



SUBSTANTIVE EDITING FOR FICTION 301

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LESSON #2

How to Perform a Substantive Edit

You understand the basics of compelling fiction writing. You've evaluated your skills and desires and have decided that you want to be a substantive fiction editor. It's finally time to look at the nuts and bolts of performing a substantive edit. In this lesson, I'm going to give you the tools (and show you which tools to ask for) so you can provide an effective edit.

We'll look at the following:

- Checklists
- Author Information
 - Publishing Goals
 - Synopsis
 - Character Sketches
- How to Perform an Effective Substantive Edit
- How Long Will It Take?

Checklists

When you start offering substantive edits, it's a good idea to work with a checklist. The checklist will help you remember what to look for and comment on throughout the edit. Items to include on your checklist are:

1. Novel formatting
2. Characterization
 - a. Goals-motivations-conflicts (GMC)
 - b. Character development
 - c. Consistency in character traits
 - d. Appropriateness for genre

- e. Appropriate dialogue/thought structure
3. Plot structure
 - a. An opening hook
 - b. A captivating first chapter
 - c. A proper ending
 - d. Unavoidable conflict
 - e. Internal and external conflict
 - f. Sagging middle
4. Fiction-writing techniques
 - a. Point of view (POV)
 - b. Proper dialogue tags and beats
 - c. Showing vs. telling
 - d. Information dumps
 - e. Clear setting
 - f. Active vs. passive
 - g. Overused words/pet words
 - h. Over explanation (that would insult the reader)
 - i. Floating body parts
 - j. Author intrusion
 - k. Purple prose and stilted writing
 - l. Including all five senses
 - m. Comparisons (metaphors, similes, etc.)
 - n. Appropriate use of em dashes and ellipses in dialogue
5. Grammar/punctuation basics, including
 - a. Commas
 - b. Semicolons (to be avoided in fiction!)
 - c. Limited use of exclamation points, em dashes, and ellipses
 - d. Proper use of quotation marks

The more you edit, the more natural it will be to look for all of these issues, and the less you'll need to rely on a checklist. Until then, it's a good idea to create a list that will help you provide the most comprehensive edit you can for your clients. It's also not a bad idea to share the checklist with your clients to show them what exactly you're doing.

Style Sheets

Style sheets help you keep track of how authors write things throughout the story. I use very basic versions for a substantive edit because the more technical items listed during a copyedit (grammar, punctuation, usage, etc.) will often change after the first substantive edit and before the copyedit.

That doesn't mean style sheets can't be useful, though. Style sheets are a great way to track an author's consistency throughout a manuscript. It's also helpful to pass this sheet along with your

edit so your author can not only see the work you've done but also give the style sheet to his or her copyeditor to help maintain consistency.

For example, the first time John Doe appears on the page, you can jot down everything the author says about him—dark curly hair, blue eyes, dimpled chin. Then, if you're halfway through the book and he's shaving around his square chin, you don't have to search through the entire manuscript to see what he looks like. You have his description on the style sheet, so you can make a note for the author to make sure the description is consistent.

Author Information

Publishing Goals

To perform the best substantive edit possible, you will require more information than just an author's manuscript. You'll want to get as much information about goals and objectives as possible so you'll know how to advise your client. Here is a question I recommend asking before you start editing:

Are you going to self-publish, or are you seeking traditional publication?

Asking this question does *not* mean you can work less or do less than your best on an edit. It's simply a question to help you know how to comment on a manuscript so you can give your client the best advice possible to improve his or her chance at successfully publishing.

Here's one example of why this question is important:

Several years ago, I edited a book with very dominant Christian themes—the main characters prayed, went to church, and talked about Jesus. The main characters also accepted and encouraged a teenage girl in her lesbian relationships. At that time, I was unaware of any Christian publishers who would publish books that encouraged homosexual relationships; I was also unaware of any secular publishers who would publish books that spoke so openly about Jesus Christ.

As this author wanted to traditionally publish her book, I made sure to tell her that including both of those elements would virtually eliminate her publishing options. If she had planned to self-publish, it wouldn't have been an issue. Knowing her plans, however, I was able to point out those roadblocks. It was not my job to tell her how to change the story, or even that she *had* to change the story, but to let her know that those themes could cause problems for her in the future.

That's why it helps to know whether or not an author is seeking traditional or self-publication.

Synopsis

One time I was hired to edit an adventure novel. The book started quite seriously, with the main character bitter about a past trauma and angry at everything. Then, after seven chapters, he changed—not a little bit, but a complete 180-degree turn. I kept making notes based on what I'd

read at the beginning of the book, but after several chapters with the “new” character, I wasn’t sure if the author intended for the story to be an intense adventure novel or a light-hearted story with some adventure woven in.

That’s when I asked for a synopsis.

The synopsis is a summary of the novel. It’s not a book’s back-cover copy—that introduces characters and teases about what they might do—but an honest-to-goodness summary of events, showing the reader exactly what to expect throughout the story.

I needed to read the synopsis because I needed to see what the author had planned for the novel. (I had asked him about it earlier, but I wanted to see for myself how he’d set up the story.) If your authors don’t have synopses, encourage them to write them. Not only will it give them new perspectives on their stories, but it will also help them prepare to submit their manuscripts, as most agents and publishers require a synopsis.

Here are the synopsis basics:

1. Write the synopsis in present tense. Even if the novel is written in past tense, the synopsis stays in the present.
2. Introduce main characters only. If a secondary character needs to be mentioned, say “a friend” or “the cab driver” or “his sister”; naming too many characters in a synopsis leads to confusion.
3. Summarize the whole story. This isn’t the place for cliffhangers or unanswered questions. Show exactly what’s going to happen.
4. Show, don’t tell. It’s tempting to slip into passive telling in a summary, but don’t. Showing applies to the novel as well as the synopsis.

Character Sketches

Referring to the adventure novel mentioned earlier, in addition to asking for a synopsis, I asked the author for sketches of the main characters.

More than just the characters’ GMCs, character sketches provide a comprehensive look at the main characters, including the following:

- Appearance (age, height, weight, etc.)
- Family life (including parent and sibling relationships)
- Education (where they studied, what they studied, and why)
- Career (history and goals)
- Relationships (friendships, romances, etc.)
- Secret desire
- Greatest fear
- Happiest moment

These sketches, coupled with characters’ GMCs, help you see exactly what the author has planned for each character. That’s important information to know, as it helps you determine

whether or not the characters are being portrayed accurately and consistently throughout the entire manuscript.

Looking back at the adventure novel example, I needed to see the character sketches to figure out the “real” main character—was he moody and intense or fun and flirty? Did I need to suggest edits for the opening chapters of the book or for the rest of the chapters? There was no way to know without getting more information about the characters.

How to Perform an Effective Substantive Edit

Each of you will eventually develop your editing style and technique, but to help you get started, here’s a look at how I edit.

Microsoft Word

I edit documents only in Microsoft Word. If I receive a manuscript as a PDF, I’ll ask the author to resend it. I ask that all manuscripts be formatted the same so I have an accurate idea of how long the edit will take. My manuscript guidelines follow the publishing industry standards:

- 8.5" × 11" page size
- 1" margins
- 12-point Times New Roman font
- Double-spacing
- No extra spaces between paragraphs
- Auto-indent the first line of each paragraph to 0.5"

Having the manuscript properly formatted will help you give an accurate estimate regarding how long the edit will take (more on that later).

Track Changes

In Microsoft Word, I use the Track Changes (TC) feature to make and suggest changes for the author. Before I turn on TC, however, there are a couple of things I like to do:

1. **Change the format.** If the author hasn’t formatted the page properly, I make the changes *before* turning on TC. If you do it after TC is on, your margins will fill up with unnecessary notes (for example, every time an extra space is removed, a comment will appear on the right side of the document). That will crowd the comment section, making it difficult for your author to read the fiction-writing comments you leave. Instead, format the document first, then leave your author a note explaining what changes you made.
2. **Tweak your TC settings.** Track Changes comes with several options. The most detailed option makes a vertical line in the left margin next to any line where a change is made, but it also leaves a balloon comment on the right side explaining the change.

For example, say you delete a repeated word from a sentence (a duplicate “the”). You’ll see a | on the left side, as well as a balloon that says, “Editor’s Name, Deleted: the.” That comment isn’t

necessary because the author will see that change on the manuscript, so there's no reason to crowd the margin.

Instead of overwhelming your author with excessive (and often unnecessary) balloons, consider changing the TC settings to leave the left-margin lines while eliminating the balloon comments. To do that, follow these steps:

- a. Go to the Review tab at the top of your page.
- b. In the Tracking section, click on Show Markup.
- c. On the dropdown menu, click Balloons.
- d. Select the option Show Only Comments and Formatting in Balloons.

Once you've formatted the document and adjusted the TC settings, it's time to start editing. Here are some things to remember when performing a substantive edit:

DO point out fiction-writing errors (such as telling, passive, POV, etc.).

DON'T rewrite those sections.

My general guideline is to offer a suggestion and definition the first time I see an error. After that, I simply point it out to the author.

Example:

As she replaced the receiver, Addie smiled at Greg. She no longer hid her delight in seeing him. "Hi! What's up?"

Greg smiled at Addie. "I wanted to talk about dinner tonight," he said. He shifted his weight as he spoke.

Addie tensed, noticing his uneasiness. "Is something wrong?"

"I'd like to make you dinner tonight ...". "At my house."

Since I've already explained the rationale behind the POV comment, there's no reason to repeat the information (plus, including that info each time will crowd the comments on the right side). In the above example, it's okay to suggest cutting the POV changes, as it's just a suggestion and easy for an author to reject (if you hover the cursor over the change and right-click the mouse, select Reject Deletion, and the line will disappear).

What you don't want to do is rewrite the section:

As she replaced the receiver, Addie smiled at Greg. She no longer hid her delight in seeing him. "Hi! What's up?"

Greg smiled at Addie, his gaze never straying from her face. "I wanted to talk about dinner tonight," he said. He shifted his weight as he spoke.

Addie tensed, noticing his uneasiness. "Is something wrong?"

"I'd like to make you dinner tonight. You might be tempted to argue about this next part, but hear me out first, okay. I'd like to eat at my house."

It's not your job to decide how to fix the error. You're just pointing it out. Let the author decide how to change it.

DO look for writing that can be tightened or cleaned up to improve the pace or clarify potentially confusing parts.

DON'T change a character's or author's voice in the process.

It's not uncommon for new editors to suggest changes that better fit their preferred reading styles, but that's not an editor's job. The snippet below is from a historical romance in which the characters speak more formally. One example is edited to strengthen the section; the other example is changed to reflect the editor's personal preferences. See if you can tell the difference.

"I will stretch my legs." She swiveled on her heel and stomped to the woods, leaving him standing there with his smoke. The men stood there, seemingly more anxious for their disgusting tobacco break than for the chance to relieve themselves. She'd use the moment to find privacy for herself and not risk being caught.

"I will stretch the kinks from my legs." She turned and left him standing with his smoke. Most of the men seemed more anxious for their tobacco than for the chance to relieve themselves. She would use the moment to find privacy before risk of being caught.

In the first example, you can see in the dialogue that the suggested edits play into contemporary speech patterns but not necessarily the formal speech used throughout the rest of the manuscript. You can also see how the editor included her ideas about the story—deciding how the character should walk away, where she should walk, and what she should think about tobacco.

In the second example, the editor leaves it up to the author to decide how to rewrite the first section. The other suggested word cuts are filler words (or implied words) that create longer sentences but don't add anything to the story. Cutting those words doesn't change the meaning of the scene—it simply improves the flow of it.

The Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS), 17th ed., says this about substantive editing (2.51):

A light editorial hand is nearly always more effective than a heavy one. An experienced editor will recognize and not tamper with unusual figures of speech or idiomatic usage and will know when to make an editorial change and when simply to suggest it, whether to delete a repetition or an unnecessary recapitulation or simply to point it out to the author, and how to suggest tactfully that an expression may be inappropriate. . . . An author's own style should be respected, whether flamboyant or pedestrian.

Light and heavy editorial hands are subjective. My style has been appropriately labeled as “aggressive,” but I’ve been able to work well with clients for several key reasons:

- **My edits are honest.** I don’t overlook errors to spare an author’s feelings. If his or her goal is to publish a historical romance in the CRA market, I mark everything that might hurt his or her chances.
- **My edits are kind.** I never insult an author or writing style, even when I disagree with the author’s interpretation or theology in a story. Instead, I ask leading questions (i.e., *Is it appropriate for the characters to make jokes while standing over a dead friend’s body?*). Then I let the author decide how to handle the situation.
- **My edits are learning opportunities.** As I mentioned before, I never suggest edits without giving my authors a reason for the suggestion. When I do that, it not only helps the authors identify weaknesses but also gives them an opportunity to correct them. That helps the authors learn how to identify and correct those issues on their own (and when they can do that, they will no longer need to hire a substantive editor!).
- **I don’t expect an author to accept all of my changes/suggestions.** Telling in a story isn’t always bad—there are times when it’s appropriate and can help keep the pace of the story. If, however, the entire manuscript is told instead of shown, it’s hard to pinpoint those areas where telling works. Instead of deciding where telling might work in a story, I simply mark *all* instances of telling and let the author decide when and where to make the changes. I’ve never had an author take all of my suggestions, and they’ve still produced gripping stories.

My editing style doesn’t work for every author, and that’s fine. Not every author-editor combination will work, so don’t be discouraged when authors pass on your services. It happens to everyone. Just stay true to your editing style and make sure to always do your best work—your clients will find you.

How Long Will It Take?

I made the mistake of not asking this question until after I’d already booked two substantive edits in one month. Now I know better, and I’m able to plan my schedule accordingly. Here are some numbers to keep in mind when trying to figure out if you can fit that edit into your schedule:

According to *CMOS* (2.52), “A 100,000-word book manuscript, edited by an experienced editor, might take seventy-five to one hundred hours of work.”

To make those numbers a little more manageable, let’s turn the word count into page count.

An average page (properly formatted to the guidelines noted earlier) contains 250 words, so a 100,000-word book manuscript would yield 400 pages; 400 pages divided by 100 hours means an experienced editor can edit approximately 4 pages per hour.

That's it: four pages.

If you're just starting out as a substantive editor, I would cut that number in half, just to make sure you don't over-promise on your delivery time.

That means a new, inexperienced editor can expect to spend 150 to 200 hours performing a substantive edit. If you plan to work eight hours a day, five days a week, at a rate of two pages per hour, that's five weeks to finish a 100,000-word book manuscript (can you see now why it was a bad idea for me to book two substantive book edits in one month?).

If you'd like to figure out a more accurate editing speed, simply time yourself as you perform the sample edit for your author—that will help you provide the most accurate time estimate for your client. If, however, you forget to time yourself, don't worry. Use the two to four pages per hour average to calculate the time you'll need for the job.



LESSON #2 ASSIGNMENTS

Complete either assignment #1 or #2 and either assignment #3 or #4 to earn your certificate for this class.

Assignment #1

Using the checklist above, personalize it to your editing strengths and weaknesses (i.e., make notes for yourself to help you look for and identify the necessary aspects of a well-written novel).

Assignment #2

Create a “Character Sketch Worksheet” that you can give to clients to help them figure out who their characters are. Include enough questions to create a detailed backstory that will support a character’s GMCs.

Assignment #3

Practice writing a synopsis. Pick a novel and write a two-page synopsis using the guidelines mentioned above.

Assignment #4

Practice editing! Copy and paste the following sample into a separate document. Then practice performing a substantive edit on the first page only.

Kyle slammed his fist against the steering wheel. “Not now.” He tried the key again. The engine whirled, but would not start. He popped the hood and lumbered out of the car. It was dark, it was windy and he had no idea what he was looking for, but it would make him feel better if he tried. He wasn’t sure how long he had been staring at the intricate web of pipes and hoses before he heard the clicking of heels on pavement. Kyle glanced up at the woman before him.

She was tall and slender, her auburn hair pulled out of her eyes. She came from the same hotel as he, but he recognized her as an employee; he’d seen her many times during his frequent visits. However, as it was nearly midnight he was surprised to meet her in the parking lot, just leaving the Park Place Hotel.

“Need some help?” she asked politely.

“I’d like to say no, but I just can’t get it to start,” he confessed.

“It doesn’t sound like anything more than a dead battery. You just need a jump.”

“Well that doesn't sound to bad,” Kyle smiled warmly. “Do you know how I can reach AAA or something similar?”

“Are you kidding?” the woman laughed. She approached Kyle and switched her bag to her left arm; she extended her right hand to him. “I'm Annie.”

“Hi Annie, I'm Kyle. Why am I kidding?”

“AAA will fleece you! You can use my car,” she offered. “I won't even charge you,” she winked.

“I don't think I have the right wires for that,” explained Kyle. Annie laughed again. Was she really laughing at his plight? “Are you laughing at me?” He hadn't yet decided if she was irritating or amusing.

“Nice shiny new BMW with no jumper cables,” she teased. There was no mistaking the taunting in her voice now.

“I guess I didn't check the fine print on my options package. Can I get my car started now?”

“I'll be right back.” Kyle smiled as she walked away. Her stride was confident and, he noted, quick for someone in heels. He watched her slide into a practical sedan. She pulled into the empty space beside him and popped her hood and trunk. The graceful, professional woman produced jumper cables and began connecting the two vehicles.

“Are you serious?” Kyle asked, watching her with a mixture of humor and admiration. “I've only ever seen 200 lb. men with exposed butt-cracks working in there.” Annie smiled up at Kyle and chuckled.