# 5 Steps to Editorial Excellence



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Write Purposefully • Edit Insightfully • Publish Strategically

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You raise your hands in triumph and shout a boisterous "Hurray!" You've just finished writing that essay, article, or chapter.

After spending countless hours pouring your heart onto the page, a refreshing sense of accomplishment floods over you. Sure, you still need to scan your draft for spelling and grammar. But that's pretty much all that editing involves, right?

Nope!

Editing encompasses much more than simply figuring out where commas go or ensuring subject / verb agreement. In fact, editing is where real writing begins. And I'm not alone in this assertion. Here are a few of my favorite quotes about this craft:

> **"Writing is probably one-fifth coming up with the stuff, and four-fifths self-editing again and again and again."** – David Mitchell

> **"You write to communicate to the hearts and minds of others what's burning inside you, and we edit to let the fire show through the smoke."** –Arthur Plotnik

So if finding grammar errors is only part of the editorial process, what else is involved? Glad you asked! After finishing the rough draft of that essay, article, or manuscript, follow these 5 steps to ensure editorial excellence.

## 1 Understand the Purpose of Your Piece



During my many years managing the editorial departments of both domestic and international publishers, the following author characteristic proved true: The more experience and successful an author is, the more he or she recognizes the value of in-depth editing.

In contrast, many first-time authors submit their manuscript thinking that their text is perfect. They assume that the publisher will not need to change a single word. However, the reality is that authors (both fiction and nonfiction) are often so close to their narrative or subject matter that it's difficult to step back and objectively evaluate whether each scene or subpoint contributes to the overall whole.

But developing this analytical ability to understand the theme and purpose of the piece is vital. And it an essential first step of the editorial process.

Here you analyze whether you've truly accomplished what you set out to achieve. If you're writing a college essay, did you fully address the topic and fulfill all requirements? If you're writing a novel, did you convey your purpose? If your goal is to show human triumph in the midst of personal tragedy, did your readers absorb that theme through the reading of the novel? If you're writing a nonfiction book about the dangers of too much sugar consumption, do your readers clearly understand this health detriment?

It's vital that writing accomplish your primary and secondary objectives. If not, you'll need to reevaluate how best to correct the deficiency. This is often done by engaging in Step 2 of the editorial process.

## 2 Revise Globally for Overall Development

Don't waste your time and energy correcting grammar when paragraphs of text may not even be retained in the final draft. Instead, start strategically by determining if your draft contains all the necessary components to accomplish your purpose and satisfy the reader.

If you're writing a novel, are characters fully developed? Do you have too many or too few characters? Is the storyline rational? Are your scenes building tension and driving the plot forward? Are transitions, timeline, and spatial arrangements natural and logical?

For nonfiction, have you fully covered the topic? Do you need to add or reduce content? Do you need to expand or narrow the topic? Have you arranged the material in a coherent sequence? Do you use chunk-sized information to guide your reader through the text? Do you adequately back up your claims?

Based on your reader demographics, is the piece at the correct length? Is the vocabulary, tone, and reading level appropriate? Depending on what your theme and purpose is, have you tailored the writing style toward the reader?

Again, it's during this second stage of the editorial process that you ask these hard questions. Even more challenging is courageously engaging in developmental / substantive editing. By honestly evaluating your content, you'll be able to analyze when some element is lacking or unnecessary. This will require you to return to that section and either add to or detract from it.



Revising globally for overall development is perhaps the most time consuming of all steps. But it's in the development of this stage that clarity of organization and purpose takes shape.

## 3 Engage in Line Editing

After you've fulfilled your purpose in writing and fully developed your content, next you engage in line editing for structure, emphasis, accuracy, and style.

It's in line editing that your piece finally begins to "sound" polished. This is accomplished by evaluating the syntax and diction of each sentence and word.

Syntax involves the arrangement of words, phrases, and clauses within the sentence. Do you use short or long sentences? Do you use a simple, compound, or complex sentence structure? Knowing your audience is essential in knowing how to structure your chapters, paragraphs, and sentences.

Diction is the specific choice and use of words within sentences. Want to excel in your writing craft? Then carefully, even painstakingly, consider the meaning and underlying connotation of your words. Take time to reflect on how they sound within your writing. Can you incorporate alliteration and assonance for effect? Although poetry places even more emphasis on sound than does prose, you'd be wise to still incorporate poetic techniques into your prose.

A study of rhetoric (though more often associated with speech than composition) will yield additional insight into structuring your words and sentences. Take your writing to the next level by studying and applying rhetorical techniques within your fiction and nonfiction. These time-tested delivery methods will enable you to structure your words for maximum emphasis, insight, and reception.

Line editing isn't fast or easy. It requires careful attention, perceptive evaluation, and insightful discernment. Constructing sentences and words for maximum clarity, continuity, and effect is not an easy task—but consistent effort will certainly advance your writing quality.

## 4 Check Grammar and Punctuation

By the time you arrive at the fourth step of the editorial process, the hard editorial work has already been accomplished. Your writing purpose is clear, the content is well developed, and each sentence and word harmonizes for maximum effect.

Now, at long last, you review each paragraph and sentence for grammatical accuracy. Grammar, the means by which we follow established rules of communication, facilitates the exchange of ideas from one person to another. Although readers may not always understand the finer points of grammatical accuracy, they'll quickly recognize if something is "off."

Additionally, if you're striving for publication, literary agents and publishers quickly link substandard grammar to inferior writing quality. Give yourself the best possible chance at success by ensuring every sentence is grammatically correct. If a grammar rule is broken for effect, it'll be obvious that it was done intentionally and not as an inadvertent error.



Likewise, punctuation must be carefully scrutinized. Although commas routinely cause confusion, they don't have to be detested. The em-dash—my favorite piece of punctuation—is another fantastic tool for writers and editors. Acquaint yourself with all pieces of punctuation. Use them accurately and judiciously.

By skillfully applying grammar and punctuation, you'll create polished prose that avoids common pitfalls of ambiguity, inaccuracy, and distrust.

# 5

## Proof Meticulously

Too often writers think proofreading is what editing is all about. But proofing is only the last step of the editorial process.

In proofing, you polish your final draft. You ensure that everything is spelled correctly and consistently applied. You again double check that grammar and punctuation are accurately used.

Other elements to check during the proofing stage include paragraphing, line breaks, hyphenation, margins, font size, font type, citations, and word spacing. Depending on your purpose, proofing may also include the checking of typeset copy. This would include checking line spacing (leading), page numbers, arrangement, formatting, color, print quality, and a host of other typographical elements.

It's natural to become excited when nearing the end of the editorial process. But don't allow that enthusiasm to distract your concentration. Don't skip this process or complete it too quickly. Simple mistakes can easily distract from all the hard editorial work you've already accomplished. By the time you finish this final step, you'll have a highly polished draft that will effectively communicate with your readers.

### Get Started Today!

Again, don't just randomly edit your content. Methodically follow these 5 steps to editorial excellence. By being strategic in how you edit, you'll transform your writing from ordinary to extraordinary!

**— 5 Steps to Editorial Excellence —**

1. Understand the Purpose of Your Piece
2. Revise Globally for Overall Development
3. Engage in Line Editing
4. Check Grammar and Punctuation
5. Proof Methodically

Want to continue transforming your writing and editing? Ready to take your craft to the next level? If so, Mark Wainwright provides coaching services to help make your writing, editing, and publishing dreams a reality.

Learn more at www.Mark-Wainwright.com.

