SELF-EDITING ON A SENTENCE LEVEL

10 Simple Revisions for a Big Impact

Line editing can be a daunting affair, but it's easier when we know what to look for. It's best not to stress over sentence-level issues when drafting (perfectionism is paralyzing!) or when tackling big-picture edits (look past the trees and see the forest!). However, after issues such as plot, pacing, and character development have been addressed, it's time to start in on the nitty gritty.

Here are some simple sentence-level tips that have a big impact:

1. **Cut filter words.**

   Filters are words that draw attention to what the point-of-view character is experiencing rather than allowing the reader to participate on a visceral level. This includes phrases such as *I see, I feel, I hear, I watch, I think*. While there are a few occasions where filtering can be used for a specific effect, these words typically create unwanted narrative distance. Removing them from our writing will heighten the impact of sensory details and create a more immersive experience for readers.

   Examples: I watch the wounded bird flap its wings uselessly.
   Revision: The wounded bird flaps its wings uselessly.

   Hank stood under the hot water and felt the tension melt from his muscles.
   Revision: Hank stood under the hot water, and the tension melted from his muscles.

2. **Cut filler words.**

   Filler words sneak into our writing but serve no legitimate purpose. This wordiness lessens the impact of our writing. While filler words are unavoidable when we draft, removing them during revision makes our sentences less cluttered. Common filler words include *suddenly, really, just, that, actually, absolutely, utterly, only,* and *well*. It can also include phrases such as *started to* and *began to*; these words are typically only needed if the character doesn't complete their action. Another phrase to watch for is *there is/was*, which creates unnecessary narrative distance. Also keep an eye out for words that are already conveyed by the surrounding words. For example, *I shrugged my shoulders* can become *I shrugged*. The general rule: If it doesn't serve a purpose in the sentence, get rid of it! Dialogue, however, has more leniency. People use filler words constantly when speaking, so including some can mirror natural speech and distinguish character voices. Still, be sparing with it. We want our dialogue to give the impression of actual speech, not frustrate readers with repetitive fillers.

   Examples: Suddenly, he really wanted to sit and just do nothing.
   Revision: He wanted to sit and do nothing.

   I begin to brush my hair.
   Revision: I brush my hair.

   There was a bird on the tree branch.
   Revision: A bird perched on the tree branch.

   Maribel jumped up onto the chair and spun around in circles.
   Revision: Maribel jumped onto the chair and spun in circles.

3. **Replace weak verbs and delete unnecessary adverbs.**

   Adverbs can be powerful additions to our writing, but sometimes they weaken it. They may echo the verb they modify without adding any meaning, such as *whispered softly* or *ran quickly*. Other times, we include adverbs because we haven't used a precise verb. For example, instead of *whispered harshly*, we could use *hissed*. Instead of *walked slowly*, we could use *ambled*. Eliminating all adverbs from our work would be absurd, but we should analyze them to see if they're needed. When possible, use a strong verb instead.

   Examples: Jane slapped him harshly across the face.
   Revision: Jane slapped him across the face.

   I thought longingly of my mom's fresh-baked cinnamon rolls.
   Revision: I craved my mom's fresh-baked cinnamon rolls.

4. **Change passive voice to active voice.**

   In passive voice, something is being done to an object or character. In active voice, something or someone does the action. For example, *He was struck by the ball* is passive. *The ball struck him* is active. Active voice produces more evocative sentences. There are occasions when passive voice is appropriate, but it should be used sparingly and intentionally. A *to be* verb followed by an *-ing* verb (for example, *is running*) is not passive voice; it is used to show ongoing action. However, it can still create narrative distance and sentence clutter. For this construction, consider whether it is necessary to show continuing action, or if the verb team can be replaced by a simple verb (such as *runs*).

   Examples: The rabbit was chased by the fox. *(passive voice)*
   Revision: The fox chased the rabbit.

   I was humming along to the music. *(unnecessary use of a helping verb)*
   Revision: I hummed along to the music.

5. **Change out generic or repetitive actions and reactions.**

   He looked at her. She looked at him. He nodded. She smiled. When we draft, words like *look* and *smile* splatter through our writing. Not only do these words become repetitive, they often don't hold any meaning. If something or someone is described in the narration, readers can infer that the point-of-view character is looking at it/them; there's no need to call this out. If someone answered a question in the affirmative, nodding is superfluous. Smiling (or grinning, beaming, or smirking) can have meaning, but we may have our characters do it so often that it loses all impact. Besides, all of these reactions are generic, and they show readers very little about who the character is. Other reactions might convey emotion well, but we rely on them so much that readers become irritated by the repetition. There's only so much sighing, drawing in of breath, and pounding of hearts that can be endured before readers curl their fingers into fists.

   Instead of relying on generic or repetitive reactions, consider showing the characters having meaningful interactions with their environment.

   Examples: Georgia's heart pounded, and her fingers shook.
   Revision: Georgia tore her napkin into pieces before shoving her hands under her legs to keep her shaking fingers still.

   Carlos glared, his fingers bunching into fists.
   Revision: Carlos slammed his glass on the table with such force that the water sloshed.

6. **Change repetitive words and sounds.**

   Sometimes words creep into a paragraph multiple times, and we don't realize it—especially if the word is used in different contexts. These unintentional echoes should usually be reworded. Accidental alliteration can also occur when several words in a sentence start with the same sound. (Oh, hey, look at that last sentence!) There are times when we want the lyrical impact of repetition and alliteration. When it's unintended, however, it can create an unwelcome effect, including making our prose difficult to read. Reading our work aloud is an excellent way to catch both repetition and tongue twisters.

   Examples: I stumbled to the back of the room and leaned my back against the wall.
   Revision: I stumbled to the back of the room and leaned against the wall.

   Ahmed made marmalade and marshmallow sandwiches.
   Revision: Ahmed spread marmalade on the toast and added marshmallows.

7. **Vary sentence structure.**

   We can also create echoes with our sentence structure, creating prose that may feel choppy or singsong. A series of short, declarative sentences can speed up our pacing, but it can also produce an irritating rhythm. For longer sentences, using the same structure several times in a row can create unwanted repetition, whether it's using similar compound sentences or beginning several sentences with a dependent clause. (If you have no idea what these terms mean, see the examples below.) Multiple sentences beginning with the same word (often a pronoun) become redundant too. Fortunately, these issues can easily be fixed by combining or rearranging sentences. Another reason to read your work aloud!

   Examples: I ran to the door. There was no one there. I stepped outside. Someone ducked behind the oak tree. I called to them. They didn't answer.
   Revision: I ran to the door, but no one was there. When I stepped outside, someone ducked behind the oak tree, and I called to them. They didn't answer.

   As Maria ate, she read the news on her phone. When she finished, she switched to playing a game. (Both start with a dependent clause.)
   Revision: Maria read the news on her phone as she ate. When she finished, she switched to playing a game.

   I spit in his face, and he wipes my saliva from his cheek. He raises his fist, but I don't flinch. (Both are compound sentences with two clauses.)
   Revision: I spit in his face. He wipes my saliva from his cheek and raises his fist, but I don't flinch.

8. **Fix dialogue tags.**

   A lot can go wrong with dialogue tags. If we're too creative with them, we'll produce a melodramatic scene full of people screaming, muttering, and whispering when they should be using normal voices. If we stick to the insightful advice to use mostly *said* and *asked,* we might add mountains of adverbs to explain the tone. Perhaps our formatting is off. Maybe we've used *said* so many times that it's distracting. Here are some suggestions regarding dialogue tags:

- Recognize the difference between a dialogue tag and an action. I can whisper a word, but I can't sigh a word or smile a word. This is important for formatting. Dialogue tags need a comma, but actions need a period: *"I love you," she said*. BUT: *"I love you." She sighed*.
- Don't use a dialogue tag if it's clear who is speaking. Oftentimes, tags can be replaced by actions. If the action directly precedes or follows the dialogue in the same paragraph, readers will assume the person doing the action is the one speaking. This has the added benefit of making sure we don't end up with "talking head" dialogue in which there is no description of what the characters are doing during the conversation.
- Only describe tone if it's at odds with the dialogue. For example, if I write *"It'll be okay," she said comfortingly,* the word *comfortingly* is unnecessary; it's implied in the words. However, if I write, *"It'll be okay," she said sarcastically*, it's necessary to clarify the tone because it opposes what the words imply. Also, shy away from modifying dialogue tags with emotion words, such as: *"I hate you!" she said angrily.* This tells what the character is feeling instead of showing it. If the speech alone doesn't convey the emotion effectively, replace the emotion with a facial expression or action that reveals what the character is feeling.

9. **Use contractions.**

   Most contemporary native English speakers use contractions in their speech unless they're placing particular emphasis on one of the words. For example, "I'll go to the store today" is a casual statement. "I will go to the store today" implies the speaker is convincing themselves that they have it within them to go to the store today. A lack of contractions in narration or dialogue will give an archaic or stuffy tone to the voice. An exception is characters who would naturally speak with a lack of contractions, such as those whose first language is not English.

10. **Make sure body parts don't have motivations.**

    In our quest to vary the beginning of our sentences, we may end up with gems like this: *My hand reaches out, hoping I won't fall smack on my face in front of Johnny.* The problem here is that, grammatically speaking, *my hand* hopes I won't fall. Last I checked, my hand doesn't have thoughts or desires. It's typically safer to have the person doing the action if there's a clear purpose. In this case, revise to: *I reach out my hand to keep myself from falling smack on my face in front of Johnny*. Note also that *My hand shook* is very different than *I shook my hand*. The first implies that my hand is shaking without my intentional guidance—perhaps from nerves—while the second conveys that I am purposely shaking my hand, maybe to flick something off of it. Another problem commonly happens with eyes: *My eyes fell to the floor.* Most readers will understand what is being stated here, but taken out of context, it sure could sound like someone's eyeballs fell out. Consider changing to: *My gaze shifted to the floor.* Giving special attention to sentences starting with body parts can ensure that we don't end up with rapturous fingers or eyes longing to see our lover.

There is a lot more to line editing than these suggestions, of course. Line editing includes rephrasing confusing sentences, enhancing voice, and drawing attention to the emotional impact of our characters' thoughts and actions. Furthermore, there are no absolutes in writing. While following these suggestions can increase the power of our words, there are times when they don't apply. Just like the "rules" of grammar can be broken, the principles of line editing have their exceptions. In the end, we need to trust our writerly instincts—and sometimes get a second opinion.

HAPPY EDITING!