



The Ultimate Self-Editing Guide

A step-by-step workbook for refining your manuscript before it reaches
an editor

Compiled by Scott Editorial

Scott Editorial offers free support for all writers. If you have any trouble applying these exercises or editing techniques, get in touch and we'll guide you through each self-editing step. (amy@scotteditorial.com)

Before you begin

Create a copy of your manuscript for editing. Open a new document called "Style Sheet." You will use it to record names, spellings, timelines, and rules for your world.



First Pass: Find Your Story and Character Arcs

Establish the big picture before polishing sentences

Goal: make sure the big picture works before you polish sentences.

What this means:

- A **story arc** is the external journey (goal, obstacles, stakes, outcome).
- A **character arc** is the internal journey (starting belief, pressure to change, new belief proven by action).

Do this:

1. Write one sentence that names your story promise:
"Protagonist must [goal], despite [obstacle], or [stakes]."
2. Outline three turning points for your hero: start state, midpoint shift, end state.
3. List the scenes where the hero chooses something hard. If any scene does not change the situation or the hero, cut it or rewrite it.
4. Add these to your Style Sheet.

Second Pass: Structure with Simple Tools

Give the story a clean shape so readers always feel progress

Goal: give the story a clean shape so readers always feel progress.

What this means:

- **Save the Cat** offers helpful emotional beats.
- **Chekhov's Gun** says that elements introduced early should matter later.

Do this:

1. Mark these beats in the margins or with comments: Opening Image, Catalyst, Midpoint, All Is Lost, Finale. If one is missing, create a scene or adjust a nearby one.
2. Make a "Promises" list. Note every object, secret, threat, and relationship set up early. Later in the book, give each a payoff, or remove it from the beginning.
3. If the middle sags, raise a cost or shorten a deadline. If the ending feels sudden, show the choice that proves the hero has changed.



Third Pass: Fix Scenes and Chapters

Purposeful scenes and clean chapter flow

Goal: ensure each scene has purpose, and each chapter begins and ends well.

What this means:

A strong scene has a goal, an obstacle, stakes, and a turn (something changes).

Do this:

1. At the top of each scene, write: Goal, Obstacle, Stakes, Turn, Choice.
2. Chapter openings, state who, where, and what is happening within three lines. Add one concrete detail to anchor us.
3. Chapter endings, finish on a change, a decision, a new question, or a fresh piece of information. Avoid summary.
4. If a scene only explains backstory, fold that information into an active scene or move it later.

Fourth Pass: Show Feelings Through Action

Replace labels with lived experience

Goal: replace distant telling with lived experience.

What this means:

Readers connect when they can see and feel what the character does, not just read labels like “he was angry.”

Do this:

1. Replace telling with specific actions or sensory cues.
2. Limit emotion labels. Use body language, small objects, and environment to carry feeling.
3. Use the “camera drill.” Rewrite one paragraph as if the camera is very close (textures, breath, small gestures), then rewrite from far away (room layout, positions). Combine the most effective lines.

Fifth Pass: Line Clarity and Word Choice

Remove filter words and strengthen verbs

Goal: remove filter words, strengthen verbs, and tidy sentences.

What this means:

Filter and filler words create distance or clutter. Examples: felt, realised, noticed,



saw, heard, seemed, began to, started to, tried to, managed to, was, were, had, got, really, very, just, quite, suddenly.

Do this in Word:

1. Press Ctrl+F (Cmd+F on Mac). Search for **felt**. At each hit, rewrite so the body or setting shows the sensation.
2. Search for **was** followed by a verb ending in “ing.” Replace with a simple past verb.
3. Search for **really, very, just, quite**. Cut most of them. Strengthen the noun or verb instead.
4. Read one page aloud. If you run out of breath, split the sentence. If two sentences repeat the same idea, keep the sharper one.
5. Aim to reduce at least half of these target words. Keep a few where the rhythm sounds natural.

Sixth Pass: Dialogue that Works on the Page

Dialogue that sounds natural

Goal: make dialogue reveal character and move the story.

What this means:

Dialogue should sound natural but be purposeful, not small talk.

Do this:

1. Cut greetings and filler lines unless they reveal character.
2. Give each speaker a distinct rhythm or vocabulary.
3. Use action beats instead of constant tags.
4. Read the scene out loud with a friend or with Word’s Read Aloud. If it sounds stiff, trim and simplify.
5. Add subtext. Let characters dodge questions, change subject, or speak lightly while their actions reveal strain.

Seventh Pass: Voice and Point of View

Goal: keep the lens consistent so the reader feels anchored.

What this means:

Voice is how the story sounds. Point of view is whose mind the reader lives in.

Do this:



1. One viewpoint per scene. If you need another viewpoint, start a new scene.
2. Remove head hopping. Keep interior thoughts to the viewpoint character.
3. Decide what your viewpoint character notices first, for example threat, beauty, status, or systems. Keep that habit consistent.
4. Cut out-of-character metaphors or knowledge the character would not have.

Eighth Pass: Continuity and Style Sheet

Goal: remove confusing inconsistencies.

What this means:

Readers notice when Wednesday turns into Friday with no days between, or when green eyes become brown.

Do this:

1. In your Style Sheet, record names, ages, hair and eye colour, places, distances, holidays, school terms, and any invented terms.
2. Create a simple calendar. Place major events on specific dates. Check travel time and sunrise or sunset if important.
3. Verify facts and professional procedures. If you portray a real culture or identity, consider sensitivity feedback.

Ninth Pass: Genre Checks

Goal: meet reader expectations for your category while keeping your unique voice.

Fantasy and speculative, believable worldbuilding

- Rules must have limits and costs. Record them in your Style Sheet.
- Show world facts in action. Replace lectures with consequences.
- Culture lives in food, idioms, rituals, taboos, and work. Add one lived detail per scene.

Romance, satisfying relationship arcs

- Why these two. Name the complementary wounds or values.
- Progression: attraction, friction, trust building, rupture, repair, commitment.
- Both leads make choices that carry risk. Do not let one partner do all the growing.
- Promise of a hopeful or happy ending is earned by the final choice.

Thriller and suspense, the three Cs



- Contract: state the type of danger early.
- Clock: add time pressure that escalates. Shorten deadlines, shrink resources.
- Crucible: trap the hero in the pressure cooker. Remove easy exits with duty, isolation, or moral cost.

Mystery, fair play

- Plant clues and red herrings with cause and effect.
- The solution should be visible in hindsight.
- Keep the sleuth active. Questions cause actions, not only reflection.

Historical, authentic without lecture

- Verify dates, transport, laws, fashion, and etiquette.
- Use period detail to serve character desire, not decoration.
- Keep dialogue readable while flavouring it with idiom.

Tenth Pass: Compression and Polish

Goal: make every page carry its weight.

What this means:

Tight pages feel confident, and confidence builds trust.

Do this:

1. Try a ten percent cut on one chapter. Remove repeats, soften modifiers, and idle lines.
2. Replace a vague noun plus modifier with one strong noun or verb.
 - “Very big noise” becomes “crash.”
3. Check paragraph openings. Start with energy or a clear focus.
4. Run a spelling and grammar check. Then run a personal list of habit words from your earlier searches.

Final Pass: Read Like a Reader

Goal: experience the book as a whole.

Do this:

1. Take two or three days away if you can.
2. Send the manuscript to an e-reader or print it. Read as if you bought it in a bookshop.



3. Put a mark beside any place you skim or get confused. Those are the next tiny fixes.
4. Re-read your story promise sentence and your turning points. Confirm that the final scenes pay the promises you set on page one.

Quick checklists you can paste into your document

Scene card

- Viewpoint:
- Goal:
- Obstacle:
- Stakes:
- Turn by the end:
- Choice made:
- How this advances the arc:

Chapter start and end

- First three lines tell me who, where, and what is happening.
- Last three lines land on change, decision, question, or new information.

Line-level sweep

- Filter words revised: felt, noticed, saw, heard, realised, seemed, began to, started to.
- Filler cut: really, very, just, quite, suddenly.
- Strong verbs and concrete nouns present.

One sensory detail per page on average.

Short reading list, practical and beginner friendly

- *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* by Renni Browne and Dave King
- *Sin and Syntax* by Constance Hale
- *Into the Woods* by John Yorke
- *The Emotional Craft of Fiction* by Donald Maass
- *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* by George Saunders
- *Refuse to Be Done* by Matt Bell
- *Steering the Craft* by Ursula K. Le Guin