

Editing Primer: Editing Your Own Work

By Lillie Ammann

A series of blog posts appearing early 2008 on



www.lillieammann.com/blog



Editing: Part 1 – What is editing?

Several weeks ago, I wrote about a post about roundups, themes, and link love posts. I mentioned that I intend to write one series each month and asked for input on subjects readers would like to know more about. Word vixen left this comment:

I'd personally like to know more about editing. Particularly whether it's better to take a course in editing, or just buy a style book and study it.

Let's start with understanding what editing is. Misconceptions abound, even among "editors." One client brought me a manuscript that was riddled with grammatical errors, fragments and run on sentences, and wrong word usages. He told me he had paid an editor to edit the manuscript but wasn't happy with the results. No wonder! Apparently, the "editor" ran spell and grammar check and accepted the first recommendation every time. Instead of improving the manuscript, he made it much worse.

Although I **depend on spell-check** to catch typos and those certain words I always misspell, I probably reject more suggestions than I accept. **Spell-check is useful only to alert you to possible errors, and grammar-check is wrong more often than it's right.**

The American Heritage Dictionary defines editing this way:

To prepare (written material) for publication or presentation, as by correcting, revising, or adapting.

Often people think of editing primarily as making corrections, which is, of course, an important part of editing. However, **editing isn't just correcting what's wrong. It's also improving what's right.**

I tell my clients that my goal is to make their work sound like them ... only better.

My plan for this series is to focus on self-editing but also to include information that will be helpful to you if you are hiring a freelance editor or working with an editor at a publishing house.

Editing: Part 2 – What are the different kinds of editing?

In the first installment of the series, we talked about what editing is: preparing written material for publication or presentation. This series specifically covers self-editing: preparing your own work to publish, to submit to a publication, or – if you're a freelancer – to turn in to your client.

Now, let's talk about different kinds of editing. I'm not trying to present the definitive explanation of every kind of editing. Not everyone agrees, and you don't need to be an expert in editing to edit your own work. However, recognizing differences among kinds of editing will help ensure that you do all the editing you should do on your manuscript. You will also work more effectively with editors – freelancers or publishing house employees – if you know what they mean.

In the publishing FAQs on the Web site of the [Small Publishers Association of North America](#), Creative Minds Press says

There are two kinds of editing and then there's proofreading.

The Bay Area Editors' Forum [describes a dozen kinds of editing](#). The Editors' Association of Canada lists a similar number ... but with differences in names and definitions.

Many tasks (such as permissions editing and project editing) relate to publishing houses rather than to writers self-editing their own work. If you get a contract with a [traditional publisher](#) for your manuscript, familiarize yourself with the different kinds of editors who will be working on your book. If you want to know how to edit your own work, however, you don't need to know what markup/coding is.

I think the following categories cover what you need to do in self-editing:

- ◆ Content editing – also called developmental, substantive, or structural editing; revising; rewriting
 - Revising or moving entire paragraphs or sentences
 - Adding new material to fill in gaps and deleting original material that doesn't work
 - Re-organizing and restructuring content to improve flow and clarity
- ◆ Copyediting – also called line, mechanical, or stylistic editing
 - Correcting spelling, grammar, punctuation, and mechanics
 - Checking that the content follows the appropriate style guide or internal style sheet
 - Verifying facts and ensuring consistency
 - Clarifying meaning and improving readability by changing word choices and sentence structure
- ◆ Proofreading
 - Reading the final copy of the manuscript to check for errors
 - Ensuring that all changes have been incorporated and that no errors have slipped in during the editing process

Not everyone will agree with these descriptions, but I think authors self-editing their own work will be more effective if they look at editing as a process involving these three elements.

You may see different terminology on Web sites of individuals and companies offering editing services. If you plan to hire a freelance editor, be sure to understand what they mean by the terms they use. You will also see options of “light,” “medium,” and “heavy” editing. Again, these terms won’t mean the same to everyone, so you need to make sure you understand exactly what the editor will do. Most editors will give you a free sample edit of a small part of your work. Take advantage of those offers to see if what the editor does matches what you expect.

I offer only one level of editing, what would be described as “heavy” by most people. Although I realize no manuscript will reach perfection, I’m not comfortable with doing less than the best I can. The only “light” edit I ever did taught me to stick with “heavy” edits. Writers who want to create the best work they can will accept nothing less than “heavy” edits from themselves.

Next time, we’ll talk about when and how to start editing your work. In the meantime, I’d like to know your reaction to the categories of self-editing described above. Did I leave out something important to you? Did I include anything you don’t think should be part of the editing process?



Editing: Part 3 – When should I start editing?

The answer to the question “When should I start editing” is the same answer to many writing and editing questions: *It depends.*

Writers fall into two distinct camps when it comes to editing. Some like to edit as they write. They finish a scene or a chapter and go back and edit it before moving on to the next scene or chapter. I know a few successful and prolific writers who do a good job of editing as they write. Perhaps that has always been the way they write best or maybe they developed the skill through years of experience and the pressure of deadlines.

Editing as you write requires:

- ◆ An organized and well-planned outline: If you don't know exactly what plot point will occur in every chapter or the how you will structure your how-to book, you will end up editing material that you later decide to delete or change.
- ◆ The discipline to edit, then continue writing: Some writers spend so much time revising and polishing the first chapter or scene they never finish their book.

In my experience, most writers edit more effectively if they finish the first draft before they begin to edit. I've written about this earlier: [The First Draft: Pure Green Dreck](#), [Editing: Turning Dreck into Prose](#), [Ten Tips for Self-Editing](#), and [Seven Editing Tips for Professional and Nonprofessional Writers](#).

Other writers agree with me. Eric Eggertson at [Common Sense PR](#) wrote:

Only when you have the structure of the piece where you want it to be should you bother honing the wording, correcting spelling and checking facts. Why fix a typo at the beginning when you might delete the whole paragraph?

Although the post is a couple of years old, [Editing Your Writing](#) at All Kinds of Writing generated a lively discussion among several writers who share how they edit. You will see different perspectives that may help you decide which editing method you prefer.

I finish the first draft before I edit, but I do use Word's auto-correct to correct common mistakes as I type. Unlike spell check and grammar check, auto-correct can be customized to eliminate your most common errors without creating new errors. You can add the words that are your bugbears and know that when you type harrassment, auto-correct will change it to harassment (one of my bugbears). You won't spend any time or energy correcting those common mistakes – while writing the first draft OR while editing.

In future installments, we'll cover the various steps in editing your manuscript, assuming you have written a first draft and have “pure green dreck” to turn into powerful prose.

Editing: Part 4 – What are style guides and why do I need them?

Before we move on, let's briefly revisit [when to edit](#). I stated in the last post that I write first, then edit. That is how I work on major projects, such as books. However, a comment made me realize that I usually edit as I write when I'm writing short pieces, such as blog posts. I find it easier to plan a few hundred words than to fully develop the plot and characters for an 80,000-word novel. As I write short pieces, I make revisions and corrections, then do a final edit of the complete article. The advice in this series is aimed at longer work, but much of it is relevant to shorter pieces as well.

Now let's talk about style guides/style sheets. **A style guide defines the house style of a publication** regarding such things as spelling, capitalization, punctuation, word usage, and formatting. Many elements of writing – such as whether or not to use serial commas – are style choices, not grammar rules. The style guide specifies the style used by the publication.

[The Associated Press Stylebook](#), used by newspapers, states that serial commas (the comma before the and in a series) are not used unless required to avoid confusion. The [The Chicago Manual of Style](#), used by book publishers, specifies the use of serial commas, as does the [Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, Fifth Edition](#), used in academia and social science publications. Writers must follow the prescribed style guide, which can be complicated. The Chicago Manual is about 700 pages long – that's a lot of rules. And there are many other style guides applicable to specific publications or academic areas of study, such as [AMA Manual of Style: A Guide for Authors and Editors](#), [The Columbia Guide to Online Style](#), and [MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing](#). You need to become familiar with the appropriate style guide(s) required by your publisher(s).

Perhaps you think that you don't have to follow a style guide because you're writing a blog or a book you will self-publish or your memoir. You may not have to follow the house style of a particular publication, but **you need to ensure that you are consistent in your writing**. Readers find it confusing if you erratically change the style rules you follow – like a friend of mine back in the days when people still wrote letters. If she wasn't sure how to spell a word, rather than look it up, she'd spell it a different way each time she wrote it. She'd probably be right at least once!

I suggest you **choose – and follow – a general style guide**, such as the venerable [The Elements of Style](#) or the Web site [Guide to Grammar and Writing](#). You may also want to choose a specific dictionary to use for spelling, as there are sometimes differences.

However, if you're writing a novel or nonfiction book – or if you want to ensure that your blog posts and articles are consistent – you need to **develop your own style sheet**. This can be as basic or as complex as you need for your work. A simple list that includes the spelling of names and words you use often along with anything specific to your writing (how to format your bulleted lists, whether or not to capitalize industry terms) and your style guide and dictionary of choice may be all you need.

The Writer's Resource Center recommends that novelists **create an information guide for their novel**. Part 2 gives a **sample information guide** that may be very helpful to you in creating your own.

Information guide is probably a better term because style guide generally refers to spelling, punctuation, usage, and other style issues. You need to keep track of a lot more than that in a novel or in a nonfiction book.

Your information guide for a novel might include:

- The spelling of names and places so Lizzie in Timbucktoo doesn't accidentally turn into Lizzy in Timbuctoo somewhere along the line
- Character traits, habits, and speech patterns of the characters so your high school dropout doesn't start talking like a college graduate without making any effort to do so
- Physical descriptions and details about characters and places so your brunette heroine doesn't turn into a blonde without the benefit of bleach and the trip that took ten minutes in chapter one doesn't take an hour in chapter ten
- Details about the setting (time and place) so your 18th century lady doesn't use words that didn't come into use until the 19th century or your magician's powers don't change randomly without reason
- Anything else that needs to remain consistent throughout the story

Your information guide for a nonfiction might include:

- The spelling of names, places, and other elements so your Law of Self-Esteem doesn't become the ego rule
- The steps in your how-to or the important points of your theory so you don't skip a step or leave out the essential logic that makes your theory believable
- Anything else that needs to be included in your manuscript to deliver the message you want readers to receive

In most cases, you won't just write the information guide once, then use it forever after. You'll revise the guide as you make changes or add characters or plot points to your book. The guide won't be useful unless it's accurate, so you need to **update the information guide whenever you make changes to your manuscript**.

Your guide will help you write your book because you won't have to rely on your memory of something you wrote 150 pages ago. Perhaps more importantly, **your guide will help you edit efficiently**. Writing a book usually takes months, and by the time you reach the editing stage – or after you've made changes several times – it's easy to lose track of details. You'll find it much easier to refer to your information guide than to search back through your manuscript to find the color of the heroine's eyes. Even if you didn't create a guide before you wrote the manuscript, you can develop one before and during editing.

I've come to realize the need for a style sheet or information guide after years of trying to remember all the details of a story. Recently, I discovered a minor character in a novel I was editing was called Dimple in one place and Dimples in another. I had to contact the author to find out which he wanted to use. If we had created a style sheet/information guide for the novel before I started editing, I would have known the correct name. I don't plan on encountering that kind of problem again. Whether you call it a style guide, an information sheet, or just your notes ... I think you'll find having a record of important details about your manuscript will enhance your editing skills.

Next, we'll talk about the first round of editing – developmental/content/substantive editing, revising, rewriting.



Editing: Part 5 – What steps should I follow when I edit?

You'll find a wide range of opinions on the steps you should follow and the order you should follow them in editing your manuscript. I'll explain what I do and include links to other opinions. **Read different ideas, experiment, and develop your own system.**

Which and how many of the steps you follow will vary with different work. A long book may require all the steps, some repeated several times. A short blog post or article may require only a few.

- ◆ **Set the work aside and allow some time** between writing and editing. I prefer several days or longer if possible, but if you have a deadline to meet, you may not have the luxury of that much time.
- ◆ **Read through the work and make notes.**
 - Don't edit at this point. Your goal is to get a new perspective on your writing and to determine what works and what doesn't.
 - You'll find some excellent questions to ask yourself in [Revising Your Novel: Read What You've Written](#) by John Hewitt at Writer's Resource Center.
 - Mark any areas that don't make sense or that don't flow smoothly. Note gaps in the plot or problems with character development. Highlight any paragraphs or chapters that need to be moved. Write down any questions you need to research.
 - Many people prefer to read a print copy. I like to transfer the work to my e-book reader to read. I can make notes directly in the reader. Read the way that is most comfortable for you.
- ◆ **Do the first round of editing** – a content edit or revisions.
 - Save your original file and give the edited document a new filename. I like to include the title and current date in the filename, but use whatever naming convention makes sense to you. You want to be able to return to an earlier version if you make a royal mess of revisions.
 - Some people recommend doing a light edit first, but I prefer to spend my time making major revisions at this point.
 - Determine if your book starts in the right place. Novelists are often advised to delete the first four chapters of their story because most of us tend to put too much backstory into the manuscript at the beginning. Readers don't need to know everything about the characters' history from the beginning. If the information is important, weave it into the story as it's needed.
 - Create a new file for deleted material, especially if you eliminate a lot of backstory. You can draw from that file to add details as needed later in the book.
 - Delete points or scenes that are repetitious or unneeded. Every scene in a novel should move the story forward or develop character. Every point in nonfiction should provide valuable and necessary information or illustrate a point.
 - Evaluate the structure and order. Does the book make sense or is something missing? Should paragraphs or chapters be moved for better flow?

- The amount of revision you need to do depends on how well you structured the first draft, but this first step can involve major rewriting if you find serious flaws in your manuscript.
- ◆ **Set the book aside again.**
- ◆ **Do the next round of editing – a copyedit on the screen.**
 - Read the entire manuscript and edit line-by-line.
 - Refer to your selected **style guide and the information guide you created earlier** (and that you update as needed) to ensure consistency.
 - Correct spelling, grammar, punctuation, and usage errors.
 - Look for your own common errors, passive voice, and other items that we'll discuss in the next installment of the series.
 - Read the document on your computer and make the corrections as you read for the greatest efficiency, but print the manuscript and work on paper if you aren't effective editing on screen.
- ◆ **Set the book aside again.**
- ◆ **Do the next round of editing – a copyedit on paper.**
 - Print out the manuscript to edit.
 - Read the entire manuscript and edit line-by-line as you did on the screen.
 - You will find errors in print that you miss on the screen.
- ◆ **Set the book aside again.**
- ◆ **Do the next round of editing – a read-aloud edit.**
 - Read the manuscript aloud and notice where you stumble over the words or where the phrasing is awkward.
 - You'll find errors that you missed in previous edits.
 - Mark the manuscript to indicate where you need to make changes or edit as you read, if you prefer.
 - Listening to someone else read your work aloud can be even more effective. Not only will you hear where she stumbles, but you will hear what you actually wrote. Even reading aloud, we tend to read what we meant, rather than what we wrote, though we do it less reading aloud than reading silently. Another reader may also catch spelling or punctuation errors that you have missed.
- ◆ **Set the book aside again.**
- ◆ **Continue to repeat the above steps** (or some combination of them) until you are confident that your book is finished, then allow some time before the final step.
- ◆ **Proofread your manuscript.**
 - Read the manuscript line-by-line to check for errors and to confirm that all previous edits have been made correctly.
 - Ensure that the manuscript conforms to the appropriate style guide.
- ◆ **Get other opinions.** We'll discuss this in the final installment of the series.

Editing: Part 6 – What should I look for when I edit?

You know you have to do **several rounds of edits – both content and copy edits**. What do you look for each time?

Here is a list of **things to look for in all your edits**. You can decide for yourself what to focus on each round, and you will look for many of these items each time you edit.

◆ **Consider the structure and organization of the manuscript.**

- Are the scenes/chapters in a logical order? Your story must happen in sequence (though you may have a flashback to provide needed background). Your nonfiction may depend on following certain steps or building on earlier ideas. Does the story/information flow smoothly between scenes/chapters?
- Did you include all the points/plot points needed? Your tutorial must include all the steps, even those that seem obvious to you. Your mystery must have enough clues that the solution makes the reader think, “I should have figured it out.”
- In fiction, do your characters have goals and motivations? If the characters act without reason (not necessarily logic but reasons determined by their characters, personalities, and experiences), your story will fall apart and your readers will lose interest or give up in disgust.
- Does your fiction include conflict? If the characters achieve their goals without overcoming obstacles or opposition, your story will be over in the first chapter.
- Do you need to delete superfluous information or condense some scenes or points? You don’t have to tell your characters’ life histories, just what the reader needs to know. You don’t have to describe in tortuous detail in your nonfiction book how you developed your philosophy of life. Detective novelist Elmore Leonard described the success of his books this way: “I leave out the parts that people skip.”
- Does your pacing move the reader forward at the right speed? Is the pace appropriate for the genre? Your reader should not feel like she’s out of breath because the book moves so fast, nor should she feel bored because the book moves so slow.

◆ **Correct grammar, spelling, punctuation, and usage.**

- If you used auto-correct while you were writing the manuscript, you shouldn’t have many spelling errors. However, you may have words that are spelled correctly but that are the wrong words. The Guide to Grammar and Writing provides an excellent resource with **Notorious Confusables** that lists several hundred “confusable” words – everything from your/you’re to aberrant/abhorrent.
- Look for misplaced modifiers (“he only wanted a horse” rather than “he wanted only a horse.”), noun-verb agreement (“the man and his wife lives in town” rather than “the man and his wife live in town), pronoun/antecedent agreement (“the students gave the teacher their lessons” – their refers back to teacher instead of students; a better way: “the students gave their lessons to the teacher”), and similar problems.

- Check your sentence structure. Avoid run-on sentences (two clauses separated by a comma rather than a semicolon, comma and conjunction, or period and capitalized next word). “She ate all the cookies, she drank the milk” could be changed to “She ate all the cookies; she drank the milk,” or “She ate all the cookies, and she drank the milk” or “She ate all the cookies. She drank the milk.”
- Be alert for your own common errors. We all have words that we misspell, trite phrases we overuse, errors we make often. I tend to leave out words – especially not – so I end up saying the opposite of what I mean.

◆ **Edit for style.**

- Ensure you have followed the appropriate style guide (if applicable) or your own style sheet/information guide.
- Beware of passive voice. You can't totally eliminate passive voice, and some things are best written passively. However, you should use active voice as much as possible. “The ball was thrown over the fence” is passive. “John threw the ball over the fence” is active. “It was raining” is passive. “Rain poured from the sky” is active.
- Show more than you tell. “She was angry” is telling. “She pounded her fist on the table and shouted...” is showing. You don't have to tell the reader she was angry because you have shown her anger by her actions. Fiction writers often hear, “Show, don't tell.” While this is generally good advice, sometimes telling is appropriate. For example, following a fight scene, you may want one of your characters to tell someone who wasn't there. “Sue told Betty about the fight” is telling, but it's all you need to make the reader aware that Betty knows about the fight.
- Vary your sentence structure. I recently edited a document in which every paragraph had at least one sentence beginning with a gerund phrase: “beginning at noon,” “running through the dark,” “having won the championship.” Each sentence was fine on its own, but so many so close together became distracting.
- Make sure you have engaged all the senses. Don't just say a bouquet of flowers – describe what it looks like, how it smells, the emotions it evokes.
- Eliminate unnecessary words and purple prose. Let your nouns and verbs stand on their own as much as possible. Rather than “the man with black hair walked slowly,” say “the black-haired man trudged...” Look for overuse of certain words or phrases. Leave out “that” except in those rare instances where it's needed for clarity.

◆ **Ensure you have followed the conventions of the genre.**

- A romance without a happily-ever-after ending is not a romance. A mystery in which the murder isn't solved isn't a mystery. A how-to book that doesn't teach the reader how to do something isn't a how-to.
- Each genre also has other elements not included here, such as point of view in fiction. You can find information about editing specific genres by visiting Web sites devoted to the genres or searching for “editing <genre>.”
- The articles listed below include editing tips for fiction, academic papers, and other types of writing.

One of the best resources I've found on editing is [Self-Editing for Fiction Writers: How to Edit Yourself into Print](#). As the title indicates, the book is aimed at fiction writers, but I guarantee you that nonfiction writers will find plenty of useful information as well, especially in the chapter "Once is Usually Enough."

What is important for you to look for when you edit that I haven't listed?

For other views on editing, read the following articles:

[Barbara Dawson Smith's Self-Editing Checklist](#)

[Editing Fiction by Lee Masterson and Tina Morgan](#)

[Jeff Chapman's Self-Editing Checklist](#)

[Paisley Currah's Writing Guide: Writing is Revising](#)

[Self-Editing by Glen and Karen Bledsoe](#)

[Self-Editing by Lori Handeland](#)

[Self-Editing and Revising Your Fiction by S. D. Farrell](#)

Editing: Part 7 – Do I need an outside editor?

You've edited your manuscript several times, and you're convinced it's the best you can make it. Should you consider having someone else edit the manuscript?

I always think it's **important to get another perspective, another opinion, another set of eyes looking at your work**. No matter how hard we try, we're bound to overlook something. Perhaps we don't correct a confusable word because it's not confusable to us – we know exactly what word to use. Only problem is ... we're wrong. Maybe the logic seems perfectly clear to us ... but not to someone unfamiliar with the subject.

You can enlist the aid of someone else to read and either critique or edit your work at any point in the writing and editing process.

- **You can join a writers group or form your own critique group** of other writers who will give you feedback on your work. If you choose the right critique partners, this can be very effective because other writers familiar with your genre know what to look for and will usually be more objective than people close to you.
- **You can ask a friend or relative who is a teacher or otherwise knowledgeable about writing to read your work** and offer suggestions. This can be helpful, especially for copyedits; however, people who know you sometimes tend to avoid criticizing your work so they don't hurt your feelings.
- **You can gather a group of readers who enjoy your genre and are willing to read and critique**. My client **David Bowles** uses this technique effectively. His readers are interested in genealogy and history and on occasion have corrected facts or provided additional information that has been valuable in improving the manuscript. You may find willing readers in an organization related to the subject of your book.
- **You can hire a professional editor**. Certainly this option is not viable for short pieces, but for book-length manuscripts – especially if you are self-publishing – professional editing is a wise investment.

Feedback – whether in the form of general suggestions, a detailed critique, or a content edit – can give you a new perspective on your work and make it even better, which is the whole purpose of editing.

About the Author



Lillie Ammann writes and edits as a freelancer for authors, publishers, and business and nonprofit organizations.

A graduate of Southwestern University with the degree Bachelor of Arts Magna Cum Laude, Lillie owned and operated an interior landscape business for more than twenty years. She had always dreamed of writing someday—suffering a stroke made her realize that someday had arrived. As soon as she was physically able, she began writing. She has published two novels, *Stroke of Luck*, a contemporary romance, and *Dream or Destiny*, a romantic mystery.

As a freelancer, she especially enjoys helping self-publishing authors navigate the publishing maze; and likes to think of herself as a book midwife. In addition to editing, she can design the interior of the book, negotiate and contract with a cover designer and printer, create and maintain the author's Web site, and help with promotional activities.

Lillie blogs at A Writer's Words, An Editor's Eye: www.lillieammann.com/blog.