

Editing

A Stress-free Guide



Provide your reader as smooth a “flight” as possible by eliminating turbulence.

Turbulence

- My focus in editing is to provide a reader with as smooth a reading “flight” as possible by eliminating **turbulence**.
- Readers shouldn’t have to leave the world an author has created to search for:
 - Who’s talking
 - Who a new character is
 - Where/when the scene is set
- Readers shouldn’t have trouble visualizing a scene or wonder when a character entered or left a scene

More turbulence

- A reader's mental tongue shouldn't stumble over
- Awkward phrasing
- Anachronistic words—words that don't belong in the space/time continuum of the work
- Words that are inconsistent with the reader's perception of a character's vocabulary
- Is there too much singsongy-ness, assonance, dissonance, or alliteration?
- "Eye dialect" is often used to convey a character's manner of speaking but can be quite difficult to read.
- Example: "Jyallwanna cohoak?"
- After three years abroad, this was my hearing of a Delta Airlines stewardess's question: "Do you all want a Coke?" If I'd put that into eye dialect, the reader would be hopelessly out of the story while trying to translate the jumble of letters.

A revision plan

- Disclaimer: This is my personal final revision plan, a blend of things compiled from Stanford professors and from classes or craft books written by John Dufresne, Donald Maass, Alicia Rasley, Janet Burroway, Margie Lawson, and many others.
- It makes more sense to start globally and work down to the itty-bitty details. There's no point in correcting spelling if you're going to cut a passage or fixing fine details if a major overhaul is required.
- It's helpful to be consistent and follow the same process with every work.

The Final Passes—There can never be just one

- This revision plan assumes beta readers have read your work and that you've ironed out your plot before looking at these other items.
- This degree of revision should certainly be done before you submit your work to an editor or agent. I get a substantial discount from my editor because she knows she has an easy job ahead.



1A. Looking at the overall picture:

- **Scale:** Does the scale of your story match the format you've chosen? i.e., are you trying to squeeze the entire Civil War into a short story?
- **Plot:** Do the main events follow an interrelated sequence? Is the sequence interesting?
- Does every **chapter, paragraph, and sentence** move the plot forward or increase characterization?
- Is every **scene** essential? Every **character**? Every pet? Every detail?
- Does each character have **sufficient goals, motivation, and conflict**?
- Is the **conflict** sufficient to justify the word count?
- Does your **word count** fit within the standards of your genre?

1B. Looking at the overall picture: Beginnings and endings

- Look at your first and last pages side by side.
- Have you used symbols, images, or moods that echo or contrast each other?
- **Bookending** with images, symbols, or wording resonates with the reader in a subliminal way and brings things full circle to a resolution
- Example: In my first book, each of the four phases of Ruby's life starts or ends with a train journey in which she has nearly the same conversation with the conductor, but her feelings and her actions are different each time. The last line of the book echoes lines spoken to Ruby by two prior lovers.

1C. Looking at the overall picture: The Middle

- **Middle / pinch points** are reminders of the antagonist's power to stymie the protagonist's goal. They provide new information to the plot and begin setting up the major events
- Are these sections powerful enough to drive the story toward its climax?
- Is there a **false high** or **false low** point for the main character and reaffirmation of her/his commitment to the story goal?
- Have you used **literary devices** or emotionally **power-packed words** to highlight these? A good source for literary devices, what they are and how to use them can be found at [Literary Devices](#).
- Example: Jess jerked awake, her extremities flailing. Her eyes snapped open. Shrill shrieks still pained her ears.
- A good resource for plotting can be found at [Alicia Rasley's](#) website. She has free downloads and reasonably-priced books on plotting and dialogue that are well worth studying.

2. How does your work SOUND?

- Are you aiming for **audiobooks**? Then read your work aloud or have someone read it to you. This step is important even if audiobooks aren't in your current game plan.
- If you don't want to read it, voice recognition software on the Mac and PC (scroll down under "edit") is effective. I do this a chapter at a time, and it's quite time-consuming. Again, there's no point in doing this unless you're ready for your FINAL final draft.
- Does the cadence work?
- Are there words, phrases, or sentences you stumble over? If so, your reader will stumble too. Rewrite to remove these obstacles.
- Are there areas of irritating singsongy-ness, assonance, dissonance, or alliteration?
- Are there words that tangle your tongue and are hard to read when near each other?
- Have you used a two-dollar word when a ten-cent word would do?

3. Continuity and consistency.

- Are there any gremlin-like changes in the color of a character's eyes or hair? Changes in age?
- Are your characters' names sufficiently distinct? Do you have multiple girls named Tiffany? Do two or more characters' names start with the same letter? Are too many characters' names alliterative, like Jesse Jones and Rachel Robinson? Your novel begins to sound like a comic book populated with characters like Lois Lane and Wonder Woman.
- Is every action completed? If Ms. Jones hands a cup of tea to someone, does that person actually take it?
- Are there any unintentional breaks in the space-time continuum, shifts in time or place?
- Have you set up any special skills or tools your character may need? Is your heroine able to climb mountains to escape the bad guy? Set it up ahead of time.
- Do any characters unintentionally suddenly appear or disappear within the scene?
- Weapons, cars, props that may unintentionally suddenly appear or disappear?
- Remember Chekov's gun: If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off.
- Any plot threads that aren't resolved?
- Working out these glitches will decrease **turbulence**.

4. Reevaluate point-of-view

- The beginning of each new chapter or scene needs a little prose to ground it and to establish POV. There's nothing more irritating than reading a page or two and realizing the author switched POVs or locales and didn't clue you in adequately.
- Avoid head-hopping (bouncing between POV too frequently). A good example of this is Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove* series, but this distant POV works for his cast of hundreds and the epic scale of the work.
- Point of view enables a reader to bond with your character. The deeper an author delves into a character's head, the more likely a reader is to get involved. If you break that bond by head-hopping, you risk alienating your reader.
- Sometimes, POV shifts can be quite subtle. I woke one morning realizing I'd missed a POV shift in a manuscript I'd finished months ago. Multiple beta readers, a professional editor, and I all missed this:
- Example: Surprised to see her in her nightgown, her father said, "Clothe yourself, Ruby." As the manuscript is written in close third person (Ruby's) POV, *surprised* represents a shift to what is going on in her father's head, thus is a shift to his POV.

5. Increasing the power of your words

- Have you ended big scenes / paragraphs / sentences with power words?
- Example: She shuddered as she wiggled her feet into the shoes of a dead woman.
- Example: At a press conference Michel attended, MSF-France begged for military assistance. He scribbled their take-home point to include in his article, “One cannot stop a genocide with doctors.”
- Ending a paragraph with dialogue is usually stronger than ending with a regular sentence. Example: “Time for you to go back home,” Mary said as she patted her dog. She straightened and pointed down Pecan Street.
- Better: Mary patted her dog, then straightened, and pointed down Pecan Street, indicating the direction the dog should take. “Time for you to go back home.”
- The [rule of three](#): events are more satisfying if three occur in increasing importance

6. Cause and Effect/Action and Reaction

- Put cause before effect, action before reaction, and relate actions in a logical manner.
- Example: Jason's lips moved in reply. Since he didn't repeat Joey's question, I assumed Jason heard it. Then his lips moved in reply.
- Here, the hearing needs to precede the replying: *Since he didn't repeat Jason's question, I assumed Jason heard it. Then his lips moved in reply.* This sentence is still problematic as the *I assumed Jason heard it* isn't really needed. The *Then his lips moved in reply* indicates Jason heard the question as he is responding.
- Put action before reaction.
- Example: Jess jumped. Bam bam! She recognized the sound. One she'd heard too often in Rwanda and Tanzania. Automatic weapons fire. Her heart stopped.
- She needs to hear the sound, react, then process it.
- Better: Bam bam! Jess jumped. She recognized the sound. One she'd heard too often in Rwanda. Automatic weapons fire.

7A. Sequencing things correctly in time

- This doesn't mean you always have to write events in chronological order, but within paragraph or two, things should flow nicely and not confuse your reader
- When you bounce your reader around temporally or visually, you create **turbulence** in their mind.
- Example: Jenna's voice shook. The calm of a moment before disappeared. She felt like a skein of yarn, unraveling. Even her voice took on the quality of a weak thread. She said, "Wilbur, I'm leaving you."
- Here, the reader feels a bit of angst as the author describes the quality of Jenna's voice not once, but twice, yet she doesn't actually speak until the last sentence.
- Better: The calm of a moment before disappeared. Jenna's emotions unraveled like a skein of yarn. "Wilbur, I'm leaving you." Her voice shook, taking on the quality of a weak thread.

7B. Sequencing things correctly in time

Example:

Ruby Schmidt worried the bottom button on her winter coat till it dangled by a thread. When the fiber snapped, the bone button bounced from the floorboard of the wagon and tumbled into the road, lost forever in the red West Texas dust. Her future lay before her, waiting at the Statler's Mercantile, not back on the family ranch.

Nearly a week ago, Molly Statler had sent word with a passing cowboy that it had arrived. Ruby had been to town the week before with her father but knew she would be unable to stand the anxiety another two weeks till her turn rolled around again. She begged, pleaded, threatened, and finally bribed Beryl by agreeing to do a week's worth of supper dishes in exchange for her younger sister's place.

As soon as her Pa pulled the wagon up in front of Statler's Mercantile, Ruby kicked off the old buffalo robe...

Here in the space of three paragraphs I bounced my reader all over the place temporally—from the present, to nearly a week ago, to the week before, two weeks into the future, then back to the present. Rearranging it chronologically made it flow better for the reader.

8. Flashbacks

- Too many *had's* clutter flashbacks. If the flashback (a reflection or memory) goes beyond a paragraph and becomes a scene, the proper structure is to use the past perfect form of the verb (*had + verb*) in the sentence that begins the memory, then simple past tense for the flashback, and the past perfect in the last sentence that brings the character's thoughts back to the present.
- Example: Looking back, Jess realized she had wanted to go to Rwanda, but Tom had chickened out. So she had decided she had to go without him. It had been a hard decision, but one she had had no regrets about making.
- Better: Looking back, Jess realized she had wanted to go to Rwanda, but Tom chickened out. So she decided to go without him. It was a hard decision, but one she'd had no regrets about making.

9. Color coding your manuscript

- Highlighting your work helps you visualize what's happening on each page so you can iron out areas of slow pacing, too much dialogue, too much introspection, etc.
- To save trees, rather than print my document out, I duplicate the file (so I don't screw up the original), then change the color of the font on my computer to color code. I started out using colors rather randomly. Eventually, for consistency, I settled on Margie Lawson's version. If you can't attend one of her workshops, you can purchase her editing products at <https://www.margielawson.com>. They are reasonably priced. After working with her system, I added a color and category or two as I worked out my own system.
- Train yourself to focus on one color at a time
- Use any colors you wish, just be consistent and use the same ones every time.
- With color coding, you immediately see where you have problems with:
- Pacing
- Chunks of excessive exposition or scene-setting?
- Too much dialogue, setting, etc.
- More than five or six lines of unbroken dialogue
- If you have areas you feel could fit into two categories, just choose one. This system is to help you, not stress you out.

10A. Color #1—Dialogue

Dialogue is a critical part of your work, the part that probably helps your readers identify with your characters the most. The reader may skim over your setting descriptions, etc. but will zoom in on your dialogue. Therefore, it warrants a great deal of attention.

Print out your manuscript. Choose your first color then go through your manuscript and color code every line of dialogue.

- Is there a good mix of dialogue and other text (introspection, setting description, action, etc.)?
- Can you tighten the dialogue?
- Can a character say one thing and mean another?
- Can you play with subtext, the “read between the lines” parts of the conversation?
- Can characters talk at odds with each other to heighten conflict?

10B. Color #1—Dialogue

- Does each character have his/her own voice?
- When I plan novels, I draw up a list of characters and the words I'll associate with them to give each a distinctive voice. Each has their "favorite" expletive, way of describing things, way of thinking, etc.
- Example: Jessica is a list maker, but Tom thinks in terms of physics and science; she is black and white in her morals where he can see shades of gray. These traits should be reflected in their voices. They both are physicians, though, and think in terms of anatomy, symptoms, etc.
- Example: Ruby, an artist, thinks in colors, shapes, textures, and images, says "Lordy" as a proper teenage girl, but moves on to "damnation" and "son of a bitch" as she ages and becomes more worldly. Her rancher husband, Bismarck says "Sweet Jesus," is concrete in his thoughts and uses words associated with the land and ranching.

10C. Color #1—Dialogue

- Avoid “talking heads” which are little snippets of dialogue without dialogue tags that switch back and forth between speakers—like a ping-pong match—and go on for so long your readers lose track of who is talking.
- Example: “Joe said he’s going to the store.”
“He didn’t tell me that.”
“He’s going to get meat and vegetables.”
“Well, he should have asked me if I needed anything.”
“Why don’t you text him with your list?”
“I guess I could do that.”
- Avoid large unbroken areas of monologues or dialogue. If you have more than five or six lines of lines of uninterrupted dialogue or an extended monologue, break it up either with interactions with other characters, comments, dialogue cues, or action beats.

10D. Color #1—Dialogue: Eye dialect

- John Dufresne, [*In The Lie That Tells a Truth*](#): *A Guide to Writing Fiction*: Eye dialect distracts the reader. Anyway, trick spellings and lexical gimmicks are the easy way out. Not the best way. When you use unusual spelling, [“eye dialect”] you draw the reader’s attention away from the dialogue and onto the means of getting it across.
- Example: “That’s rhat nahs.”
- I was completely out of the story for several long seconds while I mentally moved from “rat gnaws” which didn’t fit the context. Eventually I arrived at “right nice.” The “right nice” alone is enough to place the speaker as a good old Southern boy.
- Dufresne suggests that dialect be rendered by “rhythm of the prose, by the syntax, the diction, idioms and figures of speech, by the vocabulary indigenous to the locale” rather than in aberrant spellings.” Above, the “right nice” is enough to establish that the speaker is a good old Southern boy even without the eye dialect.
- Eye dialect at best is politically incorrect; at worst it reveals an author’s bias and demeans not only characters, but the population that those characters are derived from.

11A. Color #2—Dialogue tags and action beats

- Go through your manuscript and look at all the dialogue attributions (dialogue tags and action beats).
- A **dialogue tag** is a small phrase either before, after, or in between the actual **dialogue** like *said*, *pronounced*, *etc.* that identifies who's speaking.
- Example: Jasper *queried*, "How long are you going to be in the bathroom?"
- Example: "Are you going to study in the library tomorrow?" Leslie *asked* her roommate.
- Example: "She's not dating John," Carol *said*, "she's dating Robert—and they're serious."

11B. Color #2—Dialogue tags and action beats

- **Action beats** or **action tags** identify the speaker without the use of a dialogue tag. These are sentences that describe the **action** of the character who's talking.
- Better: Mark scuffed his boot in the dirt then kicked a clod across the barnyard then raised his head. “I reckon you better hightail it out of here.”
- Action beats are stronger than dialogue tags as they convey what the character is doing not just saying.
- If you have an action beat, delete the dialogue tag as the excess words simply clutter your work.
- Example: “Show me the money,” he demanded as his finger jabbed the air just above my chest.
- Better: “Show me the money.” His index finger jabbed the air above my chest.
- The prose is snappier without the dialogue tag *he demanded*.

11C. Color #2—Dialogue tags and action beats

- John Dufresne, [*In The Lie That Tells a Truth: A Guide to Writing Fiction*](#): Every time you insert an explanation in dialogue, you cheat the reader out of a chance to collaborate in the creation of the scene.
- Avoid—or use very sparingly—aberrant or creative dialogue tags, words like *quipped*, *chortled*, *grunted*, *murmured*, *squealed*, *etc.*
- Unlike *said* which fades into the background, these aberrant tags “tell” rather than “show” and, if too creative, call attention to themselves and undermine the reader’s participation in your writing.
- Creative dialogue tags are wearing on the reader’s mental ear:
- Example: I squealed, “I got the job in Hawaii! Will you move with me?”
He chortled, spewing a mouthful of beer. “Sure, why wouldn’t I?”
“Are you sure?” I murmured.
He grunted. “Hell, yeah!”

11D. Color #2—Dialogue: Physically impossible dialogue tags

- These include such words as *snarled*, *sneered*, and *growled*.
- A snarl is a step down from an animal growl, and with teeth gritted and mouth distorted, it's nearly impossible to speak.
- Example: “Jake Biedermeier delights in tormenting me.” She gave an aggravated growl as she peeled off her right glove.
- Here, she completes her dialogue before she growls.
- It's also difficult to sigh, laugh, or chuckle and speak at the same time.

11E. Color #2—Dialogue: *-ly* adverbs with dialogue tags

- Like aberrant dialogue tags, adverbs “tell” rather than “show.”
- Example: “Thirty-nine years old,” the professor echoed somberly. That’s so young to die. What happened?” His eyes beamed inquisitively.
- Here we have an aberrant dialogue tag (*echoed*) along with an *-ly* adverb *inquisitively*, plus “beamed” is incongruous, as it is usually a happy facial expression and not usually associated with death
- Punch up the dialogue itself rather than its attributions.
- Example: “You lost the baby,” he said bitterly.
- Better: “You let that son of a bitch’s bastards live, but in the name of Art, you killed my boy.”
- Here, all the bitterness is expressed in dialogue alone:

11F. Color #2—Dialogue: Too many dialogue tags

- Too many dialogue tags slow pacing and clutter your prose.
- Example: “First let’s get you settled in your rooms,” Jason **said** as we walked through the castle’s labyrinth of hallways. “I have clothes you can borrow,” he **added**.
- Better: “First let’s get you settled in your rooms.” Jason led me through the castle’s labyrinth of hallways. “I have clothes you can borrow.”
- Here, you’ve used an action beat (*Jason led me*) rather than a dialogue tag and eliminated an unneeded dialogue tag (*he added.*)
- When two people are talking, you only need an occasional dialogue tag—or better, an action beat—to avoid “talking heads”

12. Color #3—Dialogue cues

- Unlike dialogue *tags*, which tell who said what, these give some idea of *how* your character said *what*.
- They can be those pesky, overused *-ly* adverbs, but can be expanded into descriptions of tone of voice, etc, and can give insight into the character, increase suspense, etc.
- Example: “I read all night,” he said wearily.
- *Wearily* is redundant. Simply being up all night would make him tired.
- An alternative is to reinforce the dialogue with an action beat:
- Example: He yawned as he stretched. “I read all night.”
- Example: “There’s smoke in the kitchen,” she huffed. “Everyone has to leave the building. Now.”
- Better: “There’s smoke in the kitchen.” She came to a halt and caught her breath. “Everyone has to leave the building. Now.”
- Try for innovative, fresh ways of expressing tone of voice, etc.
- Example from earlier: She felt like a skein of yarn unraveling. Even her voice took on the quality of a frayed thread.

13A. Color #4—Actions

- Are your movements consistent with your character?
- Have you chosen the right verb to express the motion?
- Think of synonyms: Examples: Run: sprint, race, dart, rush, dash, hasten, hurry, scurry, scamper, bolt, fly, gallop, career, charge, shoot, hurtle, speed, zoom, go like lightning, go hell-bent for leather, go like the wind, go like a bat out of hell; jog, trot.
- Which of those most closely approximates the action you want to convey?
- Be sure the actions your characters make are appropriate and unique to them. A very elderly woman is unlikely to be quick moving and a kid with or without ADHD is likely to be rather “hyper,” so choose actions that reflect their characters. If the actions are out of character, provide a reason.

13B. Color #4—Actions: Choreography

- Make sure your characters' actions are plausible as well as physically and physiologically possible.
- Example: A fight scene in which the hero has two hands occupied with weapons. Suddenly his “free hand” clutches his opponent's arm, making the hero the rare human who can spontaneously grow a third appendage.
- Example: A lover with a third hand can do quite unusual things ;)
- I know someone who uses Barbie dolls to enact her scenes. If she breaks a doll, she knows the action isn't possible ;)

13C. Color #4—Actions: Choreography

- Are you repeating the same motions over and over? Writers tend to get into ruts with *laughed, chuckled, chewed lips*, etc.
- Can you write fresh actions?
- Example: He furrowed his eyebrows.
- Better: His eyebrows met in the middle of his forehead like two furry caterpillars chomping on the same leaf.
- Caveat: Once you've written something as unique as *furry caterpillars*, you can't use it more than once in your novel—it will stick out like the proverbial sore thumb.
- Be sure people get into and out of scenes and no one is left hanging, so your reader doesn't have to wonder where they came from or where they got off to
- Make sure actions are completed.
- Example: She let her racing heart slow. Only then did she realize her right hand was empty. She'd lost the photograph of her children during her plunge. Darkness masked the surrounding landscape. She'd never find it now. Her search would have to wait 'til first light. She closed her hand, now as empty as her heart.
- Here, she first realizes her hand is empty, then she closes it, attempting to clutch what she's lost.

14. Color #5—Senses

- Have you incorporated senses into your work?
- Have you used them to accentuate setting, emotion, etc?
- Smell is the sense most closely tied to memory. I always know when I've dreamed of my artist grandmother because I wake smelling turpentine.
- Example: She trailed off, unable to tell Ben how powerless she'd felt when crushed by Gatera's body. Or how filthy she'd felt afterward. Or how the smell of cigar smoke and banana beer had been embedded forever in her nostrils—and her memory.
- Example: The odor of death, so strong Jess tasted it, seeped through the closed windows of the Toyota and shrouded its occupants.
- What do these senses evoke in the character? The reader?
- What effect do these sensory details have on the story and ultimately on the reader?

15A. Color #6—Setting

- Look at your settings.
- The beginning of each new scene needs a little prose to ground the reader to time and place. There's nothing more irritating than reading a page and realizing the author switched locations or time-travelled and didn't clue you in immediately.
- Authors tend to pull away and become more distant in the POV with these opening scenes, so be sure you only describe what POV character can photograph and relate it directly to him/her.

15B. Color #6—Setting

- A new scene or chapter needs enough information to ground the reader as to where the scene occurs and to establish POV.
- Example: At the service station in Sundsvall, Texas, Jim Heimdal and his buddies stopped for a break during their loop from San Antonio through Kerrville, Leakey, and Bandera before heading home. They filled their tanks—gas in their motorcycles and food in their bellies—before riding out again. He glanced at the feed and seed across the street. Judging from the oblique stares of the cowboys over there, the bikers' lack of appropriate head wear branded them as being from somewhere else. Jim had to admit that, in their shiny black helmets and ominous leather gear, he and his friends resembled aliens from Star Trek.
- Here it's obvious within the first line where the scene is set and whose POV it's in.

16A. Color #7—Character descriptions

- You don't need a full description every time you introduce a new character.
- Use a few bits of description when new character is introduced. Postpone if the character is performing an action and the description interferes with your description of the action.
- Example: Maxing out at 110 pounds, Jess didn't have much reserve left.
- Jess is running through the forest to escape her captors. This is the *only* description of her that complements her actions. The rest can wait until she slows down.
- Sprinkle description in like fairy dust.
- Unnamed, walk-on type characters may not even need a full description, much less a name.
- Example: As she walked, a man approached her, a hoe over his shoulder. With a stocky body and a broad nose, he looked Hutu. Had he been a génocidaire? Had his hoe been his weapon?

16B. Color #7—Character descriptions

- Are your descriptions concise? Consistent? Fresh? Overdone?
- POV characters don't usually describe their own long blonde hair and shapely legs or record the autumn sun highlighting their auburn hair—give that job to another character.
- Give a few touches when new character is introduced.
- Example: Jim turned his gaze to a teenage boy. Clad in an oilskin duster so long it dragged the ground, well-worn boots, and a battered gray cowboy hat shoved tight over his head, he rhythmically squatted and rose, moving the fifty-pound bags of feed. He couldn't weigh much more than the sacks he was lifting.
- You don't need to describe a person in one fell swoop, sprinkle the details in like fairy dust. In the example above, the reader (and Jim) later learn this kid is a woman, and too much detail would have given away the gender-bending.
- What you don't need: The new intern, Mitch, wore a mint-green T-shirt covered by a navy blazer, pleated khaki trousers, and oxblood penny loafers. In one hand he carried a black backpack with a Nike Swoosh, and in the other a Starbucks coffee. His wavy chestnut hair was flat in the back, like he'd reclined in his seat on the train into town.
- Your reader will skim that level of detail without fail.

16C. Color #7—Character descriptions

- Character descriptions can include inanimate objects—if they rise to the level of becoming a character.
- Example: Celestine guided her friend to her red Subaru, a two-door hatchback with an engine that had a propensity for leaking. Subaru, named for the Pleides constellation. But this car was no star. Instead it was a lemon. She made sure Gloria got inside and watched her drive off until, at a distance, the car took on the look of a ladybug. The car drove off, leaving the pungent smell of gas fumes in its wake. For a moment, Amy stood listening. The rumble of the sputtering engine faded.
- This is a lot of description for a car that belongs to a minor character and has no importance in the story.
- Aim for coherence, not fragmentation. For coherence, details should matter in some way. What effect do these details have on the story and ultimately on the reader? Here, I find the *Subaru, named for the Pleides constellation...* too much. Though it's intended to contrast the car with its namesake, the fragment takes the reader out of the immediate action in the story and is an unneeded detail that makes no difference in the story. There's also some dissonance between the constellation and the lemon used in the comparison. Also, I'd associate a ladybug more with a VW Beetle than a Subaru.
- Unless this car plays a major role in the story (i.e., it's the getaway car, but is in bad shape so their escape is doomed from the beginning) cut those details.

16D. Color #7—Character description

- Example: Jeanie, ever the whirling dervish, crashed in more like a bumper car than the whimsical carnival rides Karen was used to associating her with.
- Here the description of a *whirling dervish* is fresh, but when piled onto *bumper car* and *whimsical carnival rides*, becomes too much.
- Three comparisons in such close proximity means they all lose their punch, plus the *whirling dervish* is incongruous with the *bumper car* and *carnival rides* (which are at least somewhat related, whereas a *whirling dervish* is a member of a Sufi religious order whose members have taken vows of poverty and are known for their ecstatic dancing). So this represents a form of **turbulence**.

17. Color #8—Internalization

- Now look for all areas of internalization and highlight them with color #4.
- Too much internal monologue can slow your pacing, and your reader will skim over it.
- Use dialogue, an action beat, body language, or interaction with another character to break the internalization into smaller, more easily digestible chunks.
- Internalization can also break up the flow of dialogue between characters, so sometimes it's better to place the internalization before or after the dialogue run or to place it in a natural pause in the conversation (like when an interruption distracts one of the characters).

18. Color #9—Tension and conflict

- Use color #9 to highlight tension and conflict
- You don't want too much (unless it's a very dramatic scene) or too little (a snoozing reader isn't reading your book).
- There should be at least some on every page to propel the plot.
- Remember the old axiom: a character must want *something* on every page, even if it's just a drink of water
- The reader needs down-time, as well, to catch her/his breath

19. Color #10—Visceral responses

Use color #10 to highlight your characters' involuntary or visceral responses

- Involuntary actions of the POV character only. Since these, for the most part, are internal reactions, they can't be experienced by anyone other than the POV character.
- A speck or two per chapter or two, not on every page or even every other page—too many seems overwritten and can wear out your reader.
- Visceral responses are physiological responses like heart racing, nausea, palms sweating, shaking, rapid breathing, feeling faint, muscles tensing, flushed or pale skin, dilated pupils, trembling.
- Visceral responses are part of the [fight-or-flight](#) response, thus they are actively tied to the physiological functioning of the human body—and are beyond our control. In an acute stress situation, hormones are released that make a character hyper-aroused.
- However, this response may not be accurate. It can occur in both imagined or real circumstances.
- Remember, if you can control it, it shouldn't be highlighted.

20A. Color #11—Emotion

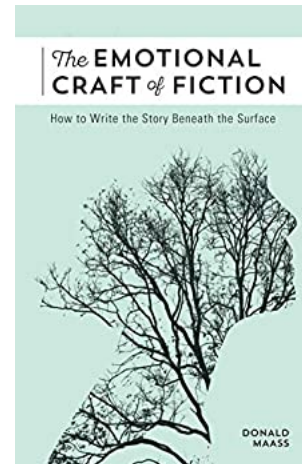
- Go through your manuscript and highlight all the emotions with color #11.
- Have you expressed emotion in a new way, a fresh way?
- The first thing you are inclined to write will invariably be the obvious, easy reaction—and it's guaranteed to be so trite the reader will not feel that emotion (this would be a first-level response to the emotion).
- Example: the hackneyed single tear, clenched fists, etc.
- Emotions can be combined in the way the primary colors can mixed to form the secondary colors. Look [Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions](#). Try combining emotions or going for second or third level emotions. For help with this, see the [Emotional Craft of Fiction](#) by Donald Maass.
- Readers aren't interested in being told how characters feel; they want to **EXPERIENCE THE EMOTION THEMSELVES**

20B. Color #11—Emotion

- Without emotion, readers won't engage with your characters.
- Show emotions with:
 - Physical signals such as posture, hand movements, body language.
 - Mental and physical responses like moving closer to someone, inability to see the flaws of the loved one.
 - Internal monologue.
 - Internal sensations such physiological responses as rapid heart rate, dry mouth, etc.
- Some books provide lists of emotions and cues. Use these with caution to avoid repeating what thousands of authors are pulling from these same books. By overusing the lists, you risk becoming cliché.
- Example: If you look at these books, cues for *adoration* might include: obsession, fantasizing, keeping a secret diary, taking risks to be close to the adored one, profuse denial of the attraction.
- There is frequently a fine line between over- and under-writing emotion. So tread carefully to avoid the dreaded “[purple prose](#).”

20C. Color #6—Emotion

- The best reference book I've found for writing emotion is [*The Emotional Craft of Fiction: How to Write the Story Beneath the Surface*](#) by Donald Maass. If you do his exercises, you will be able to write unique emotional responses in your characters which will generate deep emotional responses in your reader—which will keep them reading.



21A. Zooming in—Individual chapters

- Once you've completed your broad overview and color coded your work and made all those necessary changes, it's time to zoom in, at last, on the fine details.
- Imagine each chapter as a stage play. Does it have a beginning, middle, and end?
- Have you given **stage directions** in a clear, but unobtrusive way?
- Does every **chapter** move the plot forward or increase characterization?
- Is every **scene** essential? Every **character**?

21B. Zooming in—Individual Paragraphs

- Go through your work and take a hard look at each paragraph. It may help to start at the back of your document, so you're not bound so tightly to the story line.
- **Topic sentences:** Every new idea gets its own paragraph. Though novels aren't expository writing, each paragraph should be cohesive and contain a single train of thought.
- At the paragraph level, does every sentence fit in the paragraph and support its topic sentence?
- Example: Rolling her neck, she assessed what she would do next. The other passengers filed off the plane. Jazmin walked off the plane into the terminal, clutching her shoulder bag with one hand, rolling a small suitcase with the other, and followed the exit signs, her eyes searching for a payphone.
- The other passengers filed off the plane doesn't fit in the main idea of the paragraph which (based on the number of details related to getting off the plane) is Jazmin getting off the plane. Neither does *Rolling her neck, she assessed what she would do next*. The first of those "off" sentences pull the reader's thoughts from the main character and distances them. Either leave them out or rewrite to stay better within the character's head. Also, there are no clues that she's assessing anything.
- Better: While the other passengers disembarked, Jazmin remained in her seat, rolling her neck to relieve tension that had accumulated there, and assessed what she would do next. **(This would be a good place to insert external signs she's thinking or a bit of internal monologue like *Option number one was out. She'd never go to Fred and beg for a job. Option number two, unemployment, was definitely a no-go. Her parents hadn't raised her to accept charity. Unable to come to a decision, she walked off the plane...***

21C. Zooming in—Individual chapters

- Does every chapter have a bit of prose to set the scene: time, place, and POV.
- Does every character have **sufficient goals, motivation, and conflict?**
- Are **transitions** needed to move the reader from the prior chapter and propel them into the next chapter ?
- Does each chapter end with a strong sentence, a cliffhanger, or a temporary sense of completion that pushes the reader into the next chapter?
- Example: Michel warned Jessica, “You know it may be years before Gatera’s case comes before the Tribunal.”
 “I’ve waited this long. I can wait longer.”
- Here, the *“I’ve waited this long...”* isn’t a cliff-hanger, but it gives a temporary completion to the action in the chapter and leads to the upcoming trial.

22A. Zooming in—Individual Paragraphs

- Do your thoughts flow in a logical manner through the paragraph? Though you are writing fiction, paragraphs should still have a main idea and other sentences should support that idea. If not, you need a new paragraph.
- Example: Suzette tugged up the collar of her jacket, soaked with rain. Rain bounced off the cobblestone street and settled into pools reflecting the sky above. The wetness siphoned up the pants of the police officers as they swept the cordoned-off road for clues. At least she'd chosen jeans instead of her good wool pants. Nothing like the smell of wet wool. Her hiking boots splashed through the gathering puddles, and droplets fell from the rim of her broad hat...
- This is an example of turbulence as the paragraph starts with Suzette's clothing, moves to the water and the officers, then back to her clothing, bouncing the reader's visual images around.
- Better: Suzette tugged up the collar of her denim jacket, soaked with rain. At least she'd chosen jeans instead of her good wool pants. Nothing like the smell of wet wool. Her hiking boots splashed through the gathering puddles, and droplets fell from the rim of her broad hat. *(Collect all the things not related to her clothing and start a new ¶)* Rain bounced off the cobblestone street and settled into pools reflecting the sky above. The wetness siphoned up the pants of the police officers as they swept the cordoned-off road for clues.
- Are transitions needed to move the reader into the next paragraph?

22B. Zooming in—Individual Paragraphs

- Do not mix thoughts/actions/dialogue of one character in the same paragraph as the thoughts, actions, or dialogue of another character. Every character's actions, dialogue, or thoughts should start a new paragraph.
- Example: Tom buried his face in his hands. "You're that journalist, aren't you? Just tell me—was she Dr. X?" Michel hesitated. Then decided one word wouldn't hurt. He grimaced and forced out, "Oui." "I knew it." Tom slumped. "I couldn't bear knowing she'd endured so much."
- With two people speaking in this paragraph, it should be divided as shown: Tom buried his face in his hands. "You're that journalist, aren't you? Just tell me—was she Dr. X?" ¶ Michel hesitated. Then decided one word wouldn't hurt. He grimaced and forced out, "Oui." **new** ¶ "I knew it." Tom slumped...
- An action and line of dialogue by the **same** person can exist in the **same** paragraph, as long as they align with the topic sentence.
- Example: Michel's face twisted in an ironic grimace. "I'm sure a White woman wouldn't have faced the same difficulties, but a Black woman claiming to be an American at the height of an international Black refugee crisis caused by a genocide the world refused to acknowledge—impossible." Fournier opened the laptop and stared pensively at it. "She must have thought she was in serious danger if she gave you her computer."

22C. Zooming in—Individual Paragraphs

- Does action come before reaction?
- Cause before effect?
- Do you move smoothly from distant objects to near and vice versa?
- Are characters' actions clearly delineated? Can the reader tell what's going on?
- Is there emotion in the paragraph?
- Do actions interrupt the flow of emotion or vice versa?
- Does internal monologue break up the flow of dialogue or action?

22D. Zooming in—Individual Paragraphs

- Do you describe a person from head to toe, or do you make your reader's eyeballs dance all over? Men may look at a woman's breasts first, then move up or down her body. Women tend to start with a person's eyes while a very young child may start with the knees and move up. If your character doesn't follow a pattern, how does the disparity help your story?
- Example: Stunned, the biker stared into the bluest eyes he'd ever seen, all the prettier for being set in a woman's face. Her lips, once pinched together in anger, broadened into a smile, revealing the cutest damned dimples. The sunlight gave her fair skin a luminous glow. Strands of wind-whipped blonde hair encircled her face, making her resemble a Russian icon, a Madonna who'd stuck her finger in a wall socket.
- In this example, Jim's gaze moves from her eyes to her mouth to her hair, pulling back like a camera in a movie moves from a close-up to a wider shot. Also, the wall socket image upends the classical ideal of a Madonna.
- Example: "You've got big feet," the three-year-old exclaimed. Then he looked up. "And you're very tall."
- Do you move smoothly from wide shots to a close-ups? If not, how does the disparity help your story?
- Do you interrupt dialogue with a lot of description or internal monologue? Your reader will get bored and skim these sections

23A. Zooming in—Individual Sentences

- At the sentence level, does every word convey the desired meaning?
- Is each word the most powerful you can use?
- Does every verb convey the most action?
- Does every sentence tie into the paragraph that contains it and to the sentences preceding and following?
- Are transitions needed to move the reader into the next sentence, paragraph, scene, or chapter?
- Look at the clauses in each sentence. Do they all relate?
- Example: I've thought about it, but would there be available properties in the islands, and could I afford any of them?
- There are three clauses in this sentence. (1) *I've thought about it*, (2) *but would there be any properties available*, and (3) *could I afford any of them?* Clauses 2 and 3 relate more to each other than to the first. So it's better to break into two sentences.
- Better: *I've thought about it. But would there be any properties available in the resort, and could I afford any of them?*

23B. Zooming in—Individual Sentences:

Misplaced modifiers

- A **misplaced modifier** or **dangling modifier** is an ordinary modifier (adverb, adjective, etc.) associated with a word other than the one intended or sometimes with a word that isn't even in the sentence you're looking at. A writer may have meant to modify the subject, but English rules of word order ([syntax](#)) attach the modifier to the nearest object. Such ambiguities lead to difficulty in understanding a sentence and occasionally unintentional humor. Misplaced modifiers can remove a reader from your story as they puzzle over what's going on.
- Syntax requires modifiers to refer to the person or object immediately before or very nearby in the sentence. In *the big dog*, *big* modifies *dog*. If you stretch it out to a modifying phrase, the same is true.
- Example: With a sigh of disappointment, the expensive dress was returned to the rack.
- *With a sigh of disappointment* is a misplaced modifying phrase. Obviously, the dress cannot sigh. The *sigh of disappointment* should modify the person who put the dress back on the rack (who's not even in the sentence), not the dress itself, so the sentence needs to be rewritten.
- Better: With a sigh of disappointment, the teenager returned the expensive dress to the rack.
- Misplaced or dangling modifiers can be quite subtle, so you need to evaluate every modifier. If you can't fix the problem easily, it's usually best to just write two sentences.

23C. Zooming in—Individual Sentences: Misplaced modifiers

- Example: She shoved her shoulder against the door splashing through the parking lot while continuously clicking the car remote to unlock the door.
- Here, the door seems to be splashing through the parking lot while clicking its remote.
- Better: *She shoved her shoulder against the door, dashed into the parking lot, and ran to her car while continuously clicking her remote.* Also, the gerund *splashing* indicates a simultaneity that can't exist—she can't push against the door *and* splash through the parking lot at the same time.
- Example: The castle, alight with bonfires and lanterns, was a beacon in the dark clearing, glowing with the promise of warmth.
- *The glowing with the promise of warmth and merriment* should modify castle, not the clearing.
- Better: The castle, alight with alight with bonfires and lanterns that glowed with the promise of warmth, was a beacon in the dark clearing.
- Example: Ginny laughed but settled in to watch her guilty pleasure, *The Bachelor*, plopping onto the couch and sloshing the glass of wine on the side table in the process.
- *Plopping onto the couch and sloshing the glass of wine on the side table in the process* needs to modify Ginny not *The Bachelor*.
- Better: Ginny plopped on to the couch, sloshing the glass of wine on the side table in the process. She laughed but settled in to watch her guilty pleasure, *The Bachelor*, anyway.
- This sentence is complex enough that it benefits from being made into two sentences.

23D. Zooming in—Individual Sentences: Passive voice

- Recently, the “by zombies test” for passive voice has appeared on the Internet: if you can add *by zombies* to your sentence, you’re in passive voice.
- Example: John was chased through the forest by zombies.
- This test doesn’t always reveal passivity, though. Passive voice, like POV shifts and misplaced modifiers, can be quite subtle.
- Example: The shovel blow to the vampire’s skull reinforced his authority.
- Superficially this seems to be an active sentence, though the “by zombies test” doesn’t work here.
- As an editor, though, I’d prefer to see protagonist performing the action, not the shovel. Also the pronoun *his* refers back to the vampire, not the hero.
- Remind your reader the hero is in charge by rearranging the sentence. He reinforced his authority with a forceful blow to the vampire’s skull
- Sentences that start with *This is* or *There was* tend to be passive as well.
- Example: There were many men playing soccer on the field.
- Better: Many men played soccer on the field. Eliminating the *There were* cleans up the prose and makes it stronger.

23E. Zooming in—Individual Sentences: Interjections and exclamations

- Do a global search for *er*, *hmm*, *well*, or *oh*
- In reality, we all use such interjections in our speech. In written dialogue, these filler words slow the pacing which may cost you a reader.
- John Dufresne, *In The Lie That Tells a Truth: A Guide to Writing Fiction*: “... beginning a line of dialogue with one word or two, then a comma before the content, though it is the way we talk, does not work well in dialogue ...These filler words can almost always be eliminated.”
- On rare occasion, such words may reveal a character’s personality, but when everyone speaks with them, characters lose their individuality and the pacing really slows. No one wants to read an exchange like this one:
- Example: “Well, we got the same last name, don’t we?”
 “ Oh, er, please, call me Joseph. Joey, if you prefer.”
 “ Er, well, okay.”

23F. Zooming in—Individual Sentences: Filter words

- Janet Burroway in [*Writing Fiction*](#): Filters are unnecessary words that separate the reader from the story's action. They come between the reader's experience and the character's point of view, words like *see/feel/hear/touch/know*.
- Do a global search for these and others like *recognize, notice, observe, understand*, etc. and eliminate as many as possible.
- Filter words increase the distance between your reader and your POV character. Rather than have the reader “process” the sensation through the character, have the reader experience the sensation him/herself
- Example: Jeanette felt the cool water cascading down her back and shivered.
- Better: Jeanette shivered as the cool water cascaded down her back.
- Example: With every step, she felt mud ooze between her toes. She knew she should clean the gunk off but realized if she removed her shoes, she'd be reluctant to put the disgusting things back on.
- Better: With every step, mud oozed between her toes. She should clean the gunk off, but if she removed her shoes, she'd be reluctant to put the disgusting things back on.

23G. Zooming in—Individual Sentences: Clichés

- Have you deleted all clichés? Texans like me have a ton of them ranging from “cute as a button” to “hotter than a whore on dollar day.”
- At the very least, use them sparingly and limit them to dialogue as part of a character’s voice.
- They shouldn’t creep into the narrator’s voice unless the narrator is someone who’d use them naturally, like a Texas cowboy, and, even then, use clichés with restraint.
- If you use a cliché, turn it on end and do something unique with it.
- Example: A twist on oil and water not mixing: *Like oil sitting on water, his presence calmed the turmoil in the household.*

23H. Zooming in—Individual Sentences: Sentence fragments.

- Do you use too many sentence fragments? This can make for a machine-gun type reading experience for the reader.
- Because there are few longer sentences to hold the prose together, these machine-gun fragments can be difficult/exhausting to read, akin to being in a car with driver who rides the brake.
- Do you use too few?
- Spread out as individual paragraphs, fragments can increase the white space on a page and increase the pacing.
- Sometimes sentence fragments can heighten suspense and speed up pacing.
- Example: She darted toward the forest. Barefoot. Half-naked. But at least she'd escaped.
- On the other hand, spread out as individual sentences or paragraphs, they can be used to slow time.
- Example: The blood dripped from her wound. One. Drop. At a time.

23I. Zooming in—Individual Sentences: Redundancies

- Example: Despite the already warm morning, memories ran a cold chill down Jessica's spine. Back in 1994...
- *Back in 1994* tells us this is a memory.
- Better: A cold chill raced down Jessica's spine. Back in 1994, she'd crossed that same bridge...
- Example: In retrospect, I thought back and realized...
- *In retrospect* and *thought back* are redundant.
- Better: Either write *In retrospect, I realized...* or *I thought back and realized...* Here, too you need to look at the filter words *realized* and *thought*. Can you rewrite the sentence without them?
- We'll visit at other redundancies when we start looking at individual words.

23J. Zooming in—Individual Sentences

- Look at each sentence.
- Does action come before reaction?
- Cause before effect?
- Do you move smoothly from distant objects to near and vice versa?
- Example: Jim scrutinized a classic 1953 F-100 with a deluxe cab. The body was painted sea-foam green while the driver's side sported a glacier-blue door and a vermillion bed panel. The vehicle had obviously been around the block many times, yet its war wounds were polished and waxed to a blinding shine. A bold script on the driver's door announced its name: Frankentruck.
- Here Jim's gaze moves from the general (*a classic 1953 F-100*) to the specific (*Frankentruck*). This is a lot of detail about a vehicle, but unlike in the earlier example about the red Subaru, this truck belongs to the main character and reveals her quirky personality. The fact that she named the truck also indicates its importance.
- This also is a case of an inanimate object rising to becoming a character.

23K. Zooming in—Individual Sentences

- Where can you tighten by eliminating filler words and filter words (see, feel, touch, etc)?
- Example: Robert gave a whoop.
- Better: Robert whooped.
- Example: I recalled the days before he passed away. It was all I could do to tolerate the memories of the mental and emotional abuse he'd inflicted on me.
- Better: I recalled the days before he passed away. (This would be a good place for some body language to show how she feels about her memories.) It was all I could barely tolerate the memories of the mental and emotional abuse he'd inflicted on me.
- *It was* is can be deleted because it's vague and often over-used to start sentences. *On me* can be deleted because such prepositional phrases (to her, at him, for her, etc) are usually implied and, when tacked on at the end of a sentence, leave it with a weak finish.
- Example: It only took a couple of days, and I had a response from Warren Estes, the man who owned the bar.
- Better: In only a couple of days, I had a response from Warren Estes, owner of the bar.
- Warren is obviously male, so "the man" can be deleted.
- Where can you rephrase to simplify?
- Example: After six deliveries with only two hours of sleep in the past twenty-four, Dr. Jones walked out of the hospital as fast as her achy feet would carry her. She was so tired...
- Better: Dr. Jones walked out of the hospital as fast as her achy feet would carry her. After delivering six babies in twenty-four hours, she was so tired...
- Breaking this into two sentences lets the reader visualize the action more easily. It also puts cause (two hours of sleep) before effect (she was so tired).

23L. Zooming in—Individual Words: Eliminate filler words and work on gerunds

- Words you can almost always delete include *just*, *that*, and little filler words like interjections (*oh*, *well*, *er*, *uh*).
- Look for alternatives to *as if*, *like*.
- Do a global search for sentences starting with *It was* or *There were*. Writers often use these words to start sentences. Rewrite those sentences in a more active form.
- Make sure with gerunds (*-ing* verbs) that you are not creating a simultaneity that doesn't exist. Remember the example from above: *She shoved her shoulder against the door splashing through the parking lot while continuously clicking the car remote to unlock the door*. The gerund *splashing* indicates an impossible simultaneity: she can't push against the door and splash through the parking lot at the same time.

23M. Zooming in—Individual Sentences

- Look at the details in the sentences—do they matter?
- Aim for coherence, not fragmentation. For coherence, **details should matter in some way.**
- Example: Mikaela drove to her little homestead, all 1600 acres of Texas Hill Country. She was plumb mad at old Biedermeier with his lewd suggestions and roving hands. Corey had been buried five long, hard, lonely months, but Jake and other local studs considered her fair game.
- Here you learn a lot about Mikaela in a few sentences. She owns a decent amount of land in a rural location. She's a new widow. She's having trouble with the local studs.
- Example: Jess darted toward the forest. Barefoot. Half-naked. But at least she'd escaped. Maxing out at 110 pounds, she didn't have much reserve, but she'd worry about food tomorrow.
- Every detail here is integral to Jess's current situation. We don't need to know that her hair is curly, that she's petite (though that's implied in the 110 pounds), a physician, or biracial—yet.

23N. Zooming in—Individual Sentences

- Remember that pesky word *syntax*? Pronouns typically refer back to the noun immediately preceding it. Example: *Bob ate his apple.*
- If you have too many pronouns in a sentence or paragraph, your reader can become confused. This becomes a real problem with sentences or paragraphs that have more than one person of the same gender. Make sure every pronoun indicates the correct person. In paragraphs and sentences with two or more people of the same gender, it's important to be sure the reader can tell which he or she is which.
- Example: *While Bob shook Jake's hand, he took a bite of his apple and gave the core to his dog.* The *he* and *his* refer back to *Jake*, but the writer might have meant *Bob*. If so, that need to be reiterated.
- Better: *While Bob shook Jake's hand, Bob took a bite of his apple and gave the core to Jake's dog.*

230. Looking at individual sentences:

Parallelism

- Parallelism: When you have a list, the items need to be written in a parallel fashion, in the same verb tense, for example.
- Example: Roger stared at the limp body hanging from the light post, at the blood trailing from her nostrils, her hair matted with it.
- Better: Roger stared at the limp body hanging from the light post, at the blood trailing from her nostrils and matting her hair.
- Example: He swung a fist over his shoulder in an awkward attempt to knock her free, but she launched upwards, flipping forward as she took to the air, and landing in a crouch directly in front of him.
- Better: He swung a fist over his shoulder in an awkward attempt to knock her free, but she launched upwards, flipped forward as she took to the air, and landed in a crouch directly in front of him.

23P. Zooming in—Individual Words: Over-used words

- Draw up your own list of over-used words. It may vary from book to book. Currently, I am overusing *spy*, *militia*, *genocide*, words that aren't in my usual armamentarium, but try finding a synonym for *genocide*!
- An easy way to check if you've over-used a word. Use the find and replace (Control F), type in the word you're looking for (such as *just*). The computer will tell you just how many *justs* you have in your manuscript.
- Words you might look for: *just*, *that*, *it*, *nearly*, *almost*, *sometimes*, *nice*, *some*, and other inexact, imprecise words. Come up with your own list.

24A. Zooming in—Individual Words

- I work my manuscript, chapter by chapter, through Autocrit (an editing software program) to look at repetitive words, pacing, readability, etc. It usually takes three to four runs through the program to iron out the problems because when you fix one thing you invariably screw up another. If you use a word too often, too close together, hit the thesaurus for synonyms.
- Adjectives—Rather than list two or three to describe a single noun, chose the strongest. Again, do the details matter enough to include?
- Do a global search for *-ly* adverbs.
- Look closely at other adverbs. As with adjectives, rather than list two or three to describe a single noun, chose the strongest.
- Save the stacked-up descriptions for moments where you need more impact or where more detail adds cohesiveness

24B. Zooming in—Individual Words: Redundancies

- Eliminate redundancies: stand ~~up~~, sit ~~down~~, kneel ~~down~~, rise ~~up~~, wake ~~up~~, finish ~~up~~
- Nodding a head ~~yes~~, shaking a head ~~no~~
- Characters can just DO something—they don't need to *try*, *begin*, *start*, etc. to do something.

24C. Zooming in—Individual Words

- Do a global search for *it*. Everywhere you can, replace *it* with a concrete noun, especially if you have multiple *its* in a single sentence or paragraph, all referring to different things.
- Example: It was a hot day, and it seemed like a lot of people were standing around the fountain watching it bubble from the lion's mouth.
- Better: The day was hot, so lots of people stood around the fountain watching water bubble from the lion's mouth.
- Make sure every pronoun replaces an appropriate noun.
- In sentences or paragraphs where more than one "he," "she," or "it" is present, be sure your reader can tell which is which.
- Example: I turn, intending to bypass my father who is talking to another middle-aged man when he grabs my bare upper arm.
- Here, we don't know whether the *he* is her father or the second middle-aged man.
- Better: I turn, intending to bypass my father who's talking to another man, but Dad grabs my bare upper arm.

24D. Zooming in—Individual Words: Prepositions

- Prepositions: It's less wordy and stronger to say *standing in danger's path* rather than *standing in the path of danger*.
- Prepositional phrases—Most prepositional phrases tacked to the ends of sentences can be eliminated
- Example: He ran down the streets ~~of the city~~.
- Better: He ran down the city streets.
- Example: She gave the package ~~to him~~.
- Better: She gave him the package.
- Example: He waved a hand in the air, his aggravation palpable ~~in the air between them~~.

25A. Now start looking at individual words— Anachronisms

- Have you checked that certain words are appropriate to your novel's setting/time frame/character?
- Remember the example from earlier? *She hadn't tasted the quintessential cactus dish since she'd left Mexico twenty-three years earlier.*
- The word *quintessential* seems too formal for a little old lady with a sixth-grade education.
- You may need to use a specific dictionary/thesaurus:
- [*The Online Etymology Dictionary*](#)
- [*Dictionary of American Regional English*](#)
- [*Power Thesaurus*](#)
- [*Legal Dictionary*](#)

26A. Zooming in—Punctuation

- Look for comma splices, missing periods, missing commas
- Comma splices are two sentences joined by a comma rather than a conjunction.
- Example: *She jogged through the park, she slowed once in a while to let her boyfriend catch up.* There should be a conjunction after the comma here.
- Check for over-used commas, em dashes, etc.
- Avoid overusing exclamation marks, ALL CAPS or italics for emphasis. (Everytime you *tell* your reader what's important, you reduce his/her involvement in your story).
- There is currently some controversy over whether to italicize foreign words. My recommendation is that if you are writing #ownvoices type fiction and the words aren't foreign to you, don't italicize them. If the words are foreign to you, italicize them to indicate that.
- Example: "She and my wife ... they would be *comme l'huile et l'eau*, like oil and water." Here I italicized the French because the speaker is French and the italics heighten his foreignness to an American reader.
- Colons and semicolons are rarely used in contemporary fiction.
- For stylistic/punctuation questions: [The Chicago Manual of Style](#)

26B. Editing programs

- I use Autocrit to look at repetitive words, pacing, etc. It usually takes three to four runs through the program to iron out the problems because when you fix one thing you invariably screw up another.
- There are many others
- Most have free online trials where you can check a few hundred words to see how you like the program

Editing:

