

Aarau Literary Agency
Submission and Editing Guide

By Paul Muller PhD (Senior Partner and Editor) ©

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Our Purpose: to assist writers approaching us in the preparation of a superior submission.

Part One is a guide to submission form and format. Please carefully follow this.

Before you Submit (MS quality and standards to be met before submitting.)

General Submission Guidelines (The basic rules for submissions.)

Basic MS Formatting (The typescript form and formatting.)

What you Submit (File structure and contact protocols.)

Part Two is about avoiding common errors, often called a *Style Guide*.

The Most Common Technical Errors (spell checking, punctuation, etc.)

Recommendations: (online resources and printed dictionaries)

Prize Offer: (For the first technically perfect 30 page first submission we receive.)

Prefixes versus Hyphenation (There are rules for those who like them.)

Economy of Style (Less is more: stylish conciseness is golden.)

More Rules and Common Errors (“ands” and “buts” and punctuation)

Commonly Misused Words (Its (sic) alright George (sic). It’s not all right George.)

Writing Seriously (You have 5 pages to hook the reader, maybe 25 more to addict.)

An Introduction to Editing: the Key to Success (*e.g.* Read it out loud to yourself.)

Part Three

So You Want to be a Writer: Analogy with learning to play the Piano.

Commitment: If you have it you can succeed.

Who is an Editor? What is an Editor?

Spotting Symptoms: If you can’t find it you can’t fix it.

1. **A Surfeit of Adjectives and Adverbs:** Clues and remedies.
2. **Words:** You have choices.
3. **Conciseness:** Less is More.
4. **Sound:** Read it out loud to discover it.

Interregnum: Looking backward and forward.

Part Three continued:

Annotated Editorial Checklist: It isn't rocket science but it is a skill.

Preliminaries

The Freshman Level Edit: A didactic approach to basic editing.

The Sophomore Edit: Step by step to a higher level.

Strategic Recapitulation: What are we doing here and why?

Minimalist Editor's Checklist: All of the above compressed to one page.

Part Four—Part Five (to be continued)

This is a work in progress.

Comments, suggestions, corrected errors and clever additional examples are most welcome.

We suggest you put this document on your computer disk.

To find keywords try a WP search in this document (there is no index).

Notes to the presentation: We quote specific references to words and phrases in the usual way.

For example, the word "Web site" is a pair and not hyphenated.

Textual examples are not put in quotes as this becomes pedantic and confusing.

If an expression is in quotes, it is an example of a quotation in sample text.

→ Denotes stages or steps in edited text.

Recommended senior companion and reference: *The First Five Pages* by Noah Lukeman

Simon & Schuster (Fireside imprint) 2000

This covers Junior, Senior and "Postgraduate" topics.

Before you Submit

If you ran a business would you open it before you had a quality product to sell?

The MS for a full length novel for the adult audience is a professional *product*.

You want it to be published?

Your proposed book is a *product* intended for the marketplace.

You will not get there if you offer an unprofessional product.

We open our doors to every new writer who has the keys.

1. An agency is approached according to agency guidelines.

See next page.

2. The product must meet basic standards.

These are set out in this document.

Before submitting anywhere:

Create and *edit* a MS at least to the “sophomore” level (Parts One through Three).

See checklists and stylistic requirements in this document.

Given the volume of submissions we must do what all agents and publishers do:

Read forward until we decide this level has not been met.

We then advise you of that briefly and send you back to the editing.

Few agencies or publishers will even *tell you that*.*

Read to the agreed end of the submission if and *only* if that standard *has* been met.

Therefore for your submission to be read *through* you have some work to do.

And you have a standard to meet (the same as in any other job).

Writing is indeed a “job of work” and a novel is a *major* undertaking.

Disabuse yourself of the fallacy that anybody can do it without training.

The special skills of this craft can be self-acquired but it takes time either way.

And/or when you reach “The End” for the first time you are finished.

“Whew, finished at last.” Let someone *else* judge it and fix it.

The world does not work like that.

The companion reference, Lukeman *ibid* makes this point above all others.

Therefore, before you submit you will edit your MS to this standard.

That is why we provide this document and point you to the reference: Lukeman *ibid*.

You will be asked to confirm that you have done so to the best of your ability.

* This is a *professional* commitment and we will trust you. But refer above.

Failure will not bar you from the agency—but we may impose a resubmission delay.

General Submission Guidelines

Please also have recourse to our website: www.aaraulit.com, pronounced “arrow-lit”.

Most questions about submissions, style and formatting are covered in this document.

We only accept electronic submissions of MS by attachment to e-mails.

This should *always* be in a single file unless we have agreed otherwise in advance.

General correspondence should not be *attached* unless we specifically request that.

Instead, just put brief comments/exchanges directly in e-mail text *e.g.* as to a friend.

We prefer to use first name salutations but we will follow your preference.

In every contact please put all of the following in the body text of the e-mail:

Your actual first name and last name.

If this is a difficulty, please indicate that on the first contact.

We *can* agree a first & last pen name used *consistently*.

A valid postal address (this need not be your home; that can remain private).

The WORKING TITLE in caps (please do not later change this unless agreed).

This assists us in having fast and reliable access to your MS in our servers.

Our primary e-mail address is: submission@aaraulit.com.

The direct e-mail to the Senior Partner is: senior-partner@aaraulit.com.

Word for Windows 1997–2003 or 2007 format is preferred.

Submit from Word for Windows as a filename.doc.

From all others sources submit as filename.rtf (Rich Text Format).

If you have technical problems first contact a suitable secretary friend.

Or (as I do) the 12 year old down the block who knows it all! ↓

The better version of Word is from *Office* not the freebie; license is not costly. ↑

Basic MS Formatting:

Industry standards are fairly firm and widely accepted as follows:

(This also means that we can directly print your MS for submission to publishers.)

Times New Roman 12 pt, double spaced, A4 or Letter Size paper, normal (full) margins.

All paragraphs indented with a TAB character except:

Do not indent first paragraph after a new Chapter heading but *do* put in blank line.

Intra-chapter breaks: use one intervening blank line only, next text line not indented.

Do not put *** or other breaking marks, just leave the blank line.

All paragraphs ended with CR (Enter) character. Let the WP software wrap the lines.

This is important: do not manually force line breaks *inside* a paragraph.

If you do, you will be asked to reformat the *whole* document by hand.

One-line paragraphs are just that and *do* end with a CR for each line (*e.g.* lists).

Only one space is typeset after punctuation marks and between words.

Page numbering (centered at bottom) is optional with electronic submissions.

We later add header/footer for MS on submission to publishers as they require.

Do not justify the text; leave it ragged right (as here). Editing is difficult in justified mode.

Dashes—the so-called em-dash—is available in all modern word processors.

In Word for Windows: Insert, Symbol, Special Characters, em-dash.

Suggest giving it a shortcut key: I use CTL ALT -.

This is like (parentheses) for a break in text (not for break in dialogue or action).

If you cannot typeset it, use three hyphens---as here.

He said, “Ellipses...also set without spaces...are for noteworthy breaks in action or dialogue.”

They can also fall at the end of a sentence of text or dialogue...

Grammatically in this case the third dot is the full stop (period).

Do not add a fourth dot or spaces.

If it is used after punctuation then leave in the leading space.

Minus sign and ranges: The total was –3 and the range was 3–5. Not -3 and 3-5.

Word and WPs should do this automatically if you type -- two hyphens.

This is the en-dash. Go there as for the em-dash and set a shortcut.

These four (—, –, ... and - hyphen itself) are distinct, distinctive and important.

Some style guides recommend replacing all em-dashes with ellipses; we suggest not.

Quote marks: Use either “opening ‘interior’ closing”, or the opposite; be consistent.

The trend is for the single exterior quote marks, except for a few US publishers.

See later section for the punctuation of quotations and other similar topics.

What You Submit:

Always in one single file, unless we have agreed otherwise.

It takes us much longer to put files together than it does for you; you know them!

Page One is Title Page (everything centered with vertical space between each):

MS title in bold, centered, large font, part way down the page: **My Story**

Then genre (*e.g.* ‘Novel’) and word count on same line: Thriller Novel 82,000 words.

All Word Processors will give you this from a menu selection (don’t count!).

Your full name (or pen name if agreed) and full contact details.

Mailing address and e-mail address mandatory, fax optional, telephone unnecessary.

Page Two is your CV/resume (can be 1.5 line spacing):

Emphasize writing projects completed, working, published. Your goals as a writer.

Page Three is the MS Synopsis (can be 1.5 line spacing):

We prefer a dust-jacket style in 150 words or less: maximum one page.

Avoid character names, details and ‘promotional’ comments.

Tell us why we should read it: what it is about and where it is going.

Page Four begins the MS proper

Title, author, centered bold, blank lines between, then text.

The same MS title in large font bold centered, say three blank lines down the page.

If it is subtitled, put that here after a blank line.

You may repeat your name centered below but nothing else (begin 12pt size).

If a Prologue comes first, or Chapter and number, this goes next, centered, bold.

Blank line, then first line of MS, not indented.

All new Chapters begin on a fresh page, with at least three blank lines at top of page.

The above page structure is for first or renewed submissions after a lengthy lapse of time.

Later edits and resubmissions may omit pages 2 and 3 so MS begins on page 2.

However, put a brief note on the title page as to what part of the MS it is.

e.g. “First scene, chapter 16, as discussed.”

Part Two

Style Guide

The Most Common Technical Errors

In our experience many writers treat these casually, believing that the writing comes first.

MSs won't be read by anybody important *if they must wade through a blizzard of errors*.

Our standard for a full MS submission is a maximum of two errors per 120,000 word MS.

That is a very difficult target to meet.

Help yourself by 'learning the ropes', being attentive and absolutely consistent.

We begin with the two most common classes of errors.

1. Punctuation in and around quotations:

He said, "She was once caught for speeding."

He shook his head and spluttered, "trials and tribulations".

Do you see the difference?

The first quotation is a complete sentence, the second is not.

The punctuation must reflect that. Full stop inside quotes and outside, respectively.

He ticked off the list: "breakfast, lunch, dinner and midnight snack".

One useful trick is to remove the quote marks and see if the sentence works.

Then follow the above rule based on what is inside the quotes or outside.

Unless you are an expert, if you find yourself stuffing "?" and "!" and "xxx" in one phrase, with a few commas, a semicolon and an em-dash paired with an ellipsis thrown in to hold it together, consider simplifying or revising! With few exceptions, direct, positive text is the best.

Use "!" sparingly; likewise all special punctuation and formatting such as *italics*, or you weaken impact. I may have used the italics too frequently even for a technical guide.

2. Split words, single words and hyphenated words:

Is it "email", "e-mail" or "e mail"? All three are accepted by the Word spell checker.

I typically write "email" in informal correspondence and got into a bad habit. It is "e-mail".

Notice that the full stop is *outside* the quotation mark (see above).

I am using a half dozen style guides (and my own experience of course) in creating this document. I was guided by the very useful one provided by a small (this is not a pejorative term in the business) publishing house in Florida USA, "Spinster's Ink" specializing in southern style fiction for women (for which I thank their anonymous editor). This was a special line item in their guide. When in doubt, check it every time, for every doubtful word in your whole MS, either as you write, or if that interferes, when you edit (see later section). You will edit carefully and professionally before submission, yes? See the end of Part Three.

As a writer and editor I am truly a good speller and am a deadly spotter in this category of split-word errors. But I make mistakes: “e-mail” is hyphenated and “pejorative” in the previous paragraph was first rendered as “perjorative” (sic). When the Word spell checker flagged this underlined in red, such was my hubris that I felt it was fair odds that it was not in the Word dictionary; but as usual, it *was* there, it *was* right and *I* had misspelled it.

If an experienced editor can make these mistakes, you should stand back and regard at a distance some of the otherwise promising MS we receive that are riddled with *avoidable* errors. Please don't make yours one of them (we stop reading!). Take pride in your work and send us the best you can provide both technically and artistically (well edited).

Trick number one: turn on the Word spell checker; it is superb.

Check every red underline in Word's dictionary, or look it up (see below).

Trick: Select (highlight the word), then hit F7. The checker will help you out.

Then it will ask if you want to check the rest of the document. Click “no”.

This avoids the awkwardness and loss of your place from a full check.

If you check a word in the dictionary and it is not in Word, click “add to dictionary”.

Trick number two: turn on the Word *grammar* checker. It is very good indeed.

When the green underline appears, 95% of the time it is an error in grammar.

The exception is quoted dialogue, where we allow things like incomplete sentences.

It will also “flag” double spaces, repeated full stops (periods) etc. Look closely.

In general I try to figure out the error myself, rather than asking the checker; up to you.

Trick number three: any doubt about split, joined and hyphenated words, do the following.

(1) Type it as a single word (take out the space or hyphen).

If Word complains, it isn't one word.

(2) Go to the online dictionary below and enter the word *hyphenated*. It will tell you.

Word's dictionary may do this for you in (1) but it is not yet a reliable hyphenator.

The logic here is subtle. Allow me to emphasize it.

Word will accept ever-increasing but not everincreasing (sic).

Word accepting ever-increasing does *not* mean that is correct. Think about it.

Word will accept any two words hyphenated if both are in its dictionary!

If there is any doubt at all, first test with no space, no hyphen. It's that easy 95% of the time.

There is no other way forward. After 10,000 “lookups” you will be pretty good!

Still, check it every time unless you are certain. Then still check it. (See next section.)

We are not talking about hyphenated adjective pairs here (that is a separate issue).

This is about whether a word pair should be one word, two words, or hyphenated.

Over-awed, overawed, or over awed? Which is it?

Recommendations

Online Dictionary: www.mirriam-webster.com. It is definitive, free and easy to use.

It includes a Thesaurus. Word for Windows also has a good one.

On paper, we recommend the *Mirriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary* in the USA, and the *Macmillan English Dictionary* (with CD ROM) in the UK.

You also have www.britannica.com, www.wikipedia.com, and www.thefreedictionary.com.

Do you write, “He was a Darwinian?” Or, “He was a darwinian.” (sic)

The Word spelling checker hits this one but there are other subtle cases. Try to check.

Prize Offer

This prize has been awarded only once in the history of the agency, to Ms Tina Amiri, in April 2009. A prize of significant value will be awarded to any invited submission for their first 30 pages of MS without any technical errors. The best before the prize was won for the first time was two in 30 pages. Note that our standard is that in 350 pages for submissions to a publisher. For this contest the count is limited to those key points about which there is a firm rule. That is, we will not count any technical error about which experts may differ due to interpretation or intentional use for effect (even if we think that was unwise). This Guide is the agreed reference in such matters.

Subsequent winners will receive a real prize of something nice from the UK or Thailand and your name will be cited in this document if you agree.

We have received approximately 400 serious first submissions of 30 pages in 7 years.

Note: This is *not* the *first* step in approaching us: see the website for how to do that.

Note: You won't send us 30 pages without *any* editorial issues to discuss; but you have a fighting chance of sending this much without basic *technical* errors. These two aspects of MS review and improvement are quite distinct as you will appreciate.

And as we always say in the disclaimer line one of the first review of your work:

“We are not infallible.”

Prefixes versus Hyphenation

For those who like *rules* the following prefixes generally make one word, though there are rare exceptions. We often see these prefixes wrongly hyphenated.*

anti	antihero antinondisreinterestablishmentarianismisters (43 letters, my longest made up word that <i>might</i> satisfy the “rules”)
bi	bisexual bicycle (Built for two, I presume.)
co	coauthor cooperate cooperative (noun and adjective), (“o” pair remains intact) (but “co-op” abbreviation for the last noun form, if not “coop”)*
dis	disable disorient disinformation (contrast with misinformation)†
extra	extraterrestrial extrajudicial
in	inability inflame insolvent insoluble innumerable (“n” pair remains intact) inflammable (ambiguous in practice, see backs of trucks/lorries)
inter	interface intermarriage interrelated (“r” pair remains intact)
intra-	Hyphenated. Can check dictionary for prefixes alone <i>e.g.</i> intra- or inter- etc.
macro	macrocosm macroeconomics macrolens (in <i>Webster</i> , not in Word dictionary)
micro	microcomputer microeconomics
mid	midpoint midsentence
mini	minicomputer miniskirt minibar minicar (last two in <i>Webster</i> not in Word)
mis	mistake mismatch misremember misinformation (contrast with disinformation)† misogynist mishomynist miscommunicate (last two in <i>Webster</i> not in Word)
multi	multidisciplinary multiracial
non	nonentity nonviolent nonnegotiable (“n” pair remains intact) non-euclidean
over	overawed overlook overreact (“r” pair remains intact)
post	postscript postdoctoral posttraumatic (“t” pair remains intact)
pre	preordained predominant preeminent (“e” pair remains intact)
re	reenact reexamine (“e” pair remains intact)
semi	semiannual semifinal semiinfluential (sic) it is semi-influential (check these)
sub	subclinical subatomic
super	superglue superman
un	unaccustomed undeterred unabashed unnatural (“n” pair remains intact)
under	undercompensated undergarments underprivileged

The modern trend is away from hyphenation of compound *nouns*: point-of-view, for example, is often rendered simply as “point of view”. Likewise: “He was a seven year old.” But as a compound adjective (avoid them when possible) it might be “seven year-old boy”. If you find yourself in difficulty with these, consider rewriting in a more direct way.

* One must hyphenate appropriately if there are two words with distinct meanings.

† A common confusion, look them up and note the difference.

Economy of Style

Rule One: less is almost always better than more.

You will do well to minimize/simplify: words, word groups, punctuation and phrasing.

The three basic principles of editing: cut, cut and cut.

Avoid repetitions of the same ordinary word in a local region of text.

I have cited a few very basic examples in this document (*e.g.* four lines below).

Avoid repetitions (echoes) of unusual words *anywhere in the manuscript*.

An example: do not use “onomatopoeia” more than once in the whole novel!

If you employ a repetition for effect, use it three times precisely and locally.

I edited “If you use a repetition for effect, use it three...” to the preceding.

The modern trend is away from serial commas: We ate shrimp, fish and potatoes.

No comma after “fish”, that is, no comma before a following “and”.

We didn’t consider shrimp, fish or potatoes. (same for “or”)

John said...John said...John said...John said...said John...said John...said John...

It is not necessary to label each and every line of dialogue:

In a two-hander* you can go many lines back and forth unambiguously, unlabeled.

Action may ID the source: “John, please stop,” she said. → “John, please stop.”

Only one wife present at the party: “Do you like my floral dress?”

And John can: mumble, shout, grimace, wonder out loud, wink, expostulate...

The linked description *e.g.* feeling can serve to ID the dialogue.

Ring the changes, minimize, trust the reader and eliminate ambiguity in other ways.

* Naturally, I checked this word. It is not in *Webster* but it is in *Wikipedia*.

Instead of:

a number of
as a general rule
at that point in time
at the conclusion of
the end result was
for the time (period) of a year
for the simple reason that
have got to
it can be considered that
in the event that
major portion of
regardless (or irrespective) of the fact that
they are of the opinion that

Use:

several
generally
then
after
the result was
for a year
because
must
maybe (or others that fit context)
if
most
although
they think (or believe)

More Rules and Common Errors

and is a potentially troublesome friend or foe:

John spoke quickly and emphatically.

John spoke quickly, and his manner was accepted by the others as unusually forthcoming.

The longer the phrase after “and” the more likely it is that a comma will help.

But this is always a judgment call; the second example is a borderline case.

I don’t like it but there is a rule: use the comma if the clause exceeds 6–8 words.

We have already mentioned that in a list, omit the comma before “and”.

semicolon is a genuine troublemaker.

Look back to the third from last line in the “and” section. One can write:

But this is always a judgment call. The second example is a borderline case.

If the semicolon is used correctly, the clause must be by itself a complete sentence.

Therefore, it can always be replaced by a full stop (period).

I counsel trying it both ways, then make the judgment call.

It is used to attach a closely related full sentence to another. Does it flow better?

I feel the main value is to smooth out what otherwise might be staccato text.

Don’t overuse it. Never use more than one in a given sentence.

full colon is easier to use but is often misused.

Presenting a list is its main value: item one, item two, item three.

These items can be rather complex but better if not complete sentences.

If you find yourself in that predicament you know what to do.

It can sometimes improve flow and shorten text (*i.e.* avoid dedicated new sentences).

This is a subject for everyone: obscure, potentially difficult, perhaps inaccessible!

Test: Replace it with “that is” and see if it makes sense.

Text following a colon is *not* capitalized unless it is a full sentence quotation:

John blurted out the list: “Salmon, prawns and Cheddar cheese are my favorites.”

possessives comprise, perhaps surprisingly, a huge subject (tens of pages in style guides).

Let’s first deal with the **number one clanger**: “it’s” is *not* a possessive.

It is the contraction of “it is” as in the following example. It’s a fine day.

It’s a subject in its own right. The possessive “its” is *irregular* in English.

The normal usage rule is clear enough: the possessive adds an apostrophe and “s”:

John’s book, the horse’s mouth, children’s literature, bass’s stripes!

Not to mention: Dennis’s book (proper names double the “s”), ordinary nouns do not.

Do you see the difference here: The Petersens’ marriage as against Petersen’s book?

And what about Mr and Mrs Floss? Floss’s books? The Flosses’ marriage?

Try reading that out loud to yourself when editing your MS for flow!

I avoid choosing character names that end in “s”! Floss is a no-no for sure.

numbers: Numbers cited in narrative may be given as numerals unless that looks awkward or is ambiguous and you wish to clarify. Numbers less than 10 are spelled out according to many style guides and publishers. There were eight members of the committee. There were 12 members of the committee.

In dialogue one uses text as spoken: Joann totted them up: “We have one hundred and five members, twelve on the committee and a budget of forty thousand dollars.”

Italics vs quotation marks: Set the following titles in *italics*: books, newspapers, periodical magazines, plays, movies, TV and radio series, major musical works, record albums and the names of specific works of art. Set the following in quotes: chapter titles in a referenced book, articles, single TV episodes, short writings or individual songs etc. The general rule is if it is major and generic, italicize, if it is subsidiary, use quotes.

titles of persons: Doctor, MP, Senator, President, Representative, Honorable Judge, Sir, Lord, and so on. These are generally capitalized when they immediately precede the holder’s name (in effect part of the name). Doctor Richard Adams, Representative Hillary York, President Barack Obama, Judge James Vincent, Sir Arthur C Clarke, Lord Winston etc. In other cases, do not capitalize: Susan Klein the senator from Wisconsin, James Vincent judge in the Superior Court, Barack Obama is the president. The British titles are usually used in front, with the name and capitalized. And in the case of knights of the realm, when using the first name alone, one includes the title, as in: Sir Arthur referenced the article.

titles abbreviated: Dr, Mr, Mrs, Ms, Fr and so on, the modern trend is to omit the full stop (period) as in Mr Johnson, Ms Klein, Fr Obispo. The rule is you may omit it if the abbreviation *ends in the same letter as the full word*. You may not otherwise: Monsignor Obispo, Professor Wade. We allowed a MS to go forward recently omitting the full stop in the word “Prof” when used *in dialogue* as by a student in lieu of the formal name.

Technical editing is *neither* trivial *nor* absolutely deterministic.

either or / neither nor...makes a nice little rhyme and that is the rule.

who / whom: Use “who” for the subject of the sentence, “whom” for the object. John, who was the original founding director, left the room. To whom it may concern. Peter tried to steer the conversation away from Jack, whom he had never met. This distinction is softening in current usage, probably because it can sound too formal or pedantic.

That can be a useful dialogue trick. Use “whom” *correctly* in dialogue to add a clue that this character may have these traits. It is rarely used in normal speech on the street outside of Oxford, Cambridge (UK or USA) *et al*.

that / which: First, whatever you mean to distinguish when you use these words, the rule is:

No comma appears before “that”.

There is always a comma before “which” (when it begins a subsidiary clause).

John chose the car that had the best mileage. John liked his car, which was blue.

With “that” the implication is that John had a choice and the choice *was based on* the noted characteristic out of many tradeoffs. It is an essential fact, key to the sentence. In the “which” case, this merely *describes* the foregoing and *could be left off* without seriously changing the meaning. Yes, we learn that the car was blue, but in the previous case, we take it that there was a choice and this characteristic was essential to the decision.

Yes, it is a subtle distinction. What else is news about English composition?

Test: replace “which” with “which happened to be...” and if that fits, use “which”, if not consider rewriting or using “that”. In other words, is it incidental or central respectively?

farther / further: “farther” refers only to physical distance. It was farther to the store than to the gym. The use of “further” is for time or degree. The chairman ruled that there would be no further discussion. He believed it would further the discussion to include economics.

weather / whether: This is not a common error, but just as some individuals have difficulty in separating left and right, some confuse these because of the similarity in spelling.

The weather is predicted to be fair. I will go whether or not it rains. I will find a way to be happy whether or not my lover comes to me tonight.

affect / effect: “affect” means to influence as the verb, the influence itself as the noun.

Availability of the car in powder blue affected Joan’s choice. The medication affected her in predictable ways. The medication had the expected *effects* on Jean. So “effect” means to cause (as the verb) and the results (as a noun). The effects of the policies were immediately apparent (noun). The economic policies effected the intended result (verb).

Test: substitute the following synonyms in a given case and check the meaning:

affect → influence...affected → influenced...effect → result...effected → caused

its / it’s: see “possessives” above, “it’s” = “it is” and “its” is the irregular *possessive*.

backward / forward: This and the next are problems primarily because the rules vary between the UK and USA versions of English usage and true subtleties in the language. The use of “forward” is probably the most consistent: it is not “forwards”. He looked forward to the arrival of his lover. The case of “backward” is slightly less clear. Does he lean backward, or backwards? We clearly *look* backward in time. I recommend no “s” on “backward” in either UK or USA English text.

toward / afterward: Is it “toward” or “towards”, “afterward” or “afterwards”? The former are officially standard in USA text, the latter in UK, though even here, publisher’s and style guides are all over the shop (as a Brit might put it) in both traditions. I recommend no “s” in USA English and put on the “s” in UK English if that reads better to your ear.

Both of these are so messed up that so long as you are consistent, few publisher’s editors are going to complain. Even a conservative USA editor shouldn’t shudder if you use the UK standards in a USA MS, but he might do, hence the rules we follow for agency submissions.

Repetitions: please reread the previous three paragraphs. Then consider this list: regions, tradition, regimes, usage systems, in both, UK English, American, USA, UK text and regional. It was necessary to refer to these two regimes several times in the paragraphs. I tried to avoid repetitions and may have gone overboard to make the point. Editing changes that occurred as I wrote this document (all true) are noted from time to time.

If I were to limit myself to giving only two pieces of advice to a new writer they would be:

1. Less is usually more: especially fewer commas and articulated sentences.
2. Avoid *repetitions* of common words (and expressions) locally and unusual words *globally*.

Commonly Misused Words:

already	This is correct (adverb meaning “wholly ready”).
alright (sic)	<u>All right</u> is the correct form (the contraction “alright” (sic) is not).
author	It is not a verb: you cannot “author” a book, you write one.
e-mail	It is hyphenated as noted above.
Epilogue	We prefer this spelling to Epilog because it suggests “importance”.
fax	It is given in lower case.
Foreword	An extra bit at the beginning of a document: not “Foreward” (sic) etc.
Internet	Capitalized
okay	Always written out in full even in dialogue.
Prologue	We prefer this spelling to Prolog, because it suggests “importance”.
Web site	First word is capitalized, two words, not “website”.
'til	Contraction of “until”, not ‘til; look closely. Type x’til then remove the “x”.
they’re	and friends should all be carefully checked if any doubt.
if he were	not “if he was”, so “if” should normally be followed by “were”. If he were to make a pass at her... Judgment calls (again): If he was too tired tonight he would not go. If he were to be too tired tonight he would not go. Dialogue is up to the speaker, of course, in character.
like	She stood there like a wallflower watching the others dance and party. → She knew she was a wallflower and resented herself for watching. “like” is weak and should tell you to look for something better. That is different from dialogue: “John likes his bacon and eggs.”

Writing Seriously

This is inherently different from writing for pleasure (though one may lead to the other) and fiction is stylistically distinct from nonfiction. We emphasize the former here.

First requirement: you have five pages to hook the reader and maybe another 25 to addict him.

The only book on writing we consistently recommend to our potential clients is *The First Five Pages* by Noah Lukeman. Perform all of his writing exercises throughout your own MS and it will be on that high plateau from which you can potentially submit to a publisher or agent. This document has the same purpose for intermediate levels.

Part Three of this document summarizes most of his elementary points plus a few others specific to the mission of this Agency, but buy the book and use it seriously once a week.

A publisher's editor *may* grant you five pages, or toss it on the reject pile after one paragraph (though an Agency submission should win the full five pages). What does he look for? The same thing a reader wants when he pays good money for the book: a reason to read it! And surely, a fair idea of what the book is about and where it is going. If you hide this from the reader then you don't understand the novel genre.

She was surprised how easily the knife slipped between his ribs and that she could feel the throbbing of his pierced heart through the handle. As he slumped to his knees, her husband looked up into her eyes and said, "Forgive me."

On the other hand, if this is what you see when you pick up the 27th MS of the day, tired though you may be, jaded though you may be, underpaid though you may be—compared with the writers you work hard to make successful, you snap right back up to full speed.

This MS has already leaped the first hurdle. We know we are facing a bifurcated plot looking back to see how we got here and forward to see what happens to the wife. If the next five pages are clearly and crisply written, carefully drip-feeding us with a bit of background (but not too much all at once), a bit of characterization (but not too much all at once), interspersed with a taste of the action to come (but not too much all at once), the reader is going to go for the next 25 aren't you? You bet, and you are already happy that you paid upwards of an hour or more of your after-tax wages for the privilege.

So will the editor in a publishing house, large or small.

So will I when this drops into our e-mail inbox. I will also know that this writer *understands* how vital it is to hook the reader and then addict. And if he or she fails to maintain the pace but has signs of good writing and a feeling for plot, I will work *years* with that person to help them get there in the end. This has happened just recently with me/us and a writer who has spent two years honing his skills and MS, which is now circulating.

Patience pays big dividends (see Part Three).

Second requirement: At least one man-year of patient, consistent, dedication. This is not a game for dilettantes. It is not a hobby. It is an obsession, or you will never get there.

The creation of a full-length novel is a major undertaking for a *team*, visible and invisible.

It includes you and the many people in your life: teachers—authors you have met through their books and have come to know—usually others who have seen your work (writer’s circles and groups have unmatched value)—your agent if you can find one—the agency’s editorial staff if they have one (or you pay a professional outside the agency)—the above mentioned harried publisher’s editor—the further members of the editorial staff who must read and approve of your MS—the publisher’s management who must commit many times your annual salary to you and your work—the subsequent publisher’s editor with whom you work on final revisions (often a major task in itself)—and the promotional staff who will give your book the best chance they can.

The total man-hours invested by professionals in the creation and publication of a novel must add up to at least the man-year it will take you to write *and then edit* your MS.

Third requirement: Have something worthwhile to write about in your own voice. It helps if you have expertise in the contextual background: life, the universe and everything. If you are young and inexperienced, try to write something funny and insightful along the lines of how little you know about life (and showing everyone that you know how little you know about life). If you are mature and experienced, let us in on life as you have found it. Give us some of your expertise *without our realizing* that you are favoring us with it (policing, managing, researching, laboring, teaching, doctoring, nursing, loving or losing).

Don’t let me or anybody else take away your voice. Do let us try to provide you with an independent, outside perspective, guidance and encouragement.

If the first book doesn’t make it, in your view or that of the “professionals”, write another. It is a perhaps sobering observation that few writers are published before completing *six* full MS.

Write in a direct, clear manner using the minimum of words.

John chose the car that was blue. → John chose the blue car.

A decision was reached by Peter. → Peter decided.

Jack had had a fleeting glimpse of an armed man in the next room. He dropped silently, flat on the carpeted floor, scrunched along the south wall, then across to the desk, and slowly skirted the desk until he could end up behind the wastebasket and put it between himself and the open door and peer carefully around it with some measure of safety.

→ Jack caught a fleeting glimpse of an armed man in the next room. He dropped silently onto the carpet, scrunched himself along until, concealed behind the desk, he could ease his head around the wastebasket in relative safety.

Read these two sample paragraphs out loud to yourself (see also below).

Note: avoid “had had” in text and other similar awkward grammatically correct tenses and think about the flow and poetry in your MS. Yes, great prose is often poetic. It can be a very useful diversion to write some poetry from time to time. Emphasize a consistent meter. Rhyming is not necessary. It will help your prose a lot more than you might have expected.

It was awkward, wrongful and wasteful. → It was counterproductive.

His feelings were a combination of shame, worry, unreasoned fear and a desire to flee. →

He thought, ruefully, “This was surely paranoia.” → A rueful thought: “This is paranoia.”

“Shame” goes to “rueful” and the rest fit “paranoia”. Now just polish it.

When you need or use two or more nouns or adjectives, look for the right synonym.

Commas give the warning. One word is almost always better than two or three.

Choose the *one* that best expresses what you are trying to say. Then say more *later*.

I have already mentioned the avoidance of overly precise identification of who is speaking.

Avoid it when you can or tell us more by way of a comment about tone of voice or mannerism, or use some other method such as one character naming the other.

And allow only one speaker in each paragraph.

“Get the hell off of my back about this,” said Paul to George.

“George, get the hell off my back about this,” said Paul. (It’s a two-hander here.)

Paul squirmed in the chair and faced George. “Get the hell off my back about this.”

Paul thundered, “George, get the hell off my back.” Cut George if clear; cut “about this”.

“This is the only way,” Mary said emphatically, “and I say we do it.” →

Mary was emphatic, “This is the only way and I say we risk it.”

The intra-quotation descriptive is to be avoided unless it is absolutely essential to express the flow of action. Used in that way sparingly it has far more impact than if your MS is full of these when it doesn’t help (indeed is the antithesis of a smooth read).

“If we do it that way we are going to die horribly,” Joan gasped, “so here is what we are going to do.” →Joan gasped, “If we do it that way we are going to die horribly. So here is what we are going to do.” →Joan gasped, “That buys us a sticky death, so this is what we do.”

Avoid interior dialogue IDs! When the rare right one comes along (it hasn’t here for me to find a good example), you will know. Then still restructure if you can improve the flow.

Yes, it’s that easy, and so very difficult, until you have done it...*a lot*.

Passive Voice:

Prefer the active voice. Active: Jack decided. Passive: A decision was made by Jack.

Active voice merely means that the person doing the action is the subject of the sentence. In passive voice the person doing the action is the object of the sentence.

This never arises if there are two people: Mary spoke to John. One would never try to write it where somehow John is offstage when we can plainly see him, and something like...the speech was being made by Mary. So you only need to look at monologues or one-handers (one person on stage) and see if it looks okay.

The use of passive voice for reflective moments can be very powerful when used with care, and rarely. Like most things in art, differences tell, changes are noticed, and we don't want the writing to be noticed, we want the feeling to be felt subliminally!

You won’t get it right the first time. Even the top professionals need to *edit*...

An Introduction to Editing: the Key to Success

Right, you have finished your 120,000 word first novel, a masterpiece for sure. When you read it through quickly it really seems fine, so you decide you don't need to spend six months editing it and send it off to this agency because we say on the Web site that we only accept new writers. That's about all you notice on the site and you don't bother much about formatting: space and a half is fine, Arial font 10 point seems professional and doesn't it look great with fully justified margins! Your indents are five spaces each (but some are accidentally four or six). The punctuation of quotations has always gone a bit fuzzy each time you typed one in, but none of that really matters. It's a cracking good story starting on page 87 *after* you have introduced all 27 characters and described the settings in detail with clever observation.

I have not yet had a submission this nightmarish but parts of this formula have applied to almost every one. And the common factor is that very few have been well edited. What a relief when one drops through the mailbox that has been professionally turned out (by the writer alone or with assistance—both are possible). And I will know it after reading the first half page. It doesn't take five pages with a great MS, or a poor one to feel the difference.

It would be precisely the same if you were at my desk. We are not talking about my superb editing skills here (though I happen to be a pretty damn good one), or my writing ability (I write only about as well as the 50th percentile of those we represent and that's not bragging or complaining it is the truth), or any other brilliance on my part. On the contrary, a great MS stands out, it shines, it flows, it exudes authenticity and competence from the first paragraph; even the first word. *Anybody* would agree straight out of the box and ten seconds reading.

How does one achieve that? There is only one way: edit, pause and edit again...and again. Get help and outside views if you can, but *perform the edits*.

It is the purpose of this section to provide some practical guidance on that.

Then for more details and our editing checklist, see Part Three of this Guide.

Editing for Real

Three full passes through the MS is a good number *before* you submit.

Let us say it took you six months to finish the rough draft. Then you even went back through it once quickly to fix the clangers. Let us say further that you have managed to avoid most of the negatives set out in this document.

Here are some tips.

(1) Take it slow and easy.

(2) Do not work long sessions. When the page blurs or you find yourself reading on without considering each and every paragraph and nuance, take a break, come back later.

(3) Complex structures are a warning red flag. Use sparingly. Simplify the others.

(4) Be patient. Take it slow and easy.

(5) If this is the first edit/pass, put the first three chapters or so in an archive file. Then rewrite them *without* reference to the originals. Feel free to do this quickly, stream of consciousness, if that works for you. Then compare with the originals. The point here is that these chapters are often written for you, not for the reader. You need to create the characters, set the scenes and backgrounds, get your feet wet, understood. That's not what your reader needs (see above).

(6) This probably did not work to your satisfaction as a realistic redraft (and that's actually a good thing), but it likely did indicate the position well enough that you can sit down and replot, reorganize and restart the process. Don't worry, you are *not* doing the whole job over.

(7) What you are going to do now is provide a first 30 pages that hooks the reader, then addicts him and along the way provides a clear idea of what the book is about and where it is going. Wait for the right time and a feeling of readiness. Then work in your normal way but perhaps with just a bit more deliberation than may have applied the first time. Use notes if that helps, make an outline. Feel free to go into the archived first three chapters for reminders about your characters and settings. Don't do too much of any one thing in these critical early pages (this was discussed in more detail above).

(8) Work this until the new first 30 pages meshes with the old text. This may require some thought, excising and/or moving of text blocks, maybe a few more notes on those 3x5 cards you bought but didn't use before to keep it all straight.

(9) If this doesn't work to your satisfaction, take a break (we are talking days or weeks this time) and come to it again, perhaps even starting over. Sleep on it; the subconscious is a powerhouse.

I will tell a brief true story here. I was just finishing the final edit on a MS with the editor at a London agency (not this one, quite independent). It is now circulating out of this agency under the signature of the Senior Partner Emeritus (I am not allowed to do so myself under the rules). Wow, finished, finished, finished, at last, gasp. I fell into bed. Now I had an idea and a rather detailed plan in my head for another novel that had been moldering for some years. The problem was that I didn't have the absolutely essential twist at the end. I had *felt* during those long years that it was there, hiding in me somewhere and it was *brilliant*. You know the feeling. In the morning after only about 3 hours sleep, I awoke with a bang, jumped out of bed (no shower, no breakfast), dragged out a set of 3x5s and began to check if the totally insane twist that was in my head would actually fit the plot. It did and it was (to my mind, you can read the book and judge for yourself) very fine. I write "out of the fog" which is an insider's term for doing it all without notes, usually very quickly. I sat down at the computer, energized as if I had rested for a month and knocked out the rough draft in three weeks. That's not unusual, by the way. I often ask our writers (or they tell me) how long it took to produce their rough draft. The edit required 12 passes and took 9 months but the basic plot and structure remained pretty stable. It is a heist story and they have a common problem (each plot structure has its own *signature* in such matters). Since nothing really happens until near the end, it's tough to do what we are talking about, hook and addict at the top. Chapters one and two required many restarts but finally came home to papa: *Flight of the Marbles*.

(10) Some plots are naturals for the 'hook and addict' and with others it poses a real challenge. Flashbacks and their cousins in crime are not recommended, but often there is little choice and such a prologue or other trick is the way forward. The bottom line here is to do what has to be done—what works. Don't do anything else in further editing until this is locked up.

(11) When you have the first 50 pages or so in good nick, the current MS on the memory stick or equivalent (you do keep regular backups) and it all hangs together structurally, the loose ends all dealt with, then begin the editing proper.

(12) Up to you, but it might be best now to make the first full pass through the MS. Mine took 12 because I didn't do it optimally, so I'll share this with you from hard experience. This is a repeat from above for emphasis: do not edit quickly. When the eye begins to move down the

page, stop, pause and come back later. Be deliberate. Look at each paragraph, sentence, image, clever insight, choice of words and use of synonyms (is this really the right word?). Depending on skill and experience this should take 20 to 60 minutes (and in some cases much more) per page. Put in the time. If you do it well, assuming this is the second pass (after a cursory first), you might be able to fast-track the project. Here is how to do that.

(13) The 350 pages are clean after this edit, you are sure about that. Maybe some sections get another edit later, or even a bit of restructuring of the denouement, or whatever may be on the cards. Go back to the first 30 pages and do a very comprehensive edit, no more than a page or two per work session. Polish, reorganize, cut, tighten and cut again.

(14) When you are sure the first 30 pages are not only clean but really powerful, print them out, prop up a box on a table at an angle if you don't have a lectern handy and:

Read it out loud to yourself as if to an audience of 5000 breathless admirers.

Probably best to do this in the mid afternoon, because you probably will want a nice tea and an evening away from this abominable project that you loved this morning and so desperately hate now. It is just so miserably *bad*. If you feel that way, it's better than 80:20 a *good* sign!

(15) If you can in fact read your text out loud, really present it, with cadence and inspiration, with the force and effect that you will have experienced from others: a fine speaker, professor, or cinematic performance; maybe, just maybe it is ready to think about sending off. If you are in a writer's circle (join one if you can), make an appointment with the moderator and read at least the first five pages to the group. Another possibility is to invite a few friends over, you provide the drinks and food—they will want to be *compensated* for sure! Have the guts to stand and deliver. Do tell them what you are doing and why, with thanks and all the rest by way of introduction. But *do it*.

(16) By all means invite other readers and try to line up a professional who will read at least the first 30: teacher, writer, librarian, avid reader you respect. As for a frank opinion (it's hard to get that because you know they won't want to tell it straight). Tell them you need that to make progress. This is, of course, what you get from us in due course.

(17) Turning back to (14)...scene: you are tossing and turning in bed, frustrated. Take a break of a few days or weeks then come back. Work on another project. Try to arrange an independent review. Return and read it out loud again. You will immediately see the bad spots and how to fix them. The value of this technique for most new writers cannot be overstressed. Many professionals say it is the only practical way to self-editing.

(18) I promised you a fast-track and here it is. You are sure that the MS beyond the 30 pages meets the standards of this whole document. Now forget about them. Polish the first 30 or so until they shine. Every paragraph, sentence, nuance, image, choice of special word, are all the very best you can do and it reads out smoothly. You are hooked in 5 pages, addicted in 30 and would buy the book.

By the way, there is obviously nothing magic about "30". You will be aware of the length of text at the beginning of your MS that falls naturally within the parameters we are discussing. That is what I mean throughout this document by "30 pages". And less is more.

(19) Now send it to us. You may have had a referee send a review long since. But you will have promised us that it has been edited to the standards of this document. We are not infallible, but we give a professional First Reader's Report every time and it will be detailed.

(20) Welcome to the world of professional writing.

The *published author* is the writer who mastered *editing*.

The professional is the amateur who didn't give up.

Good luck.

Comments, corrections, suggestions, personal experiences of relevance and any other professional input regarding this document is more than welcome.

PART THREE

So You Want to be a Writer

You decide one bright morning to learn to play the piano. My retired mathematics teacher did exactly that at the age of 65. Do you suppose he then simply sat down at the instrument and began playing Chopin's *Studies for Piano*? Of course he didn't.

He bought a few books, some music suitable for adult beginners, found a teacher and then worked diligently for *three* years. This was a passionate undertaking and occupied more than half of his waking hours (not just half of his spare time). He wrote out some simple variations on the basic exercises, attempted the works of many composers and tried his hand in many genres from jazz back to Monteverdi.

When I visited him at the end of this time (I had been away at university), he asked if I would like to hear him play. He wasn't a master and would not have claimed even "gifted amateur" for he was a modest man. But he was more than competent. The errors were mostly notes left out (that's a trick they all use in performance), but the feeling he put into his playing was breathtaking. I have an ear for music and have played the piano and Baroque pipe organ as a beginner, no more, but one cannot miss the interpretative nuances of a player *sensitive* to the music. The playing was naturally relaxed, it was being enjoyed and explored, every phrase rolled around on the tongue before being committed to the fingers.

That is also how you write but one must learn how and be disciplined about it. The piano analogy is a very good one and we will use it.

I brought the same naiveté to writing that almost everyone does in the beginning. I assumed that anybody could be a writer. I was 23 years old on a trip to Alaska with my father and spent a lot of spare time writing science fiction. It was so bad that I gave up in disgust. I simply could not *play the words*. It never surprised me that I couldn't play the keyboard even passably well without practicing a piece for weeks. Why did it surprise me when I could not do the analogous thing with my native language?

I am a competent teacher, lecturer, speaker for popular audiences and enjoy my language. It was always clear that one must *prepare* a lesson or a talk, whether to 8 year old schoolchildren on the subject of "*Navigating Apollo to the Moon*" or "*Why I love Winnie the Pooh*" to an audience of jaded grandmothers at a Sunday tea party. (No, these titles are not reversed.) Both were delivered in the same week. I learned to write scientific papers efficiently and well. Right, so I have a CV. It is unique, it may even be distinguished in one or two particulars, yet my basic experience of *daily* life is comparable to everyone else. Yet I believed I could be a good writer and all readers know the difference. I believed I could do it by simply writing. I was dead wrong.

It is less true than for taking up the piano. One might manage the piano but you will not likely become a good writer without bringing a lot more than that to the party. The error is in believing that there really isn't all that much *to* good writing. That is the black hole of Calcutta that most of us fall into and then have to climb out of if we ever want to see the light.

Earlier in this Guide I suggested that young scribes write to express what they don't know about life, looking back on themselves and to do so with self-deprecating humor if possible. A mature writer will have: lived well, made errors, loved and lost, been well off then poor... So we will assume that you are an experienced adult and have some feeling for life, the universe and everything (beyond the now well-known answer of "42").

You could approach writing as my mathematics teacher came to the piano: buy books on how to do it, buy music to be played, find a teacher, then practice...practice...practice...

But you didn't, did you? Well, now is the time. That is the theme of this Part Three.

The book: *The First Five Pages* by Noah Lukeman, Fireside Imprint, Simon and Schuster.

Style guides can be helpful, but use a highlight pen to mark the items of true interest.

That's why we wrote this one. Send us your suggestions, corrections and additions.

The "music": books by authors whom you admire and enjoy.

It is a plus if you plan to write in a similar genre.

The style will be your own but you will strive for prose as silky as theirs.

The "teacher": join a writing group near home, take adult education classes...

Find a mentor in a local professional with some connection to writing.

Sign up for an Open University or other good writing course.

The "practice": by all means begin writing, perhaps first try a humorous diary.

Perform exercises on the alphanumeric keyboard!

Learn to touch type (this is a far bigger plus than many people believe).

You can do it in a month of 30 minute lunch breaks with a good program.

Learn the basics of computers and computing, the Internet, e-mail and backups.

Take a night school class or make friends with a good IT secretary.

Sometimes the 12 year old lad down the street "knows it all".

Learn the rules of document formatting and where to find the special characters.

Compare what you typeset with published books.

Learn the rules of English punctuation and correct *typesetting*. Yes, it is vital.

The "performance": Write short pieces first.

Perform the exercises provided here and in *The First Five Pages*.

They are analogous to piano exercises and are given in bite-size chunks.

Some are easier than others. The analogies stride on here—they fit well.

Do at least one seriously each week.

Do not perform one piece for too long a time.

Take breaks, have several things working at the same time when practical

If you are employed, devote your full holidays/vacations to serious work.

Commitment

The true *Cassandra* godhead of all writers descends upon you in a dream tonight and predicts your absolute and irrevocable future: “You will never be published.”

How will you respond? Take up the piano, or keep writing, redoubling your efforts to prove the gods wrong?

The need to write is an incurable *disease*. You will never recover. You will spend your whole life obsessed trying to create art with *your* words and every *mot juste* will be a victory (whatever *She* says notwithstanding).

I perhaps misled the reader earlier by implying that editing could or should wash away all the sins in a rough draft. The point was, of course, to impress upon all of us (I was speaking also to myself) that we must each learn to edit. And editing our own work is far harder than editing someone else’s. My job is easier than yours!

One can *incorporate* the lessons found here in everyday work. You are facing a difficult scene or series of paragraphs. They are not working, you can feel it but you are not sure what the specific problem is or how to fix it. Read through the list below and identify which one best fits the case before you. Select relevant text then perform the lessons here or end of chapter exercises from Lukeman’s book.

Once the lessons have been learned and practiced diligently, perhaps for a similar time that it takes to learn to play the piano well, you will turn out beautiful and meaningful prose *as you write the rough drafts*. This *can* be learned. It is a fallacy that certain aspects of the craft of writing cannot be learned or one must be born with them.

The one side of the writer’s arsenal that perhaps cannot be *taught* is the creation of in-depth characters, clever plots and realistic dialogue. These require experience of life and some of us do take it in or observe it better than others. But I would maintain that a reasonably aware and committed person can to some degree force themselves to be more observant, to make the skills of a “*life detective*” one’s own, thereby proving that even this supposition does not apply to *you*. I do firmly believe that any committed person can learn to do it all.

I will stick my neck out and invite anyone to test my further claim:

Perform the appropriate tests noted below (and/or those that parallel it in the reference), then exercise them on your first 30 pages in every paragraph, page and scene. Take 3 months if necessary, though one month of undistracted evenings should be sufficient. This is for the polish: I assume that you have already reached the standard of Part Two.

I assert that when you send that MS to us, to me, or to any other professional in the business, they will accept it as a professional piece of work and read it. They may even ask to see more.

So let us begin. Each section covers one aspect of editing or writing.

Who is an Editor? What is an Editor?

I quote from *The First Five Pages*:

As an editor, you approach a book differently than a general reader. You should not enjoy it; rather you should feel like you're hard at work—your head should throb. You should constantly be on guard for what is wrong, what can be changed. ... When an editor reads, he is not just reading but breaking sentences into fragments, worrying if the first half should be replaced with the second, if the middle fragment should be switched with the first. The better editors worry if entire sentences should be switched within paragraphs; great editors keep entire paragraphs—even pages—in their head and worry if these might be switched.* Truly great editors can keep an entire book in their head and easily ponder the switching of any word to any place. They will remember an echo† across three hundred pages. ... Master editors are artists themselves. They need to be. ... they'll also bring something of their own to a text, give the writer a certain kind of guidance, let the writer know if a certain scene—artistically—should be cut, if the book should really begin on page 50, if the ending is too abrupt, if a character is underdeveloped. They'll *never impose their will or edit for the sake of editing*... [emphasis mine]

* That is about my limit of mental span. I have met editors such as he describes. My father had the kind of eidetic memory required for such an awesome level of detail. Unfortunately I did not inherit his gifts. I have difficulty keeping character names straight...or could the writer have given just a few more timely reminders to help?

† The word “echo” is craft jargon for what I prefer to call “reps” or “repetitions” of words.

And yes, I do strive to achieve all the other guidelines he sets out. I am sure his italicized (my emphasis) comment also implies not unduly disturbing the writer's legitimate voice.

The ellipses are set here with spaces; this particular use is an exception to the general rule. There must be a space after a preceding full stop (period) for example.

When editing—the better *writer*...now just put in relevant parts of the above quotation where it says “editor” as you edit your own material, then work it and you are 40% there. The next 40% comes from lining up and using (fairly) astute readers and an editor if you can find one to point out the problem areas and help you to find the keys. “...the master editor can transform an entire page with one single, well-placed word.” And so can you. But you must first see the need, then rack your grey cells for it. Search in this document for “Mary” and reread the editing examples provided there. Did you spot it? The small but fresh word introduced in the final version of one of those lines? Check it out. There is a point here. Where did “risk” come from? The answer is out of the blue: “To add artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unresponsive narrative.” (William S Gilbert in *The Mikado*.) This was a small idea, but great prose flows from the cumulative effect of clear writing, fewest words, a direct structure and the right words at the key moments. You *build* a novel with a hundred thousand bricks, each in its right place, all suited to purpose. And each one must be *laid* carefully in place, by you, the writer.

And that final 20% is left to the reader/writer to figure out!

Spotting Symptoms

Before you can fix something you need to be able to recognize that it may need fixing. Here is a checklist of easily-spotted clues.

Commas: Check every one, eliminate where possible. More later on this issue.

Exclamation marks: One per page in the average in a MS is far too many.

Question marks in narrative: Should there be any at all? You *never* ask the reader a question, or directly address the reader, in third person fictional narrative. That is “writer’s intrusion” and verboten. This is another reason that writing in first person is so very much more difficult.

Question marks in dialogue: Be sure you don’t forget them (my favorite personal error).

UPPER CASE: Never in narrative or dialogue. Let the action speak for itself. It can be used sparingly in quoted (real or fictional materials) such as fax messages, telex etc.

Boldface: never used in narrative text or dialogue, see the previous item.

Fonts: Use Times New Roman throughout the MS. See above, e.g. a handwritten letter quoted in the MS. Also: *Courier* for typewritten material. Do not overuse.

Italics: One use per page on the average in a MS is likely too frequent. Drama is all about contrasts. If used it should add something useful that cannot be handled through the action. I made frequent use of italics in this document. You judge that.

Foreign words: These are always put in italics. But if the Word spell checker does not complain, it is not a foreign word, it is a foreign word that is now part of English and is not italicized. Frequent use is a warning sign. It must add the right nuance, at the right time, not just for casual effect.

Vulgar language: This is *never* used in narrative. It is absolutely reserved for quoted dialogue. As with showing linguistic accents, a single word or two makes the point for a given character and the rest (perhaps amazingly) can be left “straight”. Try it.

Clichés: Cut them all in narrative text. Minimize use in dialogue (see previous item). If you discover you have used one try this trick. Write the same idea 10 different ways using your own words. Let the brain storm its way to what may become a cliché in the next century (when you are rich and famous). Take an hour if you have to.

Unusual words: Great prose will have one or two superb examples per chapter but “unusual” has two guises. The first is a word that is rarely seen. Be sure it is the right one—that it fits. Random selection will not do. Check it, reread the context, replace with a simpler word and check all of its synonyms in the Thesaurus. Be sure it adds just the right touch, replaces lines of text. Otherwise cut it. The second is the use of a more common word in an unusual way (in narrative):

He educated the ice with a cheaper scotch this time.

Here you have more flexibility and unless it clearly misses the mark, risk it.

Facts: When you say something in the real world is “thus and so” be absolutely sure that this is correct. Check it, *Google* it, visit the *Britannica* or *Wikipedia*. You already know it is right because you were there? Check it anyway.

1. A Surfeit of Adjectives and Adverbs

Jason was a lonely, shy boy.

What could possibly be wrong with that? Let us say this is the first sentence of your whole book. So we naturally try all alternatives:

Jason was a shy, lonely boy.

Jason was a lonely boy.

Jason was a shy boy.

Which of these would you as an *editor* feel had the most punch? You might ask yourself the following questions:

Does “lonely” follow as a consequence of “shy” or is it the reverse?

Ah, “lonely” is more about how Jason feels rather than an aspect of his personality.

And “shy” is more a narrative description of his persona, than a feeling.

So which ordering of these two aspects is the more powerful?

JASON’S WORLD a novel in 78,000 words by Anne Author:

Jason was a shy boy.

Jason was a lonely boy.

His eight years of life so far had just revealed to him that the first led to the second.

He did not yet know the word “resolved” but that did not prevent him from resolving to change the first in the hope of reversing the second. ↓

You don’t stop there. The fourth paragraph has some interesting ideas or you wouldn’t be trying it on for size, but how about simply:

Jason resolved to change the second by working on the first. ↓

This is still not there. You don’t like “working” for a start.

Jason resolved to efface the second by overcoming the first.

You may stop there *for today* but it is a no-brainer to realize that these first few sentences are absolutely critical. You will be back. But this is feeling fairly good. You have begun with a subtle cause to effect relationship, it’s clean, it reads well out loud to an audience (you actually did this). You have found just the right unusual word (for now) “efface” to add the effective equivalent of a line or two of text bearing on his feelings. You smile to yourself that it also adds just that touch of literary quality that an agent or publisher might notice.

They will notice—it had better be the *best* available word or your MS is already on the scrap heap. But that is not why you are writing, is it? But at least the *monkey is off of your back* for another day, thank God for small inspirations.

I first wrote, “...thank God for small blessings.” Why did I change it?

Because that was a cliché and “inspirations” avoids that and better fits the contexts. “That might work,” I said to myself: I will also...*be back*. Note the punctuation of the quotations.

Why worry about multiple adjectives and adverbs?

It was warm, sticky, humid and windy. → It was a sticky breeze.

He spoke with authority and skill. → He spoke with authority.

The running was leisurely and pleurably satisfying.

→ The jogging had proven pleasurable.

Less is more:

Find the one best word and use it. Cover the other nuances later.

The reader has difficulties processing multiple modifiers together.

They conflict and tend to confuse aspects of each other.

You deny the reader's chance to draw his own conclusions, a put-down for him.

Give just enough to open the door, let the reader use his imagination.

He won't put it down if he *owns a share of it* as a joint undertaking.

Recognize that you used the series because *you* hadn't decided.

You're the writer, decide! Guide us—don't smack us with dead fish.

You're the professional.

Make them count because often they *weaken* the modified noun or verb.

It was a sticky breeze. This is compact, evocative and unusual. Maybe OK.

He spoke with authority. Authority implies skill. Cut it.

The jogging had proven pleasurable.

Be careful: think "had proven to be" pleasurable.

It is "proven" being used as an adverb with an implied "to be".

This also says more: it implies that he might have expected otherwise.

The reader figures this himself and feels satisfied.

Exercises:

1.1 Remove all double adjectives and adverbs in a whole chapter.

Which is the stronger, or more unusual?

Pick one, then try alternatives for the one chosen.

Try using none in the given instance (see exercise 1.3).

Change the noun or verb to a stronger synonym.

Does that eliminate the need for a modifier?

1.2 Select a few pages or a scene from the result of (1).

Examine every single adjective and adverb in the selected text.

Mr Lukeman suggests listing them on a separate sheet (or document).

His idea is to note which are commonplace, which interesting.

Cut or replace all ordinary modifiers such as: large, warm, surely, plainly...

Replace with something stronger only if you must have extra weight.

Large → unwieldy: if that is the real idea that had been there all the time.

1.3 Select a portion of text (2–3 pages or a scene) from (2) or fresh text.

Remove every adjective and adverb from the text, one at a time.

Then try to replace each associated noun (or verb) with a stronger one.

Spend time with the Thesaurus *et al.* *Replace as many as you can.*

Go all the way through the section of text. Finish the job, saving a backup.

You now have a chunk of text with *no* adjectives or adverbs at all.

1.31 Go back to the beginning and allow yourself one adjective or adverb per page.

Carefully read that page and choose the one noun or verb you *need* to modify.

Find an appropriate or unusual one to use with that selected noun or verb.

1.32 Stand up and deliver:

Read the original out loud to yourself (for real).

Immediately read the replacement out loud to yourself (for real).

Which ideas are better expressed with fewer words? What didn't work?

This was an *exercise*. You will come back again to find the right balance.

1.33 Put it aside for tomorrow or the weekend (not too long or short a time).

Come back to the new text, *not* rereading the original.

Edit the new text as the replacement, imagining that the first is irrevocably lost.

Put essential bits back where you don't like the new version.

Minimize adjectives and adverbs. Look to flow and general quality.

1.34 Put it aside again for a day or two.

Edit it again and/or:

Compare the original and the edited replacement. Proceed accordingly.

1.3 Choose a chapter from a published work you enjoyed reading and respect.

(This should be a mainstream work, not alternative fiction.)

Photocopy it if you don't want to mark in the original.

Perform exercise (1) on it: underline every double adjective and adverb.

Then go back and perform the exercise (if you found any).

Perform exercise (2) on a selected page or two.

1.5 When next you write a few pages of brand new text, before moving on:

Come back a day or two later and perform 1.1 and 1.2 on it.

I usually begin a writing session by going back one day and doing this.

Then continue with a segment of new text.

2. Words

The writer's stock in trade is his or her vocabulary.

Some best-selling books are limited to a junior High School vocabulary.

"They got away with it." You cannot. Most published books are to a high standard.

A new writer's first novel must be *better* than the average best seller.*

Keep "new word" lists. Haunt the Thesaurus.

Use the unusual word in its precise meaning.

Check it in dictionary, thesaurus and encyclopedia...

Be certain-sure that it is the best fit of any synonym (ordinary and unusual).

Exercises

2.1 Read the Dictionary (a Collegiate Edition in paperback)!

Work one random double-page before sleep each night, underlining useful words.

Many words *e.g.* proper nouns, common words, are not of interest.

Do an obverse-reverse pair, then carefully detach the page and put it in a box.

Once a week get the box. Choose 5 pages randomly and test yourself.

Ambitious: Make a word versus definition document. Use it to study by and reference.

Include the main synonyms so that you can find it by searching for a simpler word.

Include both dictionary study words and those you find or use when reading/writing.

2.2 Consider a few pages each night (or afternoon breaks) of the book you are now reading.

List all the unusual words used in your bedside writer's notebook.

Underline and note the page number on the blank space at the back of the book.

This will give you the writer's context for reference later.

Remember there are two kinds:

2.21 Rarely used words: onomatopoeia

2.22 Ordinary words used unusually: He educated the ice with good scotch.

When you have a reasonable collection from this book and feel in the mood:

Try to find a better choice in each case 2.21.

At least appreciate the writer's decision.

Replace each 2.22 with another alternative consistent with the context.

2.3 Perform 2.2 on one of the best few pages of your own text.

Next time you edit, do the same every time, every page, for every such word used.

* "best-selling" the adjective is hyphenated, "best seller" the adjective-noun pair is not.

This is typical of many word pairs. The adjective pair is and the noun pair is not.

2.4 Consider the following list of loose synonyms:

superfluous___, inconsequential___, useless___, inapplicable___, irrelevant___, unnecessary___, unneeded___, unimportant___, unwarranted___, worthless___, rubbish___, unhelpful___, a waste of time___, ineffective___, hopeless___, futile___, immaterial___, inappropriate___, extraneous___, neither here nor there___, beside the point___, unrelated___, pointless___, redundant___, insignificant___, no great shakes___, trifling___, petty___, minor___, unproductive___, fruitless___, beside the point___, of no consequence___, ineffectual___, wasted___, unsuccessful___, unconnected___, not pertinent___, stupid___, inane___, obtuse___, brainless___, dimwitted___, injudicious___.

The lead detective has made a list of clues and leads. *He ticks off those that have no possible value to the investigation.* He speaks to a colleague. “These are all _____.”

Select five of the above words to complete the sentence in the italicized context to communicate that specific point to his colleague and prioritize them “best first” 1 to 5 in _____. That is, find the best single words that accurately encompass the context’s import with a minimum of extraneous added meaning. Afterward look down the page for discussion.*

2.5 Replace the italicized text with a specific new context such that a different word from this list becomes the new best fit when he summarizes the ticked-off list to his partner. Continue this process until you have used about half of the above in specific textual examples.†

2.6 Turn to your own work in a bit of text where you felt you had a particularly close, useful or interesting single word describing a context (preferably in dialogue but narrative is OK). Create a thesaurus list by expanding on the various synonyms until it contains at least 20 reasonable alternatives (there are about 45 in the above list). Perform 2.4, 2.5 on that list.

Discussion

Do not come here until you have done the first exercise 2.4.

* My list from best downward is: useless, useless, useless, useless and useless. Providing “useless” is on your list one would not wish to split hairs with you. If it came first, at least one editor agrees with you for whatever that is worth. The right word is not necessarily a clever or unusual word. A few of these words are reasonable choices but they say more (that can have value in narrative to be sure) but the instruction was: “...with a minimum of extraneous added meaning.” Many of the words are not appropriate; check out your choices and make sure next time that the “clever” word is the “right word”.

† Exercise 2.5 deals with the converse concept: finding the context to fit the word. For example, “*no possible connection*” would probably best fit with “irrelevant” in 2.5 etc.

3. Conciseness

A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

William Strunk and E B White, *The Elements of Style*

Note: I stated earlier in this document that intentional repetition of words “for effect” was “three times” rather than two or four. I stand corrected by this artful counterexample.

Lack of conciseness is the one universal weakness (so far) in every MS I have reviewed or helped edit. I refer to the serious submissions of 30 pages or more, all of which we fully read and comment on in detail—over 300 so far. This also applied to my own earlier work.

It may happen in part because of what I call the “word count” syndrome. Mainstream adult novels range from 80,000 to 120,000 words—full range perhaps 60,000–160,000 words. Established writers are often encouraged by their publishers to go even longer. They say that the book-buying public feels that they are getting more for their money if the paperback won’t fit in their pocket. I sometimes wonder. But do we as writers have a subconscious desire not to *throw away* any words? Did the demands in school for the “2000 word essay” impart a bad habit? In most of the MSS I handle, the author is writing well in good English with signs of skill and inspiration. That isn’t the problem. It is simply that Strunk and White’s dictum is not being followed and that trumps any other argument or defense.

Then we are often not sure just what is an optimum sentence, word, flow, or level of detail. So we use a shotgun instead of a stiletto to murder our MS. I remind myself that Charles Dickens wrote with a pen; Dostoyevsky (and others) wrote on toilet paper in a prison cell. We have the luxury of the computer but with power goes responsibility. Here is what I do now and others have reported to me similar changes in their modus operandi. Type a bit. If you don’t like it, do it again immediately. And repeat as needed. There is no need now to delete or go back, just hit the keys (piano practice is again a good analogy). Then feel free to reread, cut, paste, and produce the perfect sentence or paragraph—then and there—from the whole. Note that pace and flow may suffer if one pauses too long on a detail; you will be back. I would expect an e-mail on this point claiming the opposite. [It takes all kinds.] That’s a cliché and I took it out; what you see is a faint remnant.

There are less justified causes as well: sloppiness, laziness and impatience. The last of these can be an essential in the creative processes of some writers (myself included). Proceed as in the previous paragraph—in restrained impatience, and if it is recognized that a deeper edit may be required afterward, this fault is perhaps survivable. Patience: a message to take home?

3.1 Look through your MS for some narrative (without a lot of dialogue is better) that was a “pretty fair go” and yet didn’t quite make it. A key scene between 4 and 8 pages of text is optimum for this exercise. Put it in a separate file. Edit it to *half* the original length while fully maintaining the value of the scene to the whole MS. For example: delete weak sentences, combine 2 loose or redundant sentences into one then shorten, go back to Part Two for ideas.

3.2 Then edit it to 30% or less of the original length in a new file. When it has been cut “to the bone”, read them all out loud to yourself (longest first).

4. Sound

There is *poetry* in good prose; it has a meter, a beat, an ebb and flow. It lulls you into entering that other place the writer wants to take you. You may well not notice it when reading great writing—you were not intended to! As with many other arts and crafts, you become aware only when it's wrong or absent. The English may be impeccable, yet it is *unpleasant* to read.

Writing is indeed about getting the story across. That is the destination. But as the cruise brochure said, the better part should be the traveling itself.

4.1 Go back through the several earlier examples of raw text that you then improved in the exercises. Read the original out loud, then the edited version. Take this seriously. Imagine you have an audience, stand up, hold the pages in your hands or better place them on an actual or improvised lectern. If you stumble, remember those places but keep on reading. When you finish one, go back and mark the rough spots. Sit down at your computer to perform another edit, but this time only consider the audible, verbal flow. Speak your text over and over until the new version is smooth, your voice modulates naturally, the number of beats in each phrase is somehow “right” (Poetry is more exacting, for example a poem may be entirely in iambic pentameter, but the principle applies here as well.) Don't worry about the words or even the grammar for the moment: cut, move, try and verify. Do this exercise at least once a week until you have the idea firmly tamped down. You may then find that the flow comes automatically when you write, or at least you can do it when you consciously edit in that direction.

4.2 When you happen to notice a particularly fluid bit of writing in a book you are reading, say a page or a short scene (and this can include dialogue), mark it and page-number it inside the back cover. Create a file in the computer that is a précis of the text, a good summary of the essentials. You are going to write your own version later, so condition it with that in mind. Label and save the file in a convenient place and mark in your diary at a date about one week hence: “Exercise 4.2 to do today, see file abc.doc.” Do not refer to the original, but instead pull up your synopsis, read it carefully, then write the scene for yourself. Do it properly, take time with it, do the best you can. It absolutely does not matter if you use an entirely different structure, order, paragraphing, or anything else unrelated to the original. Read it out loud and write it as you might a poem, concentrating on smooth delivery, but it is prose in your style and writer's voice. Leave it for a day if you want then come back to edit with a fresh eye but continue to concentrate on the *sound*. Choose a few words that fit the smooth delivery even if you don't think they are quite the right words. This might feel like it did if you chose a word from the list in exercise 2.4 that you later decided was inappropriate. If it *sounds* right and other choices don't, or switching around the word order in a sentence or the sentences in the paragraph are not working, keep that word for now. Do what you have to in order to make it smooth as the proverbial silk sheets you had your fictional lovers buy and put on the bed in your first novel. Feel it, *love it*. When you are satisfied that you are there, go back to the reference and read that writer's version. Stand up and deliver his text, then your text. Don't write a letter to the *Literary Times* if yours is actually better but it may well be so.

4.3 Perform 4.2 on a scene from your own work then come back to it at least three separate times with a day or more intervening. Do this on a regular basis until it becomes more natural to do it as you write and you at least begin to remember to do it and how it feels. Then you are there.

4.4 Choose a short segment of text from your own work that gave you chills of satisfaction running up and down your back. Write a sonnet (14 lines, 4, 4, 4, 2) rhyming or free verse. Pick a number between 7 and 12 (draw cards or throw dice if you want). Assure that the number of syllables in each line is that number. Then also contrive to have the natural beats fall with the same rhythm in every line. For example, “Um diddy um diddy um de dum.” That’s nine, a good number. One—two/three—four—five/six—seven—eight—nine. Or you can start the process by simply writing down some lines of about the right length that work for you and begin to raise the same feelings. Then pick the parameters that work.

I have written about 50 poems (because I enjoy it) without the slightest intention of trying to publish them. They are for me. Here is one of them.

Hippopotamus

**The Hippo is a funny fellow.
He does mostly spend his day below,
protecting hide and lying doggo,
in dark brown waters under willow.**

**From time to time rising to bellow,
and play euphonium so mellow.
Is this to call in soulful sorrow?
Or wish for a joyful tomorrow?**

**In the water he moves like a scow,
churning great waves sent off with a blow.
Surprising on land as swinging low,
he runs at the speed of a velo!**

**Hay of the veldt he does at night mow,
leaving none behind to lie fallow.
Great lion in his coat of yellow,
passes well clear without a “hello”!**

**His head never rests upon pillow,
he plays neither xylo nor cello.
It’s a very great joy to follow,
our most wondrous dear friend the Hippo.**

February 2002, Masai Mara, Kenya

Paul Muller in appreciation of Voyager Lodge

Obviously I like rhyming poetry. The meter of each line is not the same. So don’t worry overmuch about that; if it reads well you are home. This one is not perfect. I stumbled once reading it out loud today, not having seen it in 5 years. The point is to try and *experience*.

The rhyming requirement is an interesting one to essay: a challenge to be sure. But it forces one to order sentences and phrases in unusual ways and that is a useful part of the game.

Did you notice that every line has the same rhyme (though “scow/blow” is not perfect)? I first created a large rhyming word list by brainstorming without preconceptions. This is directly related to what one can do in the development of a MS at key points when “word searching”.

Accomplished poets often make for the best writers of prose because they bring to their art years of paying close attention to the sound of language, to its rhythm, breaks, to subtle elements like alliterations and echoes. Lukeman *ibid*.

As he goes on to say, if one has dealt with the issues noted above in this guide, the sound should not be overtly bad. The poorly divided sentence, misuse of commas and other punctuation, too much or too little ground covered in typical sentences, will inevitably poison the sound and rhythm. But you have already dealt with all that or will later for the escapees.

Reading out loud and paying attention cannot be overemphasized as a tool.

Let us go back to basics and review punctuation (in all cases also see Part Two).

Comma: If there are two (or more) commas in a sentence, the third (last) part should read with the first if the second (others) is/are left out (test this on every occurrence):

Peter was concerned that Larry, who was standing nearby, might miss something.

Note the last sentence above the boldface line on this page (with three commas).

This illustrates another important point. Most elements of text (phrases, sentences, paragraphs, scenes, chapters and novels) have a beginning (introduction), a middle (development) and an end (result). Note that this rule is consistent with that structure in the example sentences.

A sentence without a clear beginning, middle, and end, probably should not be made up with paired commas. That can be a clue to revision.

Peter was walking slowly, having visited his mother, thinking about life.

→ Peter was walking slowly thinking about life. He had just visited his mother.

There is a clue here, aside from awkwardness (that in a better example one might not notice at first). The original sentence does not fit the pattern (beginning, development, resolution). Thinking about life is not a resolution. Walking slowly is not a beginning, it is a continuous action, and visiting mother is set in the past, not a currently occurring action.

Observe that we are inviting the reader to relate the two, rather than saying...and these visits often put him in such a reflective mood. Another judgment call, yet less is usually more.

In a list one separates with commas, except for the last item if preceded by “and”. There are many examples in this document (and I hope I punctuated all of them correctly).

The modern trend is away from placing a comma before “and” unless the “and” introduces a major element that stands on its own (see Part Two).

Semicolon: The referenced publisher’s guide (from Spinster’s Ink) suggests replacing all semicolons with periods (full stops). That is a defensible simplification for beginning writers, because semicolons separate *complete sentences* that one wants to link together, because they relate closely, into one technically grammatical sentence. That’s a judgment call. It is also

used to separate lists of complete thoughts or ideas. I tended to use commas for that in this document, so some editors might take issue with me.

It is best to use these sparingly, and only when two sentences run awkwardly one after the other, are very closely related, other attempts to restructure the paragraph are not working and you have enough experience not to know better... Avoid using more than one.

Colon: Its primary and simplest use is to set off a list. There are many examples here.

Every aspect of his personality was consistent with one diagnosis: he was paranoid.

Test: if you replace the colon with “that is” and it works, the usage is defensible.

Hyphen: This is only used to hyphenate within a word.

She repeats the name to herself as an incantation against the ill-luck (sic) that this dark-suited stranger must surely bring to them.

The first is an error in a MS we reviewed; it is not hyphenated. Check in the dictionary every time. But “rake-off” is hyphenated when used as a noun referring to the lost wagers raked off (the verb pair is not hyphenated) by a croupier in a casino. It is mandatory to check every hyphenated word. See Part Two for further discussion of this technical issue.

The second is a compound adjective and they must of course be hyphenated. But check them all; is there a better way to avoid it by revision? Can one be cut? The pair replaced with one word? In this case it is reasonable and fits the context, so it was left in the MS.

The em-dash (hyphenated) is like parentheses but better suited to the informality of narrative text in a novel. It can also be used to indicate an afterthought: The train was late—very late.

The ellipsis (...) is for a pause or break in the action or dialogue. At the end of a paragraph ending in quoted dialogue it might, for example, indicate an interruption by the next speaker. When a sentence or paragraph ends with one, the third point is technically the period (full stop) that ends the sentence.

The difference is that the em-dash is a textual break—not a break in the action—a punctuation mark relating to text. The ellipsis is like an instruction to pause in the dialogue or action when something is filmed. It indicates something is actually happening (actually, not happening, because it denotes a pause in the action).

Parentheses “(..)” like the em-dash to set off a clarification or digressive point and must always appear in pairs (whereas the em-dash as we have seen can fly solo). It is more formal and feels “technical” and so is only rarely seen in fiction narrative text. Use the em-dash by preference.

The en-dash is for separating numbers and similar duty: It was going to be 10–12 hours. The answer to the problem was –35. Use in preference to the simple hyphen: 10-12 (sic). Or write it out. It was going to be 10 to 12 hours. See Part Two.

These four (—, –, ... and - hyphen itself) are distinct, distinctive and important.

We will now assume that you have cleaned up all the punctuation, minimized commas, eliminated broken sentences, fractured paragraphs—but it still does not seem to read quite right either out loud or in your head.

If it just isn't working, try the poet's trick. Reorganize, alter word and sentence order, even randomly as if you were writing a poem and trying to find the best rhythm irrespective of classical grammar or structure. Also consider the following...

Clues.

Echoes are repeated words either locally (in a paragraph or page), or globally (unusual words or expressions across the whole MS).

Global Echoes (repetitions): If you write, "It will be all right on the night," it would be unwise to use the same expression again anywhere in the MS. Unless perhaps, it was something one of your characters said over and over and you are drawing implications from those repetitions. That's the point: repetitions of this kind call attention to themselves even spanning the full MS. Cut if you don't truly need them.

Then there are the unusual words as has been called out elsewhere, *e.g.* onomatopoeia. Limit is one to a character per MS. And again, be absolutely certain that it is the best word from all of the other unusual words you might have chosen for the context at that point in the MS.

Local Echoes (repetitions): The most common echoes arise in IDs on dialogue: to indicate who is speaking. This was introduced in Part Two. There are tricks to minimize these, but again, reading out the dialogue will tell you when it's awkward, repetitive or boring.

Rule: If you do not need to ID the dialogue, don't. Trust your reader. But be sure to give a clue now and then. This will automatically read more smoothly with fewer breaks and hiccups.

Rule: Do not ID the dialogue in the middle of a quotation. That space is strictly reserved for special circumstances, usually some action that interrupts the dialogue or narrative essential to showing a change in mood or situation during the spoken lines. Try to avoid them by simple reorganization. It will usually work better. See Part Two.

Indirection: the characters can address each other, refer to characteristics, mannerisms, and in other ways ID themselves and/or the partner even in a roomful of people. Referring back to something that they share in common that happened before can serve double duty for it also reminds the reader of that earlier event or clue.

Descriptive: John twiddled his beard nervously, "I hope you are damn sure about this investment." Even if there are eight people at the table sharing dinner, if we know that only one of them is offering such advice (or investment), the ID is clear. And if John is the only one investing, the lead-in ID can be cut.

Clues: The most obvious one is machine-gun dialogue and you are running out of ID alternatives. Simplify, or have a character pass two or three thoughts in a quotation rather than one. Only in argumentative moods or under high stress do we shoot single thoughts like bullets. Normally we put several ideas into a piece of dialogue before yielding the floor.

In a two-hander we usually know who is speaking because the banter goes back and forth, and one *never* has two different people speaking in the same paragraph. That is one reason

for that rule: it avoids confusion. And even if one did label each speaker, it would inevitably create a disastrously awkward paragraph. We do see this “no-no” at times.

In a two-hander it isn’t necessary to use “Paul said” or its usually more awkward alternative (a recent trend that sounds false to my ear) “said Paul”. It can make sense with the first line of dialogue or if a reminder is essential after a long exchange. But note that there are many other ways of giving these clues, and some of these can provide additional useful information without having to make the point in additional narrative.

A digression on the subject of “Paul said” versus “said Paul”: the classical form is direct.

Paul said, “It will work best if we go to the CIA first.”

“It will work best if we go to the CIA first,” said Paul. Or: Said Paul, “It...??”

To the editor’s (and reader’s eye) the first is clearly easier, because *we know who is speaking before* they speak. It is suggested that the second should be used sparingly, perhaps only if that improves the *sound* and *rhythm* as it might well do in occasional textual examples. The third alternative surely isn’t realistic even in alternative fiction.

The reader will need clues any time the context might be ambiguous and one of the easiest ways to beat that rap is to have character “A” address character “B”: “George, I’m fed up with all this crap.” This can also work when there are 3 or more present when it is clear that either only two are talking, or that it cannot be someone else barging in to the conversation.

If there is only one female in a non-camp gathering and someone talks about her own makeup or dress then it must be she. *Note*: this is a formal document and must be stylistically and grammatically correct. No doubt I have made errors and they will be winkled out in later edits and with the help of readers. But the use of “she” is correct here, because “she” is the subject of the sentence. You can test this by completing a pedantic version of it:

...talks about her own makeup or dress then it must be she *who is talking*.

In dialogue almost everyone would say...it must be *her*. And pretty much anything goes in dialogue. Were someone to use “she” here, one might infer that the person was pedantic, or well educated. These are the subtleties in good writing that add up through a MS to provide something special *in the traveling*.

Trick: Automatically eliminate virtually all local echoes even of ordinary words.

There are several paragraphs in this document where I have carried that to an extreme to make the point and have called attention to one or two.

→ There are several paragraphs in this document where I have carried that to an extreme and remarked on them.

This avoids reps of: have, have, to, to, to, two—and simplifies. The reader does not need to be told “make the point”. All of the edits cited as arising in the text of this MS are real.

We are getting into subtleties now and good rules are hard come by. I do suggest this one at least as an indicator of awkwardness both in sentence structure and sound.

Rule: Eliminate or at least examine all repetitions even of ordinary words in a local segment of text (sentence, paragraph, scene segment). This includes homophones as above. Said examination should include...reading out loud.

Alliteration: is the repetition of a sound (usually the first or last syllable) in two or more nearby words. It was a little lake lying nearby. It was a lake lying nearly next door. Rhymes are a “hell no”.

These can affect text negatively across more than a sentence or two.

If used intentionally, do so sparingly. All others should be modified or eliminated.

Pace and anticipation:

Example 4.1: We are reading two pages of single-line quotations with no narrative insertions.

An argument is taking place and we have rat-a-tat dialogue. (I checked rat-a-tat and chose it to avoid the repetition of “machine-gun dialogue”.)

Then we approach a block of multiline narrative and it is the last paragraph of the chapter. The subconscious eye senses its approach in peripheral vision before we even become aware of it. The throat tightens in anticipation.

“And that’s my last word.”

“It certainly is.”

The gun exploded in harsh reports echoing around the metal building. Peter pitched over backward and landed like a fried egg on the oil-slicked garage floor. The blood from what little was left of his head rapidly displaced the thin layer of oil and Newton’s rings shimmered through it under the garish spotlighting in an expanding halo of rainbows around his head. [End of Chapter]

You knew it was coming. That is an example of pace. The final paragraph also resonated in a way that was accentuated by contrast with the two pages of snappy dialogue that preceded it. I also decided to risk an intentional alliteration in the previous paragraph. Did you notice it? If you did, I made a bad decision. If you didn’t can you spot it now? Did you notice one in this paragraph? Can you spot it now? Take a moment to look before you go below.*

Example 4.2: One character is delivering lengthy segments of dialogue and the partner is responding tersely but not trivially. Back and forth: long, short, long, short... This contrast in pace and content alone would tell us a lot even if the text were blanked out. It is something we can feel and surely resonates if performed out loud. And if the verbose partner is also slightly bombastic in his choice of words while the terse partner is scoring clean points, a page of this can reveal reams in the characterizations without the writer having to tell the reader anything directly. We will come shortly to “show rather than tell”.

Further Examples: Have recourse once again to the complementary treatment of these subjects in Lukeman *ibid*.

* They are: “harsh” versus “garish” and “intentional” versus “alliteration” (a loose one but the words are adjacent). Try to read this latter sentence out loud. Does it improve the rhythm if “intentional” is cut? I would say yes and gladly trim, because it is clear to the reader that it was put in (or left in) for that reason. If it was otherwise and an explanation was necessary, one would change the text. Why did I use the word “trim” when “cut” is the precise technical term? Why didn’t I write: Is it better if “intentional” is cut? That’s better English.

5. Interregnum

This booklet is organized into levels of sophistication in editing your MS (or someone else's). It has been written by the senior partner and senior editor of a small literary agency, but one that is unique in the world so far as we know:

We only accept submissions from unpublished writers of fiction for adults.

Our mission is to assist such writers in refining MS for onward submissions.

We do not charge fees for services or front for those who do.

Some we ultimately represent, others we help find other agencies or to go it alone.

We are probably a rare bird in several distinct ways. The first approach to the Agency is via an email following the website www.aaraulit.com. It consists of a short email giving basic details about the writer in a brief CV with (optionally) a brief synopsis of their MS. That's right, we do not *require* a synopsis and if submitted is limited to 150 words (about the length of a dust-jacket version). The writer must either have a CV showing a maturity or experience in writing, or provide a professional referee (writer, librarian, teacher, or someone with that kind of experience to vouch for the MS).

Given all is right with the world as above we *always* commit to read 30 pages.

And that "read" includes a substantive report back to the writer.

Now I can come to the point. We read and comment on a lot of MS. In 6 years we have performed this service for over 300 different writers. It is my view and experience that similar skills are present in those who deal with entry-level personnel and those who are the chief executives. The intermediate positions on the corporate ladder, such as middle management, call for quite different mixes of skills. This certainly accords with my experience in NASA, technology business and consulting for top management in the applications of information technology. In my opinion the same applies to educators. The best university teachers often prefer to work with the entry-level students and the postgraduates.

That is my role in the Agency. I read most of the new submissions and am the senior editor in dealing with those accepted for full representation. Any first submissions I do not read always pass through my hands and I compare what I would have written with what has come from an associate.

Like a university class situation we do not succeed in every case, nor do we expect to. Not every new writer (or those changing genres) is really sure themselves what their goals may be or how hard they are prepared to work to get there. That is life and we respect everyone who approaches us to answer this question in the only way it can be: by *running the course*.

But with a submission to us you get a full reading and I am content to stand by the written record of our work. A goal in writing this *Style Guide* is to provide those who submit to us (and others) a look at the key fundamentals in the craft of writing in the form of a practical checklist that can be applied to existing and new documents with enough background material to make that a meaningful exercise.

Part One is intended to cover the basics of formatting for submissions.

Part Two is geared to the essentials of technical standards and basic editing.

Part Three turns to the next level of general standards and editing.

Part Four completes the course on general standards and final editing.

Part Five deals with the subtler factors of style and writer's voice.

A loose analogy suggests itself in relating these five stages to four years of university, plus postgraduate classes in writing. I do not mean it will substitute for that or is equivalent in any way. The analogy is in the sense of basics, refined basics, beginning professional level, finished professional level, then experience beyond the previously perhaps more clearly defined stages of development. That is to my mind analogous to a course of study in any technical discipline: four "years" of the basics, followed by a touch of the mysteries.

We have here reached the end of level three. If a MS truly satisfies all of the significant items covered so far, it should be considered *professional* by anyone reading it. To be *publishable* or something that will still be in print next century is another matter entirely.

But our fictional *Cassandra* has already told you that you are never going to be published! And still you persevere in order to prove the gods of writing wrong. So you are still with us.

This seems a good time (and level of mastery) to provide an interim checklist. The point here is to go through this list in your MS and not stop applying the tests and lessons so far covered until the whole MS fully satisfies every step. The price is high (it will take many weeks in a full length MS). The standards in this craft are high. But here is another point. They are commensurate with those demanded of engineers, biologists, commercial artists, trained businessmen and anyone else who has completed a good three years in a university major. A plus is that you don't have to go to university unless you want to.

All you need to do at this level is learn the craft. Liken it to cabinetmaking if you wish. There are some good analogous connections there as well. And you could pick others.

The biggest single error in the perception of new writers is that anyone can do it without much training or technical prowess. I cannot and you cannot.

This is a craft that demands training, technical skills and constant attention to them.

When you submit a MS you are claiming to offer a *professional* product that is the culmination of such training (however achieved) and its consistent application.

When you go into the ER in a hospital you expect to be seen by professionals at all levels.

That is why publishers and agencies are themselves so discriminating. We don't often see a *professional* product, and a book is a product to be sold as such (or at least enjoyed).

Spend the year at it if need be. Let *yours* be a professional submission in every way.

Achieve that by seriously applying the following checklist and the foregoing suggestions and examples to each and every paragraph of your MS.

Augment this with *The First Five Pages* by Noah Lukeman, to which in many ways this has turned out to be a *companion* piece. We recommend using the two together.

Annotated Editorial Checklist

- You are now going to professionally edit your MS to the “sophomore” level. If this is unclear, please reread the previous page.
- If we are already reading your material and have invited you to submit short examples for assistance during edit, then feel free to make those submissions. They must always be in the form and format of the next bullet, and on the contact page in this case please provide a few lines of background on what it is and what you want back from us.
- Format right now the full MS according to the Part One submission requirements, all in one file, with the cover/contact page, the CV page, synopsis page and MS starting on page 4. This is to be done even if—especially if—you are not yet ready to submit. The point is that your *document under edit* is to be in this form and format from the beginning. Note font, indentation and other technical requirements.
- Email it to yourself, open the email and file, then check it.
- Do the same *again* just before actually submitting and *check* every detail—thrice. We have a new product return policy! We will refuse to accept it otherwise. This is most easily done by going through Part One, line by line and satisfying yourself that it does.
- Ready to edit, open your full document and create at least two working backups of the original (emailing to yourself should be one of them), the other perhaps a memory stick or the equivalent.
- If not already fully and correctly formatted as above, attend to that now. This means that your MS begins on page 4. If you want page numbering while you work, put only a centered page number in the footer and nothing else there or in the header.
- Invoke *both* the spelling and grammar checkers. The use of Word for Windows is strongly recommended. It is the best WP package by far for writers. You can obtain a fully licensed copy of Word 2003 *from Office* (not the freebie) for a few dollars in any large software shop or by mail order. Learn to use it, note the suggestions above for shortcut keys to the em-dash and other special punctuation and features.

Preliminaries

- It will be best to work the edit in manageable segments of text, say of 5 pages to a maximum of about 20 (or a full chapter each time). That is, apply this entire checklist to a given (mark it) section of text rather than do one part through the MS, then the next.
- If your MS is not organized to hook the reader in 5 pages or less and addict him in the next 25 or so, then reorganize it now. If you think you don’t need to do that I will lay 10:1 that you do. Less than 1% of MS can “get away” without it. Move lengthy introductions of characters, settings and scenes to later in the book. Note the exercises in Part Two that deal with this. If you have already had a submission accepted by us for further review, we will already have reached this point.

The Freshman Level Edit

- **Refer back to relevant sections of this document as needed.** If you need to find a topic, simply have it open in your WP and search for it.
- Read and reread any relevant sections of this document and/or the reference if you have the *slightest* doubt about what you are doing. You are wasting your time to guess. It would be like attempting brain surgery without the manual. The best surgeons review the X-rays and other diagnostics *and* the “book”, the Internet and colleagues. So does an auto mechanic. So must you and I.
- Check every quotation of dialogue and verify the punctuation. Work calmly, with precision and care. If it looks awkward or reads badly, reorganize now (as below).
- Check every word pair in the document that might even remotely be a single word, remove the space then note if the spell checker flags it. If it doesn't, it is one and accept it. See the table of unhyphenated prefixed words in Part Two. Improve your spotting skills.
- If the checker flags it and you think it may be hyphenated, go to the dictionary. Having it online standing in wait for you is a good idea (I always work that way). Put in the hyphenated form and see if it agrees. If it shows it as two words (unhyphenated), or does not have it, you are dealing with two separate unhyphenated words.
- Do *not* hyphenate noun pairs unless they show that way in the dictionary.
- Do hyphenate adjective pairs preceding their modified noun. This is a separate check from the preceding. The *Webster* will usually show these two cases in the definitions.
- If an adjective pair modifies a noun, and the pair is not in the dictionary hyphenated as preceding, then separate with a comma. He was a clever, scurrilous fellow. But as noted here, avoid them like the plague and proceed as follows:
 - Choose the better of the pair and cut the other one. He was a scurrilous fellow.
 - Cut both to test and see if you can improve the noun: He was a con artist.
 - If you find a better noun, can you leave it naked? Still want an adjective?
 - Then search afresh for the best *one*. He was a consummate con artist.
 - If none of this seems to work, rewrite, reorganize, cut a lot and paste back a little.
 - This is a good time to read the surrounding text out loud. Stand and deliver.
- At this *freshman* level you will, of course, check the spelling of any and all words that the checker underlines in red.
- At this *freshman* level you will, of course, check the grammar, structure and punctuation of any text underlined in green by the grammar checker. Even if it is in dialogue, make sure you understand why it was underlined, and make sure you are happy about your character uttering grammatically incorrect phrases! Try to figure these out for yourself, but the checker will tell you if you ask it (learn the shortcut keys for that).
- Keep the eagle eye open here, because it will underline repeated punctuation marks, extra spaces and other one-character errors with a *short underline* that can be missed. This is an invaluable aid in proofreading.

- Make a search on “ID” case sensitive in this document. You will find this discussed in Part Two and Part Three. Reread these sections to refresh yourself on what you might look for in dialogue IDs with an eye to improving them.
- Consider every line of dialogue one after the other. Remove all unnecessary dialogue IDs. Minimize them assiduously. Consider replacing the simple “He said” with useful asides such as: He winced, “...” Don’t overdo that either, but the *occasional* added image from time to time can both help us meet your characters and avoid dry dialogue IDs. Give the ID before the quotation unless in rare exceptions, it reads noticeably better placed after. If this is happening frequently, be careful. You are asking the reader to defer knowing who is speaking until afterwards. And if it is obvious who is speaking, why ID at all? If a reminder is helpful after a passage of time, have one character address the other, or use a more subtle trick than simply inserting: John said, “...”
- Getting fatigued, eye sliding down the slippery slope of casual acceptance? Stop. Take a break for tea or a weekend. Or mark you place and comment, “End of dialogue checks, today’s date.” Then perhaps do a different kind of editing somewhere else, or take a break.
- Turning now to narrative, consider the *economy of style*. Search for that in this document, or the word “echo” or “repeated”. Refresh yourself on what you are looking for:
- This may be a good time to read a page out loud to yourself. When you stumble or feel there may be a problem, mark the text quickly and continue.
- Be sensitive to repetitions (echoes) of common words in local text, awkward sentences, problems of ordering (this time you can see that the reader, you, has been asked to remember too much for too long before the thought or action was completed).
- Begin at the top of the page and look carefully at every line, sentence—then back at individual words. If it is classy and smooth, pass on to the next but be sure it really is.
- In a problem area rewrite the sentence, clause or paragraph. Reorder text, sentences, word order, combine closely related sentences into one then edit that. Do not pass on until you are satisfied that it is perfect.
- If you spend an hour on one of your more complex pages this is not excessive. Some areas of narrative are more difficult to get smoothed out than others. As in any other craft or professional work, that is the time to bear down, be tough and patient.
- Getting fatigued? Mark the spot with what you have done or were doing so you can come back. Take a break or change the editing mode to something fresh.
- Providing the basic order and structure of the MS is good and you are happy with it, editing can jump all over the place. Tired of working this scene? You have just thought of something that might work in one 50 pages farther on? Then go there and bring your fresh eye to bear.
- There is a series of tables at the end of Part Two. You have just come back from your break and are ready to go again. Consider rereading part of the last few pages of Part Two to remind yourself. Does this ring any bells? If so, perform a search on your MS for the keyword if that will work. For example, you have just had a thought that you

might be misusing “further” and/or “farther”. Search through the whole document for first one, then the other and check each use.

- Or when in the mood, pick one of these and spend an editing session searching through the MS and checking every occurrence.
- Mix and match, keep it interesting. You find your eye skipping down the page, take a break, or work a different problem in a fresh attack.
- Continue to iterate until you have covered every point in Part Two in every paragraph of your MS. This could easily take a month or more. There is no substitute. Face that fact and hold it dear through the long hours. A change in editing pace or target can be as good as a break. Have a tea, change horses and run a new series of checks.

Editing at the Sophomore Level

- When you feel the MS has no more *freshman* level problems, no easily spotted rough places, you have cut all that can be cut using the first-year methods and checks, then step up to the next level.
- We will assume that you have mastered the technical skills called out in the introductory section at the start of Part Three. If you are not yet a touch typist, now is the time to learn. It will easily double your productivity for your whole life. Get a program and devote 30 minutes a day to it almost every day. Consistency is more efficient than hit and miss.
- Go down through Part Three to the section “Spotting Symptoms”. Do any of these tweak a recollection. Let your subconscious speak to you. Go carefully down the list. If you have any doubt about an item, for example perhaps the use of vulgar language outside of dialogue or you are not sure if one of your characters isn’t coming on too strongly, search for relevant keywords in your MS and bring a fresh eye to bear. A touch of this in dialogue is enough, same for accented speech presented via misspelled or special words. Read key passages again, carefully. Will an edit help.
- Go through this list several times. If anything sparks, track it down. Edit carefully when you hit pay dirt. Clean this particular syndrome from your whole MS once and for all. Then go on to the next.
- By the way, I used “pay dirt” above and that is correct. But I wasn’t sure, so I typed “paydirt”, noted that Word’s dictionary flagged it. Thinking it just might be hyphenated I went to the Merriam-webster Web site and checked. It is there as two separate words. I’m very good at this particular little byway of a skill, but still, I checked. I was 99% sure I was correct but I *checked*. The serious writer must do this every time and usually it is best done when it first comes up.
- Echoes (duplications) of unusual words should be checked every time. If you are now editing a full MS, check *every* unusual word as you come across it. The easiest way is to search for its root and see how many times it is used. In the example used here of “onomatopoeia” I would search for “onomato” because I would want to find all examples, not just the noun form.

- This applies to the middle ground of unusual words. In this MS I thought “flowing from” had been used a time or three. I just checked by searching for “flow” to find out. The root “flow” was used about 12 times but my memory had tricked me. I never used “flowing from”. I paused here to make the search because in the past I have overused that expression. Then I remembered. I had *wanted* to use it—it had *wanted* to come in there several times—but I had not *wanted* it to, so I replaced it. In the end I had avoided all of them! I am not trying to express either my ego or skill as a writer; this is a personal aside by way of illustration. But I feel confident in suggesting that when you begin to think this way when writing (or editing), you are moving in the right direction. That’s the point I want to make here.
- Such an example might be acceptable once or twice in a MS, but if you are using “flowing from” more often than that, you should not do so. Find a different and distinctive alternative and ring the changes. Ah, there’s another one of my favorites. I search on “ring the” and find three previous examples making this the fourth. That’s too many and a warning. I go back through and judge the impact in each case; which one or two is the best. The first was best and I replaced the others to better effect. I used “other alternatives” in one case and that was far more precisely what I needed to say there. The use of special expressions like this is often a sign of laziness, a flippant alternative to thinking about it critically and deciding what one really needs to say in plain text. It takes the investment of time. Parenthetically, I can now leave it here as an example. Had that not been the case, I would have replaced it: “Find a different and distinctive alternative.” The reader has it already and the simple cut is best (as usual).
- This might be a good time to reread “A Surfeit of Adjectives” and make a sophomore-level attack on that old enemy.
- When you find a block of text that is a bit messy, or you weren’t sure about during a previous edit, apply one or more of the exercises in that section (2.3, 2.6) or the next (3.1, 3.2). This can make a happy change from the grungier aspects of editing you have been immersed in lately.
- Every day choose a scene or significant section of text and do the “read it out loud” test. Then edit on that basis. If you are having deeper problems, consider exercise 4.3, that is the rewrite from scratch without the original text and after a passage of time.
- It is a lazy Sunday afternoon: you have had it in Spades with editing and you cannot face a blank screen in your ongoing new writing project. Get a cup of tea then come back to exercise 4.4. Save it to maybe send along with your eventual submission to the agency.
- On a day when a global edit for one specific fault is on your mind, search for every comma in the document. Pass on if it is a trivial use such as in a simple list. Otherwise read the full sentence and where useful some adjacent context. If there are two commas in the sentence, assure that leaving out the middle bit leaves a sensible full sentence. If there is only one make sure that you really need it. Would it read better broken into two sentences or left out? All nontrivial uses of the comma are *warnings* for they are often misused even by top professionals. Minimize, use sparingly and only when there is no better alternative. By the same token, don’t be afraid to use them, simply assure yourself that it is a clean and appropriate use.

- You can do the same as the foregoing with all of the following: em-dash—ellipsis...and parentheses.
- It can be interesting also to search through for each ordinary hyphen. Did you forget the em-dash or en-dash? Are you sure the word is hyphenated? Did you check? If it is a noun or adjective pair, is this the best way to express yourself there? Read the text out loud: does it run off the tongue well?
- Scan through your MS stopping at each section of narrative that is more than two or three lines long. Test, try and/or eliminate all local echoes (repetitions) of ordinary words. See the examples in Parts Two and Three.
- When you feel sure that the MS as a whole has been polished to the standards discussed so far in this document, then make some extra backups and let it rest for at least two weeks.
- When you are ready to edit again begin by reading the first scene (Prologue or start of Chapter 1) out loud. Print a good copy (increase font size if it helps). Use or fashion a lectern for the pages that is at a useful height and angle. Get a good light. Have a glass of water and two sharp pencils handy. Turn on the light, clear your throat, stand up, address your audience and read it nonstop. Mark every place you stumble, or dislike for any reason in terms of rhythm, pace or sound. Make the marks quickly with a stroke of the pencil, and continue reading.
- Take account of all marked text, bringing to bear as many of the checklist items as is necessary until you find the reasons for each problem area and correct every one. Be honest with yourself and your professional work here. If it takes an hour per page or more to eliminate these last rough spots so be it. In fact to a degree the more time it takes to perfect it to your standards the better! Here, more is less and that less is more.
- Test: If you find less than one per page in the first 30 pages, take your sophomore's diploma. You may submit the 30 pages to us (if and when agreed) and assume that the rest of the MS is to this standard. This is the *fast-track* I promised you and discussed earlier.
- If it was worse than this then continue editing through the whole MS even if it takes another three months. The point is to have a MS with no more than one slight stumble per page *throughout*. Then go back three bullets and have another go at the first 30 pages.

Note: If you *choose to believe* that any professional novelist writing today got there any easier than this, disabuse yourself of that notion right now. If you believe that it was luck, or a good agent, or a great editor, or even natural talent, forget it. *Most of these others involved* are important, but without a professional MS of the first water there is nothing for them to work with. And you don't get that even with natural talent short of doing in effect all that is called out here.

Strategic Recapitulation

It will be apparent that this document intentionally begins with basics and brief introductions to the essentials. Then we run through most of them again in greater detail with further examples and explanation. We also strongly recommend doing the same in parallel using Lukeman's *The First Five Pages*. This adds another repetition from a usefully distinct perspective and with examples and exercises consistent with his "senior man's" take on the process. We feel that the two documents complement each other. I read him as looking down from the top of the profession with kindness and concern in his heart. I am looking up from the bottom trying to do what he suggests in the real world. I hope we meet with you in the middle, all able to benefit from our experience of the realities.

We go on to provide a checklist (above) in more detail than might have been expected given the title's implied claim. It is undeniably more compact than the other iterations through the process but not yet a true checklist. So to close the loop (introduction, expansion, reduced summary, minimum checklist) we provide this final step. It is a bit like climbing a mountain: first up the gentle incline, pitons and ropes to get to the top, then down the other side feeling our way because descending is in some ways more difficult and finally we can sit down in a pleasant meadow and contemplate the journey.

This is an imperfect document (and a work in progress). I am not satisfied with several subsections and do not have a strong feeling that the structure has settled down yet. Perhaps using it for a year or two will get us there, with the inputs and assistance of others trying to apply it. But the same point just made above applies to this document equally with any MS of yours or mine. *It will not get there without a lot more hard work, repeated edits and the benefit of outside contributions.*

It is incomplete for another reason. Writing professionally as an art form or even simply as a matter of sublime craftsmanship is not something that anybody can do like falling off of a log. Hundreds of books have been written about writing and writers. It is like love: the story never ends. If one feels that it should be possible to teach enough, to show enough, to inspire enough in one book to transform even a dedicated lover of writing into a writer, then one must disabuse oneself of that fallacy as well. An engineer, doctor, lawyer, teacher, mechanic, builder or artisan would not *dream* of expecting to find all that he needs to know in one book, or learn it well in less than several *years*. Facing that truth will help. Patience is an unalloyed virtue.

This checklist is obviously not going to be like one guiding the assembly of an IKEA desk. It cannot be sequential in that sense. So you will want to apply it with sensitivity to your own weaknesses (and strengths). You will likely benefit from rereading sections of the two references from time to time and applying the exercises or other tricks when appropriate. If you do that consistently, then one by one the tricks, clues, symptoms and remedies will become automatic (in your repertoire) and the list of those that you must *think* about and force on your MS will decrease. In a time and dedication comparable for the preparation needed to take up any other profession or trade you can become a writer who produces professional work efficiently.

Minimalist Editor's Checklist

- Get an outside readership including at least one professional (writer, teacher, librarian, experienced reader who will tell you the truth). Consider revealing your work in a writer's group, or a creative writing class in further education. Ask their views on problem areas in your text. "Alerting me to problems I fail to recognize is a major contribution to my development as a writer and to this MS." This also anticipates the next two levels of a writer's development when other subtleties enter the picture. It is not too soon to make a start with that if someone touches on an example. You can read ahead in Lukeman *ibid* as well.
- Recheck at this time every aspect of the technical formatting of Part One. Assure that your MS adheres to the page structure of introductory material and do not separate those pages from your text ever again. Your MS therefore begins in earnest on page 4.
- Make backups and e-mail one to yourself, open it, and check that it is complete.
- Turn on spell and grammar checks and leave on. Investigate all "complaints".
- Assure that the first five pages hook and the next 25 addict your reader.
Reorganize and edit until this is the case.
- Work a given session in one of two modes:
 1. Work a defined section of text covering all aspects of editing.
Read it out loud to begin an editing session and to end it.
Come back again if something isn't right (mark it to remind).
 2. Run one type of check through the whole MS or large volumes of it.
- Verify correct punctuation in every line of dialogue. Edit if anything else seems amiss.
- Minimize, reconsider and simplify dialogue IDs.
- Check every hyphenated word or word pair that might be a single word.
- Reconsider every double adjective or other multiple descriptive words or passages.
Searching for the comma is a good way to globally edit for this one.
- Searching for em-dash and ellipsis can reveal awkward places or the need to recheck.
- Cut out all "bullshit" words: see the "Instead Of: ...Use:" Table in Part Two.
- When you find a multiple-line segment of (especially) narrative text that isn't quite right:
Check for echoes (duplications) of common words.
Check the rhythm and sound by reading it out loud.
Try exercises 2.3, 2.6, 3.1 or 3.2 as may be appropriate, or take a clue from them.
If it won't budge, try exercise 4.3.
Tired of life as a writer? Try exercise 4.4 on an emotional section of your MS.
- Scan through your text in an area you haven't visited recently.
Stop on long paragraphs of narrative. Read them out loud and apply all above edits.
- Consider flow and pace as best you can.
Every paragraph, scene and chapter has a beginning, a middle, and an end.
Place scene and chapter breaks at logical points with a great tagline.
- Sleep on it. Then start again one more time from the top.