



SUBSTANTIVE EDITING FOR FICTION 301

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LESSON #6

The Author-Editor Relationship

In today's online economy and marketplace, there's a good chance you'll never meet your clients face-to-face. You'll rely on email, phone calls, and instant messages to stay in touch. Regardless of how you communicate, it's important to know how to communicate well. As a Christian, you have an even higher standard—you're not only communicating professionally but also representing Christ.

Last lesson we talked quite extensively about how to communicate with authors. In this lesson we'll dive deeper, including looking at examples, creating imaginary scenarios, and discussing how our Christian faith plays a role in our work as editors.

In this lesson we'll talk about these topics:

- Multiple Reviews
- Submitting Proposals and Query Letters
- Follow-up
- Communication Etiquette
- Honesty and Remaining Christlike

Once again, I'd like to encourage you to do as many of the assignments as possible—practicing now will help you build your confidence so you're ready to help your clients in the future.

Multiple Reviews

By now you have noticed that substantive edits require quite a bit of work, not only on your end but also for your authors as well. By the time you finish the edit, you'll likely have suggested changes to characters, plot, possibly even setting—there may be places in the story that end up looking completely different from the original.

Because of the extensive nature of a substantive edit, your clients may want you to perform a second run-through after they accept or reject your suggestions. There are a couple of ways to handle that. You can include the review in your original cost, or you can give the author the opportunity to request one later. In that case, you'll need to either negotiate a second contract or include the option for a final review in the verbiage of your original contract. Something like this will make it clear what you're offering to provide in the substantive edit and the review:

Editor will suggest changes to the Client, and the Client is free to either accept or reject any recommended changes. After the initial edit, the Client may choose to send the revised manuscript to the Editor for a follow-up edit at the same or different level of editing from the initial work. An additional charge will apply for follow-up/revision edits, which will require a new and separate editing agreement.

Make sure it's clear how much work you're willing to do in each step of the process so there's no confusion or surprises along the way.

Submitting Proposals and Query Letters

One question I always ask my clients is whether or not they have a specific publisher they want to contact. Not many do. Most authors are hoping to cast a wide net in hopes of attracting as many agents or publishers as possible. For that reason, they may ask for help with their proposals and queries.

It's completely up to you whether or not you want to provide proposal and query writing or editing services. Like the author, you're uniquely qualified to write either of those documents, because of your direct knowledge of the manuscript.

I'll be honest—writing book proposals isn't my favorite thing to do. But it's another opportunity to work with your client and it adds more value to your services by providing another area of help and expertise for your clients. If you've already edited the story, you could offer to write or edit a proposal for an add-on rate. I would encourage you to charge more for an à la carte proposal as you'll most likely want to read the manuscript before you write the proposal, and that time spent reading the story is valuable.

As most agents and publishers have specific guidelines regarding book proposals, it's hard to give an example of a "good proposal," other than to encourage the author to follow every single guideline. Most authors won't write a book proposal until it's requested anyway, as proposals are the second step in the submission process. The first step is the query letter.

Unlike proposals, query letters are fairly universal. They aren't full descriptions of the novels or the authors; they're professional letters written to spark interest and elicit a response. Formatted like a business letter, it should include the following:

- 12-point Times New Roman font
- Black text only

- 1-inch margins
- Left alignment (no indents)
- Single-spacing
- A space between paragraphs
- A greeting and a closing

There may be a few small differences regarding what the agent or publisher wants included in the letter, but most query letters follow a similar format, providing the following content:

- A personal greeting
- A short summary of the story (similar to the back-cover blurb on a book)
- The title, length, and genre of the novel (possibly comparable titles)
- A short author bio (including past publishing credits and writing experience)

Personal Greeting

This isn't an option; it's a requirement. Letters should never be addressed to Sir, Madam, Agent, or Editor. If you're writing the query for your client, make sure to include the name of the person you're sending the letter to. No one likes to get spam, and addressing a query letter "Dear Agent" makes the letter look like spam. Including the agent's name shows that the writer took the time to find the right person to contact.

The Hook

If the author has an elevator pitch, I recommend including that—it's the thirty-second line that hooks a person's attention. Here's the hook included in a query (and proposal) I sent to a publisher for my debut novel, *Summer Plans and Other Disasters* (previously titled *The Best Laid Plans*):

Callie Stevens planned every detail of summer vacation, from working with her brother to winning back her ex-boyfriend, but can she stay in God's will while planning out her life?

That hook needs to set up the story and give the reader a sense of what the main character wants in life/what her goals are. It's the reader's first introduction to the story, so it needs to convey a lot.

Short Summary

Next, there needs to be a story summary. This isn't just an introduction to the characters or the idea behind the plot—the reader should see the tension and have an idea as to what feeds that tension.

Elementary music teacher Callie Stevens returns home for the summer because she believes God is guiding her there to rekindle an old flame. In between leaving messages for Kyle, she devotes her time to working with her brother as the best assistant park superintendent she can be, despite her accident-prone tendencies. Her plan seems flawless until she realizes her brother's best friend (and her childhood crush) Ryan is living with her brother.

When Kyle won't return Callie's phone calls and after a few mishaps at work—including a trip to the hospital—she starts to doubt her plan. Callie wants to follow through, but with her eyes focused on her goal instead of the world around her, is she missing the signs that God's setting out for her?

Notice that the summary doesn't say that Callie is a control freak, but the reader gets the idea from the description of her. It also doesn't say that there's going to be a bit of a love triangle in the story, but it's implied in the revelation of her childhood crush. This summary reveals important details of the story and its conflict without saying "this is going to happen."

Book Stats

Next, it's time for the data: book length, genre, similar books, etc.

Set at the Old Mission Lighthouse in Traverse City, Michigan, The Best Laid Plans is 71,000 words and combines romance, humor, and a bit of coming-of-age in a contemporary setting. It's similar in tone to contemporary adult romances by Rachel Hauck and Jenny B. Jones.

Authors don't need to (and shouldn't!) make claims that their books will be the next "Best Sellers," or claim that they're "Dan Brown meets James Patterson" or "Karen Kingsbury meets Danielle Steele." Just stick with the facts.

Author Bio

Finally, the author needs to introduce himself or herself.

I'm a freelance writer, editor, and writing coach with more than 500 articles published in various periodicals. I am an active member of the American Christian Fiction Writers Association, the American Christian Writers Association, and The Christian Proofreaders and Editors Network (PEN). I currently teach Substantive Editing for Fiction 101, 201, and 301 through The PEN Institute and am a general editor for Lighthouse Publishing of the Carolina's historical romance imprint, Smitten.

This lets the query reader learn more about the author and his or her experiences.

If you're editing a query letter, make sure it includes all of these parts. Without them, it's missing the information necessary to help the reader decide whether or not to request sample chapters.

Bonus Tip

To help give your authors an edge in the query-letter game, they could also include a personal note to the agent/editor—not a note about themselves, but a note proving that the authors did their work and researched the agent/editor.

I noticed on your website that you're currently accepting submissions for contemporary inspirational romance. The Best Laid Plans is a 71,000-word contemporary inspirational romance similar in style to Rachel Hauck (an author whom you also represent).

This paragraph could be used as an introduction to the letter (before the hook) or as part of the statistics. Either way, it shows the reader that the author is not just sending hundreds of query letters to anyone calling himself an agent—it shows that the author did his homework. That in and of itself will help your author stand out from the crowd.

I've attached two successful query letters at the end of this lesson (after the assignments). These were sent to me by an agent who ended up contacting these authors and signing them because of their well-written queries.

For Fun

These are not jokes. These are quotes taken from actual query letters. Instead of attracting attention, agents (and teachers) use them as examples of what *not* to include:

This book is commercial fiction appropriate for book clubs everywhere.

I realize that you may not accept unsolicited materials, but I hope that there is an exception.

Part of the reason why I'm sending this is as a Test of sorts, while in my own "Artistic" paranoia I guess you can call it, is to see if you, the supposed Literary Agent, who is supposed to be looking for THE MOST PROFOUND OF ALL LITERATURE POSSIBLE, are what you say you are.

Here is my manuscript. I know it still needs editing, but you can evaluate it with this draft.

Hi! Are you wondering what my new book (book's title) is about?

Supposedly you're a literary agent, so you might like my book.

(If you see anything like this in a query letter, please edit it out.)

Follow-up

As an editor, you're asking an author to send you a manuscript they've worked on for months (or years) so you can point out all their mistakes. It's hard enough to ask for comments and criticism; it's even harder to accept them from a person you barely know and are hoping you can trust. That's why it's important to follow up and keep communicating with your client. Here are some ideas for when you should consider contacting your client:

- After the bid: if you haven't heard from the author in four to six days, send a follow-up note to make sure the bid was received and to see if the author has any questions.
- After the edit starts: it's a good idea to check in at the end of each week to let your client know how things are going.

- When you complete the edit: don't just send back the edited document; take some time to comment on what you read. You can also discuss future edits, whether or not you're available to help with proposals, etc.
- After you've sent back the manuscript: this is the perfect time to send a thank-you note.
- A few months later: send a thinking-of-you note to check in and make sure your authors don't have any questions. It's a great way to keep your name in front of authors.
- At Christmas: who doesn't love getting a Christmas card? I generally send cards out for one to two years after working with a client. (I do this less frequently now that I work almost exclusively online and rarely get a client's home address.)

Communication Etiquette

These days there are lots of ways to connect with your client, so you want to make sure you make the most of each encounter. These are some basic business-etiquette rules for communication that you'll want to consider adopting.

By Phone

First and foremost, make sure you set up an informative voice-mail message. Make sure people know who they've reached and what you want them to do (leave a message, call another number, etc.). On the flip side, do the following when you call someone:

- Introduce yourself
- State the nature of your call
- Speak slowly and clearly (especially when leaving a message)
- Use your manners (*please* and *thank you* go a long way)

By Text

Whether you like it or not, the majority of the world sends text messages, even in the business world. It's okay to communicate via text, just remember that it's still professional correspondence.

- Avoid slang and text abbreviations.
- Use proper grammar and punctuation.
- Include a greeting and farewell (don't assume people will recognize your number).

By Email

The same rules for texting apply to emails: grammar and content matter. There are a few other items you may want to include to give your email the professional look you want:

- Use a professional name: bigplumber487@aol.com screams amateur. You can easily create your own email domain and use brad@plumbingpros.com.
- Add a signature with your name, company name, and other contact information.

- Keep your signature brief: more than four to six lines is overkill.
- Let the other person make the first move: at some point you'll be comfortable sending quick, more personal emails, but let your client/customer make the first move. This ensures that he or she is comfortable in the relationship. Even then, keep the content work related and well written.

By Social Media

This is a great way to meet new people and stay in touch. Make the most of social media with these suggestions:

- Keep your posts relevant to your business and the social media outlet: LinkedIn is more professional; Facebook is more personal. Know the audience and post accordingly.
- Respond quickly: when people comment or respond to your posts, make sure you respond. Let them know that you're listening.
- Be polite. I cannot stress this enough—it's tempting to vent, spew, and rant, but don't. Manners *always* matter, even on social media.

Knowing how to communicate professionally will help you send the right message to your clients. A great rule that I once heard (but cannot remember who said it) is this:

Write all of your emails and social media posts as if they will be published in the New York Times!

Honesty and Remaining Christlike

I can't stress this enough—it doesn't help anyone if you're not completely honest with your clients.

I'm not talking about brutal honesty (which I don't believe has a basis in Scripture) but sincere honesty. If you try to sugarcoat your edits, you're giving your authors unrealistic expectations about what to expect from a substantive edit as well as false hope by believing that their work is better than it really is.

You may think you're sparing your authors' feelings, but it's deceitful to give anything other than an honest edit. A quick Bible study will show that *deceit* is often used in Scripture when talking about Satan and our enemies (NLT: Ps. 120:2; Prov. 15:4; Acts 13:10); *honest* is used when talking about God and his disciples (NLT: Ps. 7:11; Prov. 11:3; Matt. 22:16; 2 Cor. 6:8).

Another important thing to remember when performing and returning a substantive edit—the goal is to help the author, not to show how much you know.

If your goal as an editor is to prove to the world that you know more about fiction writing than other people, then I would encourage you to consider another outlet (start a blog or YouTube channel). Authors aren't looking for people who know more than they do; they're looking for people to help them achieve their goals for publication.

Keep that in mind when you make comments and suggestions to your clients. Also keep Luke 6:31 in mind: “Do to others as you would like them to do to you” (NLT).

Choose your words wisely. Every word you write (even if you’re not editing a Christian manuscript) reflects not only on you but also on the Lord. Even if your client is the rudest, most inappropriate person you’ve ever worked with, work as unto the Lord (Col. 3:23). He or she may not notice that you’re patient and kind, but God will.

And that, my friends, wraps up the final lesson of Substantive Editing for Fiction 301! I hope you’ve solidified your substantive editing foundation so you feel comfortable enough to launch your business and start accepting clients. If there’s anything I didn’t discuss that you want to know more about, please don’t hesitate to send questions.

Congratulations on finishing SEF 101, 201, and 301. Good luck!

(And if you want to dig deeper into fiction, join me later this year for Advanced Fiction Editing and SEF 401.)



LESSON #6 ASSIGNMENTS

Complete at least two assignments to earn your certificate for this course.

Assignment #1

If you're a writer, follow these guidelines to create a book proposal (as requested by WordWise Media Services). If you don't have a book manuscript, simply pick a favorite book and write a proposal as you think the author would have written it for the book.

WordWise Media Services:

TITLE PAGE: Your name and address upper left, word count upper right. Below that in the middle: (Genre) Fiction Proposal, then title, author name.

BEGINNING ON PAGE TWO:

The "Hook" — A concise summary, 50 words or less, of the story and why a reader should buy the book.

Synopsis: A summary of the story, 1-2 pages, single-spaced. Editors want a clear presentation of the plot outline and action. It's OK to leave out some minor characters.

Market: Who will buy this book? How can you contribute to the marketing effort beyond your circle of friends? Do you have a blog or website where you can post a teaser chapter?

Uniqueness: what makes this story different from other novels out there? Name 3-4 similar titles.

Author Creds: what qualifies you to write this novel? Education, journalism or writer training, specialized fiction study, research, reading patterns.

Characters. Make a list of the key characters, with brief descriptions.

Expanded Table of Contents: Provide a two to three-sentence summary of each chapter.

Prepare all of the above as a single Word (.doc) file, and your manuscript as a separate file.

Assignment #2

Here's an example of a fake, bad query letter (courtesy of www.writersrelief.com). How would you respond if an author asked you to edit this query letter?

Dear Sir and/or Madam:

Are you ready to have you're mind blown?

Please find enclosed my entire 300,000-word erotic romance thriller novel, The Tale of Blah, the first part of a five-book series based on events in my own life.

Have you ever wondered what it's like to rule the world? When the main character, Bob, wakes up after a bender in Las Vegas, he finds himself in the White House as the President of Earth. Bob is short and fat with thinning hair. He has a best friend name Bart whose wife Candy is the sister of the owner of an evil corporation named Jeff.

This book starts off slow but really picks up around the third chapter. Members of my prison writing group really liked it. Together, we could sell millions of copies to fans of Harry Potter, Catcher in the Rye, and the Bible.

Please call me with your thoughts. As this is a top-secret project, this is the only copy, so please return it with the contract ASAP.

Let's make some money,

Crazy L. Person

Assignment #3

Write a draft of each of these types of follow-up communication. Save them to use in the future:

- After the bid: if you haven't heard from the author in four to six days, send a follow-up note to make sure the bid was received and to see if the author has any questions.
- After the edit starts: it's a good idea to check in at the end of each week to let your client know how things are going.
- When you complete the edit: don't just send back the edited document; take some time to comment on what you read. You can also discuss future edits, whether or not you're available to help with proposals, etc.
- After you've sent back the manuscript: this is the perfect time to send a thank-you note.
- A few months later: send a thinking-of-you card to check in and make sure they don't have any questions. It's simply to keep your name in front of the author.
- At Christmas: who doesn't love getting a Christmas card? I generally send cards out for one to two years after working with a client.

Assignment #4

If you don't have an automatic email signature, create one for your work email.

Assignment #5

Respond to this email:

Your sample edit was mean and unnecessary. I've had dozens of friends read my book, and no one had any of the issues you did. Not to mention your rates are ridiculous. I've had people offer to edit my manuscript for a fraction of what you quoted! If you weren't so highly recommended, I'd go someplace else, and I still might.

Sample Query Letters

August 16, 2016

Dear Linda,

May I propose for your consideration: *You Are Epic! A Faith-Restoring Celebration of Mankind*, a work of creative nonfiction—in the inspirational genre. (76,000 words)

What do you see, Linda, when you look into the eyes of an “average,” “ordinary” human being? Be honest, now ... Is your vision of mankind cynical? I’m here to tell you: if you do not see the most *extraordinary* characteristics you have ever seen in your life, you ought to take a second look! *You Are Epic!* was written to help readers do exactly that—take a second look, and discover the epic qualities found in every human soul!

Think of this book as a guided tour through one of the greatest wonders of the world. No, not the elaborate passageways of the Taj Mahal; nor the impressive treasure chambers of the Egyptian Pyramids. This is a journey through the impressive passageways and treasure-rich chambers of the human soul! Feeling compelled to share his extraordinary vision of mankind with others, this impassioned “tour guide” sets out to describe the impressive characteristics of men and women he has encountered throughout life—and discovers, in the process, six fundamental attributes of human nature. Six epic characteristics found in every human soul!

Many inspirational books make you feel proud to belong to the human family. *You Are Epic!* will help you understand *why!* Go ahead, open up to any page, and embark upon a journey into the very heart of what it means to be human. The incredible stories in this book will take you across the heights and depths of the human soul. And by the end of your journey, you might just find yourself shouting: “Man is incredible! And look, *I* am a man!”

I am submitting my proposal to you, Linda, because of your long-standing commitment to Christian writing. In your conferences and judging experiences, you approach the craft of writing not only as a means to lift and inspire people; but as a craftsman approaches a sensitive yet powerful tool: capable of bringing valuable truths to others. *You Are Epic!* will show its readers a Godly way of living without preaching; it will restore a person’s wavering faith in humanity. There are a million objects in this world you might consider “average” or “ordinary.” Man is not one of them!

Thank you, Linda, for your love of books and publishing. If my proposal and sample chapters interest you, I am prepared to send a full manuscript.

Sincerely,

Troy Forsberg

Dear Linda,

I am seeking a literary agent for my completed inspirational novel, *For Such a Time as This*, an Esther story of love and redemption set during WWII.

In March of 1944, Jewess Hadassah Benjamin hides behind a false identity when she is pressed into service by SS-Kommandant Aric von Schmidt at the transit camp of Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia. In order to survive and maintain her cover as his secretary, Stella Muller, she must type lists sending her own people to Auschwitz during a “clean-up” process prior to an all-important Red Cross inspection by the Swiss. Stella also battles a growing mutual attraction for her Nazi employer, a man she knows she should hate. When her real identity is finally exposed during an attempt to save a young boy’s life, it is her faith and sacrifice that ultimately rescue an entire trainload of Jews. This is accomplished through an unlikely act of love from her enemy.

For Such a Time as This is approximately 117,500 words and will appeal to fans of inspirational, Christian, and historical women’s fiction. My novel is well-researched, and I feel my writing strength lies in creating vivid, cinematic characters, strong dialogue, and a unique storyline. My target publisher is Bethany House, as I feel they may be a good fit, but I am open to others. My marketing strategy for this book will include a Word Press Blog with reader discussion questions; advertising through Good Reads, Facebook, and my website. I’ve received endorsements from best-selling author Debbie Macomber, as well as Susan Plunkett and Krysteen Seelen, authors of several Guidepost Shelter Island series. I can include tag lines from best-selling author Susan Wiggs, Sheila Roberts, Anjali Banerjee, and Elsa Watson, though I’m working to obtain endorsements from other Christian fiction writers as well.

My inspiration for this story came from the Biblical work; I chose the WWII venue because of resonating parallels and my great interest in that time period. My writing background includes award-winning poetry in anthologies by the International Society of Poets and Reader’s Digest; my first novel, a Scottish historical romance, was a finalist in the Romance Writers of America National Golden Heart Contest. I’ve published travel articles and participate in a critique group of multi-published novelists. That said, *For Such a Time as This* is my “coming home” story—my testament to God that I now write for Him.

I hope you’ll consider my project. Thank you for your interest and consideration.

Blessings,

Kate Breslin