

# A Guide To Effective Editing and Critique

## Before You Start

If you are editing something that you have written yourself, leave a few days (at least) after finishing the first draft before starting the editing process. Like a cup of herbal tea, your writing needs time to breathe.



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If reading on screen, change the font type, size or colour so that your eyes see the text in a different light. If printing the story, leave wide margins around the outside for annotations.

**Tense and perspective.** Would the story feel more immediate if told in the present tense? Or perhaps the build-up of suspense would work better if told in the past? Is the use of tense consistent through the story? If there is a lot of internal thought in the story, would it be better suited to first person narrative? Or is there a need for a more omniscient third person approach? Don't forget about the possibility of writing in second person – this can be good for creating connection with the reader.

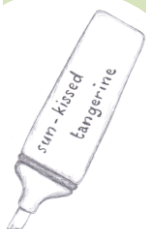
## Stylistic Edits

### The First Read Through

If you are editing or critiquing a story that you didn't write, it is important to have a sense of the overall story before getting down to the nitty-gritty of structural and stylistic edits.

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On the first read through, simply highlight where you think there may be issues. Trying to provide solutions at the same time will only slow you down.



**Concision.** Does each word, sentence or paragraph have a definite purpose or could it be done without? Are there redundant words that could be cut (i.e. 'it was a blue colour' or 'he clapped his hands')? Are there vague expressions (sort of, kind of, quite, a bit...) that don't enhance the narrative or elevate the tone? Is there flowery language that makes a mountain out of a molehill?



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**Specificity.** Whilst concision is important, it shouldn't be at the expense of reader understanding. If it's important that a wall is covered in bubble gum pink wallpaper (as opposed to plain pink paint) then it needs to be conveyed. If it would add enjoyment value/humour to the story to add that a character resembles a chipmunk then it needs to be included.

## Structural Edits

**The start.** Does the story begin in the right place? Ideally (because word count is at a premium), it should begin right in the heart of the action (i.e. midway through an event or conversation) without the need for too much build up – is the first paragraph strictly necessary or does the story stand up without it? How about the second paragraph etc.?

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**The overall structure.** Even the shortest stories should have a beginning, a middle and an end – are these elements present? The middle (where the action of the story takes places) should normally take up the majority of the words – if not, there is probably room for some trimming around the edges.

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**Pacing.** Does the story lag in places? Is there excessive description of a minor character or place without good reason? Are there peripheral actions/dialogue that don't lead anywhere? Alternatively, is there enough room for the story to breathe when building up tension or building up towards a critical reveal?

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**Clear up the jargon.** Certain stories will rely on (sometimes invented) technical terms or language. Is it clear what these mean? If an explanation is given, is it concise and free of other technical terms that might hinder understanding?

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**Showing vs telling.** Too much 'telling' can often be indicated by overuse of the verb 'to be' or by a succession of so-called 'weak' verbs ('go', 'do', 'think' etc.) When expressing emotions, is there an action or snippet of dialogue that could portray this rather than using a simple adjective or adverb? For describing physical appearance, is there a way this could be portrayed without resorting to 'John was good-looking' (i.e. 'John had the sort of appearance that turned heads in a crowd')? Can an important personality trait be shown through how a character acts or talks rather than it being bluntly stated?

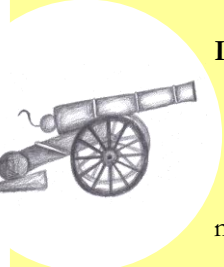
**Consistency of tone.** If a story is written in eighteenth century vernacular, it is important that this is maintained throughout. If a story is written from a child's perspective, any use of complex vocabulary should be avoided. When writing dialogue, each character should have their own unique voice.

**TIP – “Read through the dialogue for each character separately to ensure it stays consistent”**

**Rhythm and flow.** Do sentences move seamlessly from one to the next or is there a need for an additional ‘on-ramp’ or ‘off-ramp’ word/phrase to improve the flow? Unless for stylistic effect, adjacent sentences should have different rhythmic qualities and be of different lengths.

**TIP – “Reading through a passage out loud can really help get a feel for rhythm & flow”**

**Unwanted repetitions.** Look out for words that are repeated too close together (i.e. “The key to solving the mystery was to find the key to the locked door”) and think of alternatives. Also, look out for phrase repetition and repetition of structure (sentences that start with the same word; many sentences in a row that start with a qualifier).



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**Imagery/metaphor/simile bombardment.** These should be used sparingly. Unless there is a stylistic reason, multiple connected sentences based around imagery is probably too much.

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**Adverb overload.** Adverbs can often be quite a lazy way of story-telling and can be a sign of ‘telling’ rather than ‘showing’ (see above). For example, ‘she said angrily’ could easily be replaced by ‘she shouted’ or the anger could be portrayed within the dialogue.

**QUOTE – “The road to Hell is paved with adverbs... To put it another way, they’re like dandelions. If you have one in your lawn, it looks pretty and unique. If you fail to root it out, however, you find five the next day”**

**STEPHEN KING**

**Effective dialogue.** Like narrative, dialogue needs to be concise and, whilst it should reflect speech patterns, it doesn’t need to include all of the pauses, stumbles and stutters that we make when speaking. It should be consistent in tone (see above) and avoid unnecessary repetition. For dialogue tags, trust ‘say’ and ‘said’ – overuse of more flowery verbs can be quite clunky. And remember that dialogue tags are not needed with every piece of dialogue. Look out for naked dialogue (dialogue where the reader isn’t aware of what the characters are doing/thinking) but also keep an eye out for places where the dialogue is overdressed.

**QUOTE – “In writing, you must kill all your darlings”**

**WILLIAM FAULKNER**

### Polishing & Proofreading

**Read for spelling and grammar errors.** Try changing the font, font colour or font size to trick your brain into thinking it hasn’t read the words a hundred times before. Read aloud in a robotic voice. Read out of sequence (i.e. read line by line from the bottom). Check through for common cross-wire words such as ‘your’ vs ‘you’re’ or ‘there’ vs ‘their’ vs ‘they’re’. Use the find function in MS Word to check for consistency in spelling names (‘Katherine’ vs ‘Catherine’), places, jargon etc.



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**Read for formatting.** Check that all sentences end with a full stop. Use the ‘pilcrow’ (backwards P!) button to show/hide formatting – this can help identify double spaces and other formatting anomalies. Check that formatting of dialogue is consistent throughout (i.e. all single quotes or all double quotes). Check that formatting of internal thought is consistent (normally, italics).

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**One last check.** Ideally, leave the story to stew for a few days and then give it one final read.

**Further help.** Why not try listening to the story through the dulcet tones of a text to speech software? Why not try a proofreading tool such as Grammarly?

