



SUBSTANTIVE EDITING FOR FICTION 301

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LESSON #4

Substantive Editing Pitfalls, Mistakes, and Things to Watch For

No one's perfect—writers *or* editors. At some point, everyone will (or has) made a mistake while editing, be it missing something that needed to be corrected or accidentally imposing their styles onto the manuscript. By being aware of the most common pitfalls and mistakes, you can check yourself and know what to look for and avoid.

This lesson will include the following:

- Pitfalls
 - Rewriting
 - Overediting
- Mistakes
 - Genre Confusion
 - Undercharging
- Things to Watch For
 - Pet Words
 - Nondescript Words

I've mentioned a few of these things earlier in this class (and in previous classes), but today I want to dive in deeper. We'll not only look at examples but also identify why they should be avoided and how to address each issue more appropriately.

Pitfalls

Rewriting

As an editor, you are to spot errors, mark them, and (depending on the type of edit you're performing) make suggestions or some corrections. As I mentioned before, it's okay (and encouraged in a substantive edit) to demonstrate a fiction-writing technique by providing a

sample rewrite of a short section; that ensures that your author knows what you mean when you suggest showing instead of telling.

For example, your client may have had a critique partner say, “Use more sensory details.” But what if she doesn’t know what that means? You could mark up her entire manuscript with notes to add more sensory detail, but it won’t help if she doesn’t know how to do it.

That’s when you can rewrite *a sample section* to give your author an idea of what you mean. Here’s an example of a country scene that could use more sensory details. This is the opening chapter of a book:

He walked across the yard to the barn, passing the grazing cows on his way. He opened the door and stepped into the dark barn.

Here’s how I would handle this, as it’s early in the manuscript:

He walked across the yard to the barn, his heavy boots crunching on the frost-covered ground. Several cows raised their heads and mooed as he passed them on his way. He pulled the cold handle of the door and stepped into the dark, musty barn.

Using Track Changes, I would leave a comment like this:

This is a great place to add some sensory details—instead of only showing what he saw, describe how it sounded and smelled. I included some suggestions to give you an idea of how you could do that.

Then, any time I see a place where the author can add sensory details, I leave the comment, “Add sensory details here—what does it sound like, feel like?” but I don’t change the manuscript. That’s rewriting, and that’s not the editor’s job.

Following are the most common instances of unnecessary rewriting:

- **A character doesn’t react the way an editor expects, so the editor changes the reaction.** Instead, leave a comment explaining what you expected and why the scene surprised you. That lets the author decide how to handle the issue: revising the character, the reaction, or the scene.
- **The characters don’t talk the way the editor wants them to talk.** I once had a critique partner change all of the dialogue in a scene. My scene showed a conversation between a brother and a sister. The critique partner thought it should be more youthful, so she added all kinds of slang and immature jokes—except my characters were twenty-seven and thirty-two years old. The changes didn’t match my characters; they matched the voices my critique partner envisioned. It doesn’t matter if the editor likes how the character speaks. The dialogue needs to be authentic *to the character*. If you have questions or concerns about dialogue, make comments about them, but let the author decide how/if to change it.

- **The editor can't picture a scene/setting, so she adds the details that she envisions.** The problem here is that the editor doesn't know what the author was picturing when he wrote the scene, so it's impossible to add details without creating editor intrusion (when the editor's voice covers the author's voice). Instead, leave a note that you can't picture the setting and let the author clarify the details.
- **The word order/sentence structure isn't the editor's preferred style.** In fiction, it's okay to use incomplete sentences, to start sentences with conjunctions, and to end sentences with prepositions because it's a more realistic representation of how people think and speak. Just because an editor has *never* started a sentence with a prepositional phrase doesn't mean it should be changed. The word order and sentence structure need to match the POV character of each scene, not the editor's preference.

The problem with each of these rewriting examples is twofold:

1. The editor ends up creating what he imagines instead of letting the author create it.
2. The editor isn't correcting mistakes; he's appealing to his preferences.

Both of those put the editor's ideas above the author's, which is never the job of the editor.

What if the author wants me to rewrite things?

Occasionally that happens. I once had a client hire me for what he called a "ghostwrite." He wanted me to suggest edits, he would decide what to accept/reject, then I could "fill in the details." I explained that I didn't think it would be a good idea—I couldn't possibly know what he wanted in different scenes and situations—but he was confident that it would work.

I ended up editing a chapter, he reviewed the edits, then he sent it back to me. In places where I'd noted "This is telling; it should be shown," or if I wrote "It would be nice to see this—I would describe this," he replied with, "You can go ahead and show that," or "It's just a forest; if you think it should be described more, you can add it."

Because he was paying more for this kind of work, I made the changes—but only three chapters' worth. Then I sent them to him so he could see how the chapters were turning out. It took only a couple of hours before he called me in a tizzy—he didn't like my interpretation of the scenes and was not happy with my descriptions (as they didn't match his vision). We renegotiated the terms and contract, and he decided to do more of the writing himself (letting me focus on the editing).

Overediting

Overediting isn't specifically a substantive editor's pitfall, but it can be very difficult for substantive editors to avoid this as we're used to looking at everything. I cannot stress this enough: *perform only the service you were hired to perform.*

If you're hired to do a line edit and you provide a substantive edit, two things happen:

1. The author misunderstands the editing process. Now he or she will think a line edit includes characterization and plot analysis.
2. The author will expect other editors to provide substantive editing services for line editing prices.

Neither of those situations is good for authors or editors. The next time that author works with an editor, she'll likely ask for a line edit when she needs a substantive edit (or be frustrated when she gets an actual line edit, and it's less extensive than her previous edit). Or if she knows she needs a substantive edit, she'll feel taken advantage of when the cost is 50 to 100 percent more than she paid the first time.

To avoid overediting, just be honest in your assessment of the manuscript and the work required. If the book needs a substantive edit but the author wants to hire you for only a proofread, provide only a proofread. As a trained substantive editor, you might find it to be physically painful to do less than required, but provide only the service you're hired to do.

Mistakes

Genre Confusion

Once upon a time, I was hired to edit a young-adult fantasy novel. After speaking with the author about his vision for the story, I approached the manuscript as if it were being written for audiences who read *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Everything about the opening chapters lined up with the intensity and seriousness of those books until I reached chapter eight. Suddenly the dark, brooding main character turned into a flirty, fun teenage boy, and he stayed that way for several chapters.

At that point, I went back to my author to clarify—had he written a *Lord of the Rings*-type book that included a romantic thread, or had he written a *Pirates of the Caribbean*-esque book with lots of action and adventure happening around the main plot point, aka the romance?

Understanding that distinction was critical for me to do my edit. It would influence how I approached the rest of the edit. Did I need to go back and reedit the first seven chapters so they would be more lighthearted, or did I need to continue editing as I had been (suggesting ways to keep the characterization throughout the rest of the book)?

It's important to clearly understand which genre you're editing, as each genre has different requirements and expectations. If I'd continued editing that book as if it were a romance with lots of action, I would have suggested inappropriate changes. That's what happened with me and the critique partner I mentioned earlier—as a writer of young-adult literature, she critiqued my characters to fit her genre's requirements.

If you're unsure about which genre your author wrote, ask. If he says that it's a cross-genre book that appeals to all readers everywhere, ask him to compare it to some popular novels so you can figure out which genre it is. Then, before you start the edit, explain to him how you'll be editing it and why.

For example, the cross-genre book that appeals to all readers everywhere doesn't exist and would be impossible to edit: Is swearing okay? Drinking? At the very least, work with your author to provide some type of definition or comparison to help you know what to expect.

Suppose your author describes it as *Pride and Prejudice* meets *Mission Impossible* meets *Cars*. Determine which is the primary genre (let's say it's the action-adventure of *Mission Impossible*), then edit the book as if it's an action-adventure novel with heavy romantic and coming-of-age subplots. Make sure that you tell the author what you're doing so he knows how you'll be approaching the edit.

Also keep an eye open for anything that might be inappropriate in the manuscript's genre; for instance, main characters in Christian novels who live with their boyfriends or girlfriends or a young-adult story that frequently references alcohol. There might be some instances where those situations would be appropriate (if the Lord convicts the unmarried couple so they decide to live apart or if the character in the YA novel grew up with an alcoholic parent), but, generally, those elements would be considered inappropriate for their genres. Point out those areas and explain your concerns so the author can decide how to handle each situation.

Undercharging

Undercharging isn't a craft issue as much as it's a business issue, but it's common among new substantive editors. Below is an ad I found at an online freelance site where writers can search for editors and editors can bid for jobs.

“Currently working on completing my first book and in need of an editor. I am looking for an editor for grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, relevance, paragraph structure . . . I want to ensure that this book has been reviewed over with a fine-tooth comb.”

The offered pay for this intense review? \$150.

Remember when we were talking about how long it might take to finish a book edit? This writer is offering to pay \$1.50 to \$2 *per hour* for an edit. Why would anyone think they could pay someone that little for a professional service?

Because they can.

As long as there are editors willing to work for pennies, that's what authors will expect to pay.

Don't get me wrong—I started by doing *lots* of underpaid work, but I made sure my clients understood that it was a special rate. It was my first memoir edit or my first devotional edit, so I offered a one-time discount (often offering to work within a client's budget). I made it clear, however, that any future edits would be charged at my normal rates. I do occasionally provide discounted rates for special circumstances, but those are the exceptions, not the rule.

Now that I have more editing experience, I'm quite firm in my rates. I don't compromise on regular projects, and no experienced editor should for several reasons:

1. It devalues what we do when we work for \$10/hour. That's less than a McDonald's employee makes, but you need hours of extra training and education to edit.
2. It gives authors unrealistic expectations about editing rates.
3. It makes it impossible for you (and difficult for others) to make a living when you work for \$10/hour before taxes.

There's no hard-and-fast rule about how long you can or should work for reduced rates, but here's my recommendation: let your rates rise with your confidence. Once you raise your rates, don't compromise. Your time, education, and experience are valuable. Don't let anyone convince you otherwise.

Things to Watch For

Pet Words

This isn't technically a craft issue, but it's something you should be aware of and look for, as it can mean the difference between a good book and a great book.

Pet words (or phrases) are those words and phrases that appear over and over again in a manuscript. These aren't your typical overused words like *that*, *just*, or *so*. Pet words are specific to your author. They're easy to spot because multiple POV characters use them regardless of whether or not it's appropriate for each character.

These aren't the same as catchphrases or quirks. For example, I had one author whose main character regularly said *good golly*—it worked because only the main character used the phrase. In the same novel, however, several characters would say or think *fit and feisty*. While it's true that my husband and I often describe things in the same way, that's because we've lived together for more than a decade. Having two or more characters from different backgrounds, experiences, and education levels all describing a woman as *fit and feisty* stands out—clearly, it's how the author saw the character. It was her pet phrase.

In another Western historical novel, every character stood and brushed off their backsides. The old women, young men, and children—all of them brushed off their backsides. To make it more realistic, I suggested things like having the female lead shake out her skirts or having the male lead brush the dirt off with his hat. Anything to provide distinct, unique descriptions.

Keep an eye open for those unique words and phrases. Point them out to your author and let him or her decide how to handle them.

Nondescript Words or Actions

Often in a manuscript—especially in a highly-emotional scene—characters will turn away or walk away from each other to put space between them. The idea behind that action makes sense,

but more often than not an author will use nondescript words to describe what happened. The problem is that they don't show anything.

Here are some examples:

Beth stormed through the door and looked around before marching down the street.

Nondescript: "looked around." What did she look at—did she look up at the buildings or down the street at the people? What did she see?

Ryan and Lois stood in the park glaring at each other. When she wouldn't apologize, he turned and walked away.

Nondescript: "turned and walked away." Walked where? If they're in a park, he can go in any of 360 degrees. How far did he turn? Where did he walk to and why?

As soon as she dared, she snuck into the bank.

Nondescript: "as soon as she dared." How did she know it was time? What changed that she had the courage to move?

It's not necessary to show *all* the descriptions *all* the time (sometimes it's appropriate to quickly tell what happened), but these are nondescript words that tend to be overused, and it's hard to envision a story if too many details are missing. Being aware of these nondescript phrases now will help you spot them in the future.

That's a wrap. I hope you'll take advantage of the assignment to practice identifying some of these potential pitfalls and how to avoid them.



LESSON #4 ASSIGNMENT

Complete two sample edits to earn your certificate of completion for the course.

This lesson is all about practicing the substantive edit while avoiding these common pitfalls and mistakes. I've provided several samples for you to choose from (or feel free to edit them all!).

Sample One

The next day the campus was celebrating the victory of the Flying Men's hockey victory. The team had been having bad luck the past few years, and they had always been eliminated during first round play. Everyone was calling this year "the year for the Flying Men."

It was also the first day Sarah officially returned to her classes. Thursdays were her days for Sociology, Religion, Theatre, and French. The first part of the day seemed to drag on. There were short reunions in class, but they weren't the reunions Sarah wanted. By the time Theatre class was over, it was one thirty in the afternoon. Roger picked Sarah up after her class.

How are you doing? He asked, taking her bag. Sarah smiled and nodded her head. This was the only time during the day when she could see him. Their schedules conflicted too much.

I'm glad to be back. I got tho bored thitting in that room all day.

Roger walked slowly to allow Sarah to keep up. With her right hand still partly in a cast, it was difficult to move quickly.

I am tho hungry, she laughed as her stomach began to growl. I can't wait to eat an apple!

Sarah, has anyone told you about the draft yet? Roger inquired nervously. She shook her head. Roger waited a few minutes, until they reached a small bench before continuing.

The hockey draft is later this year. I've tried not to think about it, but I have until one month after the championship game to declare eligibility for it. I've already played two years here. This will be my third season and a lot of people have been talking to me about it.

Will you declare eligibility?

As far as playing goes, I think I should. There are lots of players who start right out of high school in order to train for a few seasons.

You ARE ready to play, Sarah admitted. She was looking at her hands and she could sense that Roger was staring forward, too.

But I don't know if I'm ready to leave Patterson.

Sarah took Roger's hand and looked directly at him.

Plenty don't make me the deciding factor. Do what you have to. I'll underhand either way.

Sarah smiled as her mind tried to piece everything together. Roger gently pulled Sarah forward and held her in his arms.

I'm not sure what to do. I've been praying about it.

Sarah nestled comfortably into Roger's gentle hold.

Things will work out, Sarah reassured him.

She began to laugh silently, but her body soon began to shake as she laughed out loud.

Roger looked down at Sarah, who was trying to remain calm. Unfortunately, every time they made eye contact, she began to laugh again.

What? Roger demanded.

I'm sorry, but here I am, thumping like a little girl because I can't stay on the ice. She laughed. I'm trying but it's still hurting. Roger laughed at Sarah's strange concern.

I don't care if you never pronounce it, he teased. Roger checked his watch. It's 2:30. Tone was going to the rink to do sprints for coach.

Sarah tensed as she thought about a confrontation with Tone.

I've never been nervous about talking with Tone, she spoke quietly. For as long as I can remember, I've seen Tone at least every other day. I can't imagine what's wrong that he keeps avoiding me. Have you noticed anything at practice?

Roger shook his head. He's put everything into hockey. He's been the first on and the last off of the ice all week. I've never seen him so dedicated.

I'll wait until French. How long do you have?

My classes are done for today. Why?

I need to see Dr. Omri today. If I have anything to say about it, that's what is coming off. My parents are gone, too.

We're taking your car, smiled Roger.

Sample Two

Catherine pushed the lettuce around her plate with a sigh. Nothing interested her. The food bored her as much as her latest novel ideas. The initial thoughts appealed to her, but once it was in front of her, it was boring.

“You can't keep playing with your food,” Leslie said. “Eventually you'll have to eat it.”

Catherine grimaced and dropped the fork on her plate. “I think I'll wait for my sandwich.”

“Wow, you are in bad shape.”

“Nothing interests me,” she said. “I miss the college days, when we had to write about certain subject matter, you know? I mean, I couldn't write about Faulkner in a British lit class. At least there was some structure, some framework to stay within. This whole 'pick a topic, any topic' thing is too broad.”

Leslie laughed, her short, blond curls bouncing around her cherubim cheeks. “You couldn't decide then, either,” she reminded her friend. “You always switched topics at least three times, and even then you only settled on one because we would only have a week before the due date.”

“But there were still some guidelines,” Catherine said, pointing a well-manicured finger at her former roommate.

No one understood Catherine's writing habits better than Leslie. After two years living together on campus and another three years at the same newspaper, she could anticipate which angles Catherine would investigate, though her findings and presentation always surprised Leslie. What she never understood, however, was how hard it was for Catherine to settle on a topic. That never seemed to get any easier for her.

“Well, you know you need to find a true story,” Leslie reminded her.

“That's the problem,” said Catherine. She fingered a long strand of red hair and twisted it between her fingers. “I can't find anything that I want to write about.”

“What about that family in Georgia?” Leslie suggested. “What was it again? They couldn't have kids, and when they finally adopted a baby girl, but the agency didn't tell them the mother was a meth addict.”

Catherine rolled her eyes. “Depressing.”

Leslie sipped her iced tea, her blue eyes scanning the restaurant. “What about that couple?” she whispered, motioning to an older, interracial couple sitting at the bar. They wore expensive suits, but both journalists noticed the man's scuffed shoes and the woman's Target purse. “Why do you suppose they're dressed up?” Leslie asked. “Are the suits their standards, or the casual accessories?”

“I can't write a book about that,” said Catherine. “Nobody cares.”

“But consider everything. They must be in their sixties. I can't imagine it was easy for them to have an interracial relationship in the sixties and seventies.”

“That would make a good story,” Catherine agreed, smiling. “But it's all speculation. For all we know they're friends, here for a funeral. He forgot to pack his shoes. Her purse strap broke. Now they're stuck with whatever else they had available.”

Leslie shook her head. “Talk about depressing. Okay, so what's the problem? Why can't you decide on a topic this time?”

The waiter interrupted as she set two sandwiches on the table in front of them. After refilling their teas, he disappeared and left them to their meals. Catherine looked at her turkey reuben. She had ordered a tangy, sour sandwich between twice slices of chewy, homemade bread, but now that it was in front of her, the bitter, fermented cabbage on soggy toast looked unappetizing.

“Eat it!” Leslie ordered, biting into her own sandwich. “Now, what's the problem?”

“All five of my books have been so depressing,” she said. “Every time I read about something in the paper or in a magazine and I would research it, then fictionalize the rest of the details. But everything was depressing. The little girl who disappeared, the man who's wife left him with newborn twins.” Catherine shook her head.

Sample Three

Addie stumbled back to her apartment. She eventually opened the door and crawled up the stairs. She passed out on top of her bed.

Addie rolled over Sunday morning and looked at her clock. 9:00 am. The previous night clung to her clothes and hair. The smells and memories rushed back to her. Jake. With the best of intentions, Addie wasn't able to resist the pull of the past. She pushed the lines with Jake, but she'd stopped. She tried to defend herself. She hadn't done anything with him...technically. But she remembered how much she wanted to. She remembered that clearly.

Addie needed to get out of her clothes. She needed to rid herself from every memory of the previous night. Her stomach lurched. She needed to get everything out, and her body responded. Stripping off her clothes as she ran, Addie made it to the bathroom just in time. Her body heaved out the alcohol as her mind tried to wipe away the memories. Grasping the cold, familiar feel of the ceramic bowl, Addie wept. As her tears turned to sobs, her body responded. The minutes passed like hours as Addie vomited and cried out every regret.

Forty minutes later Addie crashed on the couch. She had scrubbed herself viciously under the steaming water of the shower and changed into freshly laundered pajamas. She inhaled the scent of jasmine and a summer's breeze. She rearranged the couch pillows and nestled in for a nap.

Her phone rang. Addie moaned. She sat up and looked around. She didn't see the phone anywhere. Dragging herself off the couch, she stumbled around the room. Realizing the phone was in her purse, Addie dumped the contents onto the kitchen table. The ringing stopped just as she grabbed the phone. Addie looked at the display. Rosens. Addie called her mom.

“Hi honey!” Bea greeted her cheerily. “I just called you!” Addie rolled her eyes. Caller ID still confused her mother.

“I know. I saw your number on my phone. What's up?”

“I was just calling to see how your weekend is going. Didn't you have a wedding?”

“I did. The rehearsal was Friday and the reception was last night.”

“Everything went well? You sound tired.”

“Late night,” she said.

“Adelaide Nicole Rosen, you are destroying your body!” her mother replied.

Bea never lectured Addie on her drinking. She knew her daughter didn't care about the spiritual implications of her lifestyle, but Bea took advantage of every opportunity to remind Addie of the damage being done to her body. If moral conviction couldn't keep her daughter out of the bars, maybe a good health and safety lecture could.

“You aren't going out alone, are you? Please tell me you met a new friend and went out together?”

“Sorry, no, I went out alone. I just went to a few places within walking distance from my place,” she explained. “I took my business card with me, as well as the name and number of one of my co-workers in case I needed it. I met some nice people.”