

Chapter 3

Sizing Up Your Manuscript

Introduction

The three major sections of this book—The Story-Level Edit, The Scene-Level Edit, and The Sentence-Level Edit—will walk you through a series of steps designed to help you turn your first draft into solid story gold. The process is very similar to the one I use as a professional editor when I'm working with a client's manuscript.

It would make sense, then, for me to ask you to read this book cover to cover *before* you re-read your draft and make a revision plan.

But in my experience, that's counterproductive. It also flies in the face of everything I believe about writers and the writing process. Whether this is the first self-edit you've done, or your tenth, or your hundredth... *You* know your story better than anyone. You have an understanding of its ins and outs, its nuances, and its vision, that no book can give you. In fact, you probably already have a running mental list of what you love about your story, what you'd like to change, and of nagging concerns and brilliant-new-ideas.

So this chapter will walk you through re-reading your draft, taking notes, and organizing *your* thoughts about your story. That way, you have a personal foundation to stand on, a relationship with your story that's just between you and your story—without my nosy, oh-so-helpful advice butting in quite yet. Then, what you learn later on can help you to confirm, articulate, elaborate on, or recalculate your plan. The result, I hope, is that you'll build a deeper trust in your own intuition when it comes to self-editing, and in the future, you won't even need my help!

Reading Your Draft

The first step is to simply re-read your draft. But you have a few options to consider in terms of how you want to do it:

- Re-read your draft all at once, in a single sitting, *or* over several sessions.
- Take notes while you're reading, *or* take notes after you're done reading. (More on note-taking in a moment.)

Once again, there's no right way to do it, and your method might change mid-reading. I've personally sat down with four hours to spare and a large cup of tea, intending to read my draft from beginning to end... only to realize two hours later that I was going to have to break it into several reading sessions lest my eyes begin to bleed.

There's really only one guideline I'd like you to follow for your re-read: *Read the whole thing from beginning to end, do it at a normal reading pace, and don't let your note-taking turn into actually rewriting your story.*

It's really easy to get sucked into a tricky area of your story. One moment you're reading along making light notes about structure and character, the next moment you're getting out the microscope and spending two hours obsessing over a single scene, reading one paragraph of dialogue over and over and rewriting it to create *just* the right combination of tension and levity.

Remember: After you've taken time away from your story, your first re-read is precious. You won't have a fresh perspective like that again for a while. The goal of the first re-read is to get a bird's eye view

of your story as a whole. An easy way to make sure you're on the right track is simply to read at a normal pace, or even faster than you might normally read. If you notice you're starting to slow way down, reading very carefully, or re-reading the same sentence or paragraph several times, pick up the pace.

Keep in mind as you read that your first draft may not resemble your finished story any more than a piece of plywood looks like a shed, or a glob of yellow paint looks like a sunflower. Writing is a funny craft that way. Painters, for example, use paint, brushes, and canvas to create their art. Sculptors use clay, metal, or wood. But as a writer, your raw materials don't come from a lumber yard or art supply store. You created your material from scratch by putting words on the page. *Your* raw material is your first draft. As you read it, you'll find where you need to cut, smear, blend, chop, separate, join, and discard your material, just like any other craftsman.

Taking Notes

While you read your draft (or after you read it, depending on what method you choose), take notes. They can be as long or as short, as detailed or as simple as you like—this is for your own benefit; you won't be showing your notes to anyone else. Consider:

- **What's working.** Noticing the positive aspects of your draft is just as important as finding what needs improvement. Take note of your favorite sentences, scenes, characters, metaphors, lines of dialogue, etc., even if that just means drawing a little star or heart in the margins.

- **Major story issues.** How do you feel about your story, generally? Are you happy with the overall mood, theme, and plot? Are there wonky character arcs, plot inconsistencies, erratic pacing, misplaced events, or anything else major you'd like to change?
- **Places where you've strayed from your outline.** If you're a planner, you'll want to mark up any parts of your story that have gone off the rails from your outline. Remember, though: It might not be your story that needs to be revised to match your outline, but the other way around.
- **Underdeveloped parts.** Notice any places where your story feels too thin: Underdeveloped conflict, flat characters, short scenes, sparse descriptions, a rushed ending, etc. If you already have ideas about how those areas can be fleshed out, take note of that as well.
- **Overwritten parts.** On the other hand, observe if certain parts of your story seem to go on and *on* for no good reason: Lengthy dialogue exchanges where nothing actually happens, overwrought descriptions, babbling inner monologues, repetitive scenes, melodramatic characters or events.
- **Confusing, boring, or otherwise suspect parts.** It happens: In the throes of first draft passion, you wrote a "brilliant" scene or chapter that now, months later, is dubious at best. It might come off as boring, ridiculous, redundant, or just simply baffling. Either way, it's got to be dealt with. Take note.

- **Observations on style, tone, or mood.** Maybe you notice that the first half of your story is darkly poetic, while the second half is effusive and bubbly. Or that your writing style or your narrator's voice switches abruptly after the third chapter. For novels especially, it's not uncommon to notice stylistic inconsistencies throughout the story that you want to address in your revision.
- **Anything else you notice.** Use your instincts. Does the story seem too long or too short overall? Does it feel like it could use more dialogue? Less? Do you need to trim down the number of minor characters who are populating Chapter 5? Remember: You don't need to have a solution to every problem. You may end up marking your manuscript with notes like, "This part feels off," or "Too slow?" and that's fine. The rest of this book should help you understand those elusive problem areas and give you ideas about how to address them. For now, just put a pin in it.

Depending on where you're at in your revision process, you might have notes from a critique group, beta reader, or editor, in addition to your own. If that's the case, keep them in mind as you do your self-assessment, but don't let other people's opinions overshadow your own. Be particularly wary of any solutions that have been offered by others. As Neil Gaiman says:

Remember: when people tell you something's wrong or doesn't work for them, they are almost always right. When they tell you exactly what they think is wrong and how to fix it, they are almost always wrong.

Readers are great at sniffing out problems... but they're not always as good at finding solutions. Unless your outside feedback is coming from an experienced editor or a successful writer (and even then!), don't get too attached to their revision suggestions. Chances are, there's a better, more creative solution to the problem that only *you* will be able to see.

By the same token, don't let yourself be so swept away with *positive* feedback that you shrug off problems that are nagging at you. Trust yourself. If there's something you think needs fixing or changing, it probably does.

Reviewing Your Notes & Making a Plan

The next two steps happen almost simultaneously. Now that you've read your draft and taken notes, you'll need to sift through those notes and plan your next move. Here's the three-step process I like to use:

Step 1: Condensing Your Notes

Your notes may *seem* out of control, but chances are they aren't as complicated as you think. If you look closely, you might notice you've made ten or twenty notes about your main character that all amount to the same thing: They're reacting melodramatically to small events. Or you might have several notes in every chapter that point out overdone descriptions of the weather.

If you haven't literally said the same thing twice (or three times, or fifty), you've probably said what's *essentially* the same thing in different words. Go through your notes and see how much you can boil them down. You can make a fresh sheet of condensed notes, or just mentally condense them.

As an example, here are my condensed notes from one of the revisions of my short story *Pigtail Girls*:

- Point of View: Needs to be more obvious from the beginning that Eleanor is an omniscient narrator.
- Flashbacks: Hard to tell when we're entering a flashback. Add more line breaks, esp. in the scene with Cora on the Landing.
- Too many long, thick paragraphs. Story could benefit from more frequent paragraph breaks.
- Too many names that sound alike: Eleanor; Ellie who is also called Myra Ellen; The Knife, who is also called Ed, who is also called the Station Guard.
- Beginning is disproportionately long. Trim beginning or lengthen ending.
- Too much explaining. Let readers watch instead of being told.
- Ellie and Marianne's relationship is unclear. Why are they so close?
- Eleanor's voice is inconsistent: Needs a clear voice from beginning to end.
- Story is an awkward length. Too long for a short story; too short for a novella.

Next, we'll look at how to organize your condensed notes in order of importance, so you can make an initial revision plan.

Step 2: Organizing & Prioritizing

In order to organize your notes, you'll need to decide:

- **Which problems are most important?** What needs to be addressed immediately, and what can wait until a later revision? Break your list into major, semi-major, and minor problems. We'll talk more about how to figure this out in a moment.
- **How many problems can you tackle at once?** If you have 29 Very Important Problems, you might need to narrow it down to a more manageable list for your first revision. What you can handle is ultimately up to you, though, and you can always adjust later if you realize you're in over your head.
- **Which problems aren't actually problems at all?** Here's a world-shattering concept: You might decide that some of your "problems" don't actually need to be solved. For example, with my story *Pigtail Girls*, I ultimately decided I didn't care that the story was an awkward length and I never fixed it.

The first step is simply to put your notes in order of importance. I like to start by breaking them into three categories: Big, medium, and small.

Big Problems: Story-Level

Big problems are story-level and will require a wholesale revision of your story to solve.

For example, if you want to change a minor character into a major antagonist, switch your point of view from omniscient to a close third, or set your story in modern-day Ethiopia instead of Ancient Babylon, you

can't just adjust a few paragraphs of your story and call it good. You'll need to revise every chapter and maybe even every scene.

Big problems include:

- **Story World:** Moving your story to a different setting or world; major inconsistencies within the world you've created; or a hazy relationship between your story world and characters or plot.
- **Characters:** Adding or removing main characters, changing who's the protagonist, or realizing you have main characters with a complete lack of goals or obstacles will all require a big, wholesale revision of your story.
- **Point of View:** Changing your story's point of view; adding or removing point of view characters; tinkering with the level of knowledge, intimacy, physical/psychic distance of the point of view character.
- **Plot:** No plot; brand new plot; no conflict; different main events (different minor events and subplots are a smaller problem); new ending; new structure.
- **Theme:** An underdeveloped, confused, or over-the-top theme can be dealt with without rewriting your whole story. But if you have no theme and need to create one, or want to significantly change your current theme to a new one, that's a Big Problem.
- **Mood, voice, style, or tone:** If you need to adjust a few paragraphs or chapters to stylistically align, that's a small problem.

But if the tone of your *entire* story is off you'll need to rewrite everything, which means you've got a Big Problem on your hands.

Medium Problems: Chapter or Scene-Level

Medium problems are chapter or scene-level. They need some elbow grease to solve, but they're not as all-encompassing—or as overwhelming—as story-level problems.

Medium problems include:

- **Underdeveloped plots, characters, themes, or story worlds:** If your plot is basically working but needs to be fleshed out, you can usually fix it without rewriting your entire story.
- **Pacing:** Pacing that's too fast, too slow, or inconsistent can usually be handled on the scene-level.
- **Flashbacks:** Too many, too few, or wrongly placed flashbacks.
- **Too much scene or summary:** Converting summary to scene or vice versa.
- **Minor characters:** They can usually be added, cut, combined, or altered without rocking your story to its very foundation.
- **Point of view inconsistencies:** Sometimes point-of-view violations are so minor they can even be dealt with on the sentence-level; other times you'll need to revise the scene.

Small Problems: Sentence-Level

- **Awkward transitions:** The magic of transitions is that they can *feel* big, but in reality, they're usually only a few sentences long and fixing them is quick and easy.
- **Bloated, stilted, or underwritten dialogue:** This can sometimes be a scene-level problem, but is often handled on the sentence-level.
- **Overwriting:** Too many words, back-to-back sentences that express the same concept, overly poetic prose, convoluted metaphors.
- **Names:** Want to change Jeffery's name to Tim, or change the Protectors to the Guardians? No big deal.
- **Minor inconsistencies:** Inconsistent physical descriptions; mixed-up dates, times, or names; etc.
- **Paragraph or scene breaks:** So easy!
- **Clunky sentences:** Filtering, stage direction, clichés, repetition, purple prose, misplaced punctuation, incorrect word choices, overuse of adverbs or adjectives, etc.

As you can see, the lines between big, medium, and small problems (aka story-level, scene-level, and sentence level problems) are fluid and

sometimes blurry. Prioritizing your notes is an art, not a science—just like writing itself.

As an example, here's how I prioritized my notes for *Pigtail Girls*:

Big story-level problems:

- Eleanor's voice is inconsistent: Needs a clear voice from beginning to end.
- Ellie and Marianne's relationship is unclear. Why are they so close?
- Story is an awkward length. Too long for a short story; too short for a novella.

Issues with the narrator's voice *can* be a medium problem, but because my point of view character's voice was inconsistent from beginning to end, *and* I'm a voice-oriented writer, I decided it was a top priority.

Medium scene-level problems:

- Point of View: Needs to be more obvious from the beginning that Eleanor is an omniscient narrator.
- Too many long, thick paragraphs. Story could benefit from more frequent paragraph breaks.
- Beginning is disproportionately long. Trim beginning or lengthen ending.

Because my point of view confusion was only happening in the first chapter, I considered it a medium problem. If it had been confusing throughout the entire story, I would've made it a bigger priority.

Small, sentence-level problems:

- Too many names that sound alike: Eleanor; Ellie who is also called Myra Ellen; The Knife, who is also called Ed, who is also called the Station Guard.
- Flashbacks: Hard to tell when we're entering a flashback. Add more line breaks, esp. in the scene with Cora on the Landing.
- Too much explaining. Let readers watch instead of being told.

Flashbacks can be a bigger problem if they need to be cut, rewritten, or moved. But my flashbacks were fine—it was just the few sentences of transition between the flashbacks and the regular story that needed to be revised—so I considered the issue to be minor.

Step 3: Planning Your Approach

At this point you should have a roughly prioritized list of problems you want to address. You may already know the solution to some of the problems. For others, it might take further thought, reading, note taking, or research to figure out a potential solution.

For now, make a preliminary sketch of how you'd like to go forward. Which problems will you try to address in your first revision, and which can wait for a second, third, or fourth? Your plan will probably change once you get started, so keep it loose. But try to get some idea of how, and in what order, you want to proceed before you start revising.

We went over revision approaches in Chapter 2: “Choosing an Editing Method” (top down, bottom up, beginning to end, end to

beginning, fix the easy stuff first, etc.). What I didn't mention is that your revision plan will depend on what kind of writer you are, the story you've written, and, not least, your capacity, mood, and state of mind on any given day.

For example, I usually start with the big stuff. But the week I began my revision of *Pigtail Girls*, I decided the first thing on my list would be to fix all the names that sounded too similar. Because I was feeling overwhelmed, fixing this small problem gave me a quick sense of accomplishment that made it easier for me to keep going.

When in doubt, don't worry about how-you're-going-to-deal-with-every-single-thing. Just plan your *next* move.

If you're not feeling ready to revise, or if you have a problem that you don't know how to solve, your next move may be as simple as finishing this book. Or jumping ahead to the section that addresses a problem you want to better understand.

Self-editing takes practice. Don't expect yourself to come up with a fail-safe revision plan the first time you try. Just do your best, and adapt as needed as you go along.

After reading this chapter, you might decide to do your first revision without going any further in this book. Or you might jump ahead to a section to get help on a particular topic, but save the rest for later. That's totally fine. I encourage you to act on your own knowledge and instincts if you feel confident about going forward without my help! I'll be here when you need me.

For the rest of you, we'll move on to Part Two: The Story-Level Edit. Keep your notes—you'll need them. You can add to them as you read. You might get a deeper understanding of your manuscript's story-level issues, or discover new strengths or problems you didn't know you had, and you'll want to take note.