



SUBSTANTIVE EDITING FOR FICTION 301

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LESSON #5

Working Well with Challenging Clients

When I originally outlined this class, I called this lesson “Difficult Clients.” As I started writing the lesson, however, I realized it’s not necessarily the clients who are difficult—sometimes there are just situations that require a delicate touch and some extra attention. That’s why I changed the title to “challenging” clients.

Before we start, I want to clarify that this *isn't* a client-bashing session. Instead, I want to present some challenging situations that you might face so you’ll not only have an idea of what to expect but also a plan for how to respond.

This lesson will include these topics:

- The Client Who’s Not Ready
- The Client Who’s Not Prepared
- The Client Who Disregards *CMOS*
- The Client Who Defends Everything
- The Client Who Ignores Everything
- Red Flags

This lesson will be slightly shorter than the previous lessons, as it’s more about preparing you for the fact that not all of your clients will want or accept your advice. I believe you’ll learn more from doing than reading, so please don’t skip the assignments.

The Client Who’s Not Ready

At some point in your career, you’ll be asked to edit manuscripts that aren’t ready for editing. Those are the situations when everything needs work (formatting, characterization, punctuation, grammar, etc.) or when it’s hard to find anything on the page to compliment (because you’re not sure where the story is going or what the characters hope to achieve).

It may seem like a sample edit of two to three pages isn't long enough to know whether or not a manuscript is ready for an edit, but you'll know. You'll start the edit and run out of space in the margins for all of your comments (in that case, Microsoft Word will condense the comments, making them impossible to read without clicking on them individually); or you'll try to use Track Changes to make some suggestions and the page will fill with red lines and letters, leaving only a few original words on the page.

When that happens, the first thing I do is delete the comments and turn off Track Changes, because I don't want to scare or discourage the writer by sending a manuscript rendered illegible by all of the marks and changes. Then I look for the good, but I'm also honest with the writers. I let them know that the level of editing required is substantial and that it will be a lengthy and expensive edit that will still require quite a bit of work on their end (for the reasons mentioned in the last lesson's section on rewriting). It's virtually impossible to address all of those issues in one edit, so I let them know it will take at least two.

At that point, I generally offer two options—a mentoring relationship, in which we work through the manuscript together, chapter by chapter, to identify and correct weak spots and errors, or a critique, where I read the full manuscript and return a 4–10-page assessment with suggestions and recommendations.

Mentoring

According to *Merriam-Webster*, a mentor is “a trusted counselor or guide.” A mentoring (or coaching) relationship is exactly what you'd expect it to be—you step out of your editor's hat and guide your author through the novel-writing process.

Not all editors do (or should) offer mentor services, as it's much more a teaching role than it is an editing role. You're not only editing the manuscript but also helping the author master the fiction-writing craft as well as teaching him or her how to self-edit. It's a longer relationship, and there's much more communication involved—you'll need to be able to teach fiction-writing elements in a variety of ways to reach those with differing learning styles.

Mentoring isn't for everyone, and that's okay. I had five years of teaching experience before I started teaching writing and editing classes in person and online, so offering mentoring services isn't much of a stretch for me. If you're not comfortable taking on that role, consider a critique.

Critiques

A critique is an assessment of the manuscript without the page-by-page edits. It includes the same critical eye, but instead of making notes on the manuscript, I send an assessment (often 4–10 pages long) that describes where I noticed weaknesses, what they were, and suggestions for how to fix them.

Critiques are great options for authors because they're much less expensive and faster than edits. Authors receive the same general feedback; they're just required to do more of the work.

Whether I suggest a mentoring relationship or critique, I always recommend resources I think will help the author. For example, if the author struggles with point-of-view, I'll suggest specific books on point-of-view (instead of generic writing books). I'll also recommend classes that I've taught or taken, as well as conferences, I think might be most helpful to them.

The Client Who's Not Prepared

This is a lesson I learned the hard way, so I want to share the experience with you so you can learn from my mistakes (yes, I admit that I'm partially to blame for what happened). Let me set the stage:

A writer wanted to hire me to perform a substantive edit on a devotional, but first he wanted to see a sample edit. He sent two pages from a different devotional, not from the manuscript he wanted me to edit. That was my first mistake—I never should have agreed to edit anything other than the manuscript in question.

I did it, though. I provided a sample edit and secured the editing gig. The first few pages of the actual manuscript were similar in style and content to the sample pages, but then it changed. I found myself not understanding correlations and confused by certain comparisons. There was also quite a bit of repeated information. I didn't change the manuscript, but I left detailed comments and suggested deletions where phrases were repeated. By the end of the manuscript, there were a significant number of edits and comments.

That was my second mistake—when I realized how much more work was involved, I should have sent the first few chapters to the client so he could see what I was doing. Even though I had performed the same work on both documents, the number of edits noted on the full document surprised my client (and not in a good way). To this day I stand by the work I performed—it was a good edit full of good suggestions—but I should have given the writer a look at the work so he could have prepared himself for it. He had never hired a substantive editor, so he didn't know what to expect. He thought the writing was great. I should have done more to prepare him.

That experience inspired me to do two things with all future edits:

1. Only accept sample pages from the beginning of the manuscript being edited.
2. Always send the first three chapters to the client so he can see what's going on.

By incorporating those two policies, I haven't had any more unpleasantly surprised clients. You don't have to institute either of these techniques. I simply want to let you know what's worked for me so you can see that there *are* ways to preemptively diffuse a potentially difficult situation.

The next three challenges will only come up if you're communicating with your author throughout the editing process, but they're worth addressing, as you may decide to work this way with some of your clients.

The Client Who Disregards *The Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS)*

It's hard for my editor's mind and heart to understand this, but some authors not only break the rules but also don't care that they're breaking them. (I'll wait for your face to stop twitching . . . better?)

Here's what happened with me: my client didn't like the look of the correct way to write the possessive form of *James* (which is *James's*). After looking at the first three chapters (which I sent to him for the reasons stated above), he emailed me to let me know that he didn't like the looks of it, so he wanted to keep it written *James'*.

I don't make it a habit to argue with clients, but I did want to make sure he was aware of the *CMOS* rule regarding possessive apostrophes. So I sent him the rule number and explained that book publishers use *CMOS* as their grammar guidebook. However, I also let him know that it was his call—I could not (and would not) force him to follow *CMOS* guidelines. I only wanted to make sure he was aware of the industry standards to help him increase his chances at publication.

That's all you're obligated to do as an editor—make sure your author has all of the correct information, but it's his decision whether or not to use it.

The Client Who Defends Everything

Someday you'll find yourself editing a manuscript that makes you scratch your head. There will be characters with unclear goals and weak motivations. They might be over-the-top dramatic (the man who screams *every* time he's angry or the woman who cries *every* time she's upset), or they're too stereotypical (the high school quarterback who stuffs the captain of the chess club into a locker).

Or there will be plot issues: The woman stranded on the side of the road climbs into a car with a stranger while texting on her phone (why didn't she just call a tow truck?). The couple running from the law eat at a dive bar, then stay for karaoke (their lives are on the line—why would they stop?).

The possibilities are endless, but your reaction will be the same: you're not sure why something happened, or you don't believe the motivation behind it.

When these things happen, I make sure to point them out to the author. I leave a comment to explain what doesn't make sense and why. Then I'll often give one or two suggestions for how to tweak the situation. If it's a serious issue that will leave too long of a comment, I leave a brief note on the document, then give more information in the email when I send back the manuscript.

Most of the time the authors will heed your suggestions and make some type of adjustment to those weak areas. There will be times, however, when the author isn't concerned with your concerns.

“It makes sense to me.”

“I understand your concerns, but I really like this scene. I don’t want to change it.”

“I think the readers will get it.”

Once again, you don’t want to argue with your client—ultimately, it’s his decision whether or not to take or leave your suggestions. Just make sure you’ve made it clear why something concerns you (and make sure your concern is based on publishing standards, not personal preferences), then let the author decide what to do.

The Client Who Ignores Everything

Freelance editing doesn’t mean you’ll work only with individuals. I’ve taken several editing jobs with publishers who’ve hired me to edit manuscripts that were already under contract. In one such instance, the publisher signed the author with the understanding that the manuscript needed a full substantive edit—the publisher liked the plotline and unique setting, but there were a couple of plot holes and characterization issues that needed to be addressed.

I performed the substantive edit and sent it to the author for his review and updates. The plan was that the author would send the revised manuscript back to me for another edit before we sent it off to the publisher, so I waited to receive his revisions.

When I finally got the updated manuscript, I saw that the author had ignored all of the big suggestions. He’d cut some repetitive information and fixed the grammar, but all of the plot holes remained. In this situation, I had to get the publisher involved, as the publisher had requested specific changes.

If this had been an independent client, my work would have been done: I performed the edit as discussed (and contracted), and I made sure the author understood why I suggested each change. After that, there’s nothing an editor can do. As always, it’s the author’s decision whether or not to accept the changes.

Red Flags

A great way to deal with challenging situations is to avoid them completely. That’s not always possible, but there are a few red flags you can watch for that will help you know whether or not you’re about to step onto a minefield. Here are some of the red flags you might see:

1. **I’m looking for an editor. How much do you cost?** If an author’s first question is about the cost, then there’s a good chance your author is either on a tight budget that won’t accommodate a substantive edit or is unwilling to pay reasonable rates.
2. **This is the story that God gave me.** More than one editor has spoken with an author who’s unwilling to change anything in the manuscript because it’s a story given by God. These authors tend to believe that all of their mistakes and errors are okay because they’re part of the God-given story.

3. **Can you please explain your theology, let me know how often you attend church/how you're involved, and summarize your testimony for me?** This can be a sign that the author isn't looking for an honest edit; he's looking for someone who agrees with his theology. That's understandable if the author is targeting a specific denominational publisher, but it's not necessary. You're a professional. It's your job to know the industry standards so you can edit to increase the chances of publication. If the author is more concerned with your theology than with your professionalism, it could lead to confrontations.
4. **My novel is appropriate for men, women, and children ages 9 to 99 who read anything from sweet romance to action-adventure.** This author clearly doesn't understand who his audience is because that isn't a specific audience. Not only is it an impossible book to write but it's also an impossible book to edit.

I'm not saying that you shouldn't contact any of these authors or that these questions and statements will always turn into challenging situations. I do, however, want you to realize that just because an author asks about your editing services doesn't mean he or she will actually want or respond well to your services.

That's it for this lesson! I hope that you'll take the extra time to do all of the optional assignments, as you'll learn more from doing than from simply reading about my experiences. Good luck!



LESSON #5 ASSIGNMENTS

Complete either assignments #1 and #3 or #2 and #3 to earn your certificate for this course.

Assignment #1

Below is an example of a request you might receive through the Christian Editor Connection. Based on what's written here, assess the author's story, and write a response to bid on the project.

Working Title: Redeeming Angel

Word Count: 90,786

Fiction or Non: Fiction

Is the manuscript complete? Yes

Genre: Speculative Chick Lit

Target Audience: Male and Female

Target Age Range: Adult, Young Adult, Teen

Jan, a high-ranking angel, she wants to understand redemption, so God sends her to live among humanity to understand the full impact of living in a fallen world. Jan believes that her journey with a human heart will be easy, but she easily becomes discouraged because she didn't understand human life would come with trials and tribulations. Moreover, she's not used to being separated her from the Father (because of humanity's sinful nature). Estranged from God, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, she makes it a priority to re-establish her relationship with them.

While on earth, she is adopted into the Smith family and becomes friends with her new sister, Lois. Lois tries to guide Jan through life.

Jan, used to the constant action of the life of a warrior angel, becomes bored with her human existence. Instead of trusting God and her older sister's advice, she looks for fun in the distractions most young people experience, including alcohol and clubbing, but nothing is what she expects it to be. Even romance comes at a price, unlike in the novels she reads to occupy her time.

Jan's friends at work, Tristan and Jenny, are strong believers. He is a traditional Christian and Jenny a Messianic Jew. Jan gets along with them famously, but her pride keeps her from accepting their advice to give her heart to the Lord.

Wanting excitement and romance, Jan is attracted to her sister's boyfriend, Ken. Jan forces their break up, then starts her own relationship with him.

Meanwhile, Lois falls into the trap of purely physical relationships. This, of course, is at the consternation of Jan and their family. Lois becomes more involved with Chris the lothario and his crowd, and once again repeats the mistakes of her youth. Both sisters act spiritually and

morally irresponsible. Jan won't acknowledge that her past angelic relationship with the Father is negated by her humanity. Lois's physical relationship with Chris doesn't satisfy her true need for real love.

Jan eventually realizes that her relationship with Ken cannot work. Obeying the Holy Spirit, she leaves him. Her obedience opens her eyes, and she finally understands her fallen humanity. She then makes Jesus her Lord and Savior. She also makes amends with Lois and her friends, and even gets a special visit from God and her angel friends. Jan tearfully welcomes them back into her now-redeemed life. Lois also has her eyes opened and realizes she mistakes. She decides to quit pursuing relationships out of rebellion and insecurity.

Jan's spirit is finally set free, and she lives totally for the Lord again. She also helps Lois and Ken reconcile. She realizes that, in Tristan, she has always loved the one right there in front of her the whole time. And, that even when the Father shunned her, He never stopped loving her.

Assignment #2

Below are sample pages submitted from an author looking for a substantive edit. Provide a sample edit and writing assessment. I'll respond in a "challenging" way. Read through the response and decide how to respond to the author.

Sarah silently shut the large metal door before slipping into the nearest seat. Below, a handful of skaters warmed up on the ice. Her eyes searched until she spotted a certain player sitting on the bench and wrapping his wrist with a bandage. She saw his subtle look around the darkened arena. She smiled. Tone Mason was Sarah's best friend from high school. She'd watched him skate since they were kids. For the past three years he'd played hockey for Patterson University. This would be his final season as a Warrior.

Tone skated easily across the ice toward his teammates. Sarah blushed when she recognized the player Tone had approached: Roger Bates. The Patterson Warriors' top defense man. Sarah not only admired his hockey skills, but also his leadership on the ice as team captain. Tone knew about her crush. He knew that she sneaked in to watch practice. She suspected he'd singled out Roger to embarrass her.

When the coach finally came onto the ice, the barking began. Coach Phillips commanded attention with a voice that echoed throughout the arena. Sarah respected the coach and his techniques. She enjoyed watching how he ran his practices and inspired the players.

“Hey!” Sarah’s head snapped to look left. A janitor stood a few rows away. She ignored his threats and warnings as she dashed out the side door.~

“Finally got caught,” Tone smiled as stepped out into the cool night air. He tossed Sarah his gym bag. She nearly crumpled under its weight.

“What did I do to deserve this great honor?” she asked, heaving the monstrous bag onto her shoulder. “And I only got caught because that janitor didn't finish his work on time.”

Tone ignored her defense. “Roger asked about you today,” he teased. A bitter gust of wind nipped at her cheeks.

Sarah sighed and readjusted the gym bag. “Why do you insist upon harassing me?” she asked.

“He wouldn't have asked if you had stayed out of the arena. He doesn't actually know that it was you. He just asked if I knew the nut in the bleachers,” Tone laughed, enjoying Sarah's uneasiness. He playfully tugged on Sarah's ponytail. She snarled.

“Don't tease,” she said. “I should know better than to mention any infatuations to you. I don't know Roger and he doesn't know me. That alone is a reason enough to forget I ever said anything. Beside, all I said was I like his style.”

“Don't kid yourself. You were practically swooning.” When they finally reached Sarah's car, Tone opened the passenger side door for Sarah. She raised an eyebrow.

“I want to drive,” he grinned. Sarah bit her lip as she looked at the shiny, new Cobalt. “I promise to be careful,” Tone said, holding his fingers in a Boy Scout salute. Sarah shifted the bag as she reached for her pocket.

“You're lucky I like you.”~

“I don't want to study anymore!” Sarah cried, throwing herself onto Tone's bed. She buried her face in his pillows and whined. She heard him laughing from the floor as the door clicked and slid open.

“Tone told me you never had to study,” a strange voice chuckled. Sarah looked up slowly. Her eyes widened in shock.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi,” said Roger. He moved to take a seat on Tone's desk chair. Sarah had met him at a few functions with Tone, but they'd never run into each other socially. It surprised her that he even recognized her. Realizing how ridiculous she must look, she sat up and brushed herself off.

“Sorry you had to see that,” she said, straightening her clothes. It was then that she looked at Tone's bed and noticed she had thrown herself onto his laundry, boxer shorts and all.

“They're clean,” Tone assured her as he followed her disgusted gaze. “I asked Roger if he'd mind helping us with the French midterm. He passed this class last semester.”

“Well, I'm not studying French anymore,” Sarah announced. She grabbed her purse from Tone's desk and walked toward the bedroom door. “I want to eat. Are you coming?”

“You buying?” Tone asked.

“As long as you order reasonably. You're invited too”, she nodded to Roger.

“I’m always hungry,” he said. He jumped up and stood beside Sarah. She glanced up at the tall frame beside her before turning to Tone.

“You know, I’m in a good zone right now,” he said. “I’d like to hit this French a little harder. Why don’t you just bring me something?”

“Sure,” Roger agreed and he headed down the hall. Sarah's pulse surged as she glared at Tone. He winked at her. She kicked at shoe at him before rushing after Roger.

Sarah met Roger at the front door. He held it open as she tried to calm herself down. Her anger toward Tone coupled with the anxiety of dinner with Roger. She focused her attention on deep breathing as she smiled at her unintended date.

Assignment #3

Below is an example of an ad on a website for freelance editors. Pretend that this ad came directly to you. Write a response to the inquiry.

Experienced Women’s Fiction Book Editor

Fixed-Price - Intermediate (\$\$) - Est. Budget: \$350 - Posted 14 days ago

Only freelancers located in the United States may apply.

I am looking for a freelancer to make **edits** to my Women’s Fiction novel in tracked changes. The **book** is 310 pages double-spaced and approximately 92000.

Editing **Content Writing** **Creative Writing** **English Grammar**