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Understanding The Editing Process

Editing Type #1: Editorial Assessment

The big-picture check

An editorial assessment focused on the holistic story and is less about individual sentence edits. It's designed to answer the big questions: does the story work, is it clear what the story is about, and does it hold together from beginning to end. This stage does not include line edits or grammar fixes because the goal is direction, not polish.

This is the edit to do right after you finish a full draft and before you start any detailed editing. You need enough distance to read like a reader. During the assessment, focus on structure, character arcs, stakes and tension, pacing, world clarity, and the strength of the ending.

Intentionally ignore grammar, word choice, dialogue tags, and sentence flow—those come later.

To do an editorial assessment yourself, read the entire draft without stopping to fix anything. Take notes instead of making changes: where it drags, what decisions don't feel earned, what moments deserve more space, and what feels unclear or unfinished. When you're done, you should have a list of big changes to make—scenes to cut, move, or expand—and a clearer sense of the story's core. A common mistake is jumping straight to line edits. Pretty sentences won't fix a broken structure.

Bottom line: Fix the story first. Polish comes later.

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Understanding The Editing Process

Editing Type #2: Developmental Editing

Fixing the story structure

Developmental editing focuses on strengthening the story. This is where you make meaningful changes to scenes, structure, characters, and stakes. Rather than polishing language, developmental editing is about shaping the content so the story functions more powerfully from beginning to end.

This edit comes after an editorial assessment and before any line or copy editing. It's the heavy-lifting stage, meant for moments when you're ready to revise deeply. Developmental editing looks closely at story structure, scene effectiveness, character motivation and arcs, stakes and tension, worldbuilding clarity, and pacing across the entire book.

When doing developmental editing yourself, work from big to small. Start with the whole story, then chapters, and finally individual scenes. For each scene, ask what the character wants, what stands in the way, and what changes by the end. Track character choices to ensure motivation is clear and change feels earned. Expect to cut filler scenes, combine characters, move scenes, raise stakes earlier, and clarify the ending. A common mistake is trying to perfect sentences at this stage, you'll rewrite them anyway.

Bottom line: Developmental editing is where you fix structure from entire story to line-by-line edits.

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Understanding The Editing Process

Editing Type #3: Copy Editing

Making the writing clean and correct

Copy editing is the stage focused on correctness and consistency. It fixes grammar, spelling, punctuation, and usage errors so the writing reads clean and professional. Unlike earlier edits, copy editing does not change the story itself—your plot, scenes, and character arcs should already be set.

This is a late-stage edit that comes after developmental editing, once the structure is solid and scenes and chapters are mostly final. Copy editing looks closely at grammar and spelling, sentence clarity, consistent word usage, timeline and continuity errors, and consistency in names, terms, and capitalization. The goal is to make the manuscript reliable and free of distractions for the reader.

To copy edit your own work, slow down and prioritize accuracy over momentum. Edit in passes instead of trying to fix everything at once. For example, one pass for grammar and spelling, another for repeated words, and another for consistency across names, technology, and world rules. Reading aloud is also one of the fastest ways to catch missing words, awkward phrasing, and run-on sentences, because your ear often notices what your eyes skip. For science fiction in particular, keep a simple style list of character names, place names, and key technology terms, and check them every time they appear.

Bottom line: Copy editing cleans your writing.

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Understanding The Editing Process

Editing Type #4: Proofreading

Catch surface level issues

Proofreading is the last review of your manuscript before you share or publish it. Its job is to catch surface-level issues—typos, misspellings, missing words, and formatting problems—so your work looks clean and intentional. Nothing structural should change at this stage.

Proofreading comes after copy editing, when no more revisions are planned and you're preparing for the final version. At this point, you're checking for small errors, punctuation mistakes, formatting consistency, and clean paragraph breaks and spacing. If you find yourself wanting to rewrite sentences or adjust scenes, stop proofreading and go back to an earlier editing stage.

To proofread your own work, change the format so you can see the manuscript with fresh eyes—print it, change the font or size, or read on a different device. Then read slowly and carefully, one line at a time, using your finger or cursor to prevent skipping ahead. Don't rely only on spellcheck, and don't make big changes while you proof. For science fiction, it also helps to search for character names, technology terms, and place names to ensure spelling is consistent across the entire manuscript.

Bottom line: Proofreading fixes small details.

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Understanding The Editing Process

Editing Type #5: Fact-Checking

Making sure the details hold up

Fact-checking is the stage where you confirm that real-world details in your manuscript are accurate. It protects credibility, reader trust, and the story's impact. You do not need to fact-check invented tech, fictional planets or governments, or speculative science, as long as it stays consistent.

To fact-check your own work, start by highlighting anything that references real science, uses real numbers or timelines, or names real places or events. Then verify the basics. You don't need to be an expert—ask whether the claim is true, whether the scale feels reasonable, and whether a reader might question it. If something feels shaky, adjust instead of over-explaining: change the detail, generalize the statement, or shift it into more clearly speculative territory. Accuracy builds trust, and consistency sustains it.

Bottom line: Check what's real, then invent the rest with your world building (that's what makes it fiction!).