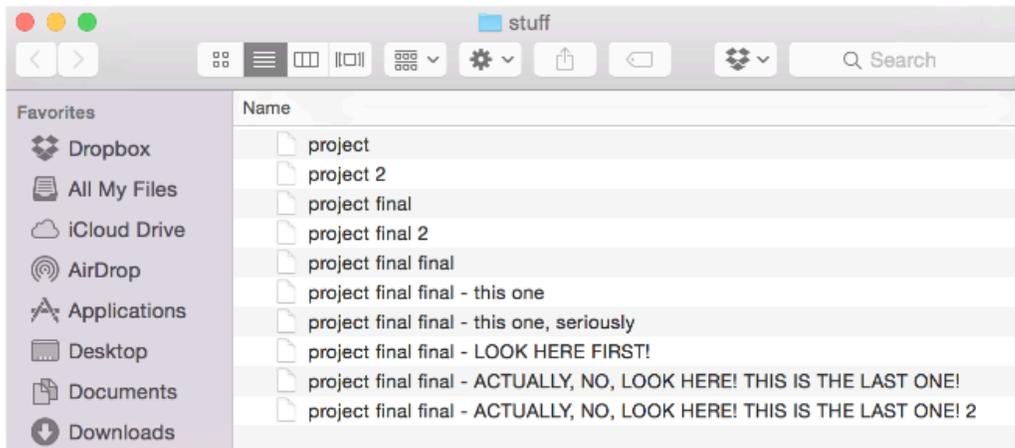


The Short Story Writer's Editing Guide



Designed for student use by Gabrielle Reid

First, save a copy of your draft!



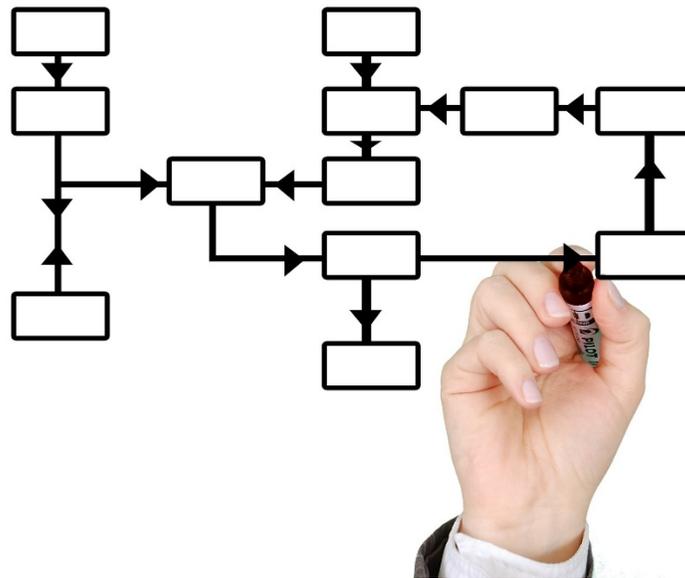
Editing for Cohesive Plot

Now that you have written your story, try summarising it in dot points (this will probably look a little bit different to your plan). Make sure you include the most important information from each scene - e.g. instead of "Sam and Ryan talk about burglar, disagree on who it might be", you would write "Sam tells Ryan he suspects his mother is the burglar because her work shifts are always at night, Ryan disagrees and suggests it might be their neighbour who is suddenly spending more money".



Starting at the END of your story and working backwards, look at each major event and answer the question "why did this happen?" If the answer is not obvious from another scene in your story, make a note of it here. You might need to:

- Add more information to an existing scene
- Write a new scene to fill in the blank
- Remove an unnecessary scene



Imagine your story as a flowchart, where one event leads to another. Or even write it out as one! If you have a subplot, you might have two flowcharts that connect to each other in a pivotal scene. **Are there any events that do *not* fit in your imaginary flowchart, scenes that don't connect to other events in the story?** These may be "filler" scenes to draw out time, "infodump" scenes that only give the reader background information rather than move the story forward, or scenes that are used to demonstrate a character's personality or state of mind.



Now comes the hard part. **Delete** the scenes that are irrelevant to other events of the story. Don't worry, you've saved a copy of your draft and you can re-add them later, if at the end you still think the story would be better with them. But sometimes the hardest part of editing is cutting out perfectly good words, maybe even beautiful sentences. Be ruthless!

Next, go through each scene and cut any paragraphs that don't contribute something important. Ask yourself "would a reader be able to understand what was going on without this paragraph?" Do not be concerned about your word count, that will move up and down plenty of times before we're finished, and a story should only be as long as it needs to be.

Look again at your story and summary.

Do all scenes work towards a common goal?

Does it include all the information needed to make sense?

If not, go back through this process a second time.



Have someone else read your story and ask them if they understood it. Ask them to summarise what happened. When you are satisfied that your plot is logical and succinct, move on.

Point of View

Whose point of view is your story told from? Does it change?

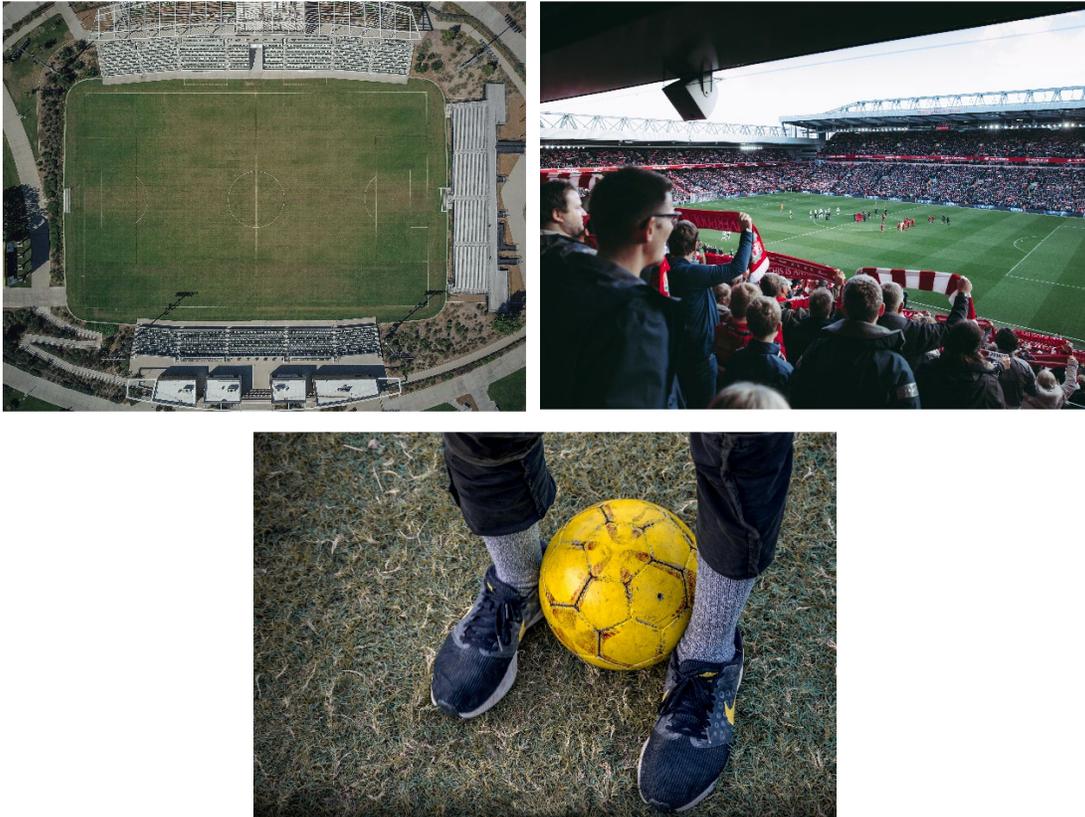
Consider the example below:

Something was beeping. Not the oven timer; the room smelled different, like pine. Nate opened his eyes and saw his youngest daughter in a hard-backed chair to the left of his bed.

Who can hear the beeping? If it was an omniscient narrator, the narrator would know what the source of the noise is, even if no one in the room does. It doesn't say "I heard beeping" or "I opened my eyes", so this is not first person narration. However, the scene is clearly narrated through *Nate's* point of view. When a scene or story focuses in on the thoughts and experiences of a particular character in this way, we call it "close third person" narration, as opposed to "third person omniscient" (the all-knowing, all-present narrator).

Narration	Example
1 st person	I hear beeping.
2 nd person	You hear beeping
Close 3rd	Nate hears beeping.
3 rd omniscient	The oven timer is beeping.

It's common for stories written in close 3rd to have more than one POV (point of view) character, *but the point of view should not change mid-sentence or mid-paragraph*. You can change point of view after a paragraph, but my advice is to only change POV at the end of a scene. Readers can usually tell which character's head we are in by who the subject of the sentence is (e.g. "Flynn watched Mary as she danced" puts us in Flynn's head, whereas "Mary danced while Flynn stood aside and watched" suggests we're following Mary).



As you're reading your story, ask yourself "whose head are we in?" Then make a note of any places where you've included a different character's thoughts. We call this "head hopping" and these sentences often confuse the reader or pull them out of the story. **Highlight any instances of head-hopping to come back to.** Some will be deleted, others will be edited to a different POV, others will be turned into character behaviours or dialogue (see **page X** of this guide).

If your story is written in first person, check for any places the character seems to "mind read" another.

If your story is written in third person omniscient, be sure to be consistent and don't keep secrets from the reader.

Using Different Character Voices

If you do decide to change POV, you can alter your character's "voice" to help the reader. Some things that help to define voice are:

- vocabulary
- race, nationality and culture
- slang or pop culture references
- confidence level (forceful or passive, direct or vague)
- habits, mannerisms, hobbies and interests
- humour
- internal thoughts
- metaphors, similes and comparisons

Word choices can indicate which character's POV we are seeing. My older, British character uses "perhaps" and "lorries" where my younger, Australian character uses "maybe" and "trucks". You may write with longer, more complex sentences for one character, and more contractions (don't as opposed to do not) and slang in a different character's voice.



Character voice is not just about dialogue, but how the story is narrated. Describing the same noisy space, one character might use a more poetic voice "the voices twirled and leaped around the room in a choreographed unison" whereas a more direct, down-to-earth character might say "everyone talked at once, but the same message came through like a chant at a football game".

If you are using multiple POVs for your story, make a note of where they change and look for places where the voice could be a little clearer.



Even if you are only narrating from one POV (in 1st person, limited 3rd person or omniscient narration), now is a good time to look at your dialogue. **If you removed all dialogue tags (he said, Molly screamed etc), would you still have a good sense of who was speaking?**

Editing for Effective Description

How much or how little description you use can be a matter of style, genre and personal preference. It is also a matter of balance. Too much description can take the focus away from what is happening in the plot; too little can leave your reader unable to imagine your story.

Read through again and look for each place where you are describing a setting, person or object.



If your descriptions are a paragraph long or more, ask yourself: how much of this detail is important? How much would my character notice? This may be a place where you can cut unnecessary words. If your descriptions are quite short, ask yourself if you've chosen the right things to describe. How evocative are your descriptions?

You're not aiming to make them longer or shorter, you're aiming to make them more effective. Work through your descriptions one at a time and after you have made any changes, re-read the scene to make sure it all makes sense.

Some ways to improve your description:

- Vary the senses used - include an interesting smell, texture or taste.
- Look for what makes the place, person or object unique. Rather than describing mundane things like the bed in the bedroom, focus on the thing that makes it *this*

character's bedroom (e.g. bars on the windows or pink flowers on the bedspread).

- Use similes and metaphors, but not for every description.
- Describe aspects of your characters other than hair colour, eye colour and height. The raspy-voiced woman who constantly runs a hand through her hair is more interesting than the tall blonde woman.
- Think of the deadly Godfather who shows his softer side by stroking a pet cat. One or two contradictions like this can be fascinating, but use them sparingly.

Describing Character Emotions (Showing, Not Telling)

Highlight anywhere you have used the words "she felt _____" or "he felt _____". Highlight any words that mean angry, excited, happy or any other emotion.

Instead of telling the reader how your characters feel, you want to show us.



You can show us your character's emotions in a few ways:



How do they behave? (action)

Verbs are amazing things. There's a big difference between a person who *leaps* up, a person who *stands* up, and a person who *stumbles* to their feet. You can use action to show the emotions of all your characters, not just the POV character. Look for what each character is doing in that moment and see if you can change your description to show how they feel.

What do they notice? (observation)

It's rare that someone will notice *every* item in a room - we pay attention to things that are important to us in that moment. A person entering a friend's house might notice how the furniture has been rearranged or what food has been prepared; a police officer entering a suspect's house will look for quite different things (clues that relate to their case); and a kidnapping victim being taken to their captor's house may only be looking for an exit. Look at what you've chosen to describe in the scene where your character is feeling something. Do your descriptions match their state of mind?



What do they say? (dialogue)

Consider the difference between "can you put that back, please?" and "don't you dare touch my stuff". In the same way that dialogue tells us a lot about who is speaking, it can tell us a lot about how that person feels. If your characters are talking in this scene, make sure their speech matches their emotions.

Editing for Pacing and Flow

By this time, you will have re-read your work several times and have probably already fixed a few places where the pacing feels "off". Pacing is about creating a rhythm and only breaking it sparingly, when you want to draw attention to something. It's about making the words feel right, regardless of what words you have chosen to use. Read the quote below:

"This sentence has five words. Here are five more words. Five-word sentences are fine. But several together become monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is getting boring. The sound of it drones. It's like a stuck record. The ear demands some variety.

Now listen.

I vary the sentence length, and I create music. Music. The writing sings. It has a pleasant rhythm, a lilt, a harmony.

I use short sentences.

And I use sentences of medium length.

And sometimes, when I am certain the reader is rested, I will engage him with a sentence of considerable length, a sentence that burns with energy and builds with all the impetus of a crescendo, the roll of the drums, the crash of the cymbals—sounds that say listen to this, it is important."

— Gary Provost



I'm not suggesting you go back and count the number of words in every sentence you use, but you can look for patterns.

Is there a place where you have several long sentences in a row?

Can you break some of them up?

Is there a place where you have many short sentences?

Did you choose short sentences for a particular reason, like building tension?

Read it. Out loud. Change the places where you stumble, or stutter, or where you change the words naturally when reading.



Get someone else to read it to you. Does it sound the way you thought it would? Mark any places where it doesn't.

If you've been reading on a screen until now, print out a copy and read that. Don't make the changes as you read, just mark them to come back to. You want the flow that a reader would get.

You can also try changing the font before you read.

An app like the Hemingway Editor (<http://www.hemingwayapp.com/>) can be helpful for showing where your long sentences are. It will also point out adverbs (more on that later). Don't feel like you must change everything it highlights. It's there to draw your attention to possible problems, but a computer is not the same as a reader.

Consistency

For each scene, check that:

- Character names and ages are the same (e.g. Julie is not called Julia)
- Settings are the same, or it's clear that the characters have moved
- It's the same time of year and weather throughout the scene. If you mentioned morning frost on the grass, don't later talk about tomatoes ripening in the garden!
- Character relationships are the same. For example, if you changed a brother to a cousin in a later edit, make sure you changed it in all scenes.

Adverbs

After however many years you've spent making your writing more descriptive with adjectives and adverbs, **now it's time to get rid of most of them**. That's not to say you should *never* use them, but ask yourself if they are necessary.

The stone sank quickly to the bottom.

Do we need the word quickly? Is it already implied by the stone sinking? Could we use a different verb (e.g. plummeted) to get the same message across in fewer words?

Adverbs are much more likely to be a problem than adjectives, but not always.

She was comforted by the friendly smiles.

Does "friendly" add anything to the sentence? Aren't most smiles friendly?



Adjectives and adverbs can be wonderful things. There are occasionally times when a verb just doesn't say what you need it to. That's fine - words exist for a reason, and you are allowed to use them. But be wary of too many, as they will clutter up your writing and make it harder to get the point across. There are programs such as the Hemingway app or Grammarly that will highlight adverbs. You may find it helpful to see how many they find in your writing.

Proofreading and SPAG

A final check over SPAG (spelling, punctuation, and grammar) is one of the last parts of the editing process. There's not much point in polishing a paragraph that will eventually be cut, but by now, you should have fixed most of the big-picture problems in your draft.



You've probably caught most of the SPAG problems in your last few edits, but here are some specific things to watch out for:

- Their, they're, there.
- You're vs. your
- Its vs. it's (hint: try making "it" a girl. She's = it's. Hers = its.)
- who's vs. whose
- who vs. that
- then vs. than
- compliment vs. complement
- Capital letters for all proper nouns, not just names
- Full stops.
- Paragraphs
- Sentence fragments (every sentence needs a verb)
- Semicolons – are used to separate two independent clauses. You should be able to put a full stop there instead. Do not use a semicolon where a colon belongs, or a comma where a semicolon belongs.
- Tense changes
- Incomplete comparisons (e.g. "my car is faster". Than what?)
- Apostrophes - to indicate possession (John's car) or contractions (don't), NOT for plurals (apples)
- Affect vs. effect

Incorporating Feedback

When you've done all the editing you can, it's time to get fresh eyes on your work. Hand your story to a few people whose opinions you trust. It's important to ask people to be specific about what they did and didn't like.

Don't change anything until you've heard from a few different people. A problem that every reader points out needs to be fixed. A problem that only one or two readers find might not be a problem - it's up to you as the writer to decide whether you agree with them or not. I can tell that my work is ready to send out into the world when all my reviewers disagree with each other!

When you've done all of that, put your story away somewhere safe and think about something different. Write something else. Read a new book. Look over your work one last time before submitting it, but now that you've learnt how to edit, you need to learn how to *stop* editing! You're done. Go enjoy a break.

