



SUBSTANTIVE EDITING FOR FICTION 201

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LESSON #1

Words

Welcome! If you're reading this, you already have a good grasp on the basics of fiction editing—industry standards, point of view (POV), plot, and characterization. If you took Substantive Editing for Fiction (SEF) 101, you know what I'm talking about. If not, I encourage you to take SEF 101 [One-on-One Instruction](#) or purchase the [Lesson Pack](#) (which you can review at your leisure). SEF 101 and 201 work together to create a fiction foundation that will strengthen your substantive editing skills.

In SEF 201, we continue building your foundation by looking more closely at wording, dialogue, showing and telling, the five senses, common fiction-writing issues, and tips for helping your authors self-edit. In this lesson, we're starting with words. Specifically, we're going to talk about:

- Pacing and Sentence Length
- Floating (and Misused) Body Parts
- Clichés
- Miscellaneous Words

Pacing and Sentence Length

In the marketing world, content is king. The same is true in fiction. Every word matters, and it's the editor's job to make sure every word is doing its job. That job is to move the story forward. One way to do that is to watch the pacing of the story.

What is pacing?

Pacing is the speed of a scene. It's how quickly (or slowly) a reader can read what's written. It's important to understand how pacing works because readers subconsciously expect different genres and different types of scenes to move at certain speeds.

Think of it like the background music in a movie—the tempo and style of music fits what's happening on the screen. Generally, chase/fight/action scenes have fast music ([check out this](#)

chase scene from *The Fast and the Furious*). More dramatic/romantic scenes, however, tend to have slower music (listen to what's playing when Captain von Trapp professes his love for Maria in *The Sound of Music*). Writers can use their words to create similar feelings in their stories.

How do you set the pace?

Word choice and sentence length affect the speed of a scene. Longer sentences create a slower, more relaxed feeling. Shorter sentences (and words) speed things up. Instead of trying to explain it, let me show you.

Here's an excerpt from *Nameless* by A. C. Williams. The first example is what it looked like before being edited. The second example is what was published. See if you can feel the difference:

Before

Dead.

The man was dead. How hard had Kale hit him?

Light flashed through the darkness in the alley, illuminating the street as the bricks by Xander's head erupted in a spray of mortar covering the ground and every visible surface, floating to the ground like dry, red snowflakes. Dust showered her, filling the air like a dense fog as the air tingled with the smell of ozone, chalk, and death, choking her throat as it filled her nostrils.

What had exploded. Was it lightening or laser fire? Someone was shooting at her?

One moment Kale stood beside her gazing at the dead man at their feet, the lifeless, limp body.

The next he threw the dead man's body on top of her and spun in place, the shadows sparkling with crimson bursts of laser pulses. She didn't even have time to be disgusted at the feel of the dead man's body against her, the warm, heavy, smack of his body against hers, pressing her into the rough ground. Debris cut into her cheek and palms as she tried to catch a breath, struggling to breath under the corpse's weight.

Three laser blasts fizzled against the dead man's back.

Cringing, she ducked her head.

Was Knightshade shooting at her or could it be someone else, someone she didn't yet know? And what was Kale doing, hiding her? Is that why he threw the dead man on top of her? She couldn't think of any other reason he would have done such a thing.

The numbness faded from her limbs, but she couldn't stop them from shaking as she continued to struggle to breath, her lungs struggling against the numbness. Why would anyone want to attack her, and what did they want? Where did they come from?

After

Dead.

The man was dead. How hard had Kale hit him?

Light flashed through the darkness in the alley, and the bricks by Xander's head erupted in a spray of mortar. Dust showered her, and the air tingled with the smell of ozone.

Laser fire. Someone was shooting at her?

One moment, Kale stood gazing at the dead man at their feet.

The next he threw the dead man's body on top of her and spun in place, the shadows sparkling with crimson bursts of laser pulses. She didn't even have time to be disgusted at the feel of the dead man's body against her.

Three laser blasts fizzled against the dead man's back.

Cringing, she ducked her head.

Was it Knightshade? It had to be. And Kale—he'd hidden her? Is that why he threw the dead man on top of her?

The numbness faded, but she couldn't stop trembling. Breath came in short, shallow gasps. Who were these people? Why were they attacking? What did they want? Where did they come from?

By shortening the sentences—either cutting unnecessary words or splitting long sentences into several shorter ones—the pace quickens, creating a more appropriate feel for a fight scene. It works the same way for slowing down scenes to draw out the emotion. Here's an example from a speculative fiction work in progress. This is the first kiss between Aaron and Beth.

Before

Aaron sat up. He offered his hand to her. She didn't know what he included in that offer. She wanted to know more, though. Beth slid off the chair and sat beside him. She let him wrap his hand around hers. "Why did you decide to tell me?"

Aaron wove his fingers between hers. "Because I'm selfish. I shouldn't tell you, but I want to. You understand. You're running too, so you know what it feels like." He tugged her close. He wrapped an arm around her.

She should pull away. They needed some space between them. He was right, though. They had a connection. She couldn't sever it. Didn't want to. She let herself fall against him.

"I've been keeping this secret for so long." His chest and arms relaxed. "It's been so long ..." Aaron nuzzled against Beth's cheek. Her heart flipped.

Her eyes fluttered closed when his lips brushed below her ear. He kissed her cheek bone, then the corner of her eye. Beth's nerves sizzled. Aaron released her hand and cupped her face. His fingers feathered across her hairline and jaw.

After

Aaron sat up and offered his hand to her. She didn't know what he included in that offer, but she wanted to know more. Beth slid off the chair and sat beside him, letting him wrap his hand around hers. "Why did you decide to tell me?"

Aaron wove his fingers between hers. "Because I'm selfish. I shouldn't tell you, but I want to. You understand. You're running too, so you know what it feels like." He tugged her close, wrapping an arm around her.

She should pull away, put some space between herself and the old man, but he was right. They had a connection, and she couldn't sever it. Didn't want to. She let herself fall against him.

"I've been keeping this secret for so long." His chest and arms relaxed. "It's been so long ..." Aaron nuzzled against Beth's cheek, and her heart flipped.

Her eyes fluttered closed when his lips brushed below her ear. He kissed her cheek bone, then the corner of her eye. Beth's nerves sizzled as Aaron released her hand to cup her face, his fingers feathering across her hairline and jaw.

Can you feel the difference? The lengthened sentences and incorporating more description allow the reader to settle into the scene. Instead of rushing through it, readers gain a sense of leisure, a chance to enjoy the scene and everything that's happening in it.

You can change the pace of a scene by altering the descriptions but also by altering dialogue. Here's another excerpt from A. C. Williams, this time from her book *New Name*. See if you can guess which one she published.

Example 1

Rain threw back the last of her bourbon. "What's for dinner? I'm starving."

"Chicken tenders and broccoli."

Rain flung her head over the arm of the sofa. "Again?"

"Again."

"Can't we have something else?"

"I can whip you up a batch of protein mash," Aura said dryly.

Rain groaned in exaggerated agony. "A whole week of rehydrated chicken tenders and broccoli." She pressed her fists into her eyes. "I hate broccoli. It's like eating old shoes."

Aura shook her head. "You could just live on bourbon."

Example 2

Rain threw back the last of her bourbon. "What's for dinner? I'm starving."

And getting loopy from the alcohol. She needed something in her stomach.

"Chicken tenders and broccoli."

Rain flung her head over the arm of the sofa. “Again?” She hated broccoli, didn’t Aura know that?

“Again.”

“Can’t we have something else?” Like plain oatmeal, overcooked fish, or cotton batting.

“I can whip you up a batch of protein mash,” Aura said dryly.

Rain groaned in exaggerated agony. “A whole week of rehydrated chicken tenders and broccoli.” She pressed her fists into her eyes, as if closing her eyes would somehow make a pizza appear. “I hate broccoli. It’s like eating old shoes.”

Aura shook her head. “You could just live on bourbon.”

What did you notice about the pace of these scenes? While the second example provides lots of extra description, it slows down the conversation, telling several things that the dialogue shows, as well as giving many unnecessary details. The first example (which was published) keeps the scene moving forward without slowing it down.

As an editor, it’s important to understand which genres and types of scenes flow at which paces so you can help your authors maintain (or set) the right pace for their scenes. There are no hard, fast rules about how quickly a scene should go. Your author, for example, may want a first kiss to be fast and intense instead of slow and savored. That’s okay, just make sure the words create that feeling. Here are some tips for correcting the pacing.

When you need to speed up a scene: Is the description needed? Are the extra words needed? Will the scene lose meaning without them? If not, cut.

When you need to slow down a scene: How can more emotion be shown? Can punctuation be changed or sentences be combined? How can a deeper character-reader connection be made while keeping the plot moving forward?

Using these techniques can create the right feel (i.e., pace) for every scene.

Floating (and Misused) Body Parts

Floating Body Parts (FBP) are descriptions which, when read literally, show disembodied body parts acting on their own, separate from the rest of the body. There are also Misused Body Parts (my own personal phrase), in which characters are shown doing things that are not physically possible.

There seems to be a continuous debate about whether or not to allow FBP in fiction. Some FBPs have become common and are easily understood, but they should still be used cautiously and sparingly.

What exactly do FBPs look like? Here are some examples:

- *Her eyes followed him down the road.*
- *His muddy feet trekked through the swamp.*

- *Her fingers flew across the keyboard.*
- *He threw his hands up in the air.*

I see FBP most often when writers are trying to find a new, creative way to say something common. A frequent example happens when using the verb *looked*. Over the years, sentences have morphed from:

- *He looked at her face to*
- *His gaze traveled across her face to*
- *His eyes caressed her face.*

The problem with the last example is that eyes can't actually caress anything (even if they could, would you want them to?). Most readers will understand the meaning of the last sentence, but others will have to reread the description. And you never want a reader to have to reread or stop to think about a description. Here are some examples that have made me scratch my head (and reread the passages):

- *He threw a finger her way.* (No, he didn't—he pointed at her.)
- *Her hands flew to her mouth.* (No, they didn't—she covered her mouth.)
- *His arms raised in surrender.* (No, they didn't—he raised his arms.)

It's impossible to know whether readers actually understand what your author's saying or they read those descriptions and laugh. Since you want to avoid the possibility of the latter, point out anything that might cause a reader to stumble while reading. Bring these FBPs to your author's attention and explain how a literal interpretation could cause confusion. Ultimately, it's the author's decision whether or not to make the suggested changes; however, if your client seeks traditional publication, the in-house editor may ask the author to change or eliminate FBPs. If you've done your job, it shouldn't surprise your client to see those suggestions.

It's important to note that there are some terms that could be considered FBPs, but they're not. Here are some examples:

- *He raised his head and shaded his eyes as he looked at the sky.*
(Technically, he raised his head using his neck muscles, but you don't need that description.)
- *He lifted his hand in surrender.*
(Technically, he lifted his hands by raising his arms, but you don't need to add that information—either description will work.)
- *She lifted her foot to check her shoe.*
(Technically, she lifted her foot by flexing her leg muscles, but you get the idea ...)

When editing FBPs, as with other edits, the goal is always to eliminate confusion and create a pleasurable experience for the reader. Watch for FBPs, but use common sense when editing commonly used and understood expressions.

Clichés

A cliché is a phrase that's been overused and lacks creativity. They can be accurate descriptions, but they've become so common that they rarely inspire much thought. Examples include the following:

- *Cute as a button*
- *Deer-in-the-headlight look*
- *Flat as a pancake*
- *Slow as molasses*

When you find clichés in manuscripts, point them out to your authors so they can rewrite them. One possible exception would be when a character uses clichés in dialogue. Many people speak in clichés, so it's believable that your authors' characters would use them. Remember Biff Tannen from *Back to the Future*? He used clichés all the time, but he always got them wrong ("make like a tree and get out of here"). For his character, clichés worked, but even in that situation they should be used sparingly.

One way to help your authors rewrite clichés is to encourage them to consider each character's unique qualities then rephrase the clichés appropriately. One of my favorite examples occurs in a country music song. Instead of saying "head over heels in love," the cowboy sings that he's "head over boots" for the girl—the meaning is clear, but still individualized. It's the perfect way to personalize a cliché.

Miscellaneous Words

Here are a few other types of words to lookout for:

- Telling words
- Graphic/swear words
- Nonspecific/nondescript
- Pet words

Telling Words

Telling words announce what a character is going to do, but they're never necessary. The most common telling words (sometimes called weasel words) are the senses, emotions, and introspective words. Below are examples of each type of telling word:

- *Ella sat on the front porch. She saw Miles walking toward her.*
- *Caleb jumped out of the closet. Mark screamed, scared by his son.*
- *Michelle looked at the clouds and wondered if it was going to rain.*

Now compare the edited sentences without the telling words:

- *Ella sat on the front porch. Miles walked toward her.*
- *Caleb jumped out of the closet. Mark screamed.*

- *Michelle looked at the clouds. Would it rain?*

You can eliminate the telling words (*saw, scared, wondered*) without changing the meaning of those sentences. (We'll look more closely at showing and telling in Lesson 3.)

Graphic/Swear Words

There's nothing wrong with graphic violence and language if your author is writing secular thrillers or horror novels. If, however, you're editing Christian romance, the audience (and publishers) isn't expecting gore and vulgarity. It's important to know which genre your author is writing and where she'll be pitching the book so you can edit appropriately. If you're editing a historical romance, for example, eyeballs shouldn't be hanging out of eye sockets, even if the main character is a doctor. If your author is targeting a specific publisher, know the publisher's guidelines regarding violence and language. Beyond that, every editor needs to decide what he or she will and will not edit; one man's swear word is another man's greeting.

Nonspecific/Nondescript Words

I really like pizza. It's my very favorite meal.

How are those sentences any different from *I like pizza. It's my favorite meal?*

Honestly, they're not different. They say the same thing, but the first example has two extra words in it. People often use *very* and *really* to add emphasis, but those words aren't quantifiable, so they don't help the reader understand how much more the character likes pizza. As an editor, point out these words so the author can either eliminate them or clarify the sentences. For example, *I like pizza more than I like my husband*. (FYI—I don't actually like pizza more than my husband.)

Another word that fits in this category is *just*. Unlike *very* and *really*, *just* has several common definitions, so it's often overused. For example:

- *He ordered just one shirt.*
- *She was just leaving.*
- *That was a just ruling.*

Better, more-definitive sentences would be:

- *He ordered only one shirt.*
- *She was about to leave.*
- *That was a just ruling.* (This is the one instance where *just* is the correct word.)

Other words that fall into the nonspecific category are those nondescript words; they *sort of* show something, but they don't. Here are some examples:

- *They pulled up to the **big** house.*
- *She pushed herself off the ground, **turned**, and walked away.*

- *He was a **short** man.*

In each of these examples, the bold word is a nondescript word; it shows something without giving any specifics: how big is big? turned toward what? and how short is short? These words don't help the reader visualize anything. When you see words like these, point them out to your author and ask for specifics. You can occasionally offer suggestions for how to rewrite nondescript sections.

- *They pulled up to the two-story Victorian home with a wrap-around porch.*
- *She pushed herself off the ground, turned toward the parking lot, and walked away.*
- *The top of his head barely reached her chin.*

Pet Words

Every writer has pet words and phrases. These are words and phrases that appear frequently throughout the manuscript. It's not that they're technically wrong, but they're overused. If you're not sure whether or not a word is being overused, use the Find feature in Microsoft Word. I once had a client who frequently used *up* and *out* when they weren't necessary (*stood up; reached out*). Each word appeared more than three hundred times in the manuscript! In most situations, they could be cut. To help the author see how often certain words were used, I highlighted them each a few times, then made a note for the author to look for ways to remove them. There aren't any universals when it comes to pet words; each author has his or her own (for example, I like the word *grab*, so I look for those when I self-edit). Just know that if a word stands out to you as overused, it will likely stand out to the reader.

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LESSON #1 ASSIGNMENT

You will need to complete this assignment to qualify for the Certificate of Completion.

In the following scene from a historical novel, identify the fiction errors we discussed. This is neither an edit nor a rewrite. It's simply for you to practice seeing the problems we talked about in others' writing.

Molly Parker held her breath and stepped backward when she heard the sound of heavy boots clunking on the ground outside the open barn door. She leaned her back against the wall of the loft.

Her uncle and another man stepped inside the dimly-lit barn.

"She's sturdy and willin' to work," Uncle Mark said. "I wouldn't be doing this except that I've only got one more week to come up with the mortgage on the farm before the bank is going to kick us out."

"You know I'll take very good care of her," the other man said in a baritone voice.

Molly gasped. That voice belonged to Laney Emerson, the ranch owner at the ranch to the north of them. She wondered what kind of deal her uncle was making with him.

“I know you will, son,” her uncle said. “That’s why I’m making this offer to you alone. Molly is a sweet girl, and this will make sure she has a good future.”

Laney’s voice held a certain venomous tone that Molly had never heard from anyone before. “You’re a rotten son of a gun.” He spat on the ground.

Molly’s heart jumped into her throat. She’d never heard anyone talk to her uncle like that before.

“I’m only doing this because I know you enough to know that if I didn’t take this outlandish offer, you’d sell Molly to the first cowboy to come riding down the road.”

Molly gasped and her knees went weak, but she caught herself before falling. *Had she heard right? Uncle Mark was selling her to the neighbor in order to get enough money to save his farm? How could he do that to her? Is that all she meant to him?* Hot tears stung her eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

“Here,” Emmerson said after he reached into his saddle bags he’d slung over his shoulder and came up with a fist full of money. He handed it to her uncle. Molly saw this because she had leaned forward just enough to see the top half of the men where they stood just inside the barn door.

“Is this the whole \$3,000?”

“Yes. It is,” Emmerson replied with an indignant tone. “When I told you I’d need collateral, it’s because I don’t trust you as far as I could throw you. I’m only taking Molly because I feel like I’m between a rock and a hard place. I don’t believe you’ll ever pay this money back, but if I don’t give it to you, I fear for Molly’s life. You really are a rotten son of a gun.”

“That might be true, but I’ll be able to keep my homestead.”

Emmerson shook his head and headed to the door.

“I’ll go get Molly for you right now.”

Emmerson remained silent as the two men exited the barn.

Molly sunk to the loft floor in a pile of tears, gasping. What was she supposed to do? What did Laney Emmerson expect from her? *How could her uncle treat her like a cow he’d sold at auction before he neglected his farm and lost them all to hoof rot?*

If she left the loft now, they’d see her and she’d have to go with Emmerson. If she stayed there, they’d be sure to find her sooner or later. She heaved great sobs after she covered her face with her hands. She’d been shoved around from home to home all her life, but this was the first time someone paid for her.

She didn’t know how long she’d been up there when suddenly her uncle’s voice boomed out and startled her. “Molly! I know you’re up there. Come on down here, girl.”

What could she do? She was trapped. She stood up and wiped her eyes on the apron she wore. She walked across the floor with leaded feet and then turned around and descended the ladder. She landed on the floor and slowly turned toward her uncle.

In a barely audible voice, she said, “How could you do this to me?”

“You’re a very pretty girl,” he said. “I know how a pretty girl can have her head turned easily. This way, if you marry Laney Emmerson, your future will be set, and you’ll have all the money and security you’ll ever need for the rest of your life. I did this just as much for you as I did for myself.”

She wanted to scream and lash out at him, but all she could do was stand there like a limp rag doll and breathe.

Just then Laney Emmerson's shadow crossed the threshold, followed by the man himself. "I guess you know you're coming to live with me," he said. "Your uncle packed your things, and I have them on the buckboard. I'm sorry about all this."

Her eyes flew to her uncle and shot daggers through him. She'd never forgive him for this as long as she lived. Resigned to her fate, she raised her chin and walked past her uncle without a word.