

Viewing Yourself Through the Page: Gaining Perspective for Self-Editing

This session will help participants make sound decisions about where to begin editing their work in progress and when to ask for help. Most importantly, it will help writers practice some metafictional skills (the practice of thinking about how we write) so that we can trick our brains into approaching our own pages with a fresh editing perspective.

Task 1: Let's begin by visualizing and then interviewing your target audience.

*Imagine a person who represents your **target audience** finding your book in the bookstore and settling down into a cozy chair to read it. If you are unsure who your target audience is, you can consider readers of comps/similar works in the genre.*

(If you're really unsure just imagine an agent/editor/fan reading it ☺ and find comps later)

- What important theme do you want this reader to get out of your book?
- How would you want them to describe your book to their friend?
- What will they think worked best about your story and character arc?
- What might they criticize?
- What will they like about the ending, and does it tie into the theme?
- Where might they have questioned motivation, plausibility, or plot sequence?
- What is the “dark night of the soul” moment, and why does it resonate with them?

Now, keeping this in mind, let's consider our editing **needs**:

- Are you attending to a specific concern? An editor or beta reader's? Are you just looking to give the work a general polish? Are you concerned with the entire work or one section?
- Do you need to lengthen or shorten your work in order to fit into [genre conventions](#)?
- Are you concerned that you've not fulfilled a clear character arc or resolved all your plot points? Consider reading *Save the Cat* and or working with the A/B story questions on the next page.
- Other common concerns:

the “sagging middle” problem

micro editing: finding redundant vocabulary, repeated words in proximity, clichés, needless speech tags, or clunky sentence patterns

meso editing: revising for consistent characterization, tightening dialogue and/or polishing your narrative style and prose, weeding out unnecessary action blow by blows, making sure chapters feel logical and or end with tension to carry reader forward

macro editing: layering in themes and symbols, snipping of extraneous plot threads, mirroring first chapter to last, correcting story inaccuracies, synching up plot lines (story **A**/outer plotline vs story **B**/character growth)

Remember, proofreading is not editing! That comes last.

Here's a quick rundown of the most frequent manuscript issues I see when editing:

1. The opening and closing scene don't mirror each other and/or intended themes feel inconsistent.
2. The main characters were not given clear personalities until late in the story.
3. The main character does not have a clear motivation and story arc.
4. Major characters acted inconsistently and/or only reacts rather than acting.
5. The antagonists are quickly dispelled and/or too many antagonists enter and leave.
6. A large story thread was dropped.
7. The opening begins with a large amount of backstory or generally does not show agency on the part of the protagonist.
8. The middle sags and/or the story goes in a different direction from the opening premise.
9. Dialogue and "blow by blows" slow down the pacing.
10. The story summarizes the most interesting parts the reader wanted to read!
11. Plot or stakes are overcome easily and the reader didn't get the joy the fun and games.

Task 2: Please journal/freewrite about how you want to approach your editing process. You can also, if you wish, discuss this with a pal. If you feel stuck, try this:

*Imagine yourself five years into the future. Once your book is glowing on the shelf or safely in the hands of your beloved reader, what will **you** be most proud of? And how will you have accomplished this? What was the biggest change you implemented, on a small or large level, to make the book what you needed it to be? What kept you from making this edit/change sooner? How did you overcome this resistance?*

Of course, if you're feeling like something ISN'T working, then we can focus on the negative (yuck) instead. What do you think you will wish you had changed, years later, if it's published now? What didn't you get to finish or perfect? Or do you think it's good enough as is?

Task 3 (most likely this will be completed at home). At some point, you'll have to ensure you've fleshed out the A and B story. Here's a quick review with some metacognitive writing you can do now.

Review of **PLOT** and **CHARACTER** arc:

Plot arc is the way in which your plot develops, point by point. It's the way events happen. This relates to how you maintain and add tension and decide where and when to end scenes/chapters. (**A-story**)

Your **character arc** is the way your character grows and changes, and this will connect closely with the theme. This is likely how you decide how characters react and develop. (**B-story**)

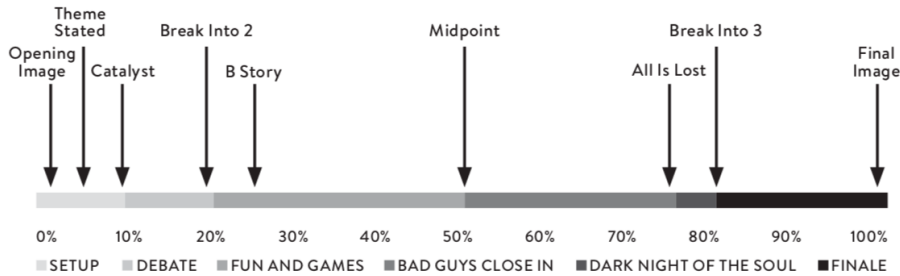
We can use the term **story arc** to cover both of these, and they are a major focus of revision. No matter how great your first draft was, it's unlikely you *won't* need to work on this.

A-Story: The general plot arc, context, setting, events. The overall "what happens in this book."

Ask yourself what major events happen in your novel and where they fall in the sequencing. Do these major events begin early on, then peak in some way in the middle, and then again near the end (a higher peak, usually?) There's no exact number of rising complications, but you want to follow a general building

of tension, likely with an inciting event, a ramping up of tension throughout, and then a climax. Does the protagonist succeed at overcoming the conflict, and if not, how do they fail/what happens?

FIGURE 1



This image is from *Save the Cat Writes a Novel*.

---Journal/freewrite a bit on what you feel is the heart of the A-Story (what genre or movie trailer would this book create, and why?) Work on an outline if you've never considered "plotting" before. If you feel stuck, write this as if you're your own protagonist and have no idea what's about to happen.

B-Story: The B-story is essentially the "character arc." It's how the character changes and grows and overcomes the flaws holding them back from achieving their goals. At some point, they experience a "dark night of the soul" moment where they make a major shift, even if it's unbeknownst to them.

---Journal about your B-Story. How does the character change/grow throughout? Will they ever achieve their personal goals or motivations? (This might be very different from the conflict). In short, what do they need to learn as a person, and do they learn it? Try the "asking the protagonist trick" if need be.

Intersection of A and B: Ask yourself how the A and B story intertwine. (STC would say they must criss-cross at certain points to be satisfying to the reader. For commercial fiction, I tend to agree).

---At what point does the B-Story/character flaw become crucial for protagonists to address in order to tackle the conflict in the A-Story? (whether or not they realize it) If this is hard for you to visualize re the protagonist; try asking the antagonist (minor or major) to answer this question for you.

Now, based on your writing and conversations today, **let's make a doable plan.**

Editing plan for _____

A. What aspects of **Macro** editing do you think you need to attend to?

B. What tools or resources might you need to start this step of the plan?

C. Is there any investigation, research, or reading on craft you wish to do first?

D. What is a reasonable timeline, given everything else you do, to complete this stage?

E. What aspects of **Meso** editing do you think you need to attend to?

F. What tools or resources might you need to start this step of the plan?

G. Is there any investigation, research, or reading on craft you wish to do first?

H. What is a reasonable timeline, given everything else you do, to conduct this stage?

I. What aspects of **Micro** editing do you think you need to attend to (most?)

J. What tools or resources might you need to start this step of the plan?

K. Is there any investigation, research, or reading on craft you wish to do first?

L. What is a reasonable timeline, given everything else you do, to conduct this stage?

What will you do if you get off track or lose confidence or become busy? Give yourself a few tips or words of encouragement below, because once you're busy, or stressed, it will be easy to convince yourself that your writing doesn't matter when it really does. Because YOU matter!

Here are more quick tricks to try to see your work “from the side.”

- Reread the first and last chapters. Do they sound like they were written by the same person? They should, and they should mirror thematically. If they’re not matching up, you’ll want to decide if you think the story went off the rails or if it went where it needed to go. If so, you might need to rework the first chapter to match.
- *Pretend* your critique groups mates have just read this book in full. What might they say? Why? How about your best friend? Someone who knows you inside and out?
- What would an imaginary (or real) confidant say? I like to tell Sidney Freedman my problems (the shrink from M*A*S*H). Or try reading it to that perfect unrequited crush you’ve always written amazing letters to in your head. Is this novel that good yet? Why or why not?
- **Don’t try to revise every aspect in one pass.** Divide mental tasks. Try to focus with one side of the brain at a time. Ex: dialogue and character development can go well together, or narrative voice and thematic revision. It’s tempting to work on all dialogue at once, but it can also divide your brain to try to handle reducing tags while *also* polishing and character development. I think of it as dealing with the mathematical or the language skills.
- While mostly in that left brain, ask yourself if every scene or line is needed, or if you just like it. Yes, this is about killing your darlings. If it’s unnecessary, but you just LOVE it, it might be time to cut it by **reassuring yourself that this scene can go in the sequel or as part of your giveaway content.** This often happens with long conversations, scenes that are mostly character development, our favorite “funny lines” or descriptive prose, and of course, prologues. Really ask yourself, and that imaginary reader with limited time to sit in your favorite chair and read: do they need to read this? How much does it add? Just flavor? Flavor and plot? Plot and characterization? Most lines should serve at least two purposes. If not, you’ll need to cut.
- No matter what type of revision or editing you’re looking at, **putting the novel aside** will help to **reduce our attachment.**
- However, there is one time I would encourage you to keep going with a revision right away, and that’s when theme and character development are involved. Have you just finished the ending or figured out an important concept about who your protagonist is? **Just nailed down that B-Story/character arc?** If so, and your edit is about something conceptual like this, and you’ve just been inspired, I encourage you to revise right away with an eye for theme and character arc.
- **Read it out loud.** Every work. A chapter a day. Really. Read with enthusiasm and pretend you’re recording your audiobook. This will help with polishing, pacing, repeated words and other unrecognized patterns that might annoy a reader. (You’ll also feel GREAT hearing it aloud!)
- If you **read your work out loud**, you’ll hear the words and phrases you overuse. I make a list, then keyword search them. This also helps me take out **qualifiers and distancers.** Here are some words we *all* overuse: really, some, very, every, never, “going to” verbs, and “that.”
- **Do proofreading and manuscript prep last.** Really. There’s no point in straining your eyes, or brain, to proofreading something that you’re going to change. You’ll have to proofread again.