

Fiction Editing Checklist

by Marianne Ward

The questions fiction editors should ask themselves as they read a manuscript:

Plot

- Is the beginning arresting, boring, or disorienting?
- Does it pull the reader immediately into the story?
- What are the key events or turning points in the story? Are there too many or not enough? Are they plausible? Do they follow, logically, one from the other or are they in the wrong order? Are they spread throughout the work or ganged together?
- Do they involve conflict? Do they increase tension?
- Are there loose threads, tangents, red herrings?
- Are there subplots? Do they make sense as they unfold and not just in light of the information the reader has at the end of the story?
- Does the pace vary and build or is it uniform throughout?
- Do the events build toward a climax?
- Is all the action physically possible?
- Which scenes work?
- Which don't work hard enough?
- Should some scenes be cut?
- Should others be added?
- Is the reader able to follow the narrative line or is it too complex?
- Does the reader know how much time has passed and when events are happening in relation to each other?
- Who knows what? Does this make sense in relation to the plot?
- If this is a second or third draft, are there remnants of earlier versions accidentally left in?
- Is the narrative arc clear, or does it need to be untangled, straightened, shortened, or made to wind toward the conclusion more effectively?

Structure: The Architecture of the Novel

- What is at stake for the central character(s)?
- What is at stake for the reader?
- How does the reader come to understand this?
- Who drives the plot?
- Is this character reliable? Can he/she see everything that is happening?
- Does the reader know too much too soon? Not enough?
- What expectations are being raised early on? Are they met?
- Is the reader confused rather than intrigued by the order of events?
- Is the conflict apparent early on? Too early?
- Does this build to a crisis? When?
- Are the consequences of the crisis clear? Which characters deal with the consequences?

Character

- Whose story is it?
- What do they want?
- Do they get it?
- Are they real, i.e., complex and multi-dimensional?
- Are they consistent?
- Are their defining characteristics (including appearance) consistent throughout?
- Do they develop over the course of the story?
- How do the characters interrelate? Is this consistent?
- Are the secondary characters flat or merely symbolic? Are they distinct?
- Are there enough characters? Too many?
- Do they sound distinct when they speak?
- Are names appropriate and consistent?

Dialogue

- Can you tell who is speaking without identifying the person by name?
- Are there pet phrases or “verbal tics” that are associated with each speaker?
- What does the vocabulary say about the character’s education, age, class, attitude?
- Are sentence lengths varied?
- Is the speech too formal? Too casual?
- Is there a regional dialect?
- Is the character’s emotional state apparent from his speech? From the silences?
- Is the word choice appropriate to the time period?
- In a conversation with several characters, are some quiet for too long?
- Why does the conversation start? End? Does it do so naturally?

Setting

- Does the reader know where he is?
- Is the setting described by appealing to the five senses? What does this place smell like, feel like, sound like, taste like, look like (e.g., furniture, rooms, buildings, vegetation, weather)?
- Is it a real city, town, or country? If so, are the details accurate?
- Has the author left out details or taken things for granted because he knows it too well?
- If the story is set in the past, are the details historically accurate?
- Is the setting cliché or overstated?
- Does the setting vary from scene to scene?
- What season is it? How do you know?

Point of View

- Through whose eyes does the author see the action?
- From what distance is it seen? First, second, or third person?
- Are there multiple points of view? Is this clear or confusing?
- Is the point of view consistent?
- Does it best facilitate the plot and structure?
- How does the author deal with information a character wouldn't know due to his point of view?
- If the point of view changes, is it intentional? Is the transition smooth?
- If a new point of view is introduced, will it reoccur or is it accidental?

Voice

- Is the narrative voice consistent?
- Is it too distant? Too intimate? Offensive?
- What does it say about education, background, and personality?
- Does the author's voice sneak in, in addition to the narrative voice?
- Does the voice shift dramatically so that it sounds like someone else speaking?
- Are there remnants of an earlier draft that have slipped in and altered the voice?

Tense

- Is the story told in the present tense? The past tense? Both?
- Are shifts indicated with design elements like a text break or extra space?
- Do the shifts occur within paragraphs? Chapters?
- Is the past recent or distant? How is this related in the language?