



FREELANCE EDITING 101

Instructor: Erin K. Brown

LESSON #7

Tips for Editing Fiction

Fiction writing is extremely complex—far more so than most people realize until they try their hand at it. Good fiction requires the implementation of several techniques that readers, in general, don't even know exist. But when those techniques are not utilized properly, readers are left with a feeling of dissatisfaction, even though they may not know why.

Some of the techniques used to write novels and short fiction stories should also be used for fictional anecdotes in a nonfiction manuscript. So even if you don't anticipate ever editing a novel, you may want to study these techniques anyway.

Many books have been written on the various aspects of fiction writing. If you haven't studied fiction specifically and at least tried writing it yourself, I would encourage you not to attempt to edit novels or even short fiction stories. (Years ago, I paid for an edit of the first three chapters of my first novel, and when I saw the editor's comments, it was obvious that she didn't know as much as I did at the time about fiction. I later learned that this editor had never written anything but nonfiction. I have to admit, I felt pretty ripped off. But then again, it was my fault. I shouldn't have hired an editor who didn't know fiction.)

Resources

Here are a few of the books I (Kathy) recommend:

- *Story* by Robert McKee
- *Plot and Structure* by James Scott Bell
- *Creating Characters* by Dwight V. Swain
- *Getting into Character* by Brandilyn Collins
- *Techniques of the Selling Writer* by Dwight V. Swain
- *Creating Fiction*, edited by Julie Checkoway
- *The Art & Craft of Novel Writing* by Oakley Hall
- *Practical Tips for Writing Popular Fiction* by Robyn Carr
- *Writing the Blockbuster Novel* by Albert Zuckerman
- *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* by Renni Browne and Dave King

Many writers have great tips on their websites. Here are a few I recommend that specifically address fiction:

- Upcoming Trends in Fiction by Tamela Hancock Murray (<https://stevelaube.com/what-are-the-upcoming-trends-in-fiction/>)
- Christian Publishing Show (<https://www.christianpublishingshow.com/?s=fiction>)
- American Christian Fiction Writers (www.americanchristianfictionwriters.com)
- James Scott Bell, author (<http://www.jamesscottbell.com>)
- Resources by Books & Such Literary Agency (<https://www.booksandsuch.com/resources/>)
- Randy Ingermanson on writing (<https://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/>)
- Writer's Digest Resources (<https://www.writersdigest.com/write-better-fiction>)
- Novel Marketing Podcast (<https://www.authormedia.com/subscribe-to-podcast/>)
- Christian Writers Institute, writing courses (<https://learn.christianwritersinstitute.com>)

In addition to books on fiction in general, there are many good books about specific types of fiction writing. My (Kathy's) recommendations:

- *Writing for Children & Teenagers* by Lee Wyndham
- *Writing Mysteries*, edited by Sue Grafton
- *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy* by Orson Scott Card
- *The Art & Craft of Playwriting* by Jeffrey Hatcher
- *Christian Drama Publishing* by Kathy Ide
- *Writing 21st Century Fiction: High Impact Techniques for Exceptional Storytelling* by Donald Maass

Again, if you've never tried writing mysteries, you may not want to take on a project editing someone else's mystery novel. The same applies to science fiction, fantasy, play scripts, screenplays, and even children's books. We learn best by doing.

However, if this is an area that interests you, at least do some research on the subject before you try to tell someone else how to do it better.

The best place to start is with *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* by Renni Browne and Dave King. It's the one book I've heard most often recommended by fiction publishers.

Following is an overview of some of the techniques unique to fiction that should be analyzed by an editor.

Point of View

“Point of View” (POV) is the perspective (or perspectives) from which the story unfolds. The reader sees, hears, smells, tastes, and experiences everything through the point-of-view character's thoughts and observations.

Since the POV character would not be able to tell what anyone else is thinking or feeling, the narrative cannot include anything the POV character couldn't know.

To move to another character’s point of view, the author needs to make a section break (usually designated by a centered pound sign, or three to five asterisks, in an otherwise blank line). The beginning of each section should identify immediately whose point of view the reader will be in throughout that section.

For each chapter/section, make sure the author has clearly identified the point-of-view character for that scene, and make sure that everything the author has written in the narrative is something that could be observed, thought, or felt by the POV character.

Show, Don’t Tell

Look for places where the author seems to be *telling* readers things he or she wants them to know instead of *showing*. Pay particular attention to emotions.

For example, if the author wrote, “Sally was depressed,” that’s *telling*. If the author described Sally eating an entire carton of chocolate ice cream in one sitting, that’s *showing* the emotions through actions. *Showing* emotions is far more powerful.

Look for places where the author both told and showed the same thing. If a character is *shown* doing something, the reader doesn’t also have to be *told*. For example, the narrative paragraph might include “Kate told her friend good-bye” and then the dialogue has:

“See you tomorrow,” Kate called.

One or the other, but not both.

Watch for adjectives and adverbs that tell how something is said or done. For example, “She said with disgust” *tells* the reader how a line is spoken. Better to *show* the emotion with actions. She could curl her lip, place her hands on her hips, or look down her nose at the person she’s speaking to. Rather than, “She said shyly,” encourage the author to *show* the character’s shyness with actions. Have the character dig her toe in the dirt, lower her eyes, or finger the hem of her dress.

Here’s a great quote to illustrate “show, don’t tell”:

“Don’t tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.”

—Anton Chekhov

Active Voice vs. Passive Voice

Verb phrases that include the words *is, was, are, were, be, been, would, could, has, had, have*, etc. are usually passive. They often describe a state of being rather than something actively happening. They indicate that a subject *exists*, or that something happens to the subject. Active verbs describe something a subject *does*. For example:

Passive: Two cups of coffee *were* on the table.

Active: Joe *picked up* two cups of coffee from the table.

Encourage your client to use strong, precise verbs rather than weak, vague ones. “They went” is preferable to “They were going.” Better yet, describe *how* they went. “They jogged,” “They raced,” “They ambled,” for example. The more description you can fit into a single action verb, the better.

Instead of writing about a character’s physical attributes in passive form (“She had dark brown hair and hazel eyes”), the character should be actively doing something through which the attributes can be mentioned (“She twirled her long brown hair around her forefinger and batted the thick lashes above her twinkling hazel eyes”). The same principle should be applied to locations. Instead of simply describing the furnishings in a room (“It was a small room with a couch in the corner next to the fireplace”), the characters should interact in the room, with the furnishings and decor described as they come into play. (For example, “Sheila strode across the small room, her spiked heels leaving indentations in the deep-pile beige carpet. When she reached the brick fireplace, she paused, then collapsed onto the sofa.”)

Dialogue

Dialogue in fiction is a *simulation* of speech but should not be written the way people talk. In real life, people leave out words, compress phrases into single words, repeat favorite phrases, and use clichés and incomplete sentences. They pause to think about what they’re saying and consequently mumble things like “um” and “er” as well as insert meaningless words like “well,” “like,” “so,” and “you know.”

Real speech is impromptu, and people often talk when they have nothing important to say. But fictional characters must have a reason for talking. Every line of dialogue should fulfill one or more of the following purposes:

1. advance the plot,
2. reveal character,
3. disclose motivation, or
4. establish tone or mood.

If a line of dialogue doesn’t fill at least one of these criteria, suggest your client delete it or change it.

Common Dialogue Mistakes

- **Dialect.** (“Dat feller sed ah shoulda jes’ kep’ runnin’ ta kitch ep wit’ da rist o’ ’em.”) If it’s important to the author to show a character’s accent, he or she should do so in narrative (“... she said with a delightful Georgia drawl,” for example) or by word choice and subtle speech patterns (“Why, you sweet little peach blossom, I do declare you get prettier every time I set my eyes on you” or “That there bonnie lass is carrying a wee one in her belly. I’d stake my pot of gold on it.”).

A tiny bit of dialect is acceptable (occasionally dropping a *g* at the end of a word, for example). But if you stumble over a line of dialogue that’s written with dialect, or it takes more time to read than it would without the dialect, suggest to

your client that he or she finds a different way to describe how the character speaks.

- **Stilted speech.** Words and phrases need to be consistent with the character’s age, background, occupation, etc. If they’re not, flag inconsistencies for the author.
- **Overusing people’s names in conversation.** (“Now, George, that’s not what I said.”) Most people don’t use each other’s names in conversation, especially if there are only two people in the room. But many new writers include the names to identify which character the dialogue is addressed to. Suggest the author indicate this in the narrative instead—something like “Tricia glared at Stephen.”
- **Incorrect narrative/dialogue paragraphing.** A character’s actions should be in the same paragraph as his speech. Start a new paragraph to designate a change in the speaker.
- **Author exposition.** Dialogue should never be used for the sole purpose of giving readers background information. A character should not tell others something they already know. (“As you recall, Father died last year.”) Characters should not talk about things they wouldn’t normally discuss. (“As long as no one digs up the box I buried, the things I wrote about in my diary will remain secret.”) Dialogue should not include details a character wouldn’t point out. (“After my boyfriend, Michael Lapinski, and I made out for twenty-five minutes in the backyard under the apple tree yesterday after school, he gave me a sixteen-inch-long gold chain with a tiny red heart on it.”) A character shouldn’t say things that would be obvious to others. (If someone barges into a room after being beaten with a baseball bat, don’t have him say, “I’m bleeding from my forehead.” Instead, have him stumble in and ask for a bandage, or let another character react to the sight of him.) If you find such things, mark them for the author to fix.
- **Long, uninterrupted speeches.** One character should not talk for a long time. A monologue should be interspersed with narrative, interruptions, other characters speaking, the POV character’s thoughts, etc.
- **All characters sounding alike.** Each should have his or her own “voice,” including speech patterns, word choice, etc.
- **“Talking heads.”** To avoid sections with line after line of characters talking to one another, details of setting, description, and action should be woven in.
- **Small talk.** Suggest the author cut out throwaway lines such as “Hello,” “How are you?” “I’m fine, how are you?” “Good, thanks, how’s the wife?” Meaningless chitchat destroys the momentum of the story. Instead of nondescript greetings such as “hi,” have a character say something that increases the tension, such as, “Thank God you’re home. We have to talk.”

Dialogue Tags

Dialogue tags identify who's speaking. There are two basic types.

1. Speaker attribution. The word *said* or a form of *said* (*asked*, *replied*, etc.) that identifies the speaker of a line of dialogue. (Example: "This is how attribution should be written," Joan told the class.) A comma is used to connect the attributive tag to the dialogue.

2. Narrative beats. Showing action in the same paragraph as the dialogue, where that action is performed by the person speaking. (Mary grinned. "I can't wait to tell John the latest gossip.") A period is used to connect a narrative beat to dialogue.

Watch for places where the author uses both a narrative beat and speaker attribution in the same paragraph. (Example: Sam clenched his fists. "You can't fire me," he said.) This is redundant. Suggest the author choose one or the other. (Narrative beats are usually preferred over speaker attribution, except if they're overdone.)

Whether attribution or narrative is used, the speaker should be identified early on in the paragraph, so readers don't have to wonder who's talking until they reach the end of the paragraph.

Scenes and Summary

Novels need a good balance of "scene" and "summary."

Scenes are told in "real time." Readers see events as they happen, rather than after the fact. Scenes have specific locations that are described in enough detail so the reader can picture them. They must have some physical action. And they usually include dialogue.

Description, action, dialogue, and narrative must be woven together. Too much description in one long chunk can kill suspense and interest. Too much dialogue without narrative and the reader will get distracted, unable to picture the scene. Too much narrative and the characters' conversations will seem to go on forever.

Summary is used to cover spans of time and to provide an overall description of events that are less important than events described in "scenes." Some plot developments are not important enough to justify scenes. If an event involves only minor characters, or repetitious actions, or small talk, it should be summarized. (For example, if a character goes to church, the author doesn't need to include every word of the pastor's sermon. Better to choose a few key lines and summarize the rest.)

Make sure your client has a balance of scene and summary and that each is used appropriately. If something is summarized that you believe should be in a scene, or vice versa, say so.

Flashbacks

Describing memories of past events can be effective if it's done right. But many new writers don't understand how to write flashbacks properly. The trick is to take the reader so smoothly and seamlessly from current action to memories of the past and back again that he or she barely

even realizes what's happened. If you're reading a client's manuscript and are jarred out of the story by the flashback, consider these possible reasons:

1. Is the flashback scene vital to the story? If the same information can be presented in dialogue or woven in little bits and pieces throughout the narrative, that's usually a better choice.
2. Is the flashback scene foreshadowed ahead of time? During previous pages, clues should be woven into the dialogue and/or narrative that allude to something in the character's past. That makes readers curious about the details, and they'll be eager to discover the backstory through an appropriately placed flashback.
3. The flashback scene must be told from the point of view of the character who is remembering the event. Nothing in the flashback should be something the character wouldn't know or be able to observe.
4. The POV character must be in a position where his mind would naturally wander. If he's in the middle of a car chase, a fistfight, or a heated argument, he probably won't stand around for several moments thinking about something in his past.
5. Something specific needs to trigger that particular memory. It shouldn't come out of the blue.
6. Flashbacks need beginning and ending transitions. Simple phrases let the reader know the story is going back in time. Something like "He remembered that fight as if it happened yesterday." Or, "Joe stared at the wrought-iron mailbox at the end of Tricia's driveway. The last time he'd seen a mailbox like that was . . ."
7. The flashback scene should start with "had" phrases, then move into simple past tense. Make sure there are sufficient details to tell the reader how far back in the past it occurred. Example:

Steve had been a normal, healthy teenager back then. He'd been working his grandfather's farm since he was twelve. But that morning, as he stood in the barn with a pitchfork in his hand, he realized he'd had enough. He threw the pitchfork into the hay, stormed out, and never looked back.

8. There must be conflict within a flashback scene. The tension in the flashback should increase the building tension in the current scene.
9. At the end of the flashback, another transition is required. It should be as smooth and subtle as the opening transition, gently bringing the reader back to the time and place and actions of the current scene. Key words should be used that remind the reader what was happening before the flashback started. For example: "If he'd known then what he knew now, he wouldn't be sitting here in this musty old attic, staring at faded pictures." Alternately, a sudden interruption of the character's thoughts can be used. For example:

[Following a few paragraphs of Bill’s memories of Melinda . . .]

As Melinda lay dying in his arms, she whispered the words he had been longing to hear, the ones that would change his life forever—

The sound of a slamming door jarred Bill from his reverie.

Flashbacks can be an effective fiction tool when used properly. When they’re not written well, they can stall the pace, interrupt the flow, and even bore the reader. So analyze every flashback in your client’s manuscript to make sure it is truly needed and that it is written in such a way that it will enhance, not detract from, the story.

Character Development

Main characters should change through the course of the story. Their basic core personalities should not alter, but the things that happen should affect them in dramatic ways. For example, a narcissistic person may be forced by circumstances to be more empathetic to others. A shy person could come out of her shell a bit (though she would not become super-gregarious). A man with questionable morals might meet a woman who inspires him to be a better person. An atheist could observe things that cause him to be more open to believing in God. If a character accepts Christ, he should retain his personality yet be changed in some way—perhaps lose the desire to engage in a sin that has always beset him.

If the main characters don’t experience some significant changes from the beginning of the story to the end, suggest the author give serious consideration to character development.

Story Development

All fiction, whether a novel or short story, should have a beginning, a middle, and an end.

The beginning sets up the main conflicts, the main characters, and the initial setting. It also reveals what the main characters’ goals are. These should be strong goals that the characters will do almost anything to achieve. But one character’s goals should conflict with at least one other character’s goals. If one character achieves his or her goal, at least one other character will fail. Or a character may have two or more mutually exclusive goals. If he attains one, he loses another. This creates conflict.

Throughout the middle (the bulk of the story), the main characters strive to reach their goals and encounter obstacles that seem to make success impossible. The middle of the story describes the characters’ responses to those obstacles. Does he try different ways? Get depressed and give up (temporarily)? Go around them? Try to blast through them? Pray about them? Whatever is the worst possible thing that could happen to that character is exactly what should happen. Whatever the character would never do in a million years, he or she should be forced by circumstances to do just that.

The ending doesn’t have to be “happily ever after.” But it needs to be satisfying to the reader. Did the main character finally achieve his goal? How did he change in the process? If the main character did reach his goal, is he glad now that he did? Or was the price of success too high? Or is what he thought he wanted not as fulfilling as he imagined? If the main character did not reach

her goal, how does she feel about the failure? Is she glad now that she didn't, realizing that she's better off? Is she resolved about it, knowing that she's a better person for having endured those hardships?

The ending should not be forced or too sudden or overly coincidental/miraculous. If a Christian character has been struggling in her marriage to an unbeliever, her husband can become a Christian in the end. But make sure the gradual process is shown, that the guy doesn't just suddenly see the light. If a character is having financial difficulties, don't just have a million dollars appear in the mail from an unknown source. If "Poof! Everything just somehow worked out!" would describe the ending, it needs to be revised.

If your client's manuscript doesn't have a powerful beginning, a middle that continually moves the story along, and an ending that will be satisfying to readers, suggest a rewrite.

Realistic, Not Real

The saying that "truth is stranger than fiction" is accurate. Real life often doesn't make sense. But fiction must be believable, plausible. Just because something really happened doesn't mean it would make good fiction.

Fiction readers employ a "willing suspension of disbelief"—meaning they know what they're reading isn't true, but they choose to believe it for the time it takes to read the story. Much like going to a movie. If the story goes beyond the realm of realism, the reader will have a harder time choosing to believe it.

If your client's story doesn't ring true to you, mention that and suggest a rewrite. And don't accept "But this really happened to me (or to a friend of mine)." It doesn't matter whether it happened, only that it sounds feasible.

Conclusion

These tips are very brief explanations of complex techniques that take years to master. For more details on fiction-writing techniques, I really encourage you to take the PEN Institute's fiction editing courses. And/or study books on writing fiction, or take a local or online course in creative writing. You might just get hooked by the fiction-writing bug yourself!

NOTE: For a more in-depth study on editing fiction, the following courses are available at the PEN Institute:

- [Copyediting Fiction 101](#)
- Advanced Fiction Editing 301 (coming in 2022)
- [Substantive Editing 101, 201, 301, 401](#)
- [Editing YA Fiction 101](#)
- [Editing Romance Novels 201](#)

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LESSON #7 ASSIGNMENTS

Complete three of these assignments to qualify for the Certificate of Completion.

Assignment #1: Point of View

Your client has a scene in Linda's point of view. She then has the following two lines. See if you can spot the POV problems. If you do find them, what would you tell the author?

Linda squirmed under her friend's insistent gaze, her cheeks turning bright red.
"Promise me," Brenda said, looking deep into Linda's beautiful hazel eyes.

Assignment #2: "Show, Don't Tell"

Your client tends to *tell* emotions. Rather than just *tell* the author about "show, don't tell," you want to *show* by example. What ways can you think of to show one or more of the following emotions:

joy, sadness, fear, excitement, rage, frustration, boredom, nervousness
or pick one of your own.

Try to avoid the mundane (like smiling and frowning) as well as obvious clichés, such as tears streaming down a character's cheeks or someone jumping up and down. Be creative.

Assignment #3: Active Voice vs. Passive Voice

Your client has a scene in which a character enters a room and sees things and people there. The author has merely described who and what *exists* in the room. Show your client how to rewrite by describing specific things happening and including the setting details in the action.

Share with classmates your examples of both "passive" paragraph(s) and "active" one(s). For example, in one paragraph you might tell about a woman entering an emergency room, describing what the room looks like. The active paragraph would show the room through what's happening in it and how the point-of-view character thinks and feels.

Assignment #4: Realistic Dialogue

Grab a spiral notebook, miniature tape recorder, or your laptop, and go to a restaurant, library, or some other public place. Unobtrusively listen to conversations around you. Write or record, as precisely as you can, exactly what people say, including small talk (Hi, how are you, what's going on with you, etc.), every throwaway word (well, um, like, etc.), and every incomplete sentence.

Afterward, go through what you wrote and decide what words that were spoken could be eliminated, which sentences could be reworded for clarity, etc.

Also notice how often (or rarely) one person uses another person's name in conversation.

Pay attention to speech patterns and unique word choices that reveal something about the speaker's character and personality.

Assignment #5: Flashbacks

Your client has a scene in which a man walks up creaky steps to the attic. Once there, he opens a trunk that belonged to his deceased wife. It's the first time he's been up here since her death, but thoughts of that trunk have been badgering him. He sits on the dusty floor and opens the lid.

Describe what he sees. Then show him recalling a memory that's triggered by one or more of the objects. (You can use a different setup if you prefer.)

Write a section that starts with something currently happening in the attic, then transitions into a flashback, then transitions back to the current scene.

Assignment #6: Character Development

Think about a book you've read or a movie you've watched in which the main character changed from the beginning to the end. Describe what the character was like at the beginning and what he or she was like at the end. What happened in between that caused the change?

Here's an example: *Gone with the Wind*.

Scarlett O'Hara is a flighty, selfish Southern belle whose biggest problem is that the man she loves, Ashley Wilkes, seems to be the only single man in her world who doesn't fawn all over her. When asked about a dance the next day, she says, "Fiddledy dee. I can't think about tomorrow right now."

The Civil War takes away almost everything important to Scarlett—including things she didn't realize were important to her. She is thrust into situations that attack and destroy her delicate sensitivities.

At the end, Scarlett cares deeply about the needs of others. She is self-sufficient; she doesn't need a man to survive. Having been through so many tragedies, she is now confident in herself and her abilities. The last line reveals the change in her character: "Tomorrow *is* another day!"

Assignment #7: Story Development

Think about a book you've read or a movie you've watched. What happened in the beginning? What was the main character's main goal? What happened during the story to prevent the main character from reaching his or her goal? How did the character handle the obstacles? How did the story end? Did the main character achieve his or her goal? Was he or she happy with the way things ended? Was the ending satisfying to you?

Here's a story development example from *Gone with the Wind*.

Beginning: Scarlett's main (only?) goal is to win the heart and hand of Ashley Wilkes. Although Ashley has some feelings of passion for her, he doesn't wish to pursue a relationship with her. Instead, he goes for Melanie, who fits his personality and needs better. Melanie loves Ashley with a pure heart. So if Scarlett were to achieve her goal, Melanie would lose. And Ashley would probably be miserable.

Middle: Even after Ashley marries Melanie, Scarlett continues to pursue her goal of having him. Her obsession with him blinds her to the only man who truly loves her: Rhett Butler. Eventually, her obsession costs her this relationship as well. Only then does she realize what she's lost.

End: Scarlett fights for Tara, determined to overcome any obstacles to keep it. Although many people who see *Gone with the Wind* probably root for Scarlett and Rhett to get together, this doesn't happen. However, it is more satisfying to see Scarlett become self-sufficient than it would have been to have these two self-centered people get together simply because they deserve each other.

You don't have to do both character development and story development for the same movie or book; you can choose two different ones if you wish.