Self-Editing for Writers

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Self-Editing for Writers

Why Edit At All? Regardless of the venue or the type of writing, we write for only one reason: to communicate, both consciously and subliminally, with others. We edit our writing to be as certain as possible our readers will glean from that communication what we want them to get. In other words, we write to communicate, and we edit to clarify.

It stands to reason then, before you can edit you must know how the various nuances of written communication affect the reader.

Punctuation for Writers

Despite the dozens of books that have been published on the topic, punctuation is neither complicated nor difficult to learn. Instead of attempting to memorize the rules only to have those rules change from one reference book or style manual to the next, the writer has to learn only two things to use punctuation effectively:

that punctuation serves only one purpose: it directs the reading of your work; and

that all readers will react in *exactly* the same way every time they encounter the same type of punctuation.

Once you understand how each mark of punctuation causes the reader to react, you've mastered the ability to use punctuation and you never need fear it again.

Long Pause—period, question mark, colon, and exclamation point.

Note: Because it creates a long pause (that's how it puts emphasis on what follows it), the **colon** should be used only after a complete thought, as in this example: *These are my favorite things: women, whiskey and horses.* Compare with the em dash, below.

Medium Pause—semicolon, em dash. Each establishes a cause-and-effect relationship between what occurs before the punctuation and what comes afterward.

Note: The **em dash** is used to indicate the abruptness of an interruption. Because it creates only a medium length pause, the em dash also is used after a list to rush the reader into the reason for the list. Using the previous example, we could write it this way: *Women, whiskey and horses— these are my favorite things.*

The **ellipsis**, which is created with three unspaced dots and anchored to the word that precedes it, creates a pause of varying length depending on the context. For this reason, it is used to indicate halting speech or dialogue trailing off.

Short Pause—comma. (In poetry there's one more short pause—the end of the poetic line—and it's actually a little shorter than the pause created by the comma.) The comma is used, in every case, to alleviate reader confusion.

Spelling Punctuation—For ease of instruction, I've dubbed all the other marks *spelling punctuation* because those marks do not create a pause at all. They are the **apostrophe** (which does double duty as single quotation marks), **quotation marks**, the **hyphen**, **parentheses** and the **en dash**.

Note: The **hyphen**'s only function is to create new words by joining two words together and thereby forcing the reader to read them as one word. Spell checkers never ding hyphenated words. The **en dash**, which is shorter than an em dash but longer than a hyphen, also serves only

one purpose: it is a substitute for the word *to* and is used to indicate a span of numbers or years.

Note: In **Microsoft Word** you can form an **em dash** by pressing Alt/Ctrl and the hyphen (minus) key on the number pad. You can form an **en dash** by pressing Ctrl and the hyphen key on the number pad. You can also use the AutoCorrect feature in Word to form the em dash and en dash. In my program, if I hit the hyphen key three times, Word replaces those hyphens with an em dash. If I hit it twice, Word replaces it with an en dash.

Note: Sometimes you'll want to use em dashes or parentheses in your writing to set off parenthetical information. If you want to give the parenthetical information more weight than the rest of the sentence (make it stand out), set it off with em dashes; this works because the em dash creates that medium-length pause. If you want the additional information to go all but unnoticed, use parentheses; this works because parens do not create a pause at all and they quiet or subdue the information. If you want the information to carry the same weight as the rest of the sentence, set it off with commas. If you were writing about Hugh Grant and want to be sure the reader or listener is certain you aren't talking about the British actor, you might write the following:

Hugh Grant—the president of Monsanto—was in the building today.

If you're fairly certain your reader will know whom you're talking about, you could write this:

Hugh Grant (the president of Monsanto) was in the building today.

And if you weren't worried about it either way, you could write it like this:

Hugh Grant, the president of Monsanto, was in the building today.

For a much more in-depth look at punctuation, pick up *Punctuation for Writers* at your favorite electronic sales outlet.

Proofreading—Of course, proofreading is a big part of editing. Proofreading your own writing is more difficult than proofreading the work of others. Here are a few suggestions:

This one is first because it's the most important tip I can give you: Read your work aloud, even if you do so quietly. (It's better and more fun if you emote.) When you read aloud, you'll catch problems you wouldn't normally catch with your eyes, especially inflection and punctuation

errors. Remember, the reader can't hear your voice when he reads your work. He has to see it. If it sounds right to you when you read it aloud, it will sound right to the reader when he reads it silently. I often read my editing clients' work aloud as I edit.

Use the spell checker, but don't use it as a substitute for your own mind. It will not catch wrong words (e.g., *that* for *than*, *an* for *and*, *waist* for *waste*). Update—you can set some spell checkers to "contextual spelling" now so they will catch "We sent our best solders into battle."

To be sure each sentence makes sense by itself, read in reverse. Read the last sentence first, then the next, then the next and so on to the first sentence. When you read in the proper sequence, especially if you're reading silently, your mind will often insert letters and even whole words that are actually missing from the writing. This is especially true of shorter words like "the" or "of" that happen to occur at the end of a line of writing.

If a word doesn't look right or "feel" right to you, don't depend on the spell checker. Look it up in the dictionary.

Watch closely for the omission of "ed" or "s" on the end of past tense or plural words. (Reading in reverse will help you catch these as well.)

Double check the spelling of words that sound similar to each other. If you aren't sure, look them up. For example, *effect* is a noun, but *affect* is a verb; the writer or speaker *implies*, but the reader or listener *infers*; *advice* is what you give someone, *advise* is what you're doing when you give someone advice. As Wayne Crane pointed out awhile back, a whole is *composed* of its parts, and the parts *comprise* the whole.

Check longer words to be sure you haven't omitted any vowels (a, e, i, o, u).

Be careful of words that contain double vowels. *Succeed*, *proceed*, and *exceed* are the only words that end in "eed." *Supersede* is the only word that ends in "sede." All other words with this sound end with "cede": *precede*, *recede*, and so on.

Be careful of words that contain double consonants, such as *occasion*, *occurrence*, and *accommodation*. My personal thorn is *millennium*. Seems like one N should be enough.

Don't depend on "professionals" like news anchors, who use words to make their living, to be

correct. For example, despite its widespread misuse, "likely" is an adjective, not an adverb, and it's synonymous with "probable," not "probably." I cringe every time a weather guy says "It likely will rain tonight."

Manuscript Format—If you want to submit your printed manuscript to agents and publishers, here's a good standard manuscript format for you. Note that this is only for printed or emailed submission to literary agents and print publishers, not for ebook publication:

Your personal information is single spaced at the top left of the first page.

The title of the overall work is centered and in bold.

The dedication, introduction, acknowledgements and chapter titles are left justified and in bold.

The text is left justified in 12 point Times New Roman font and double spaced. (I recommend Times New Roman because if you use an em dash, it will show up as the right length.)

The first line of each paragraph is indented by 1/2". (Use the paragraph formatting tool to set everything.)

Although in final book form each chapter will begin on its own page, in a manuscript you want each chapter to begin right after the end of the previous chapter. At the end of a chapter, hit Enter twice, then key in the new Chapter Number or Title, then hit Enter twice again and continue with the story.

Major Spacing Issues—These probably seem like small issues to you as you apply them, but they are major issues to the editor or formatter who has to whip your manuscript into shape for the agent or publisher.

Inserting Page Breaks—Originally I was going to write "inserting page breaks between chapters" but I've seen them in many other odd places. The point is, page breaks are something the writer should never even think about. They are the domain of the layout person, not the writer.

Using Multiple Returns (Enter) in Place of Page Breaks—At the end of a chapter, hit Enter (Return) twice, then start typing your next chapter. Inside a chapter, or in a story or novel that is not separated into chapters, to indicate a change of scene or passage of time, hit Enter twice,

center a few spaced asterisks (I usually use either three * * * or five * * * * *) hit Enter twice again and then continue with the next scene or segment. Immediately after the title of the overall work, you might want to hit the Enter (Return) key three times, but everywhere else, hit it only twice.

Using the Tab Key—Again, originally I was going to write "using the Tab key to indent the first line of a new paragraph," but the fact is, there is never a valid reason to use the Tab key for anything. The best rule is Don't use the Tab key for any reason, ever, period.

Using the Spacebar Key to Insert More Than One Space—Again, there's simply no reason for this. The spacebar key exists only to insert one blank space between words or sentences. Don't use it to indent the first line of a new paragraph. Don't use it to insert two spaces after a sentence. (Put only one space. Modern word processors adjust that space.) Don't use the spacebar to arbitrarily add spaces after the last line of a paragraph. (I've never quite understood the reason for that last one.)

For formatting in Word, it's always better to use the Paragraph Format tool. In the screenshots below, you can see the various settings. To find your Paragraph Format dialogue box, check your Help section. The first screenshot illustrates the Indents and Spacing tab. These are the correct settings for the body of your manuscript. (If you want, you may set the first line indent to .5" and the line spacing to Double instead of 1.5. This example was from an epublished manuscript.) The second screenshot illustrates the setting for Line and Page Breaks. They're all unchecked:
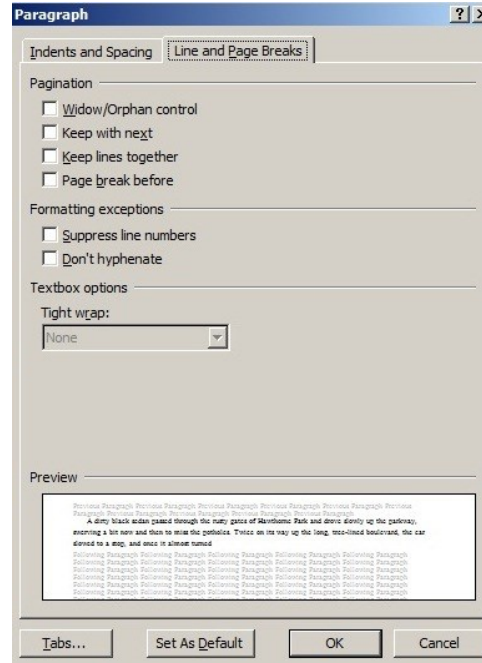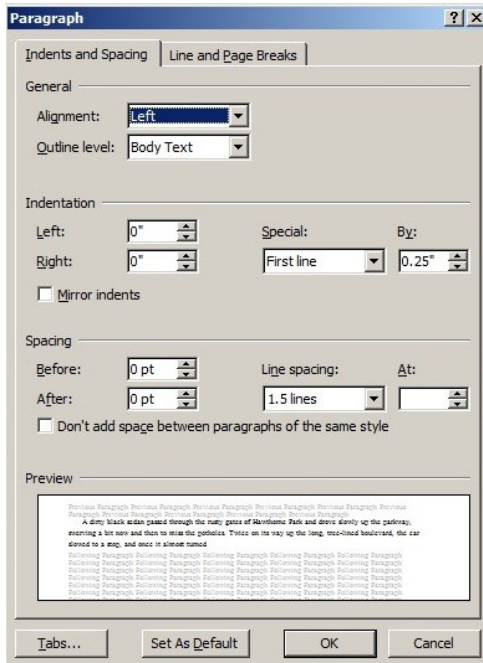
If you decide you'd like to learn to format your work for epublication, I recommend attending my seminar on The Essentials of Digital Publishing. Of course you can also purchase my ebook by the same name here (I recommend you either attend the seminar or wait for the second edition of the ebook), or you can download the free Smashwords Style Guide and wade through it on your own.

General Notes—These are notes that I most often use when editing manuscripts for writers. Because I use them on almost every manuscript I edit, I keep a list of them handy so I can copy and paste instead of rewriting them every time I have to use them:

Don't let the narrator write "to himself," "to herself," or "to themselves." Unless it's a story about mental telepathy, to whom else are you going to think? I believe it's safe to say you should *never* allow your narrator to use "to himself," "to herself," or "to themselves."

Use an em dash to indicate the abruptness of an interruption. To form an em dash, hold down the Alt and Ctrl keys, and press the hyphen key on your number pad. (If you don't have a separate number pad, just press the hyphen key on the top row.) Also to indicate an interruption, it's best to end the utterance on a word that would not normally end a sentence, something that will make the reader's brain lean a bit. It makes the interruption even more abrupt. For example, "John, I just don't know whether I can—" (The word *can* doesn't usually end a sentence, so it makes the

interruption even more abrupt.) Also, don't let your narrator write "So and so interrupted him" because the reader can "hear" the interruption for himself.

Use the ellipsis only for halting speech or for dialogue that trails off. Create an ellipsis with three unspaced dots, with no space before the first dot (anchor it to the word that precedes it) and one space after the last dot. As with an interruption, if you're going to have dialogue trail off it's best to end the sentence on a word that would not normally end a sentence. It enables the reader to actually "hear" the voice trailing off. Also, you don't have to say "her voice trailed away" since the reader can hear that for himself because of the ellipsis.

It's *never* "would of" or "must of" or "could of." Although it sounds like "of" it's actually "'ve," the shortened version of "have." It's always "would've" or "would have."

To indicate possession, the apostrophe goes after the base word. If the base word is singular (for example, *twin*, meaning one twin) the apostrophe goes after that. If the base word is plural (*twins*, meaning both boys) the apostrophe goes after that.

In a sentence like "Dad gave she and I the keys" there's an easy way to determine whether it should be "I" or "me": simply remove the "and phrase" containing the other person's name. For example, would you write "Dad gave she the keys" or "Dad gave I the keys"? No, of course not. You would write "Dad gave her the keys" and "Dad gave me the keys," so you would also write "Dad gave her and me the keys."

Indicate unspoken thought with italics, including anything that's being read silently. When the reader sees an opening quotation mark he expects what follows to be spoken aloud, so he actually "hears" the character speaking. When he sees "he thought" after the closing quotation mark, it makes his brain twist a bit.

Try not to let the narrator use the sense verbs (saw, could see; smelled, could smell; heard, could hear; etc.). Instead the narrator should just describe the scene and let the reader see, hear, smell, etc. right along with the character. This is a big part of what writing instructors mean when they say "Show, don't tell."

Never let the narrator describe a character's state of being (John was angry). Instead, again, just describe the scene. (John kicked in the door, stormed up the stairs, and smacked Joaquin in the

mouth.) As in real life, I can tell John's angry in this example just from witnessing his actions.

To indicate a change of scene or a passage of time within a chapter, just skip an extra blank line. If you choose to use something like asterisks or a pound sign, etc. add an extra blank line before it and after it anyway.

Avoid passive voice whenever possible. Passive voice (or passive construction) occurs *only* when there's a state-of-being verb (am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been) *and* a "by phrase," a prepositional phrase beginning with the word *by,* either actual or implied. Both of these are passive: The package was delivered. (The by-phrase is implied since the package was delivered *by someone*.) The edit was done by Harvey. (The by-phrase is actual.) To correct either of these, use the noun in the by-phrase as the subject of the sentence and delete the state-of-being verb: UPS delivered the package. Harvey did the edit or Harvey edited the manuscript.

Never let your narrator tell the reader what *didn't* happen. Again, just describe the scene. Instead of interrupting my reading to tell me Ralph didn't get to say anything before Ira continued, why not just let Ira continue? I'll know that Ralph didn't say anything because I didn't "hear" him say anything.

A tag line, which is connected to a line of dialogue with a comma, consists of a noun or pronoun and a verb that indicates a form of utterance. You can't "grin" or "cut in" a line of dialogue. The best verb for a tag line is "said." Because its only use is to let the reader know which character's speaking, a tag line should be as boring and bland as possible, and used only when absolutely necessary.

When a tag line is used, it's attached to the sentence with a comma specifically because it doesn't make sense by itself (the verb is intransitive, a form of utterance). Therefore, the first word of a tag line that occurs after the line of dialogue is not capitalized unless it's a proper noun.

Some writing instructors erroneously teach writers to use different verbs in their tag lines to make them more interesting. The fact is, you don't WANT your tag lines to be interesting. They exist only to let the reader know which character's talking, and should be used only when they're absolutely necessary. Likewise, when you do have to use a tag line, it should be as flat and

boring as possible so the reader can all but skip over it and get back to the story. Under no circumstances should a tag line draw the reader's interest from the story.

There's never a good reason for a narrator to use a reverse construction, in a tag line or otherwise. It's an archaic construction, and its repeated use is distracting.

Once the reader has passed the closing quotation mark, he's already "heard" the character. Any description of the character's voice the narrator adds after that changes the reader's perception and forces him to go back and re-read the dialogue. And of course, it's never a good idea to interrupt the reader. When such a description is necessary, it should always occur immediately before the dialogue.

Don't assign human traits to human parts. Saying "a hand grabbed his shoulder" is like saying "her eyes shot across the room" or "his legs raced frantically down the street" or "his jaw dropped to the floor" or "his head looked up from the menu" or "his ears heard sirens several blocks away." :-) Here's another example: He let his eyes fly around until they settled on a fat, slovenly man working on a wad of chaw tobacco.

Try not to assign possession to inanimate objects. It always sounds awkward. Don't let your narrator say "She sat on the couch's edge." Say "She sat on the edge of the couch." And take the context into account. If the character's on a ship, don't let the narrator say "She leaned against the ship's rail" or "She leaned against the rail of the ship." Simply write "She leaned against the rail." How about this one: "She stopped working and pushed her heavy glasses up her nose's bridge."

Try not to use the phrase "she (he) knew." Instead, just omit it and see whether the sentence works just as well. Most of the time it will.

Despite its widespread misuse, "likely" is an adjective, not an adverb, and it's synonymous with "probable," not "probably." I cringe every time a weather guy says "It likely will rain tonight."

Titles and terms of endearment are capitalized only when they're used as a name or as part of a name. For example, you might have seen the king in town or you might have seen King Gunther in town. The doctor is a kind man, and Doctor Richey is a kind man. If it follows "a," "an," or "the," a title is not capitalized.

Use quotation marks *only* to enclose dialogue. If the narrator's saying something "cutesy" and you're tempted to use "air quotes" like I just did twice in this sentence, *Just Don't Do It*.

Don't allow your narrator to use slang, truncated words, phonetically spelled words and other forms of dialect. Remember, the narrator's *only* task is to describe the scene. He should be as invisible as possible. Don't let him draw attention to himself and away from the characters and the story line.

Characters can do and say anything they want. If your narrator is also a character, when he's speaking aloud or thinking private thoughts, he also can say anything he wants and he can use dialect, etc. But when he's being the narrator, he still should not call attention to himself.

Fill in immediate, necessary details of your major characters up front, the first time the reader meets them. The more the reader knows up front, the more deeply involved he will be in the story and the more difficult it will be for him to put it down. Few things are more annoying for a reader than "picturing" a character that he imagines is 20 years old because of the scene, only to find out three pages later that the character is a boy of only 10 or 11.

Don't withhold the character's name unless you have a very good reason. (Withholding a name to create suspense is *not* a good reason. That's one of the quickest ways I know to anger your reader.)

Usually anything being read silently is set in italics, but when it's longer like this, we set it off by skipping a blank line before and after it and be indenting both margins.

Try not to allow your narrator to use "stood and" (or "stood [gerund]") or "sat and" (or "sat [gerund]") unless the character was previously sitting or standing, respectively. Don't use "stood" or "sat" as throw-away verbs. (A gerund is a former verb that's been turned into a noun, an action, by the addition of "ing." For example, you're using "stood" or "sat" as a throw-away verb if you write "She stood [or sat] staring out the window" instead of "She stared out the window." After all, she's already standing or sitting. If she isn't already sitting [or standing], for example, then you can write "She sat [or stood] and stared out the window.")

Don't be afraid of using gerunds (ing words). They create the past progressive tense and give the reader a sense of ongoing action.

The narrator can't become emotionally involved at all. The narrator is an unbiased bystander whose job it is to simply describe the scene. The character could express satisfaction, etc. ("ah, yes") but the narrator cannot.

Just so you know, it's never "try and." It's always "try to."

Do away with any special formatting (page borders, rules/lines, oversized fonts, different fonts, all caps, small caps, bold attribute other than the titles, etc.). There should be nothing distracting in your book.

"Toward" is the American version. "Towards" (pronounced "t'ords") is the Brit version. You used both, so I picked one for consistency. Also, if you use "toward," be sure to also use "forward" and "backward."

Never force your character to just stand there, waiting for the narrator's permission to talk. For example, "Johnny stared off into space for a few moments, then said...."

Try not to let your narrator use "gave" unless something physically changes hands.

Although it's often misused, the word *while* always indicates a passage of time.

It's all right (in fact, it's important) to let your characters speak in sentence fragments, but the narrator has to be correct all the time. The narrator should never do or say anything to draw attention to himself and away from the storyline.

Always let the reader hear the characters directly rather than letting the narrator tell the reader what a character said. I mean, the characters are right there in the scene. We heard from them only a moment ago and we'll hear from them again in another moment, so why allow the reader to interrupt that flow?

Don't be afraid to write and rewrite and rewrite until you get the phrasing perfect. In a story I wrote awhile back I was trying to describe the faded signs painted in the windows of storefronts in a small village in Mexico where a bus has just groaned to a halt. The tourists have piled out and are heading toward the store fronts.

When I first wrote the phrase, it was

beyond painted window signs so faded they looked as if they'd been applied with liquid shoe polish, hung genuine leather belts with silver buckles.

The first phrase became

beyond painted window signs so faded they could no longer be read

which became

beyond painted window signs so faded they were no longer legible

which became

beyond tattered painted window signs that had faded to only partial letters and words

I thought I'd keep that version because it felt just right. Then it finally became

In the windows of those shops, beyond tattered, partial words lettered in faded paint, hung genuine leather belts with silver buckles.

It takes a lot of work to make something look easy.

<p style="text-align:center">Ends</p>

About the Author

Harvey Stanbrough was born in New Mexico, seasoned in Texas, and baked in Arizona. He spent most of his early life in the home of his heart, the Sonoran Desert of southern Arizona. After graduating from a 21-year civilian-appreciation course in the U.S. Marine Corps, he attended Eastern New Mexico University where he managed to sneak up on a bachelor's degree. His works have been nominated for the Frankfurt eBook Award, a Pushcart Prize, and the National Book Award. He writes and works as an editor, writing instructor, eformatter, ebook cover and website designer, and epublisher from his home in southeast Arizona. Contact Harvey at h_stanbrough@yahoo.com. Visit his website at http://HarveyStanbrough.com or visit him on Facebook.