

Self-editing:

A skill that any writer can develop and that every writer needs

1. Write first; edit later

If you have an inner critic (and who doesn't), as you sit down to write, grab that critic by the collar, spin it around and gag it firmly – this is writing time! In the early stages, creative work is fragile – keep it sheltered until it is well-enough developed to stand up to other people's sight. There will be plenty of time for editing later.

2. Give your work a rest

Once you have finished a draft, put it aside for at least a week – a month is better – to give you a rest from it before you start editing. To edit, you need some mental and emotional distance from the work, and with your own writing you can only accomplish this by taking time off.

3. Read aloud

When you look at your draft again, read it as if you've never seen it before – and read it aloud. Reading aloud is a fantastic tool that will reveal all sorts of things: where you need a comma, where your sentences have become too long or involved, where a character sounds wrong (or just right!), where deliberate or inadvertent alliteration or rhyme crops up and how well that works ...

4. Think about grammar

Grammar is a set of conventions that enable people speaking the same language to understand each other. So every time you break the rules, you risk someone not understanding. If something's not right grammatically, why not? Mistakes can be fixed. Deliberate flouting of conventions can be re-examined: what rule are you breaking? Why? Does it create the effect you intended? A good general rule is not to break rules until you know them, and then only for a reason.

5. Cut words

Many of us are verbose in our first drafts. But lean writing is attractive. Lean writing gets the message to readers more quickly. Examine each word: Do you need it? How much can you leave out and still have your readers understand? Tightening up your writing is surprisingly easy once you get into the habit, and works wonders with your text.

6. Keep versions

Protect yourself from heartache by keeping versions of your work. Computers crash, houses burn down, lightning strikes ... Play it safe with two clearly labelled electronic copies and a print-out, at least one stored off-site or in the cloud. Saving versions frees you to be both adventurous and thrifty, because you never really lose anything. If you have to, cut a good part to make your writing work as a whole. Saved versions allow you to reinstate parts later if desired, or use them in another work.

7. Play with structures

If you see that your writing isn't working, try restructuring. Tell the story from a different point of view or change the tense. Turn your novel into a short story, or your short story into a novel. For non-fiction, restructure your anecdotes as tips. Start at the end instead of the beginning. You have other versions to go back to, so what have you got to lose?

8. Check your facts, and copyright and legal issues

Be rigorous. You probably didn't stop in the flow of writing to check the size of a mature crocodile, but, if it matters for your story, check it as you self-edit. While you're at it, do crocs live in that area? Are males or females the most aggressive? They do *what* with their young? Aren't you glad you checked it out? Educate yourself on what you can and cannot include, such as song lyrics – a big no-no and very expensive to get permission (see www.copyright.org.au/), and possible libellous or defamatory references to people, alive or dead (see www.artslaw.com.au/info-hub/).

9. Check for consistency

Your hero has steely grey eyes on page 11 and piercing blue ones on page 58. These mistakes undermine the 'reality' you are creating. That's why readers notice them. All kinds of inconsistencies can creep in as you write. Now's the time to work through your manuscript ensuring that your plot holds water, and that characters, like any living creatures, are themselves and distinct from all others. Use a style sheet to keep track of their habits, names and attributes. Run a grammar and spellchecker in the correct version of English (or whichever language you're using). Tailor the grammar and spellcheck (e.g. uncheck 'Contractions' in fiction) and ensure you have set the correct default dictionary.

10. Reconsider viewpoint and voice

Think again about voice, tense and viewpoint. Is your point of view consistent? If not, do the changes work? Do you need to shift to another point of view to illuminate a character or situation, or to reveal certain information at this time in the plot? Would the story be more interesting told from a different point of view, or from multiple perspectives? What about voice? Both your authorial voice and your characters' tones can ring clear as bells.

Beyond self-editing

Now you've edited your own work it's time to seek an external perspective. Peers, friends, family (perhaps) ... Accept feedback graciously (or they won't be so keen to help next time), and be specific with busy people about what sort of feedback you need: a straightforward reaction to the work as a whole, or feedback on a particular character or part of the plot.

Next, it's on to the professionals: a manuscript assessor or editor.

To find publishing professionals who can help to take your work to the next level, search the IPEd Editors Directory at www.iped-editors.org/find-an-editor