

Mind Your Words

A Self-Editing Guide for Writers

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Appealing to an editor's perspective of structure and content can make your manuscript more marketable. So learn to mind your words. Toss aside your writing cap and put on a hardhat; you're entering a construction zone. Use this workshop summary as a blueprint for the process.

Step One: Structure Analysis

Resist the urge to completely reread your manuscript or begin rewriting. Simply note your discoveries.

Fiction and Memoir

1. Plot

Ensure all the primary turning points are located in the right place. Translate the percentages below into the appropriate page number for your manuscript. Do you have a visible, dramatic turning point on each of those pages or somewhere in the vicinity? If not, highlight an existing element to position as a turning point or create one.

- 10% Inciting incident. *Something disrupts the main character's life and forces a reaction.*
- 25% End of Act I. *Plans change and sends the main character in a new direction.*
- 50% Midpoint and middle of Act II. *The point of no return.*
- 75% The beginning of Act III. *A major set-back occurs.*
- 90% Climax or final turning point. *The final stand. Remaining pages tie up loose ends.*

2. Point of View

Evaluate your point of view (POV). A single POV is the preferred choice because it's easier for most writers to execute. Multiple POVs are powerful option on occasion but only when carefully constructed. If multiple POVs are essential, don't change POVs willy-nilly. Give each POV a unique voice in dialogue AND narrative.

Nonfiction

1. Outline

Update your existing outline or create a new one with these components:

- Chapter title
- Theme
- Main points
- Supporting stories and information

Analyse structure by considering these questions:

- Do the chapters progress in a logical order?
- Are they focused?
- Is each one about the same length to imply balance?
- Are any chapters so closely related that you could combine them or so long that you could divide them?
- Do each chapter's main points unfold in a logical order?
- Do they address everything you would want to know if you were new to the subject matter?
- Do you have sufficient support material for each point?

2. Prepare Citations

If you haven't already cited quotations and sources, do so. Editors appreciate the professional effort. Find formatting guidelines and the information required for various source types at https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html.

Don't begin rewriting just yet . . .

Step Two: Write a Logline

Capture the heart of your story in a single sentence. This is your logline. It's a useful focus tool for the editing process and a handy sales pitch. Consider the questions below. How do these elements converge to create your story? Infuse your logline with emotional appeal to snag attention.

Fiction or Memoire

1. What external conflict challenges your main character?
2. What internal conflict challenges your main character?
3. What is your theme?

Non-Fiction

1. What is the problem you want to address?
2. How does that problem impact people, particularly your readers?
3. What is your theme?

Now it's time! Dig into revisions using your notes and logline to guide the way.

Step Three: Add Impact

Now that we've dealt with structure, let's explore content. Good manuscripts employ specific strategies to hold reader attention. Employ these key ideas:

1. Add a hook to the beginning and end of each chapter. Incorporate *show, don't tell* details for emphasis and drama. (Yes, even in nonfiction.)

2. Turn information dumps into scenes (fiction and memoir) or draw from stories and other support materials to illustrate impact (nonfiction).
3. Foreshadow important scenes or objects. (This one primarily targets fiction and memoir, but sometimes it works in nonfiction too.)

Step Four: Lose the Excess

Most writers use too many words that don't add value, and that turns editors off. It makes reading and assessing more difficult. Learn to recognize excess and remove it. Start with one chapter and implement one reduction strategy at a time. Once you run through the list, move to the next chapter and run through each strategy again. Expect mental gymnastics.

1. Reduce passive verbs in all forms. Do this by altering the associated verb (*was **looking*** becomes ***looked***) or restructuring the sentence.
2. Avoid passive words whenever possible. ***Things*** is a good example. ***Some*** is another.
3. Use ***had*** guardedly. Once readers know you're pointing to the past, they don't need reminders.
4. Use adverbs and adjectives judiciously and only for intentional, needed emphasis.
5. Adjust double verb phrases such as *I **decided to run***, or *She **picked up her cup and drank***. The fact that your character *runs* show us she *decided*. The fact that she *drinks* implies she *picked up her cup*.
6. Remove repetition. (Unless it's intentional.) Repetition comes in two forms.

Direct repetition:

- a. Don't repeat words in close proximity. Even using *it* or *to* twice in one sentence risks diluting authority and impact.
- b. Avoid starting two or more sentences in a row with the same words.
- c. To avoid redundancy, don't combine synonyms. ***Any and all*** or ***if and only if***, for example. Also watch out for phrases like *end result*, *basic fundamentals*, *initial starting points*, and so on.
- d. Watch out for your favorite words—the ones that spill from a saltshaker.

Indirect repetition:

- a. Be on the lookout for similar ideas expressed with different words across sentences or paragraphs. Example: *The weekend **progressed as if nothing had happened**—although I remained foggy. **Nothing remarkable occurred***. Choose the most effective approach and discard the rest. Indirect repetition is subtle and may require more than one sweep.
7. Don't say what *isn't*. Tell us what *is*. What happens in a pause is far more interesting than the pause itself.

8. Review sentences with multiple commas. They often flag muddled statements. (With the exception of the Oxford comma, of course.)
9. Don't name character senses. You don't have to say *Jane saw the owl land on the fence, and her heart exploded with feelings of joy. The owl landed on the fence, and Jane's heart exploded with joy* is sufficient. (Think *show, don't tell*.)
10. Eliminate unnecessary narrative details and get to the point. If the content doesn't move the story forward (fiction and memoir) or illuminate a valuable point (nonfiction), it has no place in your manuscript.
11. Use dull dialogue attributives to avoid disrupting conversational flow. *Said* and *asked* are sufficient for all but extraordinary circumstances. When possible, avoid attributives altogether by adding character actions or mannerisms to indicate the speaker.
12. Use realistic dialogue. People do not speak with perfect grammar, and they like contractions.
13. Eliminate unnecessary details from dialogue. Get to the point. (Direct quotes in nonfiction can be reduced through the use of suspension points. See *The Chicago Manual of Style* for details.)

Step Five: Review

When editing is complete, review your manuscript with fresh eyes by changing the way it appears. Apply a new font or font size, print it out instead of reading it on the screen, or read it aloud. Ask yourself these questions:

- Do you like what you're reading?
- Do you feel emotionally connected to the main character or subject matter?
- Do any questions arise?
- Do any areas feel slow or boring?
- Does each chapter begin and end with a hook?
- Are all loose ends tied up by the time the story concludes?
- How do you feel when you're finished reading?

Trust your intuition. That little niggles—the one that says something is off—is usually right. Take note of each one.

If you make extensive changes, you may want to run through these editing steps again.

When you write, try to leave out all the parts readers skip.

~Elmore Leonard

Have fun with the process!