Writing Craft & Creativity Mini Guides

# SELF-EDITING

## A PRIMER

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# Self-editing

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# SELF-EDITING

## Writing and editing

What's the difference between writing and editing? Once you've written something and you're satisfied with it, surely that should be enough? You've written and produced your writing, without too many second thoughts. Writing is creative in itself, and if it is of consistently good quality, what is the point of meddling with it? Well, briefly, to improve it, to bring it to its true potential, as good as it can be. That's where editing comes in. Either from a professional or, more likely, self-administered. As writers, whether consciously or subconsciously, in effect, we are all editors. In this mini guide, as part of a new series by TLC Press, I'll be setting out some gentle thinking-points, and bringing together a comprehensive self-editing checklist, to help you be a better, more circumspect, reader and editor of your own writing.

## Drafting

One of my students on a postgraduate editing course voiced an epiphany he'd had when he realised what he'd been doing before, pretty well everything

he'd written, was not writing but drafting. For the drafting to become 'proper' writing it therefore needed editing. The editing process – interrogating sense and intention, phrasing, sentence structure, everything –was an eye-opener for him. Some writers don't see the need for it. But if you can sense the need for it in your writing, there are still questions to consider.

What often stops writers when it comes to editing their own work is often a kind of fear of interminability. It might become an endless process, and if it does, won't the original writing risk becoming unrecognisable? How many drafts exactly will be necessary? There's no right answer to this. It's different for different people; tortoise or the hare. It doesn't really matter, and perhaps it's the wrong question to begin with. Perhaps some writers write so perfectly nothing needs to be changed. I can't imagine Henry James having to change very much on a second draft, since he already thought and expressed himself in perfectly weighted and detailed sentences; they flowed from him like an alpine stream. (In fact, his *Prefaces* to the 1910 collected New York edition of his novels show that he didn't change very much at all, but the refined thought about technique, perspective, point of view that he appended to every single novel was immense – and faultlessly expressed.) It might be that in Henry James' case, either he was simply a genius, or, more likely, the editing process was embedded into the writing process. For most of the rest of us, it's much harder to find the perfect form in sentences and paragraphs for what we have floating round (often incoherently) in our muddled heads. But we each of us still have something interesting to say, a fascinating story to tell, and the difficulty of expressing it may actually help to deepen the message, improve and refine it. There is after all, as Yeats says, a fascination in what's difficult. The difficulty tests the truth of the message, makes it purer, in the end. And besides, the difficulty will be forgotten; made invisible. It doesn't really matter how difficult the writer finds the compositional process, or how much time it occupies, as long as the finished product is clean and readable. Perhaps all guides should start with reassurance that this anxiety is so universal it ought not to be an anxiety at all. It may feel painful to try to write (be creative), then edit (be mechanical), but you aren't alone in finding this a challenging and tangled process.

# A Freudian model

In the writing process after that initial rush of creation, so much time is given over to thinking, correcting, changing. It's as if there is an initial creative side which is then 'corrected' by a rational side. The process is not quite as simple as that though. If that were so, the most rational of people, the lawyers and scientists would make the best writers; they of course can be, but it is certainly not a universal rule. The writer and psychoanalyst Adam Phillips has demonstrated how writers still find Freud's 'theories' useful as a metaphor for dynamic creativity. Even long after professional psychologists have discredited Freud's claims to scientific method, some of his ideas retain a creative value. The triangle of the Id and the Ego and the Superego can be seen as an instructive model. First, Id, the dream world and deep sexual and mythic imagination; second the ambitious Ego, rational executive writing power; finally the conscience, the judge, Superego, the reader over one's shoulder. One of the three has wild ideas, another converts them into intentional plausible writing, while the third decides what's acceptable, what is worth keeping, what is rubbish – the inner critic, the voice of conscience, the censor. Writing is the product of what is dreamed, what is intentionally composed and what gets past the censor. Maybe this dynamic three-way process is necessary to produce finely formed finished writing. It may be that Ego Writing is dull without Id and messy without the oversight of the Superego. We might therefore think of the editing function as the Superego, or indeed the Superego as the (Self-)Editor, watching over the conduct of the writing Id and Ego double-act, policing what gets written.

# Reading yourself

The novelist and literary academic David Lodge, (who has been a lucid practitioner on both sides of the authorial fence) put his finger felicitously on the experience of writing being akin to 'reading yourself'. 'In my experience

90% of the time nominally spent 'writing' is actually spent reading – reading yourself.' How many times might we expect to go over what we have written? Countless. And this is a natural process, but also a critical process. 'Reading yourself,' David Lodge continues 'is not just a matter of assessing and polishing your verbal style, the diction and syntax of the individual sentence. It also covers deeper and larger structures, what we may call the cohesion of the text itself.' The novelist and short story writer Tessa Hadley also describes a process that seems similar to a musician playing back and listening to what they have just played, in an effort to distance herself, trying to catch it off guard, hear it a different way, afresh. 'Teaching yourself to read your own writing as a reader, it's very difficult; it makes your mind ache – not only when you first start trying, but always.'

## Distance

Tessa Hadley captures the painful process of trying to read a piece until it sounds fresh and new, trying to achieve distance from your work. But, according to her, it's almost like talking to yourself, questioning everything you've said: 'It's going on too long, it's sentimental, the tone's too heavy, there's an inadvertent repetition. Or something's missing.' Which sounds like the writer's inner voice, with its acute critical sense, niggling away annoyingly. 'Your mind will be sore from the effort of reading the same old thing so many times as if it were new.' These two distinguished writers give proper space to the intellectual effort required in 'going over' your writing, reading it critically and interrogating everything about it, in order to improve it. Distance might also be achieved by playing various tricks on yourself, tricking your mind to pretend it isn't your work, but someone else's. Put it in a drawer for six months (the Roman poet Horace's advice), print it out, change the spacing, increase the font size, change the colour, handwrite it instead of typing – in the hope you might see it afresh and achieve the requisite distance from your own subjectivity.

# Overdeveloped conscience

To pursue the Freudian metaphor a little further, there is, of course, a problem with the Superego. Some writers have an overdeveloped inner voice that prevents them from developing fully. The Superego becomes so loud that it is more of a damaging and limiting influence on the writing, cramping the style, stifling the content. For instance, students recently graduated from English Literature degrees are likely to have stored up any amount of literary models to follow, and internalised largely unhelpful comparisons to set their own work against the work of the so-called masters. Such experience can make it harder for students to find their own writing voice, giving rise to a certain criticism of academic creative writing courses that focuses on a (perceived) homogeneity of voice coming out of such courses. Whether or not this is true is up for debate, but the notion of How It Should Be Done – by Austen or George Eliot or Virginia Woolf and any number of canonised authors still being taught at university level – can be extremely inhibiting. One's reading inevitably informs one's writing, sometimes in unexpected and indirect ways. It's only a question of whether the voice of conscience and good taste (the Superego) is a beneficial influence; and at what point it can be brought into operation. Maybe not at the earliest stage of drafting or developing ideas; much better to cast a critical eye over a later draft and allow the early drafts to be as uninhibited as possible. This can be hard when the pressure of comparison is at the forefront of the writer's mind, but even harder might be an attempt to make something perfect at the first attempt – it is far more likely the draft will remain unfinished that way. And how to edit a blank page?

Good writers always make their own accommodations, according to their own preferences in ways of working. But there is certainly an essential place for that self-critical inner voice, the eye of the critical editor, as long as it does not induce paralysis in the writer at those crucial early stages, or even later: that is the whole point of quality control. Even if most well-known authors are hugely grateful to their editors for their timely and insightful interventions, even if published writing still relies upon the gatekeeping function of agents

and editors for quality control within the publishing industry, all writers will have to exercise their independent inner editorial voice, with constant vigilance, in order to produce a conceivably 'readable' piece of writing (as opposed to 'publishable', since that is of course only one possible aim, and 'readable' feels far more democratic, far less contingent on industry or market standards). Unreadable writing simply hasn't been thought about enough; the writer hasn't been doing their job of interrogating the writing closely enough. In other words, you have to do your own editing.

## On editing

I think I can just about understand Stephen King's dictum: 'to write is human and to edit is divine,' however odd it sounds. Maybe writing is the fun bit and editing the boring part, satisfying because it is final. There is a particular satisfaction that accompanies typing the words 'The End' that does, indeed, almost feel divine. Perhaps writing is getting started on the work, and having your writing edited is the finishing off, the proper completion. Writing must be the creative imaginative part, editing the logical and intellectual side. Should the writer therefore be innocent of editorial skills and wait for an outsider to come along afterwards and sort out the mess? Where do you find a good editor? Your partner, your friends, fellow writers, teachers? TLC? I wonder if again the question is wrongly framed, and a better question might be: at what point does the outsider come in? At what point do you show your work to someone else? *Then*, who do you show it to? How many stages of checking and changing can there possibly be? And how do you know when is it finally ready to send to an agent or a publisher, or to self-publish?

## Closed door/open door

I was surprised to find that, in his famous memoir *On Writing*, Stephen Kinghas some fine things to say about editing your own work and some

very applicable practical tips on writing. Why was I so surprised? I'd never knowingly read a word of his, though I realise I've seen a few films made from his novels. Indisputably he is a master storyteller. He knows how to write tight bestsellers, page turners. I couldn't write like him; like all of us, I could only ever write like myself. Awkwardly, tentatively in my case, but hey, we are what we are; we can't necessarily follow and emulate our idols. I love the writing of Italo Calvino, but I could no more write like him than fly. We write within our own limits. As the reading lists at the end of his memoir demonstrate, his literary taste is varied: Atwood, Bolaño, Franzen, McEwan, Roth and Tolstoy in the same bundle as Lee Child, Elmore Leonard, George Pelecanos, Jodi Picoult and Tom Rob Smith., I wanted to draw particular attention to his closed door/open door analogy which is relevant when it comes to self-editing techniques. There's a proper time to focus all your efforts privately on making your ms as strong and consistent as it can be. King does three drafts. During this time there is no need to show your manuscript to anyone – because it is in no way finished enough to be read by an outsider, as if it were a book; it's not, it's a work in progress. So all that time, months, years perhaps, it is kept under wraps. Then when it has taken its more or less intended shape, when the writer is ready and not before, it is time to open the door and let someone else read it – to check if it makes the sense that the writer thought it did privately, when the door was kept shut. King has a few key people lined up to read it (what one might now call 'beta readers'), including his wife, also a writer. Then he makes changes in the light of those changes: all very straightforward. It works for him: first closed door, then open door. And not a wide open door either. Not everyone gets to read it; that can happen when the book is published. Just a few select readers, primed for the task. There's no point in showing an unfinished novel to a friend who might be vaguely interested; she can wait for the finished product. And it tells us something else. That it is important to protect your own peace of mind, and to understand when the psychological shift has happened, from creative state to 'self-editing' state, a state in which you are ready to receive feedback, and ready to read your own work more shrewdly.

# Writing groups

I ought to say that in passing, King admits that a writing group is not for him. The thought of receiving an excessive amount of comment (sometimes contradictory and self-cancelling) from a large number of people, other writers but probably different kinds of writers, he would find too confusing. Anathema. The writing never gets a chance to develop naturally or fully, because it has been 'workshopped' – in his view – prematurely. I can see his point. He prefers the closed door/ slightly open door method. Not the ever-open door! However, I know from the experience of founding a successful writers group and being on the receiving end of my fellow-writers' comments that all writers can benefit from the feedback of colleagues. It is the responsibility of the writer not to take a piece to the writers group at a too-sensitive stage of development (or to do so with eyes wide open). Also, it's advisable to filter the comment of colleagues according to their interests and knowledge, strengths and weaknesses as writers – this is the kind of filtering that a service like TLC provides. Within a workshop setting, one colleague might be astute at assessing dialogue, another good on style, and another might possess a strong overview of structure. I'm saying it's up the individual writer to draw from these writers everything she needs, but not to take all comments on board. You will never please everyone. The time we can commit is limited, so it must count, and the balance between a focus on the 'creative production' (the draft) and the 'trade production' (the publishing infrastructure) is a fine one. It may be best to try to be quick and disciplined about both, if one is to think of oneself as in some way a professional self-editor.

# What job does a publisher's editor do?

In publishing an editor is the one who selects –or, of course, rejects – a book. This is a similar function to what the literary agent does, deciding whether to

represent an author and her manuscript, or not. Their prerogative: to go for it or not. Now this decision is tied up with financial shrewdness too. Does the editor think they can make a success of this book? And make money for everybody, including the author? Pointless if no one makes any money. So a big decision for the editor, whether to acquire a ms or not. Then she will need to persuade her colleagues in sales and marketing that they can make a success of it. In some cases the concerns of sales and marketing can scupper the forward progress of the book; it could be 'accepted' by an editor, then turned down by colleagues. (That's happened to me; it's hard.) The editor (who has already 'fallen in love' with the book) has to believe utterly in the book, believe they can all get behind the book and spread the word how great it is. That is how publishers think, and talk. The ms they were sent by an agent must be good enough for them to be enthusiastic about the concept and plenty good enough in technical quality for publication. A considerable amount of editing has already been done: self-editing and agent editing probably, perhaps also independent developmental intervention through a consultancy. But the editor will *still* have an opinion about a few changes that will be necessary. She might compile a written report or organise a face-to-face meeting – probably not these days a slap-up lunch – to go through a list of pointers, where the author will nod and say yes, no problem. The editor will then commit to following the book through all its stages of publication, holding the author's hand, talking them through the necessary stages – final draft, copy edit, proofreading – all the way to publication day and book launch. It's a very satisfying job, I can tell you, to steer a book from ms through to publication. An editor these days in house is also very much a businessperson, and their responsibility is often also bound up in briefing the cover artwork, compiling advance information, setting up various meetings, liaising with colleagues in publicity, sales, talking to distributors, booksellers. It's not the case any more that a publisher's editor simply sits all day editing their authors' work, in other words. The more polished the work can be by the time it arrives on this busy person's desk, the better. And the process is likely to be far more fruitful for all involved.

# An editor's invisibility

An editor might be compared to a midwife, checking during the pregnancy, regular visits to monitor progress, how soon until ready, advising on any problems, reassuring along the way, then attending kindly and encouragingly at the birth, helping the baby come out into the world to breathe the air independently. After the birth the midwife editor is forgotten – thanked for the help, valuable job done, but otherwise forgotten; the baby – the new book –has a life of its own ahead. That's as it should be. Sometimes an acknowledgement appears, alongside family and friends, agent and the Arts Council. A writer might be expected to trust an editor for their experience and advice. The editor has brought all of their reading experience to bear on every aspect of the book, and it is all the better for it. They have helped to make the book the best possible version *of itself*. This is the best kind of editing that can be offered. And it is, when it works, invisible.

# Macro editing

An editor is a literary critic too, an experienced reader with knowledge of the form, the genre, structure, style, storytelling and dialogue. Their broader knowledge might equip them to make a sensible, reliable judgement on the manuscript, its worth, its strengths and weaknesses, and its chances in the marketplace. An attempt at objectivity, then, though arising from a personal reading. Sometimes this is called structural editing. As an editor I would expect to comment generally on length, plot, story arc, characterisation, dialogue, narrative point of view – all the big stuff. It is also manuscript assessment, TLC's core service – an overall view of whether the machine, which has taken so much effort and time in construction - actually works, whether it is worthy of publication. This is macro-editing. It is hard enough for a professional editor to do. And not everyone is comfortable with attempting the overview. Some people are more comfortable pointing out

details that don't quite work, dialogue that goes on too long, inconsistent characters, phrasing that's awkward, broken-backed or overloaded sentences, redundant adjectives and adverbs – the details, in other words, line by line, micro editing. They don't feel qualified to comment on faults of structure, (openings, middles, endings), length and balance, narrative pace, build-up, dramatic tension, climax, resolution, story arc. Advice on such huge issues can be an enormous help to a writer – at the right point – if they are open to suggestion, if they can see how it might ideally be differently arranged. Which is often the kind of editorial insight most valued by authors, the eye that can see immediately what can be fixed, what needs fixing in a manuscript. The Gordon Lish for Raymond Carver; the Max Perkins for Scott Fitzgerald. The best professional editors and agents (many of whom have been editors in the publishing industry earlier in their career) have this uncanny skill in abundance. They are usually not writers themselves, but it doesn't matter because they are great readers, and can therefore be great editors. They know when to intervene, when to praise, when to query; but never at great length. They're not teachers, not critics or reviewers. They know that a hint in the right direction will be enough for a good writer. They don't have oodles of time to lavish on one individual author; they are hugely busy people, whose reading load is enormous; they will also have a stack of other books on the go at any one time, at various stages of production. And they are always focused on the end product, the finished work. So the advice you can be offered is limited by time and publishing schedules, but you can trust it to be concise, focussed, and above all, honest. It must be. Equipping yourself to deal with this kind of feedback, and using it properly to develop the work based on the suggestions made, is a key skill that the best writers possess.

## Copy editing, the micro view

But an editor is the thought police too, the grammar police and the style police. As a writer you would want a tough and exacting editor, one who

doesn't let slack phrasing or duff metaphors stand uncorrected. An editor is the person who looks over your completed work in progress to spot your weaknesses, to save you from your excesses and query any lacunae (while, of course, reassuring you about the overall quality) and then points out necessary adjustments which will make all the difference in presenting it as a professional piece to agents and publisher. In a publishing house, the invaluable copy editor saves lives by asking questions no one even dared to ask. She checks through every sentence, every line, every word for complete clarity and sense. She does a grammar check, a fact check, a metaphor check, a syntax and phrasing check. Philip Roth wanted to marry his copy editor (whom he had never clapped eyes on) because she spotted a mistake in his work which would have been deeply embarrassing for his reputation if left uncorrected.

## Presenting to an agent

Annoyingly, you only really get one chance. If you show your manuscript to an agent before it's properly finished, then, when it gets turned down, you've burnt your boats. You can't go back. The agent doesn't want to read your next improved version because she already turned it down in an earlier version. Waste of precious time for her. So when you present your final, final, no really final version finally to an agent you better be sure you're completely happy with it and it's the best you can possibly do. There is a lot of work to do before that stage. Various drafts and various edits. You will need help from others – you may have the ideal set of friends and contacts, you may have none, so don't forget TLC –but essentially all of the real work, the decision making, has to be done by you. You have to take ultimate responsibility for the version that you put in front of an agent or publisher. You are the final editor of your work.

# Editing your own work

The ideal editor has to be a great reader, attentive, a lover of detail, someone who appreciates *le mot juste*, hugely read, experienced in their chosen genre and know everything (as if)! So if I think I'm a good editor – and I have been complimented by several of the authors whose manuscripts I've been privileged to work on - then I ought to be a great self-editor. Shouldn't I? It ought to be very easy for an editor to edit their own work, shouldn't it? Well, I can tell you it isn't. And the main reason is an obvious one: it's easy to give objective advice to someone else, but much harder to give yourself the same. Psychoanalysts can't self-analyse; they have to ask a colleague. An impossible trick. It's so hard to be objective when you can only ever be subjective. You wouldn't have made such errors if in the first place you'd realised them for yourself. It's almost impossible to don a professorial reading hat when your wobbly, touchy, supersensitive writing hat refuses to budge from your head. However, it is possible to set a piece of writing to one side, walk around the block, forget it for a spell, come back to it fresh, and then surprise it into thinking it's been written not by you but by some other writer. You can be more critical of your own work after a short, and especially after a long, interval. That's self-editing too.

# Resistance to editing

I used to write fiction: several short stories and a couple of novels published. I still try. I've been working for more years than I care to count on a problematic manuscript that is now in its 11th draft. More fool me. I'm dumbfounded and frustrated – and yet it's obvious really – that I can't quite edit my own manuscript into acceptable, publishable shape. I know how it's meant to be. I have experienced, as a publisher of a prize-winning list of fiction, how good a novel has to be to make it into publication. Maybe I'm resistant to my own advice as well as other people's. Anyway not everything can be fixed, maybe it

was a silly idea to begin with, and I should bin it and move on to the next idea. But, no, I persist in thinking it is worth working on: a superhuman effort of fiddling and adjustment, will be required, some very tough self-questioning – out of which will emerge a properly finished work of fiction.

## Enormous changes at the last minute

I can report that the self-torture isn't endless. I am very close to a publishable draft now, and that is because I asked three friends, all writers, to read and comment on my latest draft. I thought at that point that I could do no more. I was sick of the thing. Help me, please. What was my novel *really* like? Now the comments I got back were varied, and I didn't agree with everything. These are three very different characters, very different writers; they will approach my ms altogether differently. But they kept returning to two problematic characters and my persistent problem of repetition and slow pace. My readers offered useful suggestions for alternative ways of bending the plot – some of which I agreed with, some of which seemed a step too far. But here's the thing: you think about what they have said, you go through the list of points one by one and *you* decide what to do; *you* start applying the changes to your manuscript – in effect you're starting a new draft, but who's counting? The things they say about your ms tell you stuff you hadn't realised before about your story. Because they can see it and you can't. Their feedback enables you to see your story differently, freshly again. And that's when you can be at your most creative: you start making Enormous Changes at the Last Minute. You remember Grace Paley's wonderfully punchy New York stories and you think: Why not, if it improves the story. You make those changes. And it is amazing what solutions you can find, what improvements you can make. And not feel regretful about the text replaced by the new text. Because this new text fits the story better, it does the job better – locally and overall in terms of structure. And when you send it to an agent, if you're lucky – if the ms has already excited their interest – then they will say some similar things: change

the ending, build up this character more, cut the strand in the middle where the pace slackens. And if you have any sense, you will think about it hard again and you will do it. You will fix it, because everything can be fixed, you have to believe. Editing, re-writing is an essential part of the writing process.

## Who to ask for feedback

So who do you ask? Who are the other people? Writers, preferably. People whose literary opinions and values you trust. This is one of the many justifications of networking in the literary life, in whatever ways that are comfortable and manageable to you. You will enjoy the company of other writers because you can enthuse about the books that you have in common and the latest books and the ones that are overrated. If you become friends with other writers then you might – eventually – be able to ask them to read your work and comment on it, without ruining your friendship. But what you have to bear in mind is this: reading a ms takes the same time as reading a published novel, say, four or five hours, most of someone's working day, and if they are busy with their own writing or busy with family matters or wanting to ration their novel reading to a minimum then they might not be willing to take on this onerous task. You are asking them to be brutally honest and pay attention to every little detail of your ms. You are asking a lot of them. Also, they may not be the kind of writer who is good at expressing critical comments on other people's work. I know writers who are so focused on their own work they can't empathise enough to enter the imaginative world of someone else. And writers who are great at the details but don't see the big picture. You will have to choose your readers carefully, or do so with eyes open and make the necessary adjustments, filtering comments according to the strengths and weaknesses of the writers.

# How much to change

How much do you take on board? Everything. Process it all. Go through the list, tick it off. Yes, no. You decide what to take on board. When is it ready to present to an agent? When there's nothing more you can humanly do. When you have fixed all the things which were isolated as problems in your drafts. When your execution – at plot, page, para and sentence level - really does match your intention. When everything works. When you have answered the internal worries you yourself have harboured about the value of the work. There is another book to be written about when to let go of a failed draft, but this guide is one full of self-editing hope. Still, one has to know when to let go and take the plunge – send it out into the world.

# Seeing your own work critically

We all veer between thinking what we're writing is great (Ego) or else terrible (Superego). It makes sense to steer a course between those two. And listen to both warring voices. I have listed some of the horrible questions that you may need to ask yourself as you check through your work, as you try and recover from your natural blindness and see your writing more self-critically for what it really is. You can be your own self-editor. These days you have to be.

# EDITING CHECKLIST

Now that we have presented some notes towards an introduction to editing, and touched upon some of the challenges and provocations to keep in mind when self-editing, I would like to present a practical checklist – thorough, but not exhaustive – of self-editing questions. Some of the areas covered here will also appear as mini TLC Press guides in their own right: do refer to these for further detail on individual aspects of narrative craft including Character, Dialogue, Plot and Structure, Voice, and more.

## A WRITER'S SELF-EDITING CHECKLIST

### PRESENTATION

DO YOU NEED TO CHECK OVER...?

- Grammar
- Phrasing
- Sentences
- Spelling

ALWAYS CHECK OVER:

- Spacing
- Paragraphs
- Sections within chapters
- Chapters
- Pagination

CHECKING FOR ACCURACY

- Dictionary check for spelling and usage
- Fact check – especially for historical fiction
- Chronology (external and internal)
- Names (consistency and plausibility)

# SOME QUESTIONS TO THE EGO FROM THE SUPEREGO

## CHARACTERS

- Is my main character strong, interesting and sympathetic enough?
- Does she/he appear in every chapter?
- Is there enough jeopardy for the character, so that we care about what is going to happen to them?
- Are they put in surprising situations, which they need to win through?
- Are there characters whose characterisation is over-simplified, stereotyped?
- Is there some complexity in my main characters? Are they capable of change?
- Does each character do their job within the plot?
- Are there any who duplicate what is already in the story?
- Are there characters who are interesting, but don't contribute to the plot?
- Are there characters who are named, but invisible?
- Are there too many characters at certain points, so that the plot becomes over-complicated?

## PACE

- Have I kept the pace going consistently throughout the story?
- Are there times when the story slows to a snail's pace and almost stops?
- Are there quiet passages which are merely marking time in the story?
- Have I injected pace at the beginning of chapters and at the end of chapters?
- Have I dwelt too long on the most dramatic parts of the story?
- Have I led up to the drama of the main incidents and milked the significance in the aftermath too? Should I have 'gone in late, and got out quick'?

## PLOT

- Is my plot surprising but inevitable?
- Or is it predictable, too predictable? (Reworking your synopsis will help you think creatively about this.)

- Does it follow standard TV/Film/soap patterns or does it deliver natural urgent surprises at every turn?
- How many of my plot points are accidental, instead of arising out of character and situation?
- Are there too many coincidences? Happenings that are convenient for your story but not quite plausible?
- Are some of the incidents and consequences too obvious? Could the reader have guessed what was going to happen?
- Is there a powerful dramatic climax just over two thirds of the way through? And does the resolution keep the reader guessing after that point?
- Does it take too long to get going?
- Does my story take too long to resolve?

**SENTENCES**

- Is there enough variation in sentence length?
- Is there variety in sentence rhythm?
- Is a sentence too densely compacted in its thought, making it hard to quickly make sense of, hard to read?
- Is a sentence too loose, and not quite informative enough? Too light? Does it make its point or convey its information smartly enough? Or does it go on too long?
- Has the point already been made? Do we already know? Is the sentence therefore redundant?
- Who is saying this sentence? A narrator directly, or a character indirectly?
- Is the last sentence of a paragraph consistent in tone with the first? Does it even belong in the same paragraph?
- Are there any sentences in the paragraph which don't make any dramatic or informational impact? Could you afford to lose one or two?
- Try splitting paragraphs for point of view and subject matter. Will a new para give a sentence more impact?
- When you read the chapter out loud are there any sentences that you (the writer, after all) stumble over, because they are awkwardly constructed or broken-backed or over-condensed? If you do stumble over awkwardness,

your reader certainly will too. Your sentences need to flow and surprise in such a way that your reader appreciates every word, but isn't slowed down by the rhythm or difficulty encountered. Flow is vital

- Are there any sentences that don't do a job? Don't contribute to the story enough, don't really say anything? Get rid of them.

## CHAPTERS

- Have you considered changing the order? Try writing chapter names on individual cards and arranging them on a table or floor to see from a distance which parts of your story can be grouped, and if any can be rearranged.
- If you have flashbacks or different narrative voices this is particularly helpful, think about re-jigging the order, since the placing of chapters in a particular order can improve the dramatic impact of your story and can improve the pace. You can get a bit stuck with your original order.
- Different narrative strands can be colour coded in your chapter list so that you can see at a glance which strands are being fed in when.
- Two consecutive chapters too similar to each other might slow the pace of the story, might reduce the surprise element in your story. Does this chapter have to be here or can it be moved for dramatic effect?
- What about splitting a chapter with two parts into two, for dramatic effect?
- Or combining two consecutive chapters that belong together?
- Which are the long chapters? Which are the short? Does the long deserve its length, or is it going on too long? Do the short chapters have surprise and impact?
- In the distribution of chapters, their individual word count, are there any marked discrepancies? A lot of very short or long, or even length and then suddenly short? Think about the impact of each chapter: drama, surprise, moving the story along.

## OPENINGS AND ENDINGS

- Does the first sentence in a chapter have impact and movement straight away? Does it follow on from the previous? Or have you allowed it to jump? This is a clever trick – the reader can allow a leap and fill in the gap for herself.

- Or is it taking a run-up, introducing itself before getting on with telling us the story? Is it taking too long to get started? Is it getting bogged down in explanation when the drama should be sparking?
- Does the last sentence round off the chapter, but point us forward too? It doesn't come to a conclusion, and a complete stop, does it?
- Does it end neatly, but not too neatly like the punch line of a joke? A clear ending, but one that allows the possibility of movement.

**REPETITIONS**

- Have you imparted that information already?
- Have you said much the same before?
- Has someone said something like that already?
- Has that description of that character already been used? Every time that person appears in the story.
- Has that phrase been used before? That word? The reader notices such things, even though the writer doesn't always.

**DIALOGUE**

- Would anyone say that? Ever? Could you hear them saying that exact phrase?
- Does it sound like spoken language or written down prose? It should have the liveliness of real animated speech.
- Is it unique to your book, or is it the kind of speech you've heard countless times on TV or in a movie? Is it fresh or is it tired and overfamiliar?
- Is it too much for one piece of dialogue? Is it too much of a speech or a monologue? Is it going on for too long, unrealistically?
- Would that particular character say that in that way? Are they speaking entirely in character? Always in character?
- Is the speech and response turning into a table tennis match, backwards and forwards too metronomically? Could you vary the length of speech contributions?
- Or is one person being allowed to drone on for too long, leaving everyone else standing waiting for him to finish?

- Do we know who is speaking? Could we tell who it was if there were no 'he saids'? Speech should be individual, and certainly different from the other person in the conversation.
- Could the uninteresting speech within dialogue be more economically and interestingly rendered in indirect speech?

## METAPHORS AND SIMILES

- Are your comparisons fresh and well seen, or are they second-hand and clichéd? Any phrases with 'like' or 'as' risk being familiar. Is it a cliché or a freshly seen point of comparison? Allowable in dialogue, but less acceptable in narrative.
- Has the comparison been taken too far? Does it draw attention to itself by being too far-fetched?
- Has the metaphor been extended unrealistically, so that the spark of thought that invented it is now being kept switched for too long, with diminishing illumination? (Like that metaphor, for instance.)
- Is it exact and spot-on? Or only approximate? Is it an over-familiar trope?
- If it is an obvious comparison, do we need it at all?

## DESCRIPTIONS

- Do my descriptions stop and declare themselves to be fine writing? Do they seem different from the other narrative?
- Or are descriptions woven into the tapestry of the story, almost invisibly?
- They may serve an important function of placing the story (the part that a film director would deem unnecessary) , so are they placed at the right point in the story?
- Do they ever slow down the pace and bring the story to a stop?
- Do they sound like the author's description or could they be from a character's point of view?
- Are they employing too many words and threatening to become convoluted – too long?

## POINT OF VIEW

- Would she think that? Would she know that? This is a constant question.
- Would she know that at that point in the story?
- Have you switched POV confusingly? Jumped from one character's head suddenly into another? Whose head are we in? Have we changed? Are you consistent in your use of point of view? A change of pov can always sit in a different chapter. It can be confusing to follow a few different points of view within one chapter.
- Have you jumped out of the character's pov and into the author's pov? This can also be confusing.
- Have you adjusted speech according to the age of your speaker or their point of view?

## ADVERBS AND SPEECH WORDS

- Do you stick to 'He said, she said' and 'she asked, he replied' so that (although repeated) the effect is invisible?
- Do you allow yourself 'enquired', 'queried', 'wondered' etc for the sake of variety?
- Do you stick with 'Ann said' rather than 'said Ann' or can you allow yourself some variety?
- Or do you keep your 'he saids' to an absolute minimum, allowing the reader to work out who's speaking? This is the modern style.
- If it's not possible to work out who is speaking, then you must insert a name or a gender to clarify the situation. The intelligent reader needs to know, but mustn't get confused over who is saying what.
- Do you need 'he said, slyly' or is it obvious from what he says and what is happening that he is being sly? Can you do without the adverb? Best to. Otherwise it is being employed unnecessarily: we know what he is like and the way he habitually speaks in these situations. As a general rule, avoid unnecessary adverbs with speech verbs.

**SYNOPSIS**

- Does this synopsis make sense? Every part of it? Could a person reading it follow your story most of the way through? Or is it one damned thing after another? Have you made a story out of it? An interesting story? Or does it sound too dull or too much?
- Have I done a clear short version? And a differently clear long version, which has tension and surprise in it, but never degenerates into the one-thing-after-another disconnected sequence. We should be able to sense the shape and pattern of the story. Impossible to mention all the characters and incidents. Have you created a good impression of the storyline, intriguing and dramatic?

**COVERING LETTER**

- Do I sound modest but confident? Have I exaggerated my track record? Have I gone into too much detail about my difficult journey? How long it took me, where my ideas came from? No need.
- Did I try to expound the themes of the novel at too much length? Was I careful in the comparisons I made with other writers and other books?
- Have I plainly stated what the book is about, what the story is, which audience might like it?

One final, very short list, to set you on your path towards self-editing with renewed clarity, rigour, and energy. As a publisher, the things I most look out for, in case you find yourself guilty of any of these, may be helpful.

## THE PROFESSIONAL EDITOR'S LIST – WHAT ERRORS AM I USUALLY LOOKING FOR?

- Inconsistency
- Repetition
- Bathos
- Sentimentality
- Portentousness
- Over-emphasis
- Overwriting
- Underestimating the reader's intelligence

And that's that. A whistle-stop tour. A primer and a starting-point for becoming a better self-editor. If submitting work, it's important to remember that busy agents and publishers are often looking for reasons to say no. It's the writer's trick not to give them the choice. The same goes for readers that one might find outside of the traditional publishing structures (and there are many exciting possibilities for this these days). If you intend to have someone read your book, you will need to put in the work to make sure they don't put it down. To do this, you will need to learn how to edit, edit, then edit again. It's hard graft, but immensely rewarding, and every draft will make you a better writer.

Now, over to you.

# THE AUTHOR

**Alan Mahar** is a freelance writer, editor and creative writing tutor based in Birmingham. He was Publishing Director of the award-winning fiction publisher Tindal Street Press between 1998 and 2012. Since then he has been a university creative writing tutor, specialising in editing skills, and a regular manuscript reader for The Literary Consultancy. Several short stories and book reviews have been published, two novels, *Flight Patterns* (Gollancz, 1999) and *After the Man Before* (Methuen, 2002), with a third in progress. Born in Liverpool, a student in London, he has also worked as a library assistant, a copywriter and a further education lecturer.