

THE SELF-REVISION CHECKLIST



A big-to-small revision guide for fiction writers

Sarah Waterman, editor & indie author

Hi, Friend. Welcome to the place where revision finally starts making sense.

Before we dive in, here's the most honest advice I can give you as both an editor and a writer: Focus on the story first.

Grammar, sentence polish, and tiny stylistic choices can—and should—come later. Those can be handled with fresh eyes (critique partners, alpha/beta readers, or a professional editor). But the heart of your revision? That's the story itself.

This checklist isn't exhaustive, but it is the list I wish every writer would run through before sending their manuscript to me. Think of it as the "please do this first" pass.

If you ever need help or want clarity, I'm just a message away:
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A Quick Note on Process

Revision feels overwhelming because most writers try to fix everything at once. Please don't do that to yourself.

The key is big → to → small.

That means:

- Start with developmental issues (character arcs, stakes, pacing, structure)
- Then move to line-level clarity (word choice, rhythm, interiority, filter words)
- Finish with copy and polish (punctuation, formatting, consistency)

This checklist is structured in that same order so you always know what to fix first—and what you can safely ignore until later.

If you want a deeper dive into character growth, you can also grab my Character Arc Workbook (\$10) anytime. There is a QR code at the back of the checklist for that.

And if you want the full system behind this checklist, my upcoming book *Fix The Right Thing First* will walk you through every revision stage step-by-step. It's available on Amazon!

For now? Let's get you revising with confidence.

Happy revising, truly.

You've got this.

—Sarah
A3W Editorial

Section 1: Developmental Edits

Story Structure

Story structure is your story's order of operations—the scaffolding everything else hangs on. Whether you follow a traditional Western arc (exposition → rising action → climax → falling action → resolution) or another framework, your structure should feel intentional, not accidental.

Here's what to check:

Is your theme carried throughout?

If your story has a central theme, make sure it isn't just mentioned once and then forgotten in chapter four. Theme should echo—lightly, consistently, and deliberately.

Are your tropes fully executed—not half-baked?

If you're writing to trope expectations (enemies to lovers, forced proximity, grumpy/sunshine, etc.), make sure you're actually delivering the promise.

Hot tip: If your “enemies” are just slightly annoyed coworkers, readers will notice. And they will riot. You don't have to adhere to trope expectations... Just don't market a trope you're not actually writing.

Does your story have a clear beginning, middle, and end?

Not every book uses the same structure, but every book needs some form of progression. Readers need to feel movement—not random events and vibes.

Is your POV locked in and consistent?

Decide whether you're writing first person, third person (limited or omniscient), or second person (you bold creature, you). Then be consistent.

Use scene breaks, chapter breaks, or headings to clearly indicate POV shifts, ESPECIALLY in multi-POV stories.

Optional but recommended: Include the POV character's name (and time/date/location if relevant) at the start of each chapter or scene. Your future self will thank you during revisions.

Is your tense consistent?

Past tense? Present tense? Choose one and commit. Tense slips are wildly common, especially when drafting fast, and they're easy to miss—until someone else points them out.

Scene and POV transitions make sense

If you're switching POVs, use clean breaks. If you're switching tenses mid-paragraph... maybe don't.

Bonus: Some published novels alternate POV and person (e.g., one character in 1st person, one in 3rd). It works—but only with strict structure and clear labeling.



Plot

Plot is everything that happens in your story—and everything that happens because of your characters. It's events, choices, reactions, consequences, and how it all weaves together to form an actual narrative instead of 87,000 words of vibes.

Here's what to check:

Do you have a strong hook? (And more than one?)

Your hook is what pulls readers in: the first line, the first page the first chapter, chapter beginnings, chapter endings, plot twists/big reveals. Avoid starting scenes with explanation or backstory. Begin with motion, tension, or interesting dialogue.

Is the setting introduced clearly and early?

Readers should understand the world quickly—not through a 14-page history lecture. Give necessary geographical, cultural, or historical context when it becomes relevant, and let the rest unfold on the page.

Is your genre clear, and are you meeting genre conventions?

You can mash genres all you want, but know the rules you're bending. Romance has a happily ever after (or happy-for-now); mystery has a crime; horror includes fear and/or threats; and fantasy includes magic or fantastical elements. Conventions are the broad expectations. Tropes are the specifics.

Is there enough conflict?

If things are too easy, your plot will feel flat. Make your characters work for what they want. (Yes, even if it hurts. *Especially* if it hurts.)

Are the stakes high enough?

Characters should desperately want something—love, belonging, power, safety, truth, survival. If all they want is a cheeseburger? Harder to care. If they want to save humanity from cryptids? Easier to care.

Do character actions drive the plot—or does the plot just “happen”?

This is where the But / Therefore method (thanks, *South Park*) comes in:

Bad plotting: “X happens, and then Y happens, and then Z happens.”

→ Passive. The story happens *to* the characters.

Better plotting: A happens, therefore B happens, but C happens, therefore D happens...

→ Cause and effect. Your characters' choices create consequences, which create new problems, which force more choices.

This keeps tension high, momentum strong, and your character arc tied to the plot instead of floating next to it.



Characters

Characters are the heart of your story. Their lived experiences shape their wants, wounds, choices, and chaos. Every character wants something—and that want should drive the plot, not sit politely in the background.

Here's what to check:

Are your main characters introduced early?

Readers shouldn't have to wait until chapter nine to meet someone important. As a general rule, introduce all major players within the first 25% of the book.

Is character description handled with intention?

Description should match your story's voice and your character's worldview. A photographer, a soldier, a shifter, and a college student won't perceive people the same way.

Please avoid: "She looked in the mirror and described herself..." You can do better. Truly.

Are character motivations clear?

Ask yourself for each major character (including the antagonist):

- What do they want more than anything?
- What have they already sacrificed to get it?
- What won't they sacrifice?
- What's standing in their way? (Hi, conflict. That's your job.)

Remember: even your villain wants something. Chaos is a reason—but usually not the whole reason.

Is there enough conflict?

If things are too easy, your plot will feel flat. Make your characters work for what they want. (Yes, even if it hurts. *Especially* if it hurts.)

Do your characters change over time?

This is your character arc. Just like real people, characters shift as their experiences stack—trauma, joy, new information, consequences. Their reactions and beliefs should evolve. Static characters can work, but only when it's intentional and serves the plot.

Is there enough interiority?

Interiority = your character's internal thoughts, feelings, realizations, and micro-decisions. It's the emotional logic behind their actions—the stuff only the reader gets access to. Most manuscripts (even strong ones) don't have enough.

- First person: easy, natural, built-in
- Third person: takes more skill, but deeply rewarding
- No interiority: readers can't connect, can't care, can't follow the arc

Interiority is the glue holding character motivation, plot momentum, and emotional stakes together.

SECTION 2: Line Edits

Line editing is where your writing goes from functional to intentional. This stage focuses on clarity, rhythm, readability, and the vibe of your prose. You're making choices that shape how the reader experiences each moment—what feels smooth, what lands emotionally, and what gets out of the way.

Focus on refinement, not reinvention.

Strong vs. Weak Verbs

Verbs carry your sentences. Strong verbs give you power and precision; weak verbs make prose mushy. Be selective, though—this is not an invitation to unleash the thesaurus.

The “Caused” Problem

Caused is vague, clunky, and everywhere. In high-action scenes, it slows the pacing and eats space. Instead of writing what caused something, show the thing happening.

“To Be” Verbs

Am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been.

They're not evil—but they're often nonspecific, static, or passive. Use them when they're the right choice—not the default.

Sensory Verbs

Felt, saw, heard, noticed, smelled, found...

These usually signal telling rather than showing. Too many sensory verbs push readers outside the scene instead of inside the character's experience.

Weak Nouns vs. Specific Nouns

Just like verbs, nouns can be vague or vivid.

- People → crowd
- Flower → wildflower
- Light → glow

Again: precision, not purple prose.

Sentence Structure (Less is More)

Most of your sentences do not need to be pretty. Save your sparkle for moments that deserve it. Clear, clean writing always wins.

Word/Sentence Variation

If every sentence is the same length or rhythm, readers will feel the monotony—even if they can't name it. Mix short, punchy lines with longer ones. Repeat simple words like said freely. Aim for readability, not gymnastics.

Metaphors, Similes & Purple Prose

Figurative language should clarify or amplify—not distract. If every sentence is doing acrobatics, nothing stands out. Save your metaphors for moments that matter so they hit harder.



SECTION 3: Formatting

Formatting is the least important part of revision—until suddenly it's the only thing anyone can see. Clean formatting won't save a messy draft, but it will save agents, editors, and readers from eye strain (and from quietly judging you).

Standard Manuscript Format (SMF)

If you're querying—or sending your manuscript to any publishing professional—use SMF. It's not arbitrary. It's not new. It's not optional. It's simply the industry standard.

SMF =

- 12 pt serif font (Times New Roman or equivalent)
- 1" margins on all sides
- Double-spaced throughout
- 0.5" first-line paragraph indent

If you're unsure how to set this up: YouTube. Google. Your word processor's help page. It's all there.

Dialogue Basics (US English)

- Use double quotation marks for dialogue.
- Use single quotation marks for quotes within dialogue.

Example: Sarah sighed. “He told me to use ‘single quotation marks,’ so here we are.”

(Rules differ around the world, but this checklist is US-only.)

Emphasis (Use Italics. Period.)

Italics > ALL CAPS.

Reserve ALL CAPS for shouting, acronyms, or extremely rare stylistic choices. If everything is emphasized, nothing is emphasized.

Titles: Quotes vs. Italics

- Italics → long works (books, movies, series, albums, periodicals)
- Quotation marks → short works (chapters, songs, essays, articles)

When in Doubt: Be Consistent

Unsure how you've been handling: ellipses, em dashes, spacing, numbers vs. numerals, punctuation inside quotes? Pick one approach and stick to it like your life depends on it. Inconsistency—not “wrongness”—is what makes prose look amateur.



Final Thoughts

Feeling overwhelmed? Totally normal.

Self-revision is a process, not a punishment. You're not supposed to fix everything in one pass—and you're definitely not supposed to magically know every grammar rule, formatting convention, or structural principle on earth. That's why editors exist.

Focus on the big stuff first. Get your story working. The rest—punctuation quirks, dangling modifiers, hyphens, fancy formatting—can (and should) come later. And yes, a good editor will help with all of that.

If this checklist was helpful and you want professional eyes on your work, here's what's next:

Want to work together?

I offer developmental edits, line/copy edits, manuscript evaluations, and query letter reviews. If you're not sure what level you need, we can figure that out together.

I also offer free sample edits

In-line edits + comments, so you can see my process before committing. You can request one through the sample edit form on my site.

Want to level up your revision skills?

- My free Self-Revision Checklist (what you're reading)
- The Character Arc Workbook (your new \$10 best friend)
- Fix the Right Thing First (coming very soon)

These resources are designed to help you revise with intention—not vibes.

And for the love of every deity available:

Please put your manuscript in Standard Manuscript Format before sending it to your editor. Double-space it. Use Times New Roman. Stop making your editor's eyeballs suffer. (They will love you forever.)

If you want to see my rates, services, or get in touch: www.a3weditorial.com
Instagram: @a3w_editorial

You're doing great. Keep going.

With love (and red editorial ink),
Sarah Waterman



Resources

Editorial Services:



The Character Arc
Workbook:



Fix The Right Thing First:
A Fiction Writers Guide
to Confident Self-
Revision (ebook):

