



## COPYEDITING FICTION 101

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### LESSON #2

#### First Things First!

PRAY. We've got another lesson packed full of information. But there's no need to stress! The lie of anxiety is that it has to happen right now. Check yourself at this moment. Are you feeling anxiety of any kind? Let's ask the Lord what it is you believe needs to be happening right now that isn't. Is it your laundry? The dinner dishes? Managing your finances? Taking your car in for an oil change? Fixing your marriage? Sleep? Reconciling with your child? Homeschooling? What is it?

Okay, Lord, you see this thing that "needs" to be done right now. As an act of my will, I place my ideas for what needs to be done and the timing in which it needs to be done into your hands. You love me. Your plan is better than mine. Your timing is perfect. There is joy in waiting. What do you want me to do right now? What shall we accomplish together, Lord? You through me. I take your hand; I take your lead. Let's dance.

Now, sit in his presence and listen. That is the only needful thing. And if he tells you it's time to proceed, enjoy soaking up this information while wrapped in the comfort of his love. Remember, the "work" is his, the "rest" is yours.

#### Style Sheets

A style sheet is an electronic document that you use to keep track of editing decisions made by the author and yourself. This is certainly useful to you as you go through a MS and make changes because it ensures consistent editing throughout. But it is also helpful to the next editor who works on the MS, which will likely be the proofreader.

Style sheets can get pretty elaborate, especially for content editing. But since this class is focused on copyediting, our style sheet is going to be a little simpler. You can format it however you like, but certain sections need to be included.

### **Identification**

The first thing you need is a title identifying the document as the “Style Sheet.” Below that, list the title of the MS and the name of the author. You may also want to list yourself as the copyeditor.

### **Source Materials**

This is where you list the guidebooks you’ve used to conform the MS to standardized rules. My standard “Source Materials” section looks like this:

*The Chicago Manual of Style*, 17<sup>th</sup> ed.

*The Christian Writer’s Manual of Style*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed.

*Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed.

### **Style Notes**

In this section, list the Bible version used if there are Scriptures included in the MS, and specify intentional departures from *CMOS* or *CWMS* if the author or publisher prefers it that way. If there are certain things you particularly look out for that you want to bring to the author’s attention, put them here. For instance, if you remove the word *that* anytime you can do so without changing the meaning of the sentence, you might want to mention it here. This is a tool for communication, so there are no hard and fast rules. Use it to the extent that you need it to communicate well and ensure a consistent edit later in the process.

### **Formatting Notes**

List here how the MS treats headers, chapter titles, and headings, different kinds of breaks, and epigraphs. These are things you are looking for as the copyeditor, and it’s handy to have them all in one place to reference.

### **Word List**

This is the section I reference most often. In the English language, there are often words that can be correctly spelled in more than one way: *toward* or *towards* for example. And especially in fiction, there can be made-up words, foreign words, and regional words that you need to keep track of. If you have a whole lot of different types of words, you can break this section into different categories. But I’ve rarely had to do that. Many times, the list is fairly manageable—it depends on the genre and length of the MS. Keep it in alphabetical order so you can find the words you’re looking for.

### **Other Considerations**

The preceding sections are the main sections I use when I copyedit. You can create more if there are other things you need to keep track of such as a character list (primary and minor characters, names, nicknames, descriptions, date of birth, family details, education/training, likes and dislikes, quirks, diction, preferences and favorite things), geographical places, timeline of events, clothing details, or native animals.

Use the style sheet in any way that will help you keep track of details and ensure consistency throughout.

If you are receiving the MS from a publisher, ask them if they have a house style sheet of guidelines with which they want you to comply. If the MS has already been professionally edited

at some level, ask the author (or the publisher if you're working with one) if the previous editor supplied them with a style sheet. It's important that the editing stay consistent from one editor to another.

If no current style sheet exists, create one as one of the first things you do before beginning the edit. Keep it open during the process, and update it as often as you need to.

## Instructional Flyers

When I took my first editing fiction class taught by The Christian PEN's own Jeanne Marie Leach, she encouraged us to create instructional flyers to provide to our clients. I had a lot of fun designing my flyers and putting the information from the course into my own words with my own flavor and branding them with my business info.

The purpose of these instructional flyers is to save you time (and ultimately money) because you can refer to them in your comments on the MS and then attach them with your final edit. It prevents you from having to explain the same concept over and over again for client after client. It may seem daunting to create a whole collection of flyers explaining each editing technique, but I found that if I took a little bit of time to create each flyer as it became relevant, I filled my collection before I knew it and began providing these flyers to clients right and left.

I strongly recommend you create instructional flyers out of the topics we cover in this course. Name them according to the concept you're covering, and save them together in a folder on your computer that's easy to access.

## Editing for Clarity, Consistency, and Pacing

There are only a few big-picture ideas you're going to keep in mind and address when you're doing a copyedit. As I mentioned in the last lesson, you're mainly going to enter the forest and look at the trees. To continue with this metaphor, you want to make sure the individual trees are clearly perceived, the same species of trees exhibit the same traits, and your journey through the forest continues along at the appropriate speeds. *Why are we talking about botany, Rachel?* Eh, because I find it entertaining! But really, what we are talking about is clarity, consistency, and pacing.

Honestly, a lot of this is going to come naturally to you. When you're reading along and you think, *Wait, what exactly does that mean?* or *Who was it that turned around?* or *How near the window is she when the bird splats into it?* then you need to edit for clarity. If you can ascertain what the text should say so readers aren't confused, go ahead and just make the change (with track changes turned on, of course). If after reading the excerpt multiple times, you are still confused, query the author. This simply means, leave a comment attached to that part of the text explaining why this is confusing and what the author needs to do to clarify it. If you have an open dialogue going with the author, just send them an email or text and ask for the information so you can go ahead and fix it for them. How you will address it will depend on the kind of arrangement you have with your client.

Consistency is vitally important to a quality novel. If you've never written a book yourself, you may wonder how an author can have Jane wearing an emerald-green dress in one paragraph and two paragraphs later she suddenly appears in sapphire-blue. Or you may muse about how Henry and Kate are arguing in the bedroom and suddenly Kate wields a skillet at Henry's head. When an author is revising and rewriting draft after draft of a considerably sized MS, it's easy to lose track of the details. It's your job to catch them.

And I'll tell you something else that easily throws off consistency . . . changing a character's name. I don't know if any of you enjoy a TV show called *The Office*,<sup>1</sup> but in the episode "The Client," the staff discovers a screenplay written by their boss, and they decide to sit down and read it together. Partway through, they come across the misspelled name of one of the staff members and realize that their boss had based the incompetent sidekick character off of his main assistant. He apparently changed the name, but Find & Replace missed this single misspelling. Unfortunately, he hadn't hired you to edit his screenplay, because while copyediting for consistency, you most certainly would have caught this!

Finally, as you move through a document, pacing is really important. You're not going to worry about cutting scenes because a section is boring—that should have been taken care of in the substantive edit. But you will watch for pacing within scenes. Action scenes or high-tension scenes should have short, simple sentences, and paragraphs that aren't too long. Long paragraphs slow down the pacing. So once a tense scene is over and readers need a bit of an emotional break, use more complex sentences and longer paragraphs.

Pacing can also be affected by dialogue tags and beats. The faster you need the reader to move, the fewer tags and beats you will use. But more on dialogue in Lesson 4.

## Points of View

While you are editing, stay aware of whose point of view (POV) you are in. There may be only one POV throughout the whole story, or the author may switch back and forth between the POV characters. Your job is to make sure the descriptions, the interactions, and the identification of thoughts and feelings all stay within the information available to the POV character. Let me tell you what I mean.

### *Omniscient POV*

In omniscient POV, readers experience the story through the eyes of someone outside of the story. They know what everyone is thinking, and they know every event happening at every relevant location. This puts readers at quite a distance from the characters. It's as if readers are hovering over the action and watching it take place far below. Although the story may "belong" to one of the characters, it is being told to the readers by a narrator. The narrator is your POV character and will have a distinct voice that is separate from the voices of the other characters. In other words, the words in the narrative (everything outside of dialogue) should be those the narrator would choose, and they should be arranged in a way the narrator would say them.

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1. *The Office* is not a Christian show, and I'm not endorsing it as nourishing soul food. I'm simply using the example of this episode because it was especially entertaining for me as an editor to be reminded of how important our jobs are.

Dialogue, however, should be unique to the characters' voices. If all the characters sound just like the narrator when they speak, your author has a problem. Fixing this problem would go beyond a copyeditor's commission, but you certainly need to query the author about it so they can consider if they have the option to move to a substantive edit. More ideally, you'll notice if there's a word or two here or there that needs to be changed to be more consistent with the POV voice.

The advantages to omniscient point of view are that the narrator can address the reader directly and the reader can be privy to information the characters may not know. The greatest disadvantage is that readers won't experience the story as if they are themselves within the story. They won't get lost in the life of a character as if they were the ones living the adventure. Instead, they will be constantly reminded they are being told a story. Sometimes this is the effect the author wants to have. If so, it's your job to make sure the author has done it well.

### *Third-Person POV*

In third-person POV, readers accompany only one character at a time. This POV puts the readers right in the middle of the action, and if the point of view is deep enough, readers feel like they have themselves become the character. It's called third-person POV because you use third-person pronouns to refer to the character whose POV you are in—*he, she, him, her, his, hers*. A book written in third person can take the reader into a different character's POV when the scene changes or a new chapter begins. But changing the POV character within the middle of a scene often results in head-hopping. This is just like it sounds. Readers feel like they are hopping in and out of characters' heads, seeing the scene from different angles. Correct this issue in your copyedit.

### *Mixing Omniscient and Third Person*

Mixing omniscient and third-person POV is tricky. The only way it works is if omniscient is used to introduce a scene, similar to a camera angle in a movie. Readers start at some distance from the characters and then move in until they are experiencing the scene as one of the characters. If omniscient POV is thrown into the middle of a scene that has already been established as third-person POV, it disturbs the flow of the story and the depth of connection readers are forming with the character.

### *First-Person POV*

If the book is written in first-person POV (referring to the POV character with *I, me, and my*), the author is generally stuck with that one character throughout the novel. Having more than one first-person POV character has been successfully done, but it's rare. If your author is trying to do it, make sure it works. Often the POV changes need to be identified by a label for each new POV character. The danger is that it can confuse readers, making them wonder which character's POV they are in now.

One thing to watch for in this point of view is inappropriate narrative. Authors often launch into backstory or lengthy descriptions. You wouldn't walk into your living room and conjure up images of the history of your couch, so an author shouldn't do a similar thing in their writing. Narrative needs to be authentic, and that means including relevant historical details in a way that naturally comes to the character's mind. If the author adds explanations simply for the benefit of

the readers, it will remind readers they are reading a story instead of experiencing the events themselves. This disrupts the transparency of the words and interrupts the flow of the novel.

### *Second-Person POV*

In second-person POV, “you” (the reader) are the POV character. You say things. You experience things. You take on the character and life of the person you are reading about. This doesn’t happen with seamless savvy fiction-writing skills but as an overt assignment with the second-person pronouns *you* and *your*.

I haven’t seen many books like this recently. They aren’t very common. But when I was a kid, I was a huge fan of Nancy Lamb’s *Which Way Books*. These were written in second person and gave the readers different choices for taking action during conflict, which would change the course of the story.

### *Deep POV*

There is something to be said for deep POV. It is the ultimate immersion of the reader as the POV character. It can be done in first-, second-, or third-person POV, but not in omniscient. Some authors mistakenly think that first-person POV is equal to deep POV, but that’s not true.

When you edit for deep POV, filter everything through the POV character’s senses. Remove things like “she heard,” “she saw,” “she smelled.” The author can simply describe the sound, the details of color and texture, and the savory-sweet air filled with maple-smoked bacon. If it’s written down, the POV character is the one who is experiencing it with her senses, so remove tags like that.

Deep POV also eliminates the need for words like the following: *thought, watched, examined, decided, wondered, knew, realized, remembered*. When you see words like this, they should signal to you that this can be taken deeper. Edit it so that readers see the thoughts. Describe the detail of what’s being examined. Think about it, if you pick up a paperweight, you don’t think to yourself, *I’m examining this*. No. You pick up on the details of its smooth surface, its dense, weighty feeling, the light that reflects off of the brilliant orange star in the center of the transparent glass.

Let’s examine this excerpt from 2006 Christy Award winner *A Bride Most Begrudging*, by Deeanne Gist (p. 68), in Drew’s POV in which he was just chided by his grandmother as she was leaving the house:

Listening to her litany, Drew felt a pang of remorse. He waited until her voice drifted off on the breeze before turning his attention back to Hopkin and the council, who were busy murmuring amongst themselves. He glanced at Josh, who shrugged in a gesture of bafflement.

Notice the words that flag shallow POV: *listening, felt, waited, turning his attention back to, glanced at*.

As the editor, pay attention to these opportunities to deepen the reader experience. Rewritten in deep POV, this same paragraph could read like this:

A muscle near Drew's stomach constricted as Grandma's ire pelted him. It was a shame he'd had to resort to card playing. She held her straight back rigid as she strode away. He turned back to Hopkin and the council, who were busy murmuring amongst themselves. Josh shook his head slightly, raised his brows, and shrugged.

You can see the paragraphs provide a different type of experience. Now, deep POV is not the only way nor the "right" way to write. I absolutely loved *A Bride Most Begrudging*. But if your author is wanting to achieve the effect of deep POV, you need to know how to edit for it.

### *Point of View Considerations*

When editing for point of view, the main question to keep in mind is, would the character know this information? For instance, if the POV character is Bill and he just turned his back to Mary, Bill can no longer see what Mary is doing. Hence, the author can't go into detail about Mary's actions. Bill may, however, still be able to hear Mary behind him, so your author is more than welcome to describe the noises being made.

One slippery problem to watch for is showing the thought process of characters other than the POV character. If the author is telling the story from Jill's point of view, they can't say, "Dan contemplated what Jill just said." Think about it. From Jill's point of view, there is no way she could know what is going on in Dan's head. For all she knows, he could be planning what he's going to eat for dinner. Instead of telling readers what's going on in Dan's mind, the author needs to tell them what Jill is observing (e.g., Dan looked at her then looked away. He shifted his weight back to his left leg. Had he understood what she'd meant?).

## **Elements of Chapter 1**

Successful novels tend to have certain things in common. This includes elements that need to be established in chapter 1. We want to make sure our authors have these in place. While you won't have a lot of freedom to make big changes at the copyediting stage, you need to know enough to make smaller adjustments. If the chapter has real issues, alert the author or publisher to them so they can at least be informed to decide if they want to change the level of editing before you get much farther into the manuscript.

### *Action*

Chapter 1 should begin in the center of the action. It needs to be happening, and it needs to be happening fast. The author needs to hook readers immediately and engage their emotions. Many authors begin their stories with a chapter or two of what can essentially be labeled as backstory. Ideally, any chapters like that were eliminated in the substantive edit, and you won't need to worry about them in the copyedit. But you still want to be aware of the first paragraph and whether it accomplishes this goal. If you aren't interested within the first couple of sentences, readers won't be either. You need to know why it works or doesn't work and how the author can fix it. If the author already has a great opening scene with a great opening hook, *make a big deal out of it*. Leave the author a comment applauding him or her for a successful beginning. In fact, always look for opportunities to cheer for the things the author has done exceptionally well.

### *Genre*

The genre should be obvious by the end of the first chapter. If it isn't, query the author and let them know there is an issue that may take this beyond a copyedit. There are so many genres and subgenres, and going into those is beyond the scope of this 101 course, but some of the main ones are mystery, suspense, romance, comedy, speculative fiction, science fiction, action-adventure, contemporary realism, multicultural, horror, alternate history, and historical fiction. The conflict presented in chapter 1 should make the genre apparent to readers. So in short, you should have a feel for what kind of story this is by the time you get to chapter 2.

### *Time Period and Location*

Make sure the time period and the country/realm in which the story takes place have been identified by the end of chapter 1. This can be revealed by the way the character is dressed, or their speech, or perhaps the setting.

### *Type of Experience*

The reader should be able to set some realistic expectations by the end of chapter 1 about what kind of experience they will have. Is this an easy read, or will it challenge them to deep contemplation? Are they going to be encouraged and inspired (as is often the case with “inspirational” fiction)? Or will they be left to ponder the dark realities of a fallen world? Since the author should provide no details except those that are meaningful, by the end of chapter 1, the author will have made several unspoken “promises” to readers about where this story will take them. As the editor, we need to jot down these promises and make sure they are fulfilled before the story is over.

### *Main Characters*

Make sure the author has established who the main characters are. The first time the main characters are mentioned, the author should introduce their entire name. A name communicates something about the character and helps readers form the mental image that will stay with them through the rest of the story. The author should also give a physical description as well as an idea of the character's age. This enables readers to “see” the character going through each event as the tale unfolds. Keep in mind, however, that there shouldn't be a whole paragraph of description at one time. Instead, the author should drop tidbits into the story organically as it progresses.

### *Central Conflict*

The central conflict the character is going to face should also be introduced in chapter 1. This doesn't have to be revealed overtly. It can be hinted at through strategic foreshadowing. What does the character want most in life, and what's stopping them from reaching it?

### *Faith Element*

Is the main character a Christian? Is he (she) a mature Christian with a solid relationship with Jesus, or is he just starting out and getting to know him? If this is a fantasy MS, is there a moral code or a higher power this culture subscribes to? Has there been a significant event in the POV character's life to shake his faith? The author should drop in little tidbits through the way the character naturally reacts to various circumstances that arise. Just like the central conflict, this doesn't need to be revealed overtly and often works better if it isn't.

## Setting

Readers need a sense of where the characters are at all times. The author should describe the rooms, the sense of space and flow, and the surrounding people, animals, or decor. You should end up with a mental “blueprint” for the area the characters are in. But the amount of description given should always be proportional to the importance of what is being described. If it’s major to the plot, there should be more details. If it’s minor, fewer details. Regardless, every detail needs to have a purpose for being there—a purpose that advances the plot or reveals important details about a character’s traits. The way a person describes what’s around them and the things they bring attention to tell a lot about that character. Setting should always be woven throughout the scene and be consistent with the characters’ movements.

## Chapter Ending

The author needs to leave the reader with unanswered questions at the end of the chapter, but make sure at least that these questions are not how old the character approximately is or where the story is taking place. If the story does not lend itself to revealing the other listed elements in the first chapter, they must be presented by the end of chapter 2 if possible.

## Hooks and Cliffhangers

Each chapter should begin in a way that hooks readers and propels them forward. The way to do this is through *action*. Something should be happening right out of the gate. Watch out for passive writing here (you’ll get more on passive writing in Lesson 3). Make sure the subject of the sentence is the one performing the action, and avoid state-of-being verbs. Another element that creates a strong opening hook is establishing POV right away. Readers should be oriented as to whose eyes they are looking through, and you want to avoid like the plague beginning a chapter with exposition (see below). In the first few sentences, the POV character should be engaged in something dynamic.

When you come to the end of each chapter, make sure the author has stopped in the middle of the action, not at the end. This serves a couple of purposes. First, it pushes the reader to keep reading, which, I admit, has infuriated me on more than one occasion when I’ve made a mental commitment to read “just one more chapter.” Second, it ends the chapter on an emotional high, which means if readers do have to stop, they’ll remember the details better when they pick it back up.

## Exposition

Exposition happens anytime the author explains something. The author might be explaining what happened in the past, why someone is the way they are, or how something works.

In general, exposition is the enemy of narrative (where the action takes place). It, by nature, slows the story. But it has its place too. If there are areas of the book where something happened that doesn’t require the reader to experience it (or be “shown” as it happens) and where including the details would become long and boring, brief exposition becomes extremely useful.

In the overarching narrative arc, the exposition phase is the first phase of the story. It establishes who the leading characters (protagonists) are and provides only the information required for the readers to understand the complications the protagonists will face. Some of this we covered in the elements of chapter 1, but it's worth mentioning here, too, because it spans beyond chapter 1. In the exposition phase, the author needs to expose the premise, the atmosphere of the story, the character's background, and the plot. Good writing makes readers wait for what is coming, but it can't make them wait for details required to understand what's going on right now.

Readers don't need to have all the background the author has gathered on the protagonists. That only delays the action that will grip readers. Instead, make sure the author provides just enough backstory to explain why the character is there at that time and the wants that will lead to the following events. The way to generate and keep momentum is to blend the exposition into the narrative action.

The exposition phase provides the perfect opportunity for foreshadowing upcoming dramatic events. One way an author can foreshadow is to intentionally show readers that a character doesn't expect the worst. That's making a promise to them the worst is on its way. The author can also introduce seemingly insignificant details the reader will likely forget until they become significant later on. Keep in mind, every detail should have a purpose. This is one reason it's important to review the whole MS before starting the copyedit. You have no idea if the details are useful if you don't know where the story is going.

When editing the exposition phase or areas of exposition throughout the MS, the test to run it by is this: tell the readers only what they must understand and no more. If it's not needed, get rid of it. And make sure you explain to the author why it needs to go. Use grace and compassion!

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## LESSON #2 ASSIGNMENTS

This concludes Lesson 2.

*To receive a Certificate of Completion, you must complete at least two of the following assignments. But if you want to complete all of them, you'll get that much more out of this class. I think we can have some fun with these, and I hope you do!*

### Assignment #1

Create your style sheet template. Save it where you can easily access it for each new job. Share it with the class along with any thoughts you have regarding the style sheet that we didn't cover in the lesson.

### Assignment #2

See if you can spot the POV issues in the following paragraphs:

“You're dead.”

“What?” Nedrill groaned. The pain radiated from the back of his head.

“You're dead.” Havron gripped his shoulder and rolled him on his back. “If this had been a real battle, you're dead. Arrow through the head. Not good enough.” *And this boy thought he could challenge someone like me!*

“Ouch . . .” Nedrill felt the back of his head. This was going to be harder than he thought. Havron withheld a full-on belly laugh. Nedrill said, “I don't care if your arrow didn't have a head on it. Those bonjo nuts you use instead might be a fate worse than death. I'm bleeding, and I have a knot the size of an egg on the back of my head. Havron, have you ever let someone shoot you with one of those things so you know what you're doing to us?”

“Why do you think I'm still alive?”

“Because you're evil,” Nedrill pushed himself off the ground. His slender, yet muscular, frame stood half a head over Havron. But that didn't intimidate his teacher. The wind blew through his already disheveled locks, which now had stray grass mixed in. His hair was as dark as the bonjo nut that had just nailed him, and he had a sticky patch oozing on the backside of his head.

“Yer acting like a wee babe.”

“I'm not! I'm just . . .” he gingerly felt his head again, “highly annoyed.”

### Assignment #3

Read again the first chapter of one of your favorite novels. How many of the elements of chapter 1 listed in this lesson are present in the chapter? Tell the class about why those elements contribute to making this an enjoyable read. What elements are missing? Why does the chapter still work without them?

### Assignment #4

Review another novel you have on hand, either one you enjoyed or one you didn't care for. Review the first few sentences and the last few sentences of each chapter and examine them for successful hooks and cliffhangers. Give the class some of the best ones, and tell us why they work. Give us some of the worst, and tell us why they don't work.