



SUBSTANTIVE EDITING FOR FICTION 201

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LESSON #6

Helping Authors Help Themselves

The good news is that an increasing number of authors understand the importance of a good edit, whether they're submitting to an agent or self-publishing, so they're seeking qualified professionals to help them clean up their manuscripts. The truth, however, is that many of those authors aren't yet ready for editing.

How do you know if an author's manuscript is ready for an edit, and what do you do when it isn't? Every editor handles it in his or her way. I'll tell you what I do and show you how you can help your authors (and yourself!) establish better editing habits. In this lesson we'll discuss these topics:

- When and Why You Should Recommend Self-Editing
- How to Recommend Self-Editing
- Self-Editing Tips to Share with Authors
- Resources

When and Why You Should Recommend Self-Editing

If you encourage authors to self-edit, aren't you putting yourself out of a job?

Not at all. All authors—even those who've published dozens of books over decades—still rely on editors to help them polish their manuscripts. To polish them, however, the manuscripts at least need to resemble a diamond. New authors often think they're handing over a clean-cut diamond when, in fact, it's still just a rock (or worse, coal). They tend to believe that because they've finished the story and their family and friends love it, it's almost ready to publish.

That's not always the case. Sometimes a manuscript is too rough to edit. How rough is “too rough”?

No manuscript is perfect. You should expect that there will be a few issues with every manuscript you read: the writing is decent, but the characterization is weak; the plot is fascinating, but it's all telling; the characters and plot engage you, but it's poorly organized. You can work with those. What you can't work with (in one round of editing) are plot issues,

shallow characters, telling, poor organization, *and* point-of-view errors all at the same time. When there's that much wrong with a story, fixing it requires rewriting or coaching, not editing.

Ideally, you would explain these issues to the author, and you could work through them one at a time through various rounds of edits over several months. Realistically, few authors can afford that kind of help (we'll discuss editing rates in SEF 301). Personally, I don't ever want to discourage an author from continuing to write. So instead of saying, "This isn't ready; try me again in six months," I want to give authors practical suggestions for how they can improve.

Why doesn't this hurt my bottom line? As I said, few people can afford to hire me for two to three rounds of substantive edits. Instead of trying to convince them to do so, I try to talk them into taking a little more time to hone their craft and tighten their story before submitting it to me or any other editor. If they insist on moving forward and hiring me, I usually offer them two options:

1. A full manuscript critique: Instead of editing the whole thing, a critique provides feedback, including pointing out all the story's issues and weaknesses. I also offer suggestions for cleaning and strengthening those areas.
2. Three-to-five chapter edit: I never edit just the first chapter, as many authors spend weeks cleaning up those first ten to fifteen pages, so it doesn't represent the story well. When I give a full edit of three to five chapters, however, the author can see exactly how much work is needed and why I don't recommend a full book edit at that time.

This technique has worked well for me. Authors realize that I'm not in it for the money; I want to help them write good books. I had one author contact me for an edit, but he wasn't ready. Instead, he hired me for the sample edit. Then, he cleaned up his manuscript. Several months later, he hired me for a full manuscript critique. He realized he could trust me, so he came back for more help.

How to Recommend Self-Editing

There's no easy way to tell an author her manuscript is not ready for an edit, especially if she's already had people read the story and praise it. No one wants to hear that their work isn't good enough, so it's important to make sure you communicate in a way that's honest but helpful.

Here's how I do it.

- Clarify the publishing goals.
- Clarify the intended audience.
- Clarify the genre (if needed).
- Be honest.

At the end of this lesson, I've included an email that I sent to an author whose manuscript wasn't ready for editing. There is no one-size-fits-all letter when having that conversation with an

author, but the example will give you an idea of how to communicate in an honest but (hopefully) helpful way.

Self-Editing Tips to Share with Authors

Okay, we're finally to the good stuff. I wanted to include this in SEF 201 because knowing how to help others will strengthen your editing muscles (and you want to learn to be a better editor or you wouldn't be taking this course!). When you understand these techniques, you'll be able not only to teach others but you'll also to use these techniques to mine information from your authors so you can provide better edits for them.

Now, let's take this one topic at a time.

Point of View (POV)

There are essentially two main POV issues you'll need to help authors self-edit:

1. Head hopping
2. Omniscient/author intrusion

1. Head Hopping: First, explain to the author what this is and why it's an issue (see SEF 101 for more information on POV). Next, you'll want to explain how to fix it. Something like this works:

In each scene, the first person mentioned is that scene's point-of-view (POV) character. After you identify that character (you may need to rewrite some scene openings), imagine giving that person an old-fashioned video camera they have to hold up to one eye—the POV character can describe ONLY what they see, hear, and know while looking through that viewfinder. Similarly, they can know ONLY what they would know from behind the camera. That means no more

- Describing events happening in different locations,
- Explaining other characters' motivations, and
- Bouncing from one character's perspective to another's (you can change the POV character only at chapter and scene breaks)

Authors won't catch all of these mistakes (no one does), but giving them this tool should help them find and correct most of these issues.

2. Omniscient/Author Intrusion: There's nothing wrong with the omniscient POV if it fits the genre and is what the author was meaning to write. Usually, however, the author thinks he's writing in third person POV when he's actually writing in omniscient (or intruding on the story).

You can tell that a story is in omniscient POV because of the head hopping and because all the characters and descriptions sound the same. When the artist, rancher, waitress, janitor, and high school baseball player use the same words and speak/think in the same poetic style, it's

omniscient.

One obvious red flag that a story is in omniscient POV is when the author talks about the narrator's voice. In third person POV, there isn't a narrator; each scene is shown from a character's perspective, so the voice should be that of the POV character, not a narrator.

You can explain it this way:

Each POV character should have a unique voice—their gender, age, education, income, hometown, etc. all influence that voice, and those differences should come through when the POV character changes. In each scene, ask yourself, “Would this character really talk/think like this, or is this how I [the author] want to describe it?”

Remember: character voices should be unique enough that you can cut dialogue tags from your book and the readers will still know who's saying what. If you can't tell the difference, then the story is in your voice and not your characters'.

If you've read enough of the manuscript to know who the characters are, you can be more specific in your instructions (would a bartender really say that?) to better help your author reevaluate his writing and strengthen the POV.

Telling

Since we discussed this quite recently (in Lessons 3 and 5 of this course), this information should still be fresh in your mind, so I won't rehash what telling is or why it's a common mistake. Instead, let's look at how to help an author self-edit it out of a story.

Start by explaining what telling is and why it should be used sparingly. Then offer some tips for identifying telling.

1. *Look for long paragraphs (or pages) without a lot of white space.* Are those sections full of information about the past? If yes, it's probably a backstory info dump (or active telling). Instead of dumping it all in one place, try revealing it through conversation or in smaller pieces that don't stop the story. If it's not past information, read through it to make sure it's relevant and it's moving the story forward.
2. *Search for weasel words.* These words announce that the author is about to tell something: *saw, looked, heard, felt, thought, considered*, etc. When you find those words, cut as many as possible (rewriting the sentences if needed to maintain clarity). For example, “She saw him standing in the kitchen” can be rewritten as “He stood in the kitchen.”
3. *Search for to-be verbs.* Look for *was* and *were*. They don't always indicate telling, but they can. Changing “He was hot” to “Sweat ran down his back” will strengthen any story and eliminate telling.

Plot

Every story needs a beginning, middle, and an end, and everything that happens in those sections needs to move the story forward. These are three of the most common plot issues I see with new authors:

1. *There's no introduction.* Authors are so anxious to start the story (with action!) that they often sacrifice introducing the characters for the sake of jumping into the plot. You can tell this is an issue if you're reading the manuscript and you don't care what happens to the characters. That's often because you don't know enough about them; you haven't had enough time to bond with them. When that happens, encourage the author to add a chapter or two to let the reader get to know more about the characters.
2. *Scenes are irrelevant/stopping the story.* Every scene needs to keep the story moving forward. Sometimes authors write beautiful, sentimental scenes that create vivid mental images and stir up emotions, but they have *nothing* to do with the plot. Remind your author that scenes like those stop the story instead of helping it. Those scenes should be cut but don't need to be tossed—authors can hold on to them to be used later to help market and promote the book.
3. *There's no conflict/the stakes aren't high enough.* The beginning of the book should show the characters' normal states; throughout the book, things need to threaten or interfere with "normal." It's not enough to have one issue. Multiple conflicts are needed, and they need to increase the stakes throughout the story. In the introduction, the hero may have been on the verge of losing his job. By the end of the book, his job, house, and fiancée should be on the line. More conflict. Higher stakes.

Characters

People won't read about characters they don't care about, so it's critical to help authors create strong, believable characters (even in plot-driven fiction). If you, as the editor, don't connect with the characters, neither will other readers. You won't be able to teach authors everything they need to know about characters in one email, but you can suggest two ways in which they can strengthen their characters (and their stories) on their own.

1. *Fill out a character worksheet.* Authors can't write consistent, believable characters if they don't know the characters. Taking the time to fill out a character worksheet will help them better understand the people they're creating. (I'm including one at the end of this lesson, though you should have a copy from SEF 101.)
2. *Strengthen the GMCs.* Goals, motivations, conflicts. Recommend that your author create at least two GMCs for each main character: personal and professional. After they do, tell them to review each one and ask, "Why?" Don't settle for, *Katie wants to get married*. Why does she want to get married? Why does it matter to her? Why, why, why? Asking *why* will cut through the superficial answers and help authors find the real hearts of their characters.

Organization

Sometimes authors have a hard time keeping track of their information. They introduce a short-haired brunette on page four, but on page eighty-six she has long hair. At the beginning of the story they live in Bakersfield, but then it's Bakersville, and then it's back to Bakersfield. It's easy to miss those things, especially after spending months (or years) on a manuscript and making lots of changes. If the story seems disorganized to you, recommend a style sheet.

A style sheet can help authors track everything from spellings to settings to personality traits. Editors use style sheets all the time for that very reason. If an author uses one to keep the details organized, he can pass it along to his editor when he's ready, and that will make the process easier (and potentially faster) for the editor. I've attached a sample style sheet at the end of this lesson.

When there are issues in all these areas (POV, telling, plot, characterization, and organization), it's difficult to provide a substantive edit without rewriting or becoming a fiction-writing coach. The good news is that all of these techniques can be learned, and most of these issues are things the authors will need to correct on their own anyway (an editor can't strengthen a character's voice if the characterization is inconsistent; only the author can do that). By encouraging them to tackle these issues themselves, you're equipping them to become better writers, which will ultimately mean faster, less expensive edits in the future.

Resources

When you recommend authors self-edit, it's usually because they haven't fully mastered (or even grasped) the basics of fiction writing. One thing I always try to do is identify the weakest areas of the manuscript and suggest resources that will help the author in those particular areas. These are the books I recommend and why (Note: I don't receive referral fees or payments from any of these publishers or authors; I've just found these to be some of the best books on these topics):

Point of View: *Writing Deep Viewpoint* by Kathy Tyers—I swear Tyers monitored my email and used those messages to authors to use in her book. She has identified and addressed some of the most prevalent POV problems in modern writing. When POV is an issue, I always recommend this book. It's specifically geared toward mastering deep third person, which is currently the preferred POV for many genres.

Telling: *The Art and Craft of Writing Christian Fiction* by Jeff Gerke—I recommend this to *all* authors, regardless of whether or not they're writing Christian fiction. Gerke is able to take the concept of showing and make it easier to understand and apply. (Also helpful, *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* by Renni Browne and Dave King.)

Plot: *Plot and Structure* by James Scott Bell—The title says it all. This book focuses on the necessary elements of plot that keep the story moving and keep it engaging. If there's any confusion about the beginning, middle, or end, this book will help. (Also helpful, *Plot versus Character* by Jeff Gerke.)

Characterization: *Plot versus Character* by Jeff Gerke—This book breaks writers into two categories: plot focused and character focused. Then he shows plot-focused writers how to create characters and character-focused writers how to create plots. This book can help authors with plot issues too, but I’ve personally found it more helpful for creating engaging characters.

(Also helpful, *Getting Into Character* by Brandilyn Collins and *The Complete Writer’s Guide to Heroes and Heroines: Sixteen Master Archetypes* by Tami D. Cowden, Caro LaFever, and Sue Viders [Disclaimer: I found this book to be *immensely* informative, but it’s also terribly edited and full of punctuation, grammar, and formatting errors; if you can’t read past those, you might want to skip this book.]

Grammar/Punctuation: *Proofreading Secrets of Best-Selling Authors* by Kathy Ide—We didn’t talk about grammar or punctuation because it’s not something you’ll focus on during a substantive edit, but there are times when you’ll read a manuscript with such poor mechanics that you’ll struggle to read past all the commas. The ultimate guide for editors, of course, is *The Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS)*, but that book’s a bit intimidating for most authors. Ide has decades of experience editing, and her book includes all the most common mistakes she’s seen. All her information comes directly from *CMOS*; it’s just easier to use. (Note: Ide’s book is based on *CMOS* 16th edition.)

Best Overall Resources: *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* by Renni Browne and Dave King and *The Art and Craft of Writing Christian Fiction* by Jeff Gerke—when *everything* is an issue for an author, these are my go-to suggestions. They discuss the most topics and do so in a way that’s easy for authors to understand and apply to their writing.

If you’ve never read these books, I highly recommend reading them before you recommend them. You might have a different resource you think provides better information. If you do, use it! (And please tell me about it—I’m always looking for new craft books to read.) If you don’t have a list of resources yet, feel free to use this one.

That, ladies and gentlemen, is it for Substantive Editing for Fiction 201! I hope this was informative and helpful, and I hope you’ll notice an improvement in your editing skills and strategies. Good luck!

* * *

Lesson #6 Assignment

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

Read and edit the section below (it's from a young adult fantasy novel). How would you respond to this author? What issues do you see in this section?

But his feelings of failure and remorse were tempered slightly by his thoughts of the elfin girl walking beside him. He watched her, gliding gracefully as if her feet didn't touch the ground. But as he studied her every move, he wondered: did she trust him? Who could blame her if she didn't after the tirade he'd just unleashed? She was right after all. She didn't ask him to save her.

Philip led them to a small rock formation where they sat down, the irony of where they were not lost on him. This was where he used to sit while watching her so many years ago, except the little elfin girl wasn't playing across the river anymore. She was beside him now, a young woman, quietly staring at him.

The air was misty and the sky clear, with the light from Rodor's moon unleashing the stars like brilliant diamonds. Two squirrels chased each other back and forth nearby, unabashedly rustling the forest leaves, excited to be playing again. The evening crickets had started their orchestral symphony that would continue for hours. The forest was at peace, its natural state intact, as if the vicious battle that just finished had not taken place.

But the eerie silence between them continued, until she suddenly spoke. "Bly will send reinforcements," she whispered, her voice cracking a bit.

"Bly doesn't pay close attention to the day-to-day dealings on Xenlon. The only land that he completely controls is the Orton. The other lands are much more problematic for him and

have huge amounts of resistance...I can't believe you and I are here, of all places," he continued, looking straight into her eyes.

"I just never thought I'd be sitting here so many years later—with you."

"Yeah—me either...so why did you stop coming?"

She looked down nervously, fiddling with the straps of her armor. "Well," she hesitated, "it's a painful story."

"Oh. I'm sorry..."

"No, it's fine," she interrupted. "My parents were killed at the end of that summer...both executed by the army. After they were killed, I lived with other families in The Valley. They didn't really like to come to the river much. So..."

"You quit coming," Philip finished for her.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Freya," he faltered, fumbling for words. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have..."

"I told you it's fine—really. You know, for a long time I thought about crossing the river to find you. But I never mustered the courage.."

Philip exhaled. She softly touched his hand, not sure if she should, sending goose bumps up his arm. "Really, I'm glad you're here. I'm glad you're alive, and for what it's worth, I thought many times of crossing the river to find you as well."

Freya squeezed his hand and smiled coyly. Philip sensed that she needed to tell him something. He reached over, and touched her leg. "You okay?"

“No—I mean yes,” she faltered.

“Freya?”

Freya shivered.

“You cold?” he asked, and when she nodded, Philip put his arm around her. He was glad she didn’t pull away. “So where did you get your bow?” he asked.

“It’s been in my family for decades. My father kept it hidden in the house, telling me never to play with it. But it was weird; one day I was drawn to it,” she said, finishing her story just as they arrived back to the horses.

“Can I see it your bow?” he asked her.

“Sure.”

Taking both the bows, he examined them. “Both the same length,” he observed, “but yours has the round stone on top.”

She reached for his bow. “Interesting. The lettering style is identical; although the letters are different.” She ran her fingers across the letters. “Your bow says ‘G-O-T-A-L,’ and mine says ‘L-O-T-A-G.’ Any idea what the letters mean?”

“It’s an ancient language, apparently.”

“Frustrating. I’ve spent years trying to figure out what Lotag means.”

“It certainly doesn’t help that Bly burned all of our books when he invaded,” Philip interjected. “It makes me so mad—a deliberate attempt to destroy our history and traditions. This planet used to be wonderful, apparently.”

As he spoke, he noticed her expression changing, her face lighting up in recognition.

“What is it? Did you remember something?”

“I know this is weird, but what did you say your father’s name was again?”

“I don’t think I told you his name, but his name was Gregor Limpton. Why do you ask?”

“I knew it!” Freya jumped up and down. “I knew I’d heard the name ‘Limpton’ before.”

She started pacing. “I didn’t know him directly, but I’ve heard of him. Your father came to The Valley ten years ago and spoke with the elder’s council. He asked whether they knew the location of the Independence Bows and requested their help in finding them. The elders didn’t have any information but promised they’d let him know if they heard anything. Your father left very determined and hopeful—at least that’s what I heard.”

“My father spent years traveling Xenlon searching for the bows. It was his life’s mission to find them and lead a war against Bly. My mother was heartbroken every time he’d leave on one of his trips. The rest of Battle Ridge called him a fool—they still do. But he was committed to the cause to say the least.”

Freya squealed, enveloping him in a hug, dropping his bow in the process. “Philip, I think we have two Independence Bows! Do you know what this means?”

Philip sniggered. “Hey there...you need to be careful with that thing,” he joked, but as he hugged her back, Philip stood silently weighing the gravity of her words. “Listen Freya. If these ARE Independence Bows, I’m not sure I want any part of this.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, backing up.

“What I mean is, I think I’m going to ride over to the nearest Regime outpost, give them the bow, and collect the reward.”

“Philip—come on!”

“Come on what? Even if these are two of the five bows, it’s a huge risk. I mean really, defeating Bly? It’s a risk I’m not willing to take, I don’t think.”

The moonlight illuminated her face perfectly; she looked like an angel.

“You said your father’s life’s mission was to find them. It sounds like he gave you that,” she pointed at his bow, “to carry out his mission. Let’s figure out what they are first and how they’re connected....”

Philip smiled. He liked her feistiness but still had reservations. “I don’t know, Freya.”

“Philip, you can’t always explain or rationalize everything. And you don’t always get a second chance. If you give your bow to the army, you’ll never get it back. And you’ll always wonder what could have been.”

Philip stared into her eyes and breathed deeply, fumbling for words. Her beauty made it hard to say no. “Fine—for now.”

“You won’t regret this,” she said, smiling.

“Let’s go. You want a ride on my horse?”

“Ha-ha! No, silly. I don’t need a ride.” Freya turned toward the woods, brought her hands to her lips, and let out an ear-piercing whistle. Within seconds a beautiful white elk emerged from the woods. Philip watched her, mesmerized as she regally mounted her steed.

“SO...” he said loudly, trying to capture her attention. “I noticed you could read—since you read the words on the bows.”

She gave Philip a mischievous grin. “Yes, I can read.”

“But how? Since education is outlawed?”

“Well,” she said coyly, “there are a few books still secretly passed down in my village. I was taught how to read after my family told the elders about what I could do with my bow. The elders wanted to give me every opportunity to eventually decipher the bow’s meaning and its use. So, to give me the best opportunity they thought I should know how to read.”

Sample Character Sheet

Name:

Age/Gender/Race:

How would you describe your appearance:

Hometown/Current City:

How did you end up in your current city:

Do you plan to stay there, why or why not:

If you could live anywhere, where would you go and why:

Is there anything else you'd like to say about where you live:

Marital Status:

Family (parents, siblings, children, etc.):

To which family member are you the closest, why:

If you could change anything about your family, what would it be (and why):

What is your favorite thing about your family, why:

Is there anything else you'd like to say about your family:

Education completed:

If you didn't graduate high school, why:

If you did graduate high school, why did you choose to go to college (or not to go):

If you went to college, how did you pick one:

If you did anything other than college, how did you decide to do that (and why):

What is your biggest regret about your entire educational experience:

What is your fondest memory about your entire educational experience:

Is there anything else you'd like to say about your educational experience:

Where do you currently work:

If unemployed, why (and what are you doing to find employment):

If employed, how did you find your job:

Why did you take this job, do you like it (why or why not):

What is your dream job, why:

How would you describe your work ethic:

Is there anything else you'd like to say about your work experience:

How would you describe your social life:

What are your thoughts on social-network sites:

How would your friends describe you:

How would you describe your friends:

Why do you think an active social life is important (or not important):

Is there anything else you'd like to say about your social life:

How would you describe your faith/religious affiliation:

How did you come to these beliefs:

Why do you think faith is important (or not important):

How do you exercise your beliefs:

How would you share your beliefs with a friend:

Is there anything else you'd like to say about your beliefs:

Is there anything else you'd like people to know about you:

Sample Email: Not Ready for Editing

Thank you for your patience and for trusting me to read your story. I know it's not easy to ask someone to comment on something you've worked so hard on, and it's a responsibility I don't take lightly.

I read through your sample chapter, and I like that you're not afraid to touch on some deep themes. I can see how those themes will provide a great backdrop in the story for forgiveness and hope.

From what I've read, I think it might be too early to contract an editor. There are some clarity/continuity issues (I was confused by a few parts), as well as some fiction-writing issues (point of view and lack of introduction) that I would encourage you to work on before submitting it. Two amazing resources that can help with those are *The Art and Craft of Writing Christian Fiction* by Jeff Gerke and *Plot and Structure* by James Scott Bell. In my opinion, those are the best resources for new writers as they're easy (and enjoyable) to read, and they will provide a solid foundation for building your story.

If you do want to pursue editing, I would suggest the fiction-coaching route. I would work with you to strengthen your writing and help prepare it for publication by working on things like:

- Manuscript development
- Strengthening your weaknesses
- Learning to self-edit
- Market research
- Brainstorming

Fiction coaching includes a first chapter critique plus critiques of subsequent chapters, correspondence to discuss the chapters, and help as needed to learn and understand fiction-writing techniques. It can also include a full developmental edit. A developmental edit looks at the big picture. It would tackle the big issues before moving on to the nit-picky details. Substantive edits not only point out areas for improvement, they also include notes, suggestions, and tips for improving the manuscript.

A substantive edit includes:

- Fiction-writing evaluation, including:
 - Characterization
 - Relatability
 - Believability
 - Goals/motivation/conflict
 - Backstory
 - Plot development
 - Hook
 - Transitional elements
 - Introduction/conclusion

- Subplots
- Setting
- Genre-specific notes
- General writing techniques
- Point of view
- Showing vs. telling
- Dialogue
- Including the five senses
- Assessment of basic writing skills
- Grammar
- Punctuation
- Formatting
- Pacing
- Voice
- Overall assessment of the story and writing strengths and weaknesses
- Fiction Fliers to explain various fiction-writing techniques (as needed)

For coaching services, my rate is \$50/hour. Coaching usually takes several months as we work through the manuscript together. Based on the estimated length of your manuscript and the sample chapters that I read, I would anticipate 100–150 hours.

Personally, I'd like to encourage you to read those books I recommended, then take what you learn from them and apply it to what you've already written. By doing that, you'll naturally eliminate many of the continuity issues and have a much cleaner manuscript to submit to an editor; the cleaner the manuscript, the faster (and less expensive) it will be to work with an editor. If we were to start working together now, I would end up reviewing most of the information from those books with you, but you'd be paying me \$50/hour to do it (versus spending \$25–40 for the books). I just want to make sure you're getting the best information you can in the most cost-effective and efficient way.

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me. I know it's not easy to ask someone to critique a manuscript (it's such a personal thing!), and I truly appreciate your trust.

Have a great weekend!