

## Editing Begins at Home

While we all know having your work reviewed by an editor, specifically a person qualified to perform an edit, is still the best course of action. I believe there is a lot more that can be done at home before the manuscript is ever sent off to your editor. I mean besides simply running a spell check. Here are a few tasks I do to clean and tighten the story. At least ones I find helpful long before a project is ever sent off to my editor.

The very first item to be considered is every story –no matter if it is 100 words or 100,00 words –will require a beginning, middle and an end. I know it should be obvious, but unfortunately it is not always the case. Back in my reader days, I once read a manuscript of four hundred plus pages, and did not have an ending. The story just stopped. Probably, a single paragraph could have done the job. A very successful writer once told me the first sentence is the beginning and the last sentence is the end. All the rest is middle. It would then suggest the first sentence, the beginning, would open the door and the last sentence, the end, would close the door. In any event you need to open the door. Walk in. Sit a spell and close the door when you leave. Basically a three act play.

Often times we writers will use an outline to flush out the story. An outline usually is a rough idea of each scene. Or at the very least an idea flow. I believe doing so can greatly help to connect the pace of the story. Typically I use an initial outline to map out the basic story concept. I continually update the outline once I begin writing and creating the story flow.

However, I also believe using this same revised outline in reverse can be just as helpful. As we write, our story is usually moving forward through the middle toward the end. Although, sometimes the story can branch out from the middle and may cause an adjustment to the beginning or the end. Either way, the questions are: Can the story still trace back to the beginning? Can the story still flow to the end? Using the outline I created as I was writing, I can then use the same outline to walk backwards through the story and the scenes. Often times by working backwards I can spot a time problem. Maybe character issues. Maybe a chapter shift should be done. Or simply a connection problem. But, more importantly, I can determine if the end works. Did I wrap everything up? Can I get here from there? The middle? The beginning? Basically, will the story still work backwards as well as forwards? Weird, I know, but always interesting.

One of the other things I do before I start putting words on paper, certainly during the writing process and once I finish a first draft, is create and constantly update a Cast of Characters. Who are these people? Who is going to play what part? Who are the main characters? Are they properly defined? Why do I need them? Who are bit players and are they necessary? Maybe I will require more secondary characters as I develop the story. Sometimes as the story goes along, I may be required to create a character to interact. Or find I should remove a character all together who doesn't fit anymore. Will I need to refer to a

particular character later? Or remind the reader who this character is popping up in the story now? Do characters just drop out? Disappear or appear for no reason? Finally, have I fully defined these characters, whoever they may be, and what part they play in the story? Will the reader know who they are and more importantly will they care? Referring to my cast list I can easily determine who is who and constantly remind myself how the character fits into the story.

Next order of business is pacing. Do my scenes connect? Do they interact? Do they work? Do I need more? Or less? Often times in getting from the beginning of the story to the end requires a whole world of filler. Fill in the blanks kind of detail. Middle story detail. And may be a parade of scenes adding, detracting, deflecting, informing and generally moving the story along. Sometimes venturing off into a few side trips—back story. Scenes are a lot like characters. You should also have a list, or simply a more detailed outline you can refer to. Do I need these scenes? Should I add more? Or should I pair down? Most importantly, will they get me where I want to go? Did I miss anything?

Usually, I create a core story, an opening, some pacing and an ending, generally following my initial outline. I will then make several passes to flush out the characters, scenes and pacing.

The last step I perform is a self edit, which is the best attempt at editing I can do. The way I accomplish it, is to take each chapter (scene) and put a paperclip, binder clip or whatever will work and create a pile of clipped sheets. I select a clipped set of pages at random to focus specifically on the chapter to get the chapter as tight and clean as I possibly can. I then grab the next set of sheets still at random to keep my focus on the specific chapter instead of the entire story. I find trying to edit my work in whole lulls me into reading the story rather than looking for issues. Besides, I already know how the story ends, so it doesn't matter where I start or finish the pile of chapters.

*Another trick I've used recently is a deck of cards, assigning value to each suit and face card. Ace through ten of spades = chapters 1 - 10 and so on. If my chapters exceed 40, I assign face cards J,Q,K of spades = 41 - 43 and so on. Should my chapters exceed 52, I randomly shuffle those higher chapters separately and finish those before I start on chapters 1 - 52. Basically I shuffle the cards and pick a card. Eight of spades, I select Chapter 8 and so on. I find this method works quite well especially if you have your manuscript on the screen only, no paper to clip. Find and choose Chapter 8.*

After all of those steps are performed, I will have a new completed [retyped back in the day] manuscript and should be very close to a finished product. However, the final step I will do, is one last read through of the complete story again. First word to last to determine if the story still works. Especially, after I have performed all of the aforementioned tasks. No real editing all reading at this point. The purpose of this exercise is to check for issues which may not always be obvious as I'm making any and all changes, such as structure, or continuity and specifically story flow.

After one final read through, usually at least two passes, and more often than not some additional corrections, only then do I dare send the manuscript off to my editor.