FREELANCE EDITING 101

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LESSON #5

Basic Editing Tips

Whether the manuscript is fiction or nonfiction, proofreaders/editors should look for specific items in a client's manuscript.

Proofreading

A straight proofread should focus on the following:

1. **Typos**
   a. Make sure the manuscript doesn't have *any* typos. The human mind tends to see what it expects to see in the context of a sentence, especially if the beginning and ending of a word are correct.
   b. Make sure every opening quotation mark has a closing one (and vice versa) and that every opening parenthesis has a closing one (and vice versa).
   c. Look for places where the client has two spaces instead of one or a space where it doesn't belong (such as between the last word in a sentence and the ending punctuation).

2. **Spelling**
   If you're proofreading online, run spell-check but don't rely on it. Check all spellings in *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* for books or *Webster's New World College Dictionary* for articles. (As mentioned previously, make sure you're using the most recent edition.)

3. **Usage**
   Pay careful attention to the part of speech and definition to make sure the client used the correct spelling for the meaning of the word in the context of the sentence.

4. **Punctuation**
   a. Make sure every sentence is properly punctuated. When in doubt, consult *The Chicago Manual of Style* for books (or *The Associated Press Stylebook* for articles).

b. For specific questions about Christian issues (such as capitalization of religious words/terms or abbreviations of books of the Bible), check *The Christian Writer's Manual of Style*.

c. ALL CAPS and **bold** should not be used for emphasis. If something must be emphasized, it should be typed in *italics*. (Most of the time, emphasis isn't needed. If used at all, it should be used sparingly.)

d. Use only one space, not two, between sentences.

5. Accuracy

a. If Scripture is quoted, make certain it's been copied *precisely*, including all punctuation and capitalization. (There are a few exceptions. We'll cover them in detail in the next lesson.)

b. Check all chapter and section titles to make sure the numbering sequence is correct.

6. Consistency

a. Make sure quotation marks are consistent throughout. Likely, you may find a combination of straight/smart quotes and curly quotes. Do a find/replace to change them all to curly quotes. And make sure any curly apostrophes at the beginning of words are curled in the right direction. Word processing programs, assuming you want an open quotation mark, will automatically curl the wrong direction. Also, look for sentences that end with a dash and a curly quotation mark (—"). Computers tend to curl those in the wrong direction too.

b. Whether a client uses hyphens for dashes [single hyphen for an en dash (–) or double hyphen for an em dash (—)] or the converted kind, make sure they're consistent throughout.

c. Whether the author capitalizes pronouns for God or not, make sure it's been done the same way throughout the manuscript.

d. Make sure the author has been consistent in the formatting of chapter titles, headings, subheadings, and Scripture quotations.

NOTE: You may want to prepare a style sheet as you go along, marking on it what the author has done, to see if something has been done differently later in the manuscript.

If you are interested in proofreading, consider the Proofreading 101 Lesson Pack or Group Course. (Proofreading 201 is due in 2022!)

Editing

Proofreading is looking for mistakes. Right or wrong. Black or white. Editing, on the other hand, is where you offer your professional opinions of how the manuscript could be improved. You may want to make it clear to your clients that they should certainly make all of the *corrections* you mark, but that they should carefully consider your *suggestions* to determine if they agree. You could also indicate that your recommendations for rewording don't need to be taken exactly, but that they can be springboards for them to come up with their own improvements. After all, these are *their* manuscripts, not yours, and you don't want to interfere with someone's "voice" or "style." (Keep in mind, however, that some new writers may not understand "voice" and may think that their "style" can include doing things that are simply not acceptable to today's readers

or commercial publishers. On the other hand, if the client is self-publishing, he can write in whatever "style" he wants!)

Here are some of the things an editor should look for in a client's manuscript:

1. **The beginning: How and where does the book start?**
   The first chapter has to grip readers, riveting them to the page and creating an intense desire to keep reading. It should also set the tone for the rest of the book and give readers a hint of what's to come.

   This is not an easy task, but it's essential. So look very carefully at how the manuscript starts and consider whether that's the *best* place to start. If you're not hooked right away, readers won't be either. Nor will an acquisitions editor.

2. **The middle: How does the book flow?**
   Does the manuscript have a clear and logical progression from one point or scene to the next? Once you're a few chapters into it, does it still hold your interest and attention? Is anything included that shouldn't be, that doesn't fit with the main theme of the book? Anything that should be included but isn't?

3. **The end: How does the book finish?**
   The ending is just as important as the beginning. When the reader has read the last line of your client's book, she should feel satisfied, glad she read this book, and eager to recommend it to her friends. If you don't feel that way, try to determine why and what can be done to make it work.

4. **Paragraph beginnings**
   If two consecutive paragraphs (or several paragraphs on a page) begin with the same word, recommend rewording to avoid repetition.

5. **Sentence beginnings**
   Watch for places where consecutive sentences (or several sentences within a paragraph) start with the same word. For example: "Terry watched the sunset. Terry thought it was beautiful. He sighed. He fell asleep." Instead suggest something like: "Terry watched the beautiful sunset. With a contented sigh, he fell asleep."

6. **Sentence lengths**
   Long, flowing sentences give a sense of meandering. Short, quick sentences provide punch and urgency. Make sure the sentence lengths fit the mood of the scene or section. Also, make sure the author has varied sentence lengths so they're not *all* either long or short.

7. **Repeated words and phrases**
   Watch for words that are repeated within proximity (besides "invisible" words like *the* and *said*). For example: "The wind blew. The wind felt gentle. The wind felt more like a breeze than a wind." Instead, suggest something like: "The wind blew. But it was a gentle wind. More of a breeze, actually."

Also, look for words or phrases that are overused throughout the manuscript. If characters are always sighing or walking or blinking or shrugging or nodding or drinking coffee, for example, suggest they do different (and more descriptive) things.

8. **Unnecessary words**

Eliminate any words that can be deleted without changing the meaning. For example:

- "She got out of *her* bed."
  Unless she's in someone else's bed, shorten to "She got out of bed."
- "He looked *at his image* in the mirror."
  Unless he sees something *else*, shorten to "He looked in the mirror."
- "She thought *to herself*."
  Since you can't think to anyone else, shorten to "She thought."
- "She nodded *her head*."
  What else would she nod?
- "*There are* four procedures that must be followed."
  "Four procedures must be followed."
- "*It was* Pastor Chuck Swindoll who said . . ."
  "Chuck Swindoll said . . ."

9. **Action delays**

Rather than say someone "began to" do something, show them *doing* it.

Instead of telling the possible ("He *could* sense that nobody believed him"), show the actual ("He *sensed* nobody believed him").

Instead of "He *decided* to go," just write "He went" . . . unless he decided to go and then didn't.

10. **Relative structures**

For example:
- "The child **who was** sick . . ."
  "The sick child . . ."
- "The movie, **which is** titled *Star Wars*, takes place . . ."
  "*Star Wars* takes place . . ."
- "The system **that is** most efficient . . ."
  "The most efficient system . . ."

11. **Multiple-word phrases where single words would do**

For example:

at this point in time *(now)*
have an expectation *(expect)*
in the near future *(soon)*
it is clear that *(clearly)*
make an arrangement *(arrange)*
made the decision *(decided)*
has a tendency *(tends)*

12. Flowery words

Some writers love to use big words when smaller ones would be more easily understood. A simple word, or a familiar one with impact, is often a better choice.

13. Clichés

The *only* place clichés are acceptable is in dialogue (or interior monologue written in the character's direct thoughts). In a narrative, clichés should be avoided like the plague. ☺

14. Look at each page's appearance

Does the author have any overly long paragraphs? Readers (and publishers) like to see "white space" on a page, not one big paragraph taking up the whole page.

15. Search for adverbs and adjectives

a. Unnecessary Modifiers

Many adverbs and adjectives can be eliminated without altering the meaning of the sentence. For example: *basically, definitely, exactly, highly, just, quite, really, simply, truly, utterly, very, well*. If the modifier doesn't make any significant difference in the sentence, delete it.

b. Redundant Modifiers

Delete modifiers that describe a noun that already has that connotation in the definition. For example:

whispered *softly*
shouted *loudly*
terrible tragedy
reconsider *again*
future prospects
past history
completely finished
true facts
unexpected surprise
reluctantly dragged

c. Multiple Modifiers

When you see more than two adjectives or adverbs together, advise the author to choose one or two of the most important modifiers and delete the rest. Example: "The cold, gray, sterile, hard concrete walls closed in on Jack, making him feel lost, hopeless, helpless, buried, lonely, alone, and abandoned." Too many adjectives will make the reader think the author couldn't decide on the right word so just threw in a bunch.

d. Synonymous Modifiers

Suggest the writer choose between two words that mean basically the same thing. For example, if the author has "She struggled with deep, intense feelings and emotions of anger and wrath," recommend that your client choose either *deep* OR *intense*, *feelings* OR *emotions*, and *anger* OR *wrath*.

e. **Overused Modifiers**

If you find the author using the same modifiers multiple times throughout the manuscript, suggest rewording to avoid repetition.

f. **Weak Verb/Adverb Combinations**

New writers tend to tack adverbs onto weak verbs to describe how an action is done. These modifiers are easy to spot because they usually end in *-ly*. Search the manuscript for words ending in *-ly*. Suggest the writer come up with solid, descriptive verbs to replace the weak verb/adverb combinations.

g. **Boring Modifiers**

Find places where adjectives and adverbs can be replaced with creative similes and metaphors. Instead of "The song was pretty," you could suggest something like "The hymn was a breath of fresh air to her spirit" (metaphor) or "The praise chorus echoed in her mind like waves crashing onto the shore of her soul" (simile). This technique should not be overdone. It must be used sparingly for maximum effect, just an occasional sprinkle here and there to spice up the writing. And watch out for mixed metaphors:

- The job of a good teacher is to find that spark of enlightenment and to water it well.
- Once you open a can of worms, they always come home to roost.
- Let's run it up the flagpole and see if it makes a splash.
- We've got the best of both sides of the coin.
- We've got to nip this in the bud right out of the gate.
- We don't want to lead them up the garden path and then pull it out from under them.
- Never kick a good horse in the mouth.

Format Edit

If your client is writing for a particular publisher (commercial or subsidy), you may request that the client send you a copy of the formatting guidelines to make sure they are followed properly.

If you're working with a client who intends to try for a commercial publisher or agent, certain basic formatting should be followed. Now, different resource books differ slightly in their recommendations. But the following is generally accepted standard formatting.

1. **Title Page**

For books, this should be a separate page with the title of the book, followed two lines down with the byline (how the author wants his or her name to be printed on the book cover), centered and starting about 1/3 down the page. The author's (real) name and contact information should be in the lower-left corner.

For an article or short story, the author's name and contact information should be in the upper-left corner, with details such as rights offered, word count, etc. in the upper-right corner. A few lines down should be the title of the article, followed two lines down with the byline. Three lines down should be the first line of the article's text.

2. **Running Header**

   At the top of every page except the title page, in a header, flush left, should be the author's last name, a slash, and the title of the book or article (key words if the title is long). In the upper-right corner should be the running page number. No page numbers should be anywhere else on the page.

3. **Page Format**

   Black text on white paper—no colors
   Wide margins, 1 inch
   All text double-spaced, on one side of the paper
   Indented paragraphs (half-inch tab)
   No extra space between paragraphs
   Font should be Times New Roman, 12 point
   Paragraphs should be left aligned—no full justification (an even right margin)

   Pages should not be bound, three-hole punched, stapled, wrapped in ribbon, etc. Just loose pages, possibly with a rubber band around them.

4. **Chapter Format**

   Each chapter should start on a new page (inserting a page break, not a bunch of blank lines). A few lines down from the top (about 1/3 of the page), type Chapter One (Two, Three, etc.) and chapter title (if applicable), centered. Two double-spaced lines down, start the text (indented and left aligned).

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LESSON #5 ASSIGNMENTS

For a Certificate of Completion, you must complete at least two assignments below (#1–5) and the Proofreading Test (#6).

<u>Assignment #1</u>
What single word could each of these phrases be replaced with? (See #11 above)

> due to the fact that
> in the event that
> in view of the fact that
> in spite of the fact that
> with regard to
> for the purpose of
> *AND MY PERSONAL FAVORITE:* pouring down rain outside

What other phrases can you think of that could be pared down to a single word?

<u>Assignment #2</u>
What words could be eliminated from these phrases without changing the meaning? (See #8 above.)

> whether or not
> each and every
> He paced back and forth
> twelve o'clock noon (or midnight)
> exactly the same
> 8:00 a.m. in the morning
> He nodded his head
> She shrugged her shoulders

What other wordy phrases can you think of?

<u>Assignment #3</u>
Redundant Adverbs: Review the list under #15b above (whispered softly, shouted loudly, etc.).
What other redundant modifiers can you think of?

<u>Assignment #4</u>
Adverb Phrases (#15f): What single action verbs can you think of that could replace the following adverb phrases:

> walk slowly
> walk quickly
> walk purposefully
> walk aimlessly

look closely
look briefly
look carefully
look nervously

say softly
say loudly
say tentatively
say strongly

Assignment #5

Mixed Metaphors (#15g): If you can think of some amusing mixed metaphors, share them with me.

Assignment #6

Proofreading Test: Take a look at the following paragraph and see if you can find the mistakes in it. Don't worry about content or flow or anything like that, just actual errors. (Use the appropriate reference manuals for this to be included in a book.) I found thirty-three mistakes. How many can you spot? (And don't cheat by using spell-check!)

For free-lance writers, its clear that the world is changing. In the 1980's few people had even **seen** a computer; much less owned one. Now they are on most childrens' christmas wish-lists. In the 90's satelite T.V. was a new and wonderous thing – no less than 16 chanels! Now the world-wide web has changed our lives to such an extent that the question is no longer, 'To internet or not to Intenet,' [to misquote Shakespear], but 'How do you connect to the Web'? Can you imagine life 100 years ago, when there was neither television or radio. Most of us can't bare to think about it.