

# SELF-EDITING

**Curriculum: NOVICE and ADVANCED**

**Created by: Dar Bagby**

**Definition:** The process of correcting your own literary work before submitting it to a professional editor.

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**Goals:** 1) Be able to recognize errors in others' works.  
2) Be able to self edit your story before submission to a publisher.

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**Tools:** 1) A copy of the HANDOUTS (#1, #2, and #3) for each enthusiast  
2) A dry-erase board (or flip-chart) and marker  
3) A pen or pencil for each enthusiast

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**Ice Breaker:** Distribute HANDOUT #1 to the enthusiasts. Have them find mistakes in the paragraph and raise their hands when they see them.

**Excerpt: (Answer key follows)**

Jacob steps down into the small aluminum boat that was tied to the dock. It was unstable in the choppy water, and he was careful to step directly into the center of it to keep from capsizing. He reaches for his life jacket, being careful not to drop it into the cold clear rippling murky water. He went ahead and put it on while he stood, looking out across the smooth, mirror-like, surface, of the lake. Then, looking back at his friend Stephen and saying, who is still standing still on the dock, he says, "I think its going to be a good day for fishing".

His friend gives him a rather rapid retort with a worried look on his face, "I don't know those whitecaps are pretty scary-looking to me." Jacob tells him not to worry. I'll be fine.

He steps back to the motor and lowered it on the the transom. He pulls the starting cord and the engine took off with a whir that sounds like a cat on a hot tin roof. His friend unties the boat and said, "I hope I don't have to come out their and scoop your up in a net!!!!!!"

"You wont", Jacob shouted back at him and waves. he didn't like the looks of the gray waves slamming against the bow and spraying up over it. Making the seats and the contents of the boat all wet. *I'm not sure if I whether I believe my own words or not. It is pretty scary out there.* He throws out the anchor when he finds a good place to fish. Then he turns the boat around and threw out the anchor. He turns the ignition key off to shut it off. It stopped, but continued to bounce, in the waves.

Answer key:

1. the tense goes back and forth between present and past all the way throughout the story
2. Says the water is choppy but looks across the mirror-like surface
3. directly is misspelled
4. cold clear rippling murky water needs commas; is the water clear or murky?
5. no commas are necessary after mirror-like and surface
6. Then. looking back at his friend Stephen and saying, who is still standing still on the dock, he says, "I think its going to be a good day for fishing". This sentence should be written as follows: Then looking back at his friend, who is still standing on the dock, Jacob says, "I think it's going to be a good day for fishing."
7. change gives him a rather rapid retort (alliteration) to says, with
8. should be "I don't know. Those"
9. Jacob tells him not to worry. I'll be fine. delete the first sentence and write as: "I'll be fine."  
     should be a new paragraph
10. No new paragraph at He steps back
11. there is a double the before transom
12. add a comma after cord
13. delete that sounds like a cat on a hot tin roof (cliché)
14. change their to there
15. change your to you
16. delete all but one of the exclamation points and add a period then quotation marks after  
     net
17. "You wont", should be written as "You won't,"
18. capitalize he after waves.
19. it. Making should be written as it, making
20. if I whether I – choose one or the other (if I or whether I)
21. he throws out the anchor twice
22. he turns the ignition key to shut it off. To shut what off—the anchor? And he started the  
     motor with a pull cord, not an ignition key.
23. no commas are necessary in the last sentence

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## Lesson

(NOTE: This is a long lesson. You will probably want to break it down into more than one session so the enthusiasts have time to ask questions.)

- Distribute HANDOUT #2 and ask the enthusiasts to follow along as you discuss the lesson.
- Encourage the enthusiasts to take notes on the HANDOUT sheet.
- Be sure to put key words/phrases on the board (chart) as you go.

## The Importance of Self Editing

When writing, the best approach for an author is simply to key his/her story on a text document and not be overly concerned with grammar, punctuation, etc. No author should be side-tracked and lose a line of thought because he/she has to think about rules of style. It is for this very reason, however, that an author **MUST** self edit the story before submitting a manuscript to a publisher or self publishing. No matter how good a story is, a publisher will not accept a submission that has not been self-edited; it is far too difficult and time consuming to try to follow the plot, read the sentence structure with ease, and make a choice regarding whether to publish it. No doubt, it will end up being deleted from their list of submissions. And a self-published story that is poorly edited will give you a bad reputation as a writer, which means people get the word and don't buy your books.

It is important to **put your completed story away after writing it**. Don't even look at it for at least two weeks; a month is better. When you take it back out, it will be "new" to you, and you will be able to look at it from a reader's standpoint, not the writer's. Immediately run a spelling/grammar check and make necessary corrections. Then read it **aloud** and look for typos and clumsy expressions or words that create unwanted effects. Highlight them as you go.

Pay special attention to the gist and flow of the story. One of the first steps in self editing is making sure the central theme is obvious. Ask yourself, ***Does the reader know what I'm trying to get across?*** Look at your basic plot arc: does the protagonist embark on a quest, face an antagonist(s), develop through conflict, prevail in a climax, and tie up loose ends (to the satisfaction of the reader)? ***Has the story maintained continuity?*** Time lines and locations must be in the right order and in the correct time frame (the period in which the story is set) with corresponding days and years. It is imperative to allow characters ample time to get to and from locations; this must always be obvious to the reader. ***Do reason and logic prevail?*** This is a must, even in fantasy and science fiction. Don't let the impetus of the characters or situations twist the story artificially to get to the outcome. In other words, don't fabricate something or someone and inject it/them into the story just to find an easy way to end the book; this annoys readers.

After you have corrected all of your highlights, go back and read it again, but this time put it in a different font and size, and change the margins. You'll be amazed at not only how different it looks, but also at how different it reads. You'll find yourself thinking, *Did I actually write that?* And that can be good or bad!

Even after your best self editing efforts, your manuscript will need to be professionally edited. A writer is too close to his/her story to be completely objective about what works best to sell books.

## Active Voice vs. Passive Voice

Which of these shows more action?

**A) I went to the grocery store and bought hamburger buns for my mother.**

**B) I was sent to the grocery store by my mother to buy hamburger buns.**

The first example screams action; a reader can actually *picture* the action happening. The second example only *suggests* an action might have taken place; it was actually only suggested *by* someone. Example **A** is written in **active voice**. Example **B** is written in **passive voice**.

The best way to tell active from passive is to ask yourself, *Is the action actually happening (or did it actually happen, if written in past tense)?* If so, you've written it in active voice. Ask yourself, *Is the action suggested **by** someone/something?* If you can answer *Yes*, then

you have written it in passive voice. Another way to tell if your sentence is in passive voice is to check for the words **was** or **were**. Check examples **A** and **B** again; in example **B** you see the word **was** (**I was sent...**), which is a major hint that it is passive voice. Bear in mind that **was** and **were** don't always indicate passive voice. For instance:

*I was (We were) in the middle of the street when I (we) saw the bus heading right toward me (us).*

In this case, it merely indicates past tense.

Customarily in literature, **active voice is preferred over passive voice** most of the time. ACTION RULES! That does not mean, however, that passive voice should be ignored. There are times when a *suggested* action (passive voice) can be more appropriate—to set a mood, for instance.

**C) I was destined to sit in the graveyard and watch, shivering, as the darkness closed in around me.**

**D) I sat shivering in the graveyard. The darkness was closing in around me.**

Example **C** sets a more mysterious mood, while example **D** only states the facts. In this case, the passive example, **C**, does a much better job of transporting the reader into the story. In literature it isn't always best to give “just the facts, ma'am.”

When an action scene is taking place, active voice is preferred, and it is best expressed through short sentences. Short sentences keep the action flowing. Check out these examples:

**E) “Run!” Brad yelled.  
“I can't, my leg's broken.” Jessica said.  
“Then I'll carry you.”**

**F) Brad told Jessica to run, but she said she was unable to do so because of a broken leg, so Brad told her he would carry her.**

Which describes more action? Pretty obvious it's **E**, wouldn't you say?

Active and passive can set a mood or keep the action moving. As an author you have to decide the appropriate choice for the moment in your story. Changing just a couple of words often makes a huge difference in how a thought or situation is perceived by your readers.

### **Show & Tell**

For some reason, the distinction between these two words often becomes obscured by writers. Just as with active and passive voice, more action takes place when **showing** something, such as during dialogue, a perfect place to do the best showing. **Telling** is basically narration. That having been said, let's observe some examples.

If I want my readers to know that Winston went to college, has his doctorate in physics, and is now a physics professor at Cambridge University in England, I could **tell** the readers those exact facts. BORING! Instead, I'd rather use dialogue to do that:

**“Hey, Winston? Is that you?” Randall called out.  
“Yeah, buddy, it's me. Long time no see,” Winston said.  
“Since high school. What've you been up to?”  
“Went to college—Harvard—and got my PhD in physics. Now I'm a full-time prof at Cambridge.”**

**“THE Cambridge? The one in England?” Randall asked.**

Makes it a little more interesting, don't you think? That's what **showing** is all about.

Of course, you can also **show** without using dialogue. For instance:

**Dawn grabbed the railing as the ship rolled up and down and threw itself back and**

**forth within the giant swells. Her clothes were soaked from the spray that washed over the deck.**

Now let's see how that would be if I chose just to **tell** it:

**Dawn was on a ship. The seas were very rough, and the ship rocked a lot. Spray from the waves made Dawn's clothes wet.**

Get the picture? The first example actually puts the readers right into the story—it **shows** them what was happening. The second example merely **told** the readers. If you want to hold your readers' interest, you need to bring them into the story so they feel they either *are* one of the characters or can at least *relate to* the characters around them. Readers want to be swept up and dropped smack-dab into the center of the action. They want to participate in what the characters are doing, to experience their emotions or feel empathy for them. They want to laugh with them at humorous moments and weep with them over their losses. They don't simply want to be told what the characters are going through.

### Leaving Space on the Page

Space on the page is visually inviting to readers. It is an indication that dialogue is going on, and well written dialogue is the best avenue for keeping the pace moving in a story. Now don't go hog wild and try to write nothing but dialogue—99.9% of the time that doesn't work. A great book includes a good mix of narration and dialogue, showing and telling, active and passive, well maintained tense, non-wavering point of view, heavy moments and comic relief...I think you get the idea. In other words, there is no single aspect of writing that constitutes a good book; it requires a lot of variables.

Without a doubt, one of the best variables is dialogue, but it must be interspersed at the best places in your story. Too much of it leaves the reader weary; too little—well, it pretty much does the same thing. A prospective buyer/reader will often thumb through a book before buying it. If there is very little empty space, it will appear to be a textbook...nothing wrong with that if that's what it's supposed to be. A novel, on the other hand, or even a lot of non-fiction, needs to be broken up into parts that contain space (dialogue) and parts that don't (narration). When the prospective buyer/reader sees that mix, a sale is much more probable.

Another way to leave space on the page is by avoiding overuse of speaker attributions. For example, I'll use the example from above:

**“Hey, Winston? Is that you?” Randall called out.**

**“Yeah, buddy, it's me. Long time no see,” Winston said.**

**“Since high school. What've you been up to?”**

**“Went to college—Harvard—and got my PhD in physics. Now I'm a full-time prof at Cambridge.”**

**“THE Cambridge? The one in England?” Randall asked.**

Don't be afraid of the words, “said” and “asked.” There is no need to use up all of the synonyms in a thesaurus. For the most part, readers don't care whether the speaker “replied,” “retorted,” “answered,” or “inquired.” “Said” and “asked” are words readers gloss over without really having to contemplate their meaning; having to do so would result in slowing down the action. More importantly, readers are interested mainly in *who* said or asked something. It is best to make sure the name or pronoun is first (...**he said** or ...**Tami asked**, NOT ...**said he** or ...**asked Tami**). In the example above, **Randall called out** is used to signify that he was not standing right next to Winston, which leads us to **beats** and **tags**.

## Beats & Tags

Beats and tags are used in dialogue. **Beats** are stage directions. **Tags** tell the reader who said what and how.

**Tags** act as signposts to attribute dialogue to certain characters. Each tag contains at least one speaker (noun or pronoun) and a verb indicating a way of speaking. The most important thing to remember in most written dialogue is not to be afraid to use the words “said” or “asked.” “Said” and “asked” are words readers have learned to gloss over without really having to contemplate their meaning, and therefore, they don’t slow down the action. When other words appear, readers must take an extra fraction of a second to notice a tag that might mean the same as “said” or “asked” yet is not crucial to the dialogue. More importantly, readers are interested mainly in *who* said or asked something. There are times when other tags important, however. For instance:

*Dave **whispered**, “Don't go in there!”*

This evokes an entirely different picture than:

*Dave **shouted**, “Don't go in there!”*

The more characters involved in a scene, the greater the number of tags are necessary to identify the speakers, and the more important the tags' positioning becomes. And don't forget, it is best to make sure the name or pronoun precedes the tag.

**Beats** describe the physical action a character makes when speaking. Beats **show** instead of **tell**. For example, instead of having your character **tell** the reader;

*“I don't want to sleep at Grandma's. I don't like the things in the closet,” Bette said sheepishly,*

try using:

*“I don't want to sleep at Grandma's.” Bette's eyes became as big and round as hub caps, and her voice trembled as she whimpered, “I don't like the things in the closet.”*

Now you have **shown** the reader the extent of Bette's fear. Beats are a perfect tool for writers to portray body language. When using beats remember that using only a few of them implies tension, just as short sentences do.

## So You've Decided to Write a Series

A series of books (volumes) has become a popular seller in recent times. Readers seem to love being left on the edge (a cliffhanger) until the next book in the series appears. But bear in mind that a series **requires exceptional self-editing**. It is the author's responsibility to double, triple, and quadruple check for glaring errors from one book to the next.

Another part of writing a series is making certain your readers get a recap when each successive book reaches publication. The difficult part of this is giving only enough information for newcomers to be able to follow what's going on, and for returning readers (who might have read the older books quite some time ago) to be reminded of what they read in the previous volumes. It's not easy.

As the author, you know exactly what went on in your previous book, and you're very close to your story and plot. Your readers, on the other hand, may have read lots of books between this one and the last, or they may be just starting your series and reading it out of order. Therefore, each book must stand by itself as well as continue the story from a previous volume. Are you beginning to see how this can be more difficult than it sounds?

Let's start by talking about background filler. Though background filler is a major point to consider when first introducing a character, that character has to have enough personality to

make the correct impression—whether protagonist or antagonist—on new readers right from the character's introduction in each successive book. Professional editors are likely not going to remember your individual characters from one book to the next, so they will be looking for character identifiers from the get go. As for returning readers, they too need a nudge regarding the characters' details and development to envision them as the story unfolds. Everyone needs to get to know your characters from their present lives, not their pasts. Remember, just because you introduced a character (or a scene, a location, a setting, etc.) at the outset of the series, readers rarely remember it later. You have to **jog their memories**.

Protagonists must be consistent in the way they behave. They must have powerful motivations and emotions. These attributes are far easier for readers to remember than such things as physical details. It also helps if you can find a way to mention something in the preceding book about the next one to come (foreshadowing) and then repeat it in the following volume.

If all these things fail to happen, your editor may suggest you do a rewrite. It happens more often than you want to think about.

### **Editing Your Characters**

Once you have finished writing your manuscript you'll need to go back and check the whole aspect of character development before putting your manuscript away for a while. We'll start with your protagonist. Has he/she/it remained constant in behavior? With powerful emotions and motivations? Remaining inoffensive?

A single word or phrase can make your protagonist appear in a way you don't intend. It's worth every single minute you take to go back through the entire manuscript and make sure your protagonist is truly the person you want to portray in your story. It may not require more than removing or changing one small aspect of his/her/its behavior or speech to correct this mistake, so **DON'T SKIP THIS STEP** in self editing. Then again, you may discover that your protagonist became someone you hadn't meant to write about, so you'll need to rethink the whole idea. Or you might realize your protagonist is actually a “cardboard cliché” character, being flat instead of rounded and having depth. It happens.

When your protagonist has an interior monologue (thinking rather than speaking), you must be certain he/she/it would actually think those thoughts. (FYI: In written prose, the industry standard is to represent one's thoughts in italics.) Bear in mind, too, that if you are writing from the protagonist's point of view (POV), he/she/it is the only one whose thoughts you will be able to express; how could you know the other characters' thoughts? And if you are writing in first person, you can't write about anything your main character couldn't know.

Is your antagonist believable, or have you created a “cartoon” antagonist who is too evil, too sadistic, or too vain. If this is the case, you should be able to see right away that the character has ceased to be frightening, perhaps to the point of being silly, not even as frightening as a real human being. Time to revamp your modifiers.

Have any of your minor characters been allowed to take the story down a wrong path? If they do nothing to take the story forward, they should be deleted. On the other hand, sometimes a minor character acts as a catalyst to head the reader in the right direction, even if that character doesn't show up again in the story. Don't underestimate the power of catalysts; just make sure they act to keep the pace moving, not slow it down or create an unnecessary tangent.

## Make the Cut

After you have ignored your finished manuscript for 2-4 weeks and then come back to it, you will probably recognize portions of text that are extraneous to the plot and action. This is the point at which you need to be willing to cut them from the story.

### **ANY CHARACTER OR ELEMENT OF YOUR STORY THAT CAN BE REMOVED AND IS NOT MISSED DOESN'T BELONG THERE IN THE FIRST PLACE.**

I have cut sentences, paragraphs, and even chapters in half because of the “fluff” (nothing more than page-filler).

Being an in-the-know author means realizing that **belaboring your topic or showing off your research is useless**, as readers may not find these topics as interesting as you do. For instance, let’s say I am an avid birdwatcher, and as a result of years of enjoying it as my hobby, I have accumulated a lot of knowledge about certain species and their habits. If I were to put a character who loves birdwatching in one of my stories, I would be amiss if I thought the majority of my readers shared my birding enthusiasm; therefore, I’d need to keep that character’s dialogue within the boundaries of what most readers would find tolerable instead of weighing them down with dialogue containing statistics and explanations about birds. I would need to keep it general, not in-depth. If it isn’t going to enhance the outcome, it doesn’t belong. There may be times when details expressed through dialogue are useful in developing a character, but it should not be common practice if you are only interested in showing off your own knowledge.

One of publishers’ pet peeves is the **overuse of exclamation points**. They should be reserved for use only as indicators of moments when a character physically shouts or experiences the mental equivalent. Since the onset of email, texting, instant chat, and other formats created for keyboard communication, the use of !!!!! has gone crazy. You can allow them to run rampant in your personal life if you so choose, but please reserve them for that specific use, NOT when writing.

**Purple prose**—writing that “overdoes” by excessive use of imagery, figures of speech, poetic diction, or polysyllabication—should be avoided in today’s methods of writing. If you find any of these in your story while self-editing, REMOVE THEM. They will seem silly to readers, so they must be cut. In the same vein, dialogue containing **lengthy discussions that exist only to put information across** must be cut, too. Real people don’t talk that way. If you find you used **metaphors** or **flowery phrases** at key times during your plot, cut them. When fiction readers are in the middle of reading your battle scene, for example, they’ll probably put your book down and not pick it back up again if you begin slowing down the action, which is exactly what metaphors or flowery phrases will do.

Be aware of **sentences that are flat, strained, awkward, obvious, pedestrian, forced, vague, or abstract**, and add them to the cuts you make. Run a **search for certain words or phrases** to eliminate overuse. For instance if you search for the word “just” and find you’ve used it 27 times in 10 pages, you’ll need to whittle them down to merely a few.

Get rid of **clichés**. Granted, sometimes they can be useful when developing a character, but when used in general text, they make you, as the writer, seem uncreative. And we know that’s not the case. The same is true for overuse of **adverbs** (the -ly’s) and **adjectives**.

Readers don’t like a lot of **lecturing** when reading stories. Use paraphrasing a little more frequently. Remember when we talked about readers liking white space on a page? In slower sections, cut out everything except the absolute essentials. If readers see page after page of long paragraphs, they’ll likely decide your book is a textbook rather than a story.



It's up to you to take care of making these cuts, unless you don't mind being devastated when your manuscript comes back from a professional editor with more notes than there are words in your actual story. Writers typically become defensive about their work when this happens. If you take the time to make these cuts before a professional editor gets hold of your manuscript, however, you'll be elated at the minimal number of comments you'll get concerning cuts and alterations.

### **Tighten Things Up**

For your final self edit, **print** your manuscript; it always looks different in print. This is the point at which you'll be tying up loose ends. Cover everything in this edit, including punctuation, grammar, and sentence structure.

Make sure you have dribbled the information to the readers; never let out all of the info at one go. You need to tease the readers, allowing them to meet your characters the same way you would meet them in real life—a little at a time with the pleasure of gradual discovery.

Be certain you are happy with the variety in the story; this is what maintains reader interest. Have you kept up the pace, propelling the story forward without continuous “white knuckler” or “nail-biter” situations? Readers need some breathing time between action scenes. Check the length of your sentences; do they provide relief where they should and build tension in the right places?

Have you presented diversity in the protagonist's exploits? Have you changed the scenery and locations enough to create interest, yet not so much that the reader gets lost or confused?

Remember that the expressions you use in both narration and dialogue will both set the mood and develop characters.

Can you explain away all situations? If they have no importance to the story, or if they leave loose ends, they must either be deleted, rewritten, or included in the end of the book, either in the denouement or an epilogue. It is paramount that they be included reasonably and logically. They cannot be allowed to twist the story artificially.

Most importantly, can you honestly say that the central theme of the story leads the reader to know what you're trying to get across? If you are not honest with yourself, your editor will be. Doing your best to self edit your manuscript will help put your book on the market much faster, and you'll likely be bringing in more royalties because readers will recognize a superior product. They may not be able to put their finger on exactly why it's better, but they'll find themselves enjoying your book more than a poorly edited one.

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**Activity:** Distribute HANDOUT #3 to the enthusiasts. Ask each to supply answers to the questions; give them 8-10 minutes.

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**Discussion:** Go over the answers to HANDOUT #3 (key is below) with the enthusiasts, making sure they understand each aspect of self editing.

### **Answer key to HANDOUT #3**

1. Name three things that make an antagonist unbelievable and tell why:

too evil, too sadistic, too vain, etc; he/she becomes a "cartoon" character in the reader's eye

2. What are beats? Why should a writer use them?

*Beats are stage directions; they SHOW instead of TELL*

3. Which two tags should be used the most in writing? Why?

*SAID and ASKED; the reader doesn't have to concentrate on their meaning*

4. Which should usually come first when using tags, the tag or the character's name (or pronoun)?

*the character's name (or pronoun)*

5. What two words usually indicate the use of passive voice?

*WAS and BY*

6. In a series, is it necessary to give the reader a description of what has gone on in previous volumes? Why or why not?

*YES; it may have been a while since the reader read the previous volume, so you need to jog his/her memory; the reader may be new to the series and is reading the volumes out of order*

7. Why should you put your story away for 2-4 weeks when it's finished?

*When you bring it back out, it will be "new" to you, so you will read it from a reader's standpoint instead of an author's; this allows you to see problems you may not have noticed before, since an author is so close to his/her story*

#### **TRUE OR FALSE**

1. Dialogue is one of the best ways to SHOW rather than TELL. *True*

2. It is a good idea for your story to consist entirely of dialogue. *False*

3. If there is very little space on the pages when a prospective buyer/reader thumbs through your book, he/she may think it is a textbook rather than a story. *True*

4. If you have done a good job of self editing, it is not necessary to have a professional editor go through your book. *False*

5. Passive voice often does a better job of setting a mood than active voice. *True*

6. Unless clichés are used by a character in order to help shape/develop that character, they should be avoided because they make the writer appear uncreative. *True*

7. A writer should take every opportunity to show off his/her knowledge about a subject, even if it is probably not appealing to the reader or necessary for story progression. *False*

8. You reach a point in your story when you realize it has no reason to go on, so it is a good idea just to make something up that will quickly bring it to an end. *False*

# Self Editing

Handout #1: NOVICE and ADVANCED

Creator: Dar Bagby

**READ THROUGH THE FOLLOWING EXCERPT. IF YOU FIND ANY MISTAKES, RAISE YOUR HAND SO EVERYONE CAN DISCUSS THEM.**

Jacob steps down into the small aluminum boat that was tied to the dock. It was unstable in the choppy water, and he was careful to step directly into the center of it to keep it from capsizing. He reaches for his life jacket, being careful not to drop it into the cold clear rippling murky water. He went ahead and put it on while he stood, looking out across the smooth, mirror-like surface of the lake. Then, looking back at his friend Stephen and saying, who is still standing still on the dock, he says, "I think its going to be a good day for fishing".

His friend gives him a rather rapid retort with a worried look on his face, "I don't know those whitecaps are pretty scary-looking to me." Jacob tells him not to worry. I'll be fine.

He steps back to the motor and lowered it on the the transom. He pulls the starting cord and the engine took off with a whir that sounds like a cat on a hot tin roof. His friend unties the boat and said, "I hope I don't have to come out their and scoop your up in a net!!!!!!"

"You wont", Jacob shouted back at him and waves. he didn't like the looks of the gray waves slamming against the bow and spraying up over it. Making the seats and the contents of the boat all wet. *I'm not sure if I whether I believe my own words or not. It is pretty scary out there.* He throws out the anchor when he finds a good place to fish. Then he turns the boat around and threw out the anchor. He turns the ignition key off to shut it off. It stopped, but continued to bounce, in the waves.

# Self Editing

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Creator: Dar Bagby

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When writing, the best approach for an author is simply to key his/her story on a text document and not be overly concerned with grammar, punctuation, etc. No author should be side-tracked and lose a line of thought because he/she has to think about rules of style. It is for this very reason, however, that an author **MUST** self edit the story before submitting a manuscript to a publisher or self publishing. No matter how good a story is, a publisher will not accept a submission that has not been self-edited; it is far too difficult and time consuming to try to follow the plot, read the sentence structure with ease, and make a choice regarding whether to publish it. No doubt, it will end up being deleted from their list of submissions. And a self-published story that is poorly edited will give you a bad reputation as a writer, which means people get the word and don't buy your books.

It is important to **put your completed story away after writing it**. Don't even look at it for at least two weeks; a month is better. When you take it back out, it will be "new" to you, and you will be able to look at it from a reader's standpoint, not the writer's. Immediately run a spelling/grammar check and make necessary corrections. Then read it **aloud** and look for typos and clumsy expressions or words that create unwanted effects. Highlight them as you go.

Pay special attention to the gist and flow of the story. One of the first steps in self editing is making sure the central theme is obvious. Ask yourself, ***Does the reader know what I'm trying to get across?*** Look at your basic plot arc: does the protagonist embark on a quest, face an antagonist(s), develop through conflict, prevail in a climax, and tie up loose ends (to the satisfaction of the reader)? ***Has the story maintained continuity?*** Time lines and locations must be in the right order and in the correct time frame (the period in which the story is set) with corresponding days and years. It is imperative to allow characters ample time to get to and from locations; this must always be obvious to the reader. ***Do reason and logic prevail?*** This is a must, even in fantasy and science fiction. Don't let the impetus of the characters or situations twist the story artificially to get to the outcome. In other words, don't fabricate something or someone and inject it/them into the story just to find an easy way to end the book; this annoys readers.

After you have corrected all of your highlights, go back and read it again, but this time put it in a different font and size, and change the margins. You'll be amazed at not only how different it looks, but also at how different it reads. You'll find yourself thinking, *Did I actually write that?* And that can be good or bad!

Even after your best self editing efforts, your manuscript will need to be professionally edited. A writer is too close to his/her story to be completely objective about what works best to sell books.

### Active Voice vs. Passive Voice

Which of these shows more action?

**A) I went to the grocery store and bought hamburger buns for my mother.**

**B) I was sent to the grocery store by my mother to buy hamburger buns.**

The first example screams action; a reader can actually *picture* the action happening. The second example only *suggests* an action might have taken place; it was actually only suggested by someone. Example **A** is written in **active voice**. Example **B** is written in **passive voice**.

The best way to tell active from passive is to ask yourself, *Is the action actually happening (or did it actually happen, if written in past tense)?* If so, you've written it in active voice. Ask yourself, *Is the action suggested by someone/something?* If you can answer *Yes*, then you have written it in passive voice. Another way to tell if your sentence is in passive voice is to check for the words **was** or **were**. Check examples **A** and **B** again; in example **B** you see the word **was** (I **was** sent...), which is a major hint that it is passive voice. Bear in mind that **was** and **were** don't always indicate passive voice. For instance:

*I was (We were) in the middle of the street when I (we) saw the bus heading right toward me (us).*

In this case, it merely indicates past tense.

Customarily in literature, **active voice is preferred over passive voice** most of the time. ACTION RULES! That does not mean, however, that passive voice should be ignored. There are times when a *suggested* action (passive voice) can be more appropriate—to set a mood, for instance.

**C) I was destined to sit in the graveyard and watch, shivering, as the darkness closed in around me.**

**D) I sat shivering in the graveyard. The darkness was closing in around me.**

Example **C** sets a more mysterious mood, while example **D** only states the facts. In this case, the passive example, **C**, does a much better job of transporting the reader into the story. In literature it isn't always best to give “just the facts, ma'am.”

When an action scene is taking place, active voice is preferred, and it is best expressed through short sentences. Short sentences keep the action flowing. Check out these examples:

**E) “Run!” Brad yelled.**

**“I can't, my leg's broken.” Jessica said.**

**“Then I'll carry you.”**

**F) Brad told Jessica to run, but she said she was unable to do so because of a broken leg, so Brad told her he would carry her.**

Which describes more action? Pretty obvious it's **E**, wouldn't you say?

Active and passive can set a mood or keep the action moving. As an author you have to decide the appropriate choice for the moment in your story. Changing just a couple of words often makes a huge difference in how a thought or situation is perceived by your readers.

### **Show & Tell**

For some reason, the distinction between these two words often becomes obscured by writers. Just as with active and passive voice, more action takes place when **showing** something, such as during dialogue, a perfect place to do the best showing. **Telling** is basically narration. That having been said, let's observe some examples.

If I want my readers to know that Winston went to college, has his doctorate in physics, and is now a physics professor at Cambridge University in England, I could **tell** the readers those exact facts. BORING! Instead, I'd rather use dialogue to do that:

**“Hey, Winston? Is that you?” Randall called out.**

**“Yeah, buddy, it's me. Long time no see,” Winston said.**

**“Since high school. What've you been up to?”**

**“Went to college—Harvard—and got my PhD in physics. Now I'm a full-time prof at Cambridge.”**

**“THE Cambridge? The one in England?” Randall asked.**

Makes it a little more interesting, don't you think? That's what **showing** is all about.

Of course, you can also **show** without using dialogue. For instance:

**Dawn grabbed the railing as the ship rolled up and down and threw itself back and forth within the giant swells. Her clothes were soaked from the spray that washed over the deck.**

Now let's see how that would be if I chose just to **tell** it:

**Dawn was on a ship. The seas were very rough, and the ship rocked a lot. Spray from the waves made Dawn's clothes wet.**

Get the picture? The first example actually puts the readers right into the story—it **shows** them what was happening. The second example merely **told** the readers. If you want to hold your readers' interest, you need to bring them into the story so they feel they either *are* one of the characters or can at least *relate to* the characters around them. Readers want to be swept up and dropped smack-dab into the center of the action. They want to participate in what the characters are doing, to experience their emotions or feel empathy for them. They want to laugh with them at humorous moments and weep with them over their losses. They don't simply want to be told what the characters are going through.

### **Leaving Space on the Page**

Space on the page is visually inviting to readers. It is an indication that dialogue is going on, and well written dialogue is the best avenue for keeping the pace moving in a story. Now don't go hog wild and try to write nothing but dialogue—99.9% of the time that doesn't work. A great book includes a good mix of narration and dialogue, showing and telling, active and passive, well maintained tense, non-wavering point of view, heavy moments and comic relief...I think you get the idea. In other words, there is no single aspect of writing that constitutes a good book; it requires a lot of variables.

Without a doubt, one of the best variables is dialogue, but it must be interspersed at the best places in your story. Too much of it leaves the reader weary; too little—well, it pretty much does the same thing. A prospective buyer/reader will often thumb through a book before buying it. If there is very little empty space, it will appear to be a textbook...nothing wrong with that if that's what it's supposed to be. A novel, on the other hand, or even a lot of non-fiction, needs to be broken up into parts that contain space (dialogue) and parts that don't (narration). When the prospective buyer/reader sees that mix, a sale is much more probable.

Another way to leave space on the page is by avoiding overuse of speaker attributions. For example, I'll use the example from above:

**“Hey, Winston? Is that you?” Randall called out.**

**“Yeah, buddy, it's me. Long time no see,” Winston said.**

**“Since high school. What've you been up to?”**

**“Went to college—Harvard—and got my PhD in physics. Now I'm a full-time prof at Cambridge.”**

**“THE Cambridge? The one in England?” Randall asked.**

Don't be afraid of the words, "said" and "asked." There is no need to use up all of the synonyms in a thesaurus. For the most part, readers don't care whether the speaker "replied," "retorted," "answered," or "inquired." "Said" and "asked" are words readers gloss over without really having to contemplate their meaning; having to do so would result in slowing down the action. More importantly, readers are interested mainly in *who* said or asked something. It is best to make sure the name or pronoun is first (...**he said** or ...**Tami asked**, NOT ...**said he** or ...**asked Tami**). In the example above, **Randall called out** is used to signify that he was not standing right next to Winston, which leads us to **beats** and **tags**.

### **Beats & Tags**

Beats and tags are used in dialogue. **Beats** are stage directions. **Tags** tell the reader who said what and how.

**Tags** act as signposts to attribute dialogue to certain characters. Each tag contains at least one speaker (noun or pronoun) and a verb indicating a way of speaking. The most important thing to remember in most written dialogue is not to be afraid to use the words "said" or "asked." "Said" and "asked" are words readers have learned to gloss over without really having to contemplate their meaning, and therefore, they don't slow down the action. When other words appear, readers must take an extra fraction of a second to notice a tag that might mean the same as "said" or "asked" yet is not crucial to the dialogue. More importantly, readers are interested mainly in *who* said or asked something. There are times when other tags important, however. For instance:

*Dave **whispered**, "Don't go in there!"*

This evokes an entirely different picture than:

*Dave **shouted**, "Don't go in there!"*

The more characters involved in a scene, the greater the number of tags are necessary to identify the speakers, and the more important the tags' positioning becomes. And don't forget, it is best to make sure the name or pronoun precedes the tag.

**Beats** describe the physical action a character makes when speaking. Beats **show** instead of **tell**. For example, instead of having your character **tell** the reader;

*"I don't want to sleep at Grandma's. I don't like the things in the closet," Bette said sheepishly,*

try using:

*"I don't want to sleep at Grandma's." Bette's eyes became as big and round as hub caps, and her voice trembled as she whimpered, "I don't like the things in the closet."*

Now you have **shown** the reader the extent of Bette's fear. Beats are a perfect tool for writers to portray body language. When using beats remember that using only a few of them implies tension, just as short sentences do.

### **So You've Decided to Write a Series**

A series of books (volumes) has become a popular seller in recent times. Readers seem to love being left on the edge (a cliffhanger) until the next book in the series appears. But bear in mind that a series **requires exceptional self-editing**. It is the author's responsibility to double, triple, and quadruple check for glaring errors from one book to the next.

Another part of writing a series is making certain your readers get a recap when each successive book reaches publication. The difficult part of this is giving only enough information for newcomers to be able to follow what's going on, and for returning readers (who might have

read the older books quite some time ago) to be reminded of what they read in the previous volumes. It's not easy.

As the author, you know exactly what went on in your previous book, and you're very close to your story and plot. Your readers, on the other hand, may have read lots of books between this one and the last, or they may be just starting your series and reading it out of order. Therefore, each book must stand by itself as well as continue the story from a previous volume. Are you beginning to see how this can be more difficult than it sounds?

Let's start by talking about background filler. Though background filler is a major point to consider when first introducing a character, that character has to have enough personality to make the correct impression—whether protagonist or antagonist—on new readers right from the character's introduction in each successive book. Professional editors are likely not going to remember your individual characters from one book to the next, so they will be looking for character identifiers from the get go. As for returning readers, they too need a nudge regarding the characters' details and development to envision them as the story unfolds. Everyone needs to get to know your characters from their present lives, not their pasts. Remember, just because you introduced a character (or a scene, a location, a setting, etc.) at the outset of the series, readers rarely remember it later. You have to **jog their memories**.

Protagonists must be consistent in the way they behave. They must have powerful motivations and emotions. These attributes are far easier for readers to remember than such things as physical details. It also helps if you can find a way to mention something in the preceding book about the next one to come (foreshadowing) and then repeat it in the following volume.

If all these things fail to happen, your editor may suggest you do a rewrite. It happens more often than you want to think about.

### **Editing Your Characters**

Once you have finished writing your manuscript you'll need to go back and check the whole aspect of character development before putting your manuscript away for a while. We'll start with your protagonist. Has he/she/it remained constant in behavior? With powerful emotions and motivations? Remaining inoffensive?

A single word or phrase can make your protagonist appear in a way you don't intend. It's worth every single minute you take to go back through the entire manuscript and make sure your protagonist is truly the person you want to portray in your story. It may not require more than removing or changing one small aspect of his/her/its behavior or speech to correct this mistake, so **DON'T SKIP THIS STEP** in self editing. Then again, you may discover that your protagonist became someone you hadn't meant to write about, so you'll need to rethink the whole idea. Or you might realize your protagonist is actually a “cardboard cliché” character, being flat instead of rounded and having depth. It happens.

When your protagonist has an interior monologue (thinking rather than speaking), you must be certain he/she/it would actually think those thoughts. (FYI: In written prose, the industry standard is to represent one's thoughts in italics.) Bear in mind, too, that if you are writing from the protagonist's point of view (POV), he/she/it is the only one whose thoughts you will be able to express; how could you know the other characters' thoughts? And if you are writing in first person, you can't write about anything your main character couldn't know.

Is your antagonist believable, or have you created a “cartoon” antagonist who is too evil, too sadistic, or too vain. If this is the case, you should be able to see right away that the character



has ceased to be frightening, perhaps to the point of being silly, not even as frightening as a real human being. Time to revamp your modifiers.

Have any of your minor characters been allowed to take the story down a wrong path? If they do nothing to take the story forward, they should be deleted. On the other hand, sometimes a minor character acts as a catalyst to head the reader in the right direction, even if that character doesn't show up again in the story. Don't underestimate the power of catalysts; just make sure they act to keep the pace moving, not slow it down or create an unnecessary tangent.

### **Make the Cut**

After you have ignored your finished manuscript for 2-4 weeks and then come back to it, you will probably recognize portions of text that are extraneous to the plot and action. This is the point at which you need to be willing to cut them from the story. **ANY CHARACTER OR ELEMENT OF YOUR STORY THAT CAN BE REMOVED AND IS NOT MISSED DOESN'T BELONG THERE IN THE FIRST PLACE.** I have cut sentences, paragraphs, and even chapters in half because of the “fluff” (nothing more than page-filler).

Being an in-the-know author means realizing that **belaboring your topic or showing off your research is useless**, as readers may not find these topics as interesting as you do. For instance, let's say I am an avid birdwatcher, and as a result of years of enjoying it as my hobby, I have accumulated a lot of knowledge about certain species and their habits. If I were to put a character who loves birdwatching in one of my stories, I would be amiss if I thought the majority of my readers shared my birding enthusiasm; therefore, I'd need to keep that character's dialogue within the boundaries of what most readers would find tolerable instead of weighing them down with dialogue containing statistics and explanations about birds. I would need to keep it general, not in-depth. If it isn't going to enhance the outcome, it doesn't belong. There may be times when details expressed through dialogue are useful in developing a character, but it should not be common practice if you are only interested in showing off your own knowledge.

One of publishers' pet peeves is the **overuse of exclamation points**. They should be reserved for use only as indicators of moments when a character physically shouts or experiences the mental equivalent. Since the onset of email, texting, instant chat, and other formats created for keyboard communication, the use of !!!!! has gone crazy. You can allow them to run rampant in your personal life if you so choose, but please reserve them for that specific use, NOT when writing.

**Purple prose**—writing that “overdoes” by excessive use of imagery, figures of speech, poetic diction, or polysyllabication—should be avoided in today's methods of writing. If you find any of these in your story while self-editing, REMOVE THEM. They will seem silly to readers, so they must be cut. In the same vein, dialogue containing **lengthy discussions that exist only to put information across** must be cut, too. Real people don't talk that way. If you find you used **metaphors** or **flowery phrases** at key times during your plot, cut them. When fiction readers are in the middle of reading your battle scene, for example, they'll probably put your book down and not pick it back up again if you begin slowing down the action, which is exactly what metaphors or flowery phrases will do.

Be aware of **sentences that are flat, strained, awkward, obvious, pedestrian, forced, vague, or abstract**, and add them to the cuts you make. Run a **search for certain words or phrases** to eliminate overuse. For instance if you search for the word “just” and find you've used it 27 times in 10 pages, you'll need to whittle them down to merely a few.

Get rid of  **clichés**. Granted, sometimes they can be useful when developing a character, but when used in general text, they make you, as the writer, seem uncreative. And we know that's not the case. The same is true for overuse of  **adverbs** (the -ly's) and  **adjectives**.

Readers don't like a lot of  **lecturing** when reading stories. Use paraphrasing a little more frequently. Remember when we talked about readers liking white space on a page? In slower sections, cut out everything except the absolute essentials. If readers see page after page of long paragraphs, they'll likely decide your book is a textbook rather than a story.

It's up to you to take care of making these cuts, unless you don't mind being devastated when your manuscript comes back from a professional editor with more notes than there are words in your actual story. Writers typically become defensive about their work when this happens. If you take the time to make these cuts before a professional editor gets hold of your manuscript, however, you'll be elated at the minimal number of comments you'll get concerning cuts and alterations.

### **Tighten Things Up**

For your final self edit,  **print** your manuscript; it always looks different in print. This is the point at which you'll be tying up loose ends. Cover everything in this edit, including punctuation, grammar, and sentence structure.

Make sure you have dribbled the information to the readers; never let out all of the info at one go. You need to tease the readers, allowing them to meet your characters the same way you would meet them in real life—a little at a time with the pleasure of gradual discovery.

Be certain you are happy with the variety in the story; this is what maintains reader interest. Have you kept up the pace, propelling the story forward without continuous “white knuckler” or “nail-biter” situations? Readers need some breathing time between action scenes. Check the length of your sentences; do they provide relief where they should and build tension in the right places?

Have you presented diversity in the protagonist's exploits? Have you changed the scenery and locations enough to create interest, yet not so much that the reader gets lost or confused?

Remember that the expressions you use in both narration and dialogue will both set the mood and develop characters.

Can you explain away all situations? If they have no importance to the story, or if they leave loose ends, they must either be deleted, rewritten, or included in the end of the book, either in the denouement or an epilogue. It is paramount that they be included reasonably and logically. They cannot be allowed to twist the story artificially.

Most importantly, can you honestly say that the central theme of the story leads the reader to know what you're trying to get across? If you are not honest with yourself, your editor will be. Doing your best to self edit your manuscript will help put your book on the market much faster, and you'll likely be bringing in more royalties because readers will recognize a superior product. They may not be able to put their finger on exactly why it's better, but they'll find themselves enjoying your book more than a poorly edited one.

# Self Editing

Handout #3: NOVICE and ADVANCED

Creator: Dar Bagby

**USING HANDOUT #2 AS A GUIDE, FILL IN THE ANSWERS TO THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS.**

1. Name three things that make an antagonist unbelievable and tell why:

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2. What are beats? Why should a writer use them?

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3. Which two tags should be used the most in writing? Why?

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4. Which should usually come first when using tags, the tag or the character's name (or pronoun)?

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5. What two words usually indicate the use of passive voice?

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6. In a series, is it necessary to give the reader a description of what has gone on in previous volumes? Why or why not?

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7. Why should you put your story away for 2-4 weeks when it's finished?

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**TRUE OR FALSE: Circle the correct answer.**

1. Dialogue is one of the best ways to SHOW rather than TELL. T F
2. It is a good idea for your story to consist entirely of dialogue. T F
3. If there is very little space on the pages when a prospective buyer/reader thumbs through your book, he/she may think it is a textbook rather than a story. T F
4. If you have done a good job of self editing, it is not necessary to have a professional editor go through your book. T F
5. Passive voice often does a better job of setting a mood than active voice. T F
6. Unless clichés are used by a character in order to help shape/develop that character, they should be avoided because they make the writer appear uncreative. T F
7. A writer should take every opportunity to show off his/her knowledge about a subject, even if it is probably not appealing to the reader or necessary for story progression. T F
8. You reach a point in your story when you realize it has no reason to go on, so it is a good idea just to make something up that will quickly bring it to an end. T F