

'Are We Nearly There Yet?' Workshop with Sumi and Mike – 2nd June 2025

Editing Hints taken from 'The Book you need to Read to Write the Book you want to Write')*

Overview

- Editing is writing too – it draws the story elements into a tighter relationship with each other
- Editing means ...being your own critic/ acting on own judgements/ invoking the right to change your mind/ giving space to a better idea
- Initial writing = ART (Inspiration/ Vision/ Imagination)
- Editing process = CRAFT (Examining/ Shaping/ Finishing)

Editing Techniques

- Useful concept: 'Writer-you' and 'Editor-you'
 - Create a distance between yourself and your writing – put it away for a few days (weeks?) and return to it as 'editor-you'. 'Literary sensibilities' intact but without the emotional attachment of 'writer-you'. 'As coldly as possible' (Truman Capote)
1. Double/ 1 ½ space lines – hard copy – read whole thing 'quickly' as a 'new reader': minor corrections, underline areas that don't work well, make short comments in margin
 2. Go back and fix easy-to-fix problems. List more serious issues (Are they related – particular storyline/ character?) NOTE! Diagnosis is the essential 1st step towards a cure!
 3. Leave alone again before next read-through. If reasonably pleased (but not 100% satisfied) – time for a draft design to tighten and sharpen the whole thing
 4. Read through again. Take out all words, sentences, paragraphs that don't need to be there.
 - a. Every word should doing a job – quality trumps quantity every time
 - b. Read it aloud [Read Aloud App/ Phone recorder?] Print in an unfamiliar font/ coloured paper/ anything to make it less familiar > 'Best Draft' (not Final Draft)
 - c. Trust your instincts – if you think XYZ, you are probably right
 - d. Be prepared to revise radically (kill your darlings...) if characters, subplots aren't working or have no place in the story
 - e. Note! In editing it is important to cut *good* writing too – no beautiful sentences in the wrong place

Critical Readers

- Choose CRs for their critical acumen not their closeness to you
- Choose ones that share (or have sympathy with) your literary values
- DON'T alert CRs to your concerns – allow them to read objectively and to be honest

Editing in response to Feedback

- Take note of criticisms, especially if CR's comments coincide with each other
- See: '*Checklist of Remarks by Critical Readers*' below

Accepting Imperfections

- 'Writing is something you can never do as well as it can be done' (Hemingway)
- On the day Under Milk Wood was 1st performed Dylan Thomas was still tinkering with the text
- You will never be entirely satisfied with what you have written
- There should be a point where it feels complete and you are generally pleased with it – relish that moment and celebrate - you deserve it!

'Checklist of Remarks by Critical Readers'

- The plot is rambling/ hard to follow/ too complicated/ unconvincing
 - Is the story following the trajectory of the main character OR wandering off unprofitably?
>Write plot developments on a separate sheet – should isolate/ reveal where plot is too complex/ things happening for no reason/ characters with no motivation...
 - Is the story POV insecure? If it is intentionally varied, is it too complex for your reader?
 - Is there a clear sense of time? (Tenses correct and consistent with your intention?)
 - Does your plot depend too much on coincidences? (Unwise to rely on them)
- There are too many characters
 - 'Too many' = more than your text needs or can accommodate
 - Ask, 'Which characters can my story afford to lose?' > Are they unnecessary to the story?
Can I combine 2 into 1?
 - Think like a playwright – the fewer the characters, the less the expense!
- It's difficult to picture this character/ this character is unconvincing
 - Would you (if you hadn't invented the character) believe in them? If not, your reader won't either
 - Is your treatment of the character dynamic and consistent? Are they an individual?
 - Have you relied on tell rather than show? (i.e. merely described them). Do you know things about them that the reader doesn't (and so can't understand the character fully)
 - Does the character represent an idea rather than coming off the page as a thinking, feeling, individual? Readers need, first and foremost, to *care* about characters as real people (rather than ciphers/ puppets representing particular standpoints). Think 1984, Grapes of Wrath, The Handmaid's Tale...
- It lacks interest/ is too slow/ is too long
 - Are you avoiding taking risks or doing anything you can't do easily? Does your writing ever surprise you?
 - Is there any unnecessary preamble which delays the story starting? Does the writing finish when the story ends?
 - Are...the verbs working hard enough...the adjectives adding value? Are there [too many] pages without dialogue? Could scenes/ summaries be replaced by dialogue? Are the descriptions worth the space?
 - Are your characters' voices sufficiently different from each other and from the narrative voice?
> Read it aloud!
 - Check for too many 'he/ she said...he admonished...she expostulated' etc
 - Are there enough ups and downs in the plot? (See Kurt Vonnegut's Axes of Time and Fortune)
 - Where is the jeopardy for the characters? (Too little = no interest for the reader)
 - Is there insufficient momentum in the narrative? (Note: Any part that performs no function acts as a drag on the narrative = imposition on your reader who expends time and energy for little or no return)
 - Do you pause too often to share 'research information'? Does the story really need this? If not – jettison the detail.

*Reference: 'The Book you need to Read to Write the Book you want to Write' by Sarah Burton and Jem Poster, Cambridge University Press, ISBN 978-1-009-07373-8 £12.99