



SUBSTANTIVE EDITING FOR FICTION 201

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LESSON #5

Hooks and Common Problems

Every now and then, great writers break the rules. They can do that because they understand those rules and know *how* to break them. Unfortunately, new writers often read those broken rules and interpret them as correct or permissible, then they fill their manuscripts with pages of common mistakes that scream “newbie.”

As a substantive fiction editor, be aware of and on the lookout for these things so you can help writers identify and fix them. In this lesson, we’re going to talk about the following:

- Hooks
- Active Telling/Off-Page Action
- Mixed Genres
- Transitions
- Unnecessary Action
- Inconsistent Characters

Hooks

Every book needs a hook. The hook is that moment in the first chapter that grabs the reader’s attention and pulls him into the story. Sometimes it’s the first line. Often it’s in the first paragraph. There is no universal rule about what must be in the hook other than it needs to grab an agent’s or publisher’s attention (and not everyone likes the same things, so what grabs one person’s attention won’t grab another’s). There *is* one universal truth about hooks though: they need to relate to the story. A book shouldn’t open with a car chase if that chase isn’t important to the plot.

Here’s a great example of a women’s fiction hook as it appears in Ann Tatlock’s *Promises to Keep*:

We hadn’t lived in the house on McDowell Street for even a week when we found a stranger on the porch, reading the morning paper.

A line like that automatically inspires questions: who's *we*, who's the stranger, and why's the stranger reading the morning paper? You have to keep reading to find out.

That's not the only hook in the book though. Once the author has captured the reader's attention, she needs to keep it. To do that, each chapter needs to end with a hook to encourage the reader to turn the page. A chapter (or scene) shouldn't just end. It should hint at what's going to happen next.

There are two common issues I often see with hooks:

1. All of the hooks are the same.
2. The hook is misleading.

All of the Hooks Are the Same

Internal questions are a great way to show a character's fears and concerns, which means they naturally provide a good hook:

Could she ever forgive him?

Would they reach the store on time?

Were they ever going to stop fighting?

You have to turn the page to find out! But using this technique too often can feel manipulative—instead of inspiring the reader to keep going because of the amazing storytelling or characters, the author forces the reader to keep going to answer questions. That works well once or twice, but make sure your author doesn't overuse it. In addition to feeling manipulative, it also gets to be predictable, which is never a good thing.

If your author overuses the internal question, point it out and explain why overuse can hurt the manuscript. Then, if you have an idea for a better hook, offer the suggestion. If you don't have an idea, suggest a direction or topic the author could use to write a stronger hook.

The Hook Is Misleading

Like all other aspects of a novel, the hook needs to move the story forward. While it can introduce twists or provide cliff-hanger endings, it should *not* be used as a ploy to trick the reader into turning pages.

Suppose you're editing a romantic suspense novel about a female US marshal protecting a tech genius from the company he's testifying against. The hooks should relate to those characters and the plot. If the marshal is a confident woman who sees no need for romantic relationships, the hook needs to draw from her personality. A good chapter ending might look like this:

The doorknob turned. Forgetting the kiss, she drew her gun. She'd defend him at all costs.

What doesn't work is something like this:

The doorknob turned. She drew her gun. Would she get the chance to tell him how she felt, or would this end up being another mistake?

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Where did all that emotion come from? The marshal is trained and focused. Even if she has feelings for the witness, this type of hook slips out of character for the sake of stirring up emotions. And that bit at the end about being another mistake introduces something that may or may not be relevant at a time that isn't appropriate. I usually remind authors to "stay in the scene," meaning they need to stay in the POV character's head at that moment to write a hook that reflects how that person would be thinking or feeling in *that* situation.

Active Telling/Off-Page Action

Anyone who's been writing for any period of time has heard this: start your scene with action.

Yes, that's true, but many new authors don't know what that means. The action needs to be something that advances the story and not what I've come to call "active telling." Here's what I mean:

Joe laced up his shoes and stepped outside. The early morning air nipped at his cheeks as he jogged down the street, his feet smacking the concrete. His thoughts kept going back to his dinner with Beth. She'd looked amazing in her sundress with her tanned skin. Her eyes had sparkled when she talked about her volunteer work, and she'd nearly knocked over her drink twice. He wanted to believe it was because she'd been nervous about their first date. He certainly had been, but the evening didn't disappoint.

Does that paragraph start with action? Absolutely! But then it's followed by sentence after sentence (and often paragraph after paragraph) of telling.

As I mentioned in the lesson on showing and telling, there's a place for this kind of scene. Say the main character is a new florist and she's making her first delivery to an important client. While she's driving, she thinks about how this client could lead to another one or about what she's going to do when she gets back to the shop or how she's planning to buy a new van so she can take bigger orders. It can work because the reader sees the character doing something (making a delivery) while also thinking about relevant things that keep the story moving forward—she's thinking ahead, maintaining the forward motion of the story.

Now look back at Joe's example. There are three main problems with that bit of active telling.

1. The action is irrelevant.
2. The character is thinking backward instead of forward.
3. The important action happens off the page.

1. **Irrelevant Action:** Unless Joe’s training for a marathon or it’s been adequately established that jogging is his stress-reliever, the action is irrelevant—any character in any book could go jogging. This isn’t special to him or the story. Remember: everything in the manuscript needs to work toward advancing the plot. Showing him jogging just for the sake of showing him doing something is mundane, and readers don’t care about the mundane.

2. **Thinking Backward:** As Joe runs, he’s thinking about the past instead of the future. It’s okay to show a character remembering something, but only in the light of how it ties in to what’s happening now or what’s going to happen in the future. Ideally, readers should have already seen Joe and Beth’s first date, so they don’t need to see Joe’s memory of it. Instead, keep the story moving forward by showing the *effect* of the first date. Is Joe going to ask Beth out again? Is he planning to kiss her the next time? Is he confused about what to do next? Those kinds of thoughts will keep the story moving in the right direction.

If, however, the reader didn’t see the first date, that’s because of . . .

3. **Off-Page Action:** This keeps popping up more frequently in manuscripts: instead of showing what happens between characters, authors show characters remembering/thinking about what happened between them. That needs to stop for two important reasons:

1. It’s all telling.
2. The author is skipping important plot points.

The only thing worse than info dumps full of useless information is info dumps full of important information that should have been shown.

Look back at the example I gave. Joe’s remembering his first date with Beth; unless Joe is a player who dates a lot of different women, a first date is a big deal (especially in a romance novel)! To help the readers connect with the characters—and to let them experience the excitement of a first date along with Joe—that scene needs to be shown. It’s easier to write about the event after the fact and tell the readers how Joe feels about everything that happened, but it takes away the intimacy of the experience. It tells readers what to think and feel instead of letting them create their own opinions and experience their own emotions.

When you see an author explaining off-page action, you need to ask yourself two questions: did this need to be shown, and is it advancing the story? Once you can answer those questions, you’ll know how to advise your authors; either cut the information or show the scene.

Mixed Genres

In SEF 101, we talked about the main fiction genres and some of the subgenres. Romance, historical, and fantasy are considered main genres. Historical romance (combining two genres) is a subgenre. I’m not talking about subgenres though; I’m talking about new authors unconsciously mixing genres in ways that don’t work.

Not too long ago I edited a manuscript that opened with a woman on the run—she was clearly in danger and trying to escape. Later in the story, a helpful, grandmotherly type woman popped into the main characters’ lives, and suddenly the hero had an *It’s-a-Wonderful-Life*-type experience where he finally understood the value of his life and family. When he returned to the real world, romance bloomed.

Do you see the issues there?

The book started as suspense. It transitioned into speculative. It ended with romance. The manuscript, however, was being pitched as women’s fiction.

It’s one thing to create a subgenre like romantic suspense, in which the romance and the suspense are equally important. It’s another thing to write one genre with a different genre subplot, such as *Lord of the Rings*—a fantasy story with a romance subplot. It’s a mess, however, when authors try to combine elements from a variety of genres into one supergenre without considering how agents, publishers, and readers will receive it.

After talking with the author of the suspense/speculative/romance/women’s fiction, we figured out the problems. First, we nailed down the type of story she actually wanted to write—women’s fiction. Then we looked at the other elements and figured out how to incorporate them. We were able to weave the speculative fiction and romance plotlines into the story, but we had to cut the suspense opening. While it did start the story with action, it wasn’t the appropriate type of action for the story she wanted to tell.

As a substantive editor, it’s crucial to understand the basics of each genre so you can identify these types of issues and help your authors figure out what they’re writing. When you understand the differences between genres, you can help your authors weave those elements together (and help them avoid tangling their characters in a multi-genre mess).

Transitions

There are two main types of transitions in novels: thought transitions and action transitions. Both are necessary to create a smooth story without causing confusion. I’ll define both then explain when and how to use them.

Thought Transitions

These occur whenever characters change topics, either in conversations or thoughts. Everyone has a train of thought, and it’s important to show those on the page to help the reader understand what’s going on. Here’s an example of a missing thought transition:

“Shar’s outside,” Heather said.

Thunder cracked, and the windowpane dropped.

“I wonder if Shar calls her grandpa Grandpa Chuck,” Victoria said.

“Who cares?”

Victoria shrugged. “Do you think he’ll be here tomorrow?”

In that example, the author is trying to bring grandpa into the story, but there's no explanation for why they brought him into the conversation. The author needs to show what inspired Victoria's train of thought to shift to grandpa.

"Shar's outside," Heather said.

Thunder cracked, and the windowpane dropped. Maybe the house was haunted. Maybe it was haunted by Shar's dead grandma, and she was mad that Shar's grandpa had been forced out of the house. The Charles Conrad house. Victoria had never heard anyone refer to him as Charles, though. "I wonder if Shar calls her grandpa Grandpa Chuck."

"Who cares?"

Victoria shrugged. "Do you think he'll be here tomorrow?"

The rewrite shows the reader how and why the characters changed topics in the middle of the conversation. If you ever get to a point where you don't understand how or why characters are thinking or talking about something, point it out to the author and ask for a transition. More likely than not, it makes sense to the author, but that doesn't mean it will make sense to the reader.

Action Transitions

You can probably guess where I'm going with this, but I'll explain it anyway: action transitions are the actions that show readers how characters get from point A to point B. There's a tendency to forget about those and simply have characters magically transported from place to place. When that happens, it looks like this:

Abby pushed the porch swing back and forth as she watched the setting sun.

"You ready to go?" Noah asked. "The fireworks start at sundown."

"I need to get my jacket." Abby flipped on her bedroom light and gasped. "Noah, come quick!"

One second Abby's on the porch swing, then she's miraculously in her bedroom! This happens all the time (sometimes even in published books), but it should be avoided because it causes readers to pause or reread a few lines to make sure they didn't miss something. That pulls them out of the story, and you never want to give readers an excuse to leave the story.

When you see this, just make a note for the author to add a quick transition, and emphasize the quick. It's not uncommon for authors to overcompensate and write something like the following:

Abby pushed the porch swing back and forth as she watched the setting sun.

"You ready to go?" Noah asked. "The fireworks start at sundown."

“I need to get my jacket.” Abby stood and walked to the front door. She turned the knob and let herself in, then climbed the stairs and walked down the hall to her bedroom. She flipped on her bedroom light and gasped. “Noah, come quick!”

That’s overkill (and it will slow down the pace of the scene). The author only needs something like this:

Abby pushed the porch swing back and forth as she watched the setting sun.

“You ready to go?” Noah asked. “The fireworks start at sundown.”

“I need to get my jacket.” Abby ran to her bedroom and flipped on the light. She gasped. “Noah, come quick!”

Go ahead and give an example of how to add a quick transition the first time. Then you’ll only need to point out where the author needs to include those descriptions.

Unnecessary Action

Whether it’s active telling or action beats, it’s common to find unnecessary action scattered throughout a manuscript. We’ve already talked about some of this, but I want to explain why it’s an issue that editors should watch for.

Unnecessary action is anything that doesn’t add to the story. You’ll find a lot of these in dialogue:

Carmen shrugged. “I don’t know what to do.”

David smiled. “I have an idea.”

“I don’t think so.” She shook her head.

“Are you sure?” He laced his fingers through hers.

She looked at the TV, then the stairs. “My parents always hear the Nintendo.”

David picked up the remote control. “What if we mute the TV?”

There are only two people in this conversation, so it’s not necessary to have an action beat on every line. They don’t add anything to the scene, and they’re not fun to read. Too many beats slow down the action, making it difficult for people to read. Suggest the author cut as many beats as possible without losing the forward motion and meaning of the scene.

Every story needs action and descriptions, but it’s your job to look for those that not only slow down the story but also don’t add anything. Unnecessary actions pop up all the time in unedited manuscripts: it could be active telling at the beginning of a scene, a place where the author thinks

the story needs some extra descriptions, or the everyday actions that every character makes. When an author cuts the unnecessary, he gives himself space to add more relevant details that will better engage the reader.

Inconsistent Characters

It's hard to watch someone cry and not want to cry with them. Authors know that, so they often have their strong, independent women cry any time life doesn't work the way they wanted: their relationships end, their cars stall, they bump into tables and break their favorite trinkets. If all those things happened in one day, maybe a strong, independent woman would shed a tear, but if she cries *every* time something bad happens, she's no longer strong. Authors, in an effort to create scenes that show their characters' emotional range, sometimes end up creating bipolar characters who become unpredictable in their actions and reactions.

It's okay to have a weepy character if she's been introduced as a weepy character. It's also okay for that weepy character to have moments of strength when she's pushed to her limit. Likewise, it's okay to have that strong woman crack under pressure (but it should be a lot of pressure). What's not okay is telling the readers a character is one way then having her flop around from one emotion to the next without any core personality.

There's a fine line between stereotypical and unpredictable. You shouldn't be able to guess exactly how characters will respond in each situation, but if they don't have any dominant personality traits that anchor them in reality, they become props that the author uses to show emotions without letting the story itself evoke those emotions.

To be a good substantive editor, you need to have a basic understanding of personality traits and types. Whether you want to study Enneagram types, the Myers-Briggs index, or the four temperaments is up to you. The important thing is having a general understanding of the different types of personalities so you can help your authors spot inconsistent characters. You want to help the author create characters the readers will root for, not characters they want to throw the book at.

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Lesson #5 Assignment

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

This section contains many of the issues discussed in this lesson. Look for those issues (and any others you might see), and edit this as you would for a client. Use Track Changes and leave comments as needed.

After her shift ended Martina explored the convenient store. She filled her basket with the necessities. The prices were outrageous, but she needed only a few things to get by until a box with her stuff arrived. It had taken a lot of effort for Natalia to persuade her mom to send it since she didn't want to enable her daughter's "poor choices." After that phone call, Martina had called Jeff to talk about it, but just the sound of his voice calmed her nerves.

Martina stepped to a rack of Bakersfield Car Show t-shirts. She picked out an overly-large, pink one she could sleep in. She sorted through the different sizes and colors, and looked for two more. She jumped back, her heart beating ferociously. A little boy, with shiny blond hair and dark eyes, crouched in the center of the rack.

She knelt to his eye level and smiled. "Hey. What are you doing in there?"

The boy grinned then shushed her. "Hiding," he whispered.

A woman grabbed him from behind. "Gotcha!"

The boy squealed and giggled.

"You're silly, Peter. We'd better finish our shopping. Daddy will be here to pick us up, and you haven't picked out a coloring book yet." She set Peter down, and he ran toward the magazine rack.

Martina looked into her blue eyes. "He has a lot of energy."

A tentative smile eased onto her face then faded. "He's my whole world."

As the mom and her son stood outside waiting for their ride, Martina grabbed one red and one black shirt then set her basket on the check-out counter. A middle-aged woman abandoned her novel and rang up the items.

“That was a cute boy. Do you know the family?”

“Know them as well as I know you.” She peered at Martina through her sapphire, wing-tipped glasses.

“Well, let me change that. I’m Martina Nelson. I’m working over at the June Bug Cafe for Abby.” Natalia looked at her name tag. “You’ll have to stop by, Allison.”

The woman snorted. “That Abby sure thinks she’s something special coming here to make money off our tourists then closing up shop as soon as the cash stops flowing. Shuts down the only café around here. It’s a crying shame.”

“So, there’s no place to get a bite to eat when Abby leaves?” Martina tapped on the glass counter. How much longer would Louis hold her job for her? She’d committed to the June Bug for at least a week. Would she be unemployed by Saturday?

Allison scanned her shirts and placed them in a bag. “Not unless you want to sell some plasma so you can afford the fancy steak house outside of town or drive all the way to Lewiston. I’ve got some cold sandwiches in the cooler back there, and all the candy keep the teens happy. I’ve thought about getting a cheese warmer for nachos and a hot dog cooker, and sell food here. Whatcha think? Think that would make money?”

“You already have a cappuccino maker. I bet if you put in a couple of tables and chairs you could attract some of the older people in the winter.” Martina threw a pack of gum next to the travel toothpaste.

Allison's eyes lit up. "I think you're on to something. I could get rid of that bulky clothes rack and put the shirts on the wall. That should free up some space. Besides, no one really buys them anyway." She rang in the rest of her items without glancing up.

Martina cringed because of the three shirts folded in the plastic bag.

"What did ya say your name was?" Allison looked at her credit card before giving it back. "Martina? You don't look like a Martina."

Martina heard that all the time. For some reason people expected her to have black hair and tanned skin. Her blonde hair and hazel eyes seemed to surprise people, but she was used to it. "I get that a lot."

"Maybe you should go by Martie, or Tina! You look like a Tina."

"I'll think about it."

"Thanks for your advice, and enjoy your time in Bakersfield."

Natalia waved at her over her shoulder. The quirky residents of this town could attach to her heart if she wasn't careful.