



SUBSTANTIVE EDITING FOR FICTION 301

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LESSON #1

What Makes an Edit a Substantive Edit?

After completing [Substantive Editing for Fiction 101](#) and [201](#), you have a solid understanding of fiction-writing basics—ABA and CRA markets, plot structure, characters, GMC (goals-motivations-conflicts), transitional elements, and more. Now that you know what makes a good novel, what do you do with that information? It's finally time to talk about what it takes to perform a substantive fiction edit and how that type of edit differs from other editing options.

This may seem out of order—shouldn't I have explained this first? Maybe, but it's hard to fully understand the different types of editing if you don't understand the work required to perform a substantive edit. By now you know what kind of information you need to look for and include in a substantive edit, so let's look at how to apply that knowledge.

Here's what we're going to learn in this lesson:

- What Is a Substantive Edit?
- What Are the Different Types of Edits?
 - Developmental Edit
 - Line Edit & Copyedit
 - Proofread
 - Critique
- How Do You Know Which Services to Offer?
- How Do You Know Which Edit a Client Needs?

What Is a Substantive Edit?

Like any other definable term, a substantive edit has an “official” definition, found in *The Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS)*, but there's also the more manageable, fiction-specific definition, which I'll explain using my own words. First, let's look at what *CMOS* says, then I'll define it.

“Substantive editing deals with the organization and presentation of existing content. It involves rewriting to improve style or to eliminate ambiguity, reorganizing or tightening disorganized or loosely written sections, adjusting or recasting tables, and other remedial activities” (*CMOS* 2.50).

Generally speaking, a substantive edit is the first edit you perform on a manuscript. Most experienced authors can (and will) perform their own substantive self-edits, but new authors (or authors writing in new genres) often need substantive edits as they’re still figuring out everything that needs to be included in their stories.

I often refer to the substantive edit as the “big picture” edit—it looks at *everything* in the story. A substantive editor must understand character development, plot structure, pacing, etc. (which is why we talked about those things in SEF 101 and 201), as well as the basics of grammar, formatting, syntax, etc.

When performing a substantive edit, you don’t simply point out or correct the mistakes—you’ll want to explain why something is wrong and give examples of how to correct it. Doing so will help your clients identify and learn from their weaknesses.

That’s a substantive edit. How does it compare with other edits? Let’s take a look.

What Are the Different Types of Edits?

Developmental Edit

Developmental editing “more directly shapes the content of a work, the way material should be presented, the need for more or less documentation and how it should be handled, and so on. Since developmental editing may involve total rewriting or reorganization of a work, it should be done—if needed—*before* manuscript [line and copy] editing begins” (*CMOS* 2.48).

The fundamental difference between a substantive edit and a developmental edit lies in how much content the editor changes.

Typically, editors don’t change an author’s manuscript. They make suggestions, mark errors, and comment on strengths and weaknesses they find in the writing, but it’s ultimately up to the author how he or she wants to change the story. In a developmental edit, however, part of the process includes making changes for the author.

For example, substantive editors will eventually come across point-of-view (POV) issues in a manuscript. Below are examples of how an editor might handle POV issues in a substantive edit, then in a developmental edit. For reference, the story is written from Addie’s point of view.

Substantive Edit:

“True.” Her mother nodded. “You’ll be great.” With that said, Mom returned to her sewing. She didn’t want Addie to waste four years of college and an English degree, but she would support her daughter in anything.

The highlighted portion is out of Addie’s POV—there’s no way she would know these things about her mother. It can be cut or rewritten as dialogue to show Mom telling Addie that she thinks/feels these things.

Developmental Edit:

“True.” Her mother nodded. “You’ll be great.” With that said, Mom returned to her sewing. “I just don’t want to see you waste four years of college and an English degree. Still, I’ll support you in anything.”

HOW MUCH DO YOU CHANGE?

How much of the manuscript you change is between you and your client. In the previous example, I used Track Changes to show my edits so the author can see what the original content looked like and what I suggested changing it to. Some authors, however, may want you to just make all of the changes:

“True.” Her mother nodded. “You’ll be great.” With that said, Mom returned to her sewing. “I just don’t want to see you waste four years of college and an English degree. Still, I’ll support you in anything.”

I don’t personally recommend that option, as I want my clients to learn throughout the process. They won’t do that if they don’t see where and why you make suggestions and changes.

Another reason I don’t do that is because authors tend to think their manuscripts are cleaner than they really are—they think you’ll make a few comments per page when you’ll actually make several suggestions per page (or paragraph!). It can be quite shocking to receive a rewritten page without understanding why changes were made. If an author insists that I make the changes to the manuscript, I send them two copies—one showing the edits and the other with all the changes already made.

Line Edit & Copyedit

“Manuscript editing, also called copyediting or line editing, requires attention to every word and mark of punctuation in a manuscript, a thorough knowledge of the style to be followed, and the ability to make quick, logical, and defensible decisions” (*CMOS* 2.48).

CMOS lumps line edits and copyedits together in one definition. That may suggest that they are the same thing referred to by different names (e.g., cars and automobiles), but many publishers, the Christian Editor Connection, and I offer them differently. Technically, a line edit comes between a substantive edit and a copyedit, but it’s often combined with both.

LINE EDIT

As the name suggests, a line edit is a line-by-line read of a manuscript in which the editor scrutinizes each sentence to help the author make the most of every line and word. In a line edit, you’ll often see that the writing is technically fine, but it’s just not working for the manuscript.

An example of a line edit looks something like this:

Original: *He would have liked to travel beyond the perimeter of the town square so as to hopefully avoid confrontations that might end up being awkward.*

Editor's Comment: Tighten; this can be shortened to improve flow and readability. Suggestions given.

He would have liked to travel around the town square to avoid awkward confrontations.

Original: *Bill and I emerged into a wide clearing full of tall, green grasses surrounded by a swaying ring of birch trees.*

Editor's Comment: “Emerged” is usually used to describe someone the POV character sees; it is also hard to visualize. Something like stomped, stepped, or shuffled provides a stronger picture.

In these examples, there's nothing technically wrong with the original sentences. The first is long and uses more words than necessary. The suggested edits don't change the meaning of the sentence; they simply make it easier to read. In the second example, the author uses the verb unconventionally, which can cause a reader to stumble.

In my experience, authors need line edits when they have a solid understanding of fiction-writing techniques (i.e., there's very little telling in their story, their characterization is sound, and there are no obvious holes in the plot), but they still haven't managed to capture an agent's or publisher's attention. They have good stories, but their beta readers don't love it (yet).

There may be places in the story that are passive instead of active, or you might notice an inconsistency in characterization. To borrow a line from the Department of Homeland Security, if you see something, say something, but remember that you're not performing a substantive edit. Just point these places out to the author (if he's at a point in his career where he's hiring line editors instead of substantive editors, he should be able to make those corrections himself).

Overall, you'll notice that a line edit consists mostly of tightening writing, questioning specific word choices, and—essentially—helping authors use words more effectively and efficiently. You're helping turn a technically correct manuscript into an engaging, hard-to-put-down story.

COPYEDIT

Copyeditors are your grammar Nazis. These are the editors who can spot a comma splice from three chapters away. They know the proper way to use em dashes, en dashes, ellipses, and semi-colons. They can diagram sentences, distinguish the difference between transitive and intransitive verbs, and never miss pronoun agreement issues. More than that, however, they *like* it!

The copyedit is what I refer to as the “nuts-and-bolts” edit—it's looking at and correcting all the things that hold the story together. Unlike other types of edits, where an editor makes

suggestions based on what works best in fiction and what most publishers are looking for, copyeditors make corrections based on grammar rules. A copyedit might look like this:

Original:

“I don’t want to go to James’ house, I want to ...”

“What about Beth’s house?”

“Please...don’t interrupt me.”

Copyedit:

“I don’t want to go to James’s house. I want to—”

“What about Beth’s house?”

“Please, don’t interrupt me.”

Because copyedits deal with the hard-and-fast rules found in *CMOS*, it can be helpful to reference the rule you’re using when making a change. For example, when adding the apostrophe-*s* after *James* to show possession of the house, include a comment with the reference: “*CMOS* 7.17, Possessive of proper nouns.”

Sometimes you’ll see editors offer a heavy copyedit, which is essentially a copyedit with a line edit. The Christian Editor Connection defines a heavy copyedit as:

- A review for consistency of style and mood or presentation of content
- Analysis of the point of view (fiction)
- Cross-checking references, figures, tables, equations, etc. (nonfiction)
- Pointing out items that may require permission from the copyright holder

Proofread

“Proofreading is the process of reading a text and scrutinizing all of its components to find errors and mark them for correction. Each major stage of a manuscript intended for publication—especially the final version the author submits to the publisher and, later, the copyedited version of the same—is generally reviewed in this way. Proofreading here, however, applies to the review of the manuscript *after* it has been converted to a final format for publication but *before* it is published” (*CMOS* 2.100).

CMOS gives lots of details about the proofreading schedule for book and periodical publishers, but most of those details won’t apply to you as a freelance editor. You won’t necessarily look at manuscripts that have already been accepted for publication and formatted for printing. That doesn’t mean, however, that the same basic principle doesn’t apply.

As a freelance editor offering proofreading services, the proofread should still be the final review of a manuscript. It is the author’s last line of defense after the substantive, line, and copyedits have been finished.

Critique

A critique is an overall assessment of a manuscript. It can be performed at any time during the editing process—before the substantive edit or after the proofread—because it’s simply a

detailed review of the manuscript. As an editor, you'll point out strengths and weaknesses, identify places that stand out (for good or bad reasons), and make suggestions for improvement.

If you critique a manuscript early in the editing process (before the substantive edit), you'll generally have a lot to say, as none of the issues have been identified or addressed yet. If, however, you critique a manuscript before it's scheduled to be proofread, you may have few comments beyond your own opinions and reactions to the story.

The most important thing to remember about a critique is that it's *not* an edit! You won't correct all the comma splices or highlight all of the POV issues. Instead, at the end of the chapter or in a separate document, you'll point out the areas that need help. An end-of-the-chapter critique may look something like this:

Overall, this chapter kept up a good pace. There were no dull spots or slow spots. The dialogue is believable and well-written. Two things that jumped out at me were:

1. POV: There's a lot of head-hopping. The chapter starts in Meryl's POV, so it should stay in her POV. There are several places where we see other characters' thoughts and feelings, which Meryl would not know.

2. Commas: There are many comma splices and other comma mistakes that make some sections confusing to read. I would brush up on comma usage (I highly recommend Proofreading Secrets of Best-Selling Authors by Kathy Ide).

How Do You Know Which Services to Offer?

When you work for yourself and depend on every client to keep your business in the black, it can be tempting to take every job that comes your way. Before you do that, however, I suggest an honest, thorough evaluation of what you can do and what you like to do. Start by asking yourself the following questions.

What do I read?

I strongly encourage editors to edit what they read. If you don't read nonfiction, I don't recommend editing nonfiction. If you don't read romance, I don't recommend editing romance. Yes, you can learn the basics of fiction writing through courses like SEF 101 and 201, but it can never replace the knowledge you'll get from reading what's being printed and seeing how popular fiction changes over time.

If you're already an avid fiction reader and you're ready to break into fiction editing, take this question a step further—which genres do you read? Those are the best genres for you to consider editing, as you're already familiar with what works and what doesn't work. This doesn't mean you can't edit other genres, but you will want to consider which genres you will and won't edit.

For example, I read a lot of historical and contemporary romance, as well as lots of speculative and contemporary fiction, with some suspense and mystery thrown in. When it comes to editing,

however, I focus on historical and contemporary romance, speculative fiction, and contemporary fiction. I don't edit a lot of suspense novels because I haven't spent enough time studying the key elements needed to create a believable and compelling suspense novel. The same is true for middle-grade chapter books, horror stories, erotica, etc. I don't know the nuances of well-written books in those genres, so I don't bid on projects in those genres. Instead, I take those opportunities to pass leads along to other editors.

What do I like to do?

By the time I was in middle school, diagramming sentences was out of style, so I never fully mastered the different parts of speech. In the last ten years, I've brushed up on them and had to reteach myself the proper terminology (I can read a sentence and tell you that it is wrong, but I have to do some research to figure out the technical reasons why certain verbs do and don't work in different sentences). That's why I rarely perform copyedits outside my preferred fiction genres (and never in nonfiction). They're more time consuming for me to do—I spend more time looking at the punctuation than enjoying the story.

And the story is what I'm passionate about—relatable characters in gut-wrenching situations that keep me reading until 2 a.m. It doesn't matter how rough the manuscript is (trust me, I've read some *rough* manuscripts) because I love the process of working through it to help authors create better books (partly because I'd like to see better books published so I can enjoy reading them!).

What am I qualified to do?

I promise that I'm not being paid or coerced to talk about this, but I don't want to miss an opportunity to encourage editors to take the editing tests available through the [Christian Editor Connection](#). These tests can help you in two key ways:

1. You'll receive an honest review of your editing skills.
2. If you pass, you have the good name and reputation of the Christian Editors Connection (CEC) vouching for you as a knowledgeable and capable editor.

Why does this matter?

It matters because anyone with a computer can create a website and offer editing services. There's no way for authors to look at a website and know whether or not the services advertised are any good unless you can display a graphic and statement that you're a trained editor, such as the CEC certified editor logo.

One thing I regularly tell would-be and new authors looking to hire an editor is to look for editing certifications and recognitions, not writing achievements (just because an editor has published a novel doesn't mean he or she is qualified to edit novels!). Editors who join the CEC and pass the substantive editing test receive a stamp of approval that they have proven their abilities.

By the time you've asked yourself all of these questions—what do you read, what do you like to do, and what are you qualified to do—you'll have a good idea of what services you should be offering. That leads us to our last topic for this lesson.

How Do You Know Which Edit a Client Needs?

I can guarantee you that authors will contact you looking for a proofread when they need a substantive edit. How do you know which edit an author needs, and how do you handle the situation?

Let's work through this scenario: an author asks you to proofread her novel. She's already had several people read it, and they loved it. She just wants you to clean it up before she either submits it to agents or formats it for self-publishing.

I always start by offering a free sample edit. Generally, I edit the first three pages, but I ask for the first three chapters so I can read ahead and familiarize myself with the author's style, voice, and ability. The sample edit also lets the author see how I work and will help her decide whether or not I'm someone she thinks she can work with (I'm an aggressive editor, and not everyone likes that).

Before I ask for the edit, however, I make sure the author understands that I will edit *only* a properly formatted document (1" margins, 12-point Times New Roman font, double-spaced, 8.5" × 11" paper size). ***If you don't specify the formatting, you WILL get three pages of 0.5" margins, single-spaced, 8-point font!*** If the author sends the pages improperly formatted, I format them correctly as part of the editing process, then only edit the originally stated number of pages.

Then it's time to edit. Regardless of what the author asks for (in this case a proofread), I always perform whichever edit the manuscript needs. Why? Because our jobs are to help authors improve their chances of publication/book sales, and that means producing the cleanest manuscript possible. The author may not realize how much work needs to be done until she sees the sample edit. It's my responsibility—as an editor and Christian—to be kind yet honest in my assessment.

Sometimes the author will get the sample edit back and decide to work through the substantive editing process, but there will also be times when the author either doesn't care or doesn't want to make the investment—she just wants a proofread. In those cases, always be honest with the author. Let her know that you can do the proofread, but you think the manuscript will benefit more from a deeper edit. If she still wants to do the proofread, it's okay to provide the service and ask not to be listed as an editor or proofreader in the book.

Why should you do the proofread if the manuscript needs more work? Because the author has made it clear that she's going to hire someone to do the proofread, whether it's you or someone else. If you provide the service, then—if she later decides she should do a more extensive edit—you've already established a relationship. You can also provide honest feedback about the manuscript, which she might not get from another editor who's only interested in getting a job.

That brings us to the end of Lesson 1! Next lesson we'll look at the practical steps you can take to perform your substantive edit.



LESSON #1 ASSIGNMENTS

Each lesson in this course will include one or more assignments. To receive a Certificate of Completion at the end of the course, you must complete the required number of assignments per lesson. For this lesson, complete both.

Assignment #1

Determine which fiction-editing services you plan to offer and what each of these services will include.

Assignment #2

If you want to edit fiction, you need to read fiction (and not just the classics)! Today's publishing standards are quite different from the standards fifty years ago. Therefore, I challenge you to read one novel (published in the last ten years) throughout the rest of this course (six lessons), and write a book report using this format:

- Title and author's name
- Genre
- Brief plot and subplot summary
- Who are the main characters? What are their primary GMCs?
- Identify the main parts of the plot structure (the acts and transitional elements)