself that this is an editing course, not a writing course, but we need to know the writing side to edit effectively. We editors have no say over what forms of writing come to us, but we can influence the works during the editing process. Don't take me wrong, I never advocate tampering with the author's voice or subject—that's sacrosanct. But in the course of editing, to help the author make his or her manuscript the best it can be, we can offer suggestions and guidance to push the manuscript to the

next level.

We want to help our clients be successful. One of those ways is keeping them informed about industry trends. And one of those trends is creative nonfiction—one of the fastest-growing genres, according to Lee Gutkind, founder of the literary magazine *Creative Nonfiction*, whom *Vanity Fair* has called “the Godfather behind creative nonfiction.”

Remember, one reason people read is to be entertained. Another is to gain information. Combine these goals into one book and it rises above the norm to exceptional. Exactly what agents and readers are looking for. And editors are in the distinct position of encouraging and helping their clients to produce exceptional books.

Let’s say a client asks you to edit his memoir. He was one of the Miracle on the Hudson survivors. His book is about how the experience changed him. The manuscript takes us into his thoughts and flashbacks of his life all while recounting the plane’s crashing into the river, the process of getting out onto the plane’s wings, waiting for rescue, and then dealing with the emotional aftermath. He tells his story in an interesting way, but you know it could be better—both unique and dramatic if the author employed creative nonfiction techniques. And so your edits and comments pull the curtain back on what could be . . .

The question is, how do we edit creative nonfiction or help our clients turn their works into creative nonfiction? The simple answer is to bring in elements of fiction while keeping facts accurate. Let’s briefly explore some of those elements.

Dialogue

Using dialogue is one of the easiest ways to introduce creative elements to a nonfiction work. Several years ago, I edited *Living for Today* by Erin Merryn, her chronicle of confronting her abusers. Her story is incredible and has become a great source of strength for others living in the aftermath of sexual abuse. But when I received the manuscript from the publisher, it wasn’t incredible. The heart of her story was a faint beat, muted by pages of “he said that . . . and then I said that . . .” I fought fatigue and boredom while working through this manuscript. After getting permission from the project manager, I turned this lifeless form of telling into dialogue, including beats rather than tags. Now as she and the people in her story moved and spoke and showed themselves as living and breathing people. *Living for Today* became one of Merryn’s tools to bring Erin’s Law into effect. Would that have happened had I not pushed for creative elements to be added to her book? I’ll never know. I just know that adding creative elements elevated the text, making it better and more interesting than it was when it landed on my desk.

Conflict

Using conflict is vital in fiction, and I’ve come to think that it is just as important in nonfiction. After all, isn’t the intent of several nonfiction genres to guide you in overcoming some obstacle or learning a new skill? Go to the next page for a few examples in which conflict is a natural part of the topic.

- DIY home repair
- Self-help
- History
- Essay
- Literary criticism
- Memoir
- Parenting
- Christian living
- How-to

The Dummies series assume a conflict exists for the readers—they need to know something, but they are “dummies,” ignorant of the subject, and must be led step-by-step in the learning process. Fiction requires conflict, or else there is no story, but the addition of conflict to nonfiction heightens the interest in the subject. It can even add a bit of drama (the good kind). Some nonfiction genres easily lend themselves to conflict (for example, history), but others require a bit of imagination and, of course, creativity.

Even some cookbooks include conflict. For example, *The Farmette Cookbook: Recipes and Adventures from My Life on an Irish Farm* by Imen McDonnell provides fabulous Irish recipes. But she also tells her readers about her journey to Ireland to live on her husband’s family’s farm, which included her having to adjust to new foods, lack of corner-grocery-store convenience, new words, not to mention life on a farm rather than in a big city.

I have never “read” a cookbook from front to back until I got my hands on *The Farmette Cookbook*. I am not known for my culinary interest, much less cooking skills. Yet I kept flipping the pages (and even read the recipes) because I wanted to know how the author transitioned from being a big-city girl to a full-fledged, grow-your-own-food, cook-from-scratch farm girl.

When given a nonfiction manuscript to edit, consider what conflict naturally arises from the book’s theme or message, and weave it into the work.

Flashbacks

Going back to our Miracle on the Hudson survivor, flashback is an element that is organic to the memoir. Though the author is relating the events at the time of the accident and the emotional aftermath, it is only natural that he would provide glimpses of his life before the plane crash to understand how the event changed him.

Time is a funny thing. Though it is constantly moving forward, what happened in the past contributes to our present and future. As editors, we want our clients’ readers to be caught up in the author’s upheaval and resulting life changes, which, in turn, invite readers to reflect on their own experiences, both positive and negative, and encourage them to make vital, even transformative, changes in their lives. Some readers might even undergo much-needed healing as a result of reading about someone else’s experience that was similar to, or worse than, theirs.

Signs, Clues, Foreshadowing

If you've ever been in a vibrant relationship that suddenly fell apart, you probably asked yourself, "Why didn't I see this coming?" So you set about to reflect on what happened. That's when you identify the signs, clues, and hints that indicated something was failing in the relationship: communication, expectations, or any number of other things. Then you wonder if you had picked up on these indicators, could the outcome have been different? Could the relationship have been saved?

You know that signs, clues, and foreshadowing are elements of fiction. They bring drama and tension into the story, keeping readers flipping the pages. You can use these same elements in nonfiction. Let's say you're editing a book titled *Economics in the Late 1900s*. (Did you just yawn?!) Apply any one of these elements and you'll create suspense and surprise in this otherwise cut-and-dried book:

The emerging conflict in the Middle East seems a distant problem for the typical American family. Let OPEC grapple with it, they say. Mom and Dad just want to provide their children with a comfortable home, sufficient clothing, three meals a day, as well as save a few dollars for that rainy day. They never sensed the dark clouds, filled with black crude sludge, threatening their content little neighborhoods.

This is just one small example of the numerous ways to use foreshadowing, clues, and signs in creative nonfiction. Many nonfiction writers (and editors) use the left side of their brains more than the right side—it's what makes them so good at what they do. But by visiting the right side of the brain and borrowing its creativity, you access your imagination to find interesting ways to present the facts. You and your client might have a bit of fun in the process!

BookRiot offers a list of creative nonfiction titles. I cannot vouch for their content, but you might be interested to peruse a few titles: <https://bookriot.com/2018/07/12/creative-nonfiction-books/>. Goodreads "shelves" these titles as creative nonfiction: <https://www.goodreads.com/shelf/show/creative-nonfiction>.

Appeal to the Senses

A piece of art hanging in a gallery moves us. Are we drawn into the picture, or do the picture's images and colors draw something out of us? Music touches our emotions, sometimes taking us back to a special moment. Flashing images on a big screen have us white-knuckling the arms of our seats—or the person next to us! Who can resist the aroma of fresh-popped popcorn?

Appealing to the senses is expected in fiction. "Show, don't tell" is the mantra we editors add in comments, reminding our clients what readers expect: an emotional experience, which is welcome in nonfiction too. The value of sense appeal in nonfiction is that it creates drama and heightens interest. It's artistry.

As in fiction, appealing to the senses draws the readers into the story—even the story of politics or business building or how to lose weight. Using sensory words creates a connection between reader and story. I recently did a bid on a nonfiction manuscript. The author admitted to being new to the writing and publishing industry, but his heart was to help others in overcoming trials and struggles in their walk with the Lord. However, he failed to create a connection between the

“story” and the reader. The problem went deeper than failing to appeal to the senses; therefore, as his prospective editor, I suggested ways (and gave some examples) to rewrite his manuscript so that readers would relate to his message. If there’s no connection, you won’t have readers. What’s the point? Even a child asking, “Daddy, tell me a story,” expects to bond in some way to the tale—whether it’s a true story (nonfiction) or a made-up one.

Read the following selection from the essay “I Survived the Blizzard of ’79” by Beth Ann Fennelly (creativenonfiction.org). A father and his children (the mother is visiting her sister) struggle through several feet of snow to attend Mass, only to arrive at the church and find the doors locked. They turn back toward home and battle the bitter cold and biting wind:

Every part of my body was scalding cold, but one part scalded coldest: my neck, my plump child’s neck. The wind was wily, cupping my lowered chin and arrowing along the inch of skin before my parka’s zipper. The wind, like a squirrel wielding knives. How much farther? I tried to step where my father was stepping. I tried to use his body as a shield. Family of three or four, frozen dead on the road, hadn’t even gone to mass. It was a sin to skip mass. If you were a sinner when you died, you went to hell.

The cold, the wind, the weariness all enhance the emotional experience for the readers. They tug their sweaters a bit snugger and reach for a mug of hot chocolate.

Creative Nonfiction Summary

As we’ve skimmed some of the elements of creative nonfiction, I hope I have ignited your imagination to the possibilities of how you can help your clients raise their manuscripts to a level above the thousands of other titles competing for readers.

Editing Technical Works

Let me begin with a disclaimer: To the best of my recollection, I have never edited any technical works. So you may be wondering why I’ve included a section on technical editing and how I can offer any practical instruction or advice about becoming a technical editor (TE). First, the technical field is a specialized field with great opportunities for editors. But it’s a field I’m not interested in. However, I have researched basic information for those who want to explore getting into this huge field, and I offer it to you as a starting point. (See these websites for more information about technical documents and books: <https://clickhelp.com/clickhelp-technical-writing-blog/types-of-technical-documentation/>; <https://bookauthority.org/books/best-technical-writing-books.>)

What Is Technical Editing?

Technical texts provide information to readers to direct them in some way—to make decisions, to follow instructions to assemble something, how to administer medicine, and scientific study/research, and so much more. TEs must make sure that readers can clearly understand and follow the material. Like other forms of editing, TEs make suggestions for not only better writing and content but also layout and design, which has to do with presentation.

TEs work in a variety of fields:

- Computer software and hardware
- Engineering

- Math
- Medicine
- Sciences
- Law
- Banking and brokerage services

Whether you're editing fiction, nonfiction, creative nonfiction, textbooks, or technical titles, you still need to adhere to the basics: audience, organization, flow, grammar, clarity, word choice, usage, punctuation, spelling, and syntax.

Education and Experience

Generally, a TE may need a bachelor's degree in technical writing. Additionally, possessing a degree or work experience in the particular field may also be a requirement.

Some companies require their TEs to have worked a minimum of three years in some editorial position. TEs should be familiar with the subject matter, though not the details, and the related terminology.

A TE is often called upon to create online content.

Because TEs work closely with team members, they do well if they have strong interpersonal skills.

The Role of the Technical Editor

The TE is a member of a team comprised of the following:

- Planner
- Lead writer
- Writer
- Graphic artist
- Designer
- Manager

The TE's job is concerned with the text's technical content and how well it is presented for the target audience. Just as fiction and nonfiction editors represent readers of their respective manuscripts, TEs also advocate for their readers, ensuring the content contains precisely what they need to know (no less and no more) and that the material is complete, accurate (more on this later), and clear.

To adequately represent the readers, the TE must know the purpose of the material: Why do readers need it, and how they will use it? This helps the TE determine the document's level of edit, style, and structure.

A TE's tasks often go far beyond those of fiction and general nonfiction editors. Jean Weber suggests the following list of tasks a TE could be expected to do (<https://techwhirl.com/working-with-a-technical-editor/>):

- Be involved from planning to completion
- Determine suitability of material for the target audience

- organization
- presentation
- usage
- illustrations
- comprehensibility
- completeness and correctness
- retrievability (index, table of contents)

Weber adds that an editor may be called upon to fill the following extraordinary functions:

- Provide additional or missing material
- Edit copy written by ESL writers
- Edit transcribed tapes
- Edit for technical content

Weber offers companies looking to add a TE to the staff the following job description:

- Plan the documents necessary for a project: content, cost, timing, other resource requirements
- Coordinate the production of several books on one product (often written by different people)
- Set and enforce standards for the company's publications and (in consultation with writers) for a particular project
- Assist writers in the development of material, particularly its logical order and structure
- Advise writers on the appropriate use of graphics, wording of headings, figure and table captions, page breaks, index and glossary entries
- Provide whatever levels of edit (as described above) are necessary
- Review, edit, and rewrite all technical copy as necessary, in cooperation with authors
- Assist with translations, usually in the idiomatic expression in English of technical concepts
- Organize reviews of material for technical accuracy
- Supervise editorial assistants and graphic artists

The editor might also be called upon to do the following:

- Help . . . prepare speeches, select visual aids, and rehearse presentations
- Maintain a reference library on writing and other communications
- Collect samples of previous publications to provide material for decision making
- Design and present in-house writing courses

Style

A TE needs to develop his or her skills for editing the style and context of technical works. Just as other genres have certain expectations that must be met, each technical work has expectations that the writer must conform to, which then becomes the editor's responsibility to ensure adherence.

Let me briefly list three general styles and offer examples for each:

1. Instructional—user manuals, such as hardware and software guides, product manuals
2. Factual—scientific testing reports, annual reports, organizational manuals
3. Commercial—advertising flyers, product pamphlets, marketing brochures

A Few Special Considerations

If you ever edit user manuals, please keep in mind user safety. According to Peter Winninger in his June 12, 2013, article entitled “The Role of the Technical Editor” for *Tech Writer Today*, “Procedures must include warnings and address regulatory requirements.” This includes inserts in OTC and prescription medications. Winninger adds, “Accessibility is another key area of concern. When evaluating a document’s form and content, the editor should ensure that it meets the needs of people with physical and reading disabilities.”

The global market necessitates that TEs be mindful of problems that could come up in translation: ambiguity, date format, and jargon. One example is using the seasons of the year in place of months in something that will be used in other locations around the world. If you’re editing in the United States but the market includes South America, the seasons are opposite. So stick with using the names of the months.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this section, the TE is a member of a team that can include a number of people and even reviewers. If you’re hired as the TE, before beginning the project, find out who has editorial control. Know who to go to with questions about the project.

Chances are good that you could end up editing documents and manuscripts written by ESL authors. Though editors are never to alter an author’s voice, you will likely have to smooth out usage or syntax or some other language or grammar issue introduced by the ESL author. The most common clue that technical material is written by an ESL author is errors in verb tense/number.

Also, be aware that technical works include words that may seem odd or even wrong. Never assume this to be the case—always look up words or phrases that seem off. Assume the author is an expert at what he or she has written, but take the time to look up any questionable words or phrases.

Professional Associations

If you are interested in technical editing or want to know more about it, your first step could be to join a professional association, such as the following:

- Society for Technical Communication (stc.org)
- Council of Science Editors (councilscienceeditors.org)

Editing Textbooks

Although I have used textbooks extensively in my teaching years (twenty-six-plus) and researched topics for content included in elementary-level reading programs, I have edited only one textbook so far in my career (a beginning Latin text), so the information I provide here is what I have gleaned from my research and talking to textbook writers and editors.

When I first began professionally editing, one goal I had was to edit textbooks. However, I learned that to be a textbook editor, most publishers require a bachelor’s degree or higher, something I didn’t possess (although I taught K-12 for twenty-six years). My business grew so quickly that I set aside that goal and specialized in nonfiction. But if you have at least a bachelor’s degree and desire to edit textbooks, keep reading. This short lesson is only an introduction to the most basic requirements of textbook editing.

Keep in mind as you edit textbooks that they are a tool for teaching and learning. It is not a showcase for the literary talents of its writers. Explanations, illustrations, terms, and suggested discussion topics must be appropriate for the grade level (many times the publishers have a guideline of required terms, etc.). Think like a student as you edit textbooks.

In addition to the typical items you look for in editing (spelling, grammar, flow, organization, etc.), textbook editing includes editing graphics, numbered lists, standardized vocabulary, learning objectives, chapter outlines, notes, bibliographies, indexes, and more.

Standardizing the chapters may already have been done by the developmental editor, but the copyeditor will certainly need to check this. The vocabulary must be clear and useful. The writing should be interesting and flow clearly.

Before the textbook goes through the final copyedit, several experts have reviewed the manuscript for reading level, interest, accurate facts, and so on. Then the manuscript goes through a revision that incorporates appropriate suggestions from reviewers. Because several writers have contributed to the work, along with many reviewers, the copyeditor must ensure that the writing sounds like one writer. All those voices must meld into one.

If you want to get into this field, you will likely need to work as an in-house editor for at least a couple of years, work for a textbook developer, or work for (or as) a textbook acquisitions editor. Use social media to connect and interact with other textbook editors. A lot can be said for “who you know” in this industry.

Summary

We covered three different types of nonfiction editing in this lesson: creative nonfiction, technical works, and textbooks. Adding these skills to your repertoire will allow you to broaden your editing offerings to clients.

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LESSON #7 ASSIGNMENT

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

Access the Word file [Nonfiction Editing Lesson 7 Assignment](#).