Self-Editing: A Novelist's Best Friend

By Karen Ball

From *Writers on Writing* (Wesleyan Publishing House)

Deadlines.

We all have 'em. For some they're a blessing, motivating us to set all those goals: words per day, pages per week, chapters per month, and so on. For others (and I fall in this camp), they're a bane, a guillotine blade hanging over my head as each day ticks by. Either way, with publishers pushing to get books out faster and sooner, it seems those dreaded deadlines are growing ever closer together. And that, my friends, is not good news. Because too many of us end up writing to the deadline, determined to meet it (or to miss it by as few days as humanly possible), rather than writing to ensure our craft is the strongest it can be. Some of us are barely finishing the writing before we turn the manuscripts in. Yes, that can work out fine, thanks to eagle-eyed editors and the gift of revision time. But are we giving our readers our best writing?

Too often, the answer is no.

So, what can we do about this tension? Well, the best solution is to take more time in the writing process. But if that isn't feasible, then at least take some time for a

solid self-edit. Yes, editors get paid for shaping and refining your manuscript. But you, as the writer, need to make refining your craft as much a focus as meeting a deadline.

Following are the Lucky Seven: seven editing checkpoints to help you ensure your story is crafted as well as possible. Of course, your writing may be just fine without following the following...er, uh...well, you know what I mean. But I think most of us will find our writing is strengthened when we take the time for a self-edit run.

One caveat before we start: When you write, just WRITE. Don't let your internal editor out to play until you're done writing. If you try to edit and write at the same time, you'll drive yourself even crazier than normal.

To help demonstrate the following points, we're going to call on two friends, Sheau Dontell and Noah DeVerbe, both avid students of fiction writing.

Ready? Then here we go...

Checkpoint #1: Only use speaker attributions when absolutely necessary. When is that? When you have more than one speaker, so the reader may confuse who is saying what, or when you have a run of dialogue that goes more than a few lines. Such as:

Sheau pulled his desk close to Noah's. "Did you bring your notes from last week?"

"Sure. They're right here."

"Great. I forgot mine and we need to do a quick review."

"We? What? You got a mouse in your pocket?"

"Very funny."

"I thought so."

As you can see, it gets hard after awhile to keep straight who's saying what. So the edit would be as follows:

Sheau pulled his desk close to Noah's. "Did you bring your notes from last week?"

"Sure. They're right here."

"Great. I forgot mine and we need to do a quick review."

"We?" Noah frowned. "What? You got a mouse in your pocket?"

"Very funny."

"I thought so."

One more note about attributions: make sure they're not physical impossibilities. For example, *"I thought so," he smiled.* Nope, wrong. You can't smile, grin, or grimace words. Speaking is a *verbal* act, and attributions need to be verbal actions as well (e.g., whisper, yell, call...). However, most editors will tell you that just using "said" is best. It's almost invisible to the reader's eye, and that's what you want. Writing that draws attention to the story, not to itself. So when you need an SA, best to stick to the basics.

Checkpoint #2: Let your dialogue speak for itself. Make sure your speaker attributions, aren't telling readers what emotions your characters are experiencing rather than showing them through dialogue or action. Here are some examples of how *not* to do it. Sheau reads Noah's notes referring to the horrors of telling and turns to his friend:

"Telling?" he asked, confused. "What does that mean?"

or

"Telling?" he asked, his face filled with confusion. "What does that mean?"

or

"Telling," he asked, feeling confused. "What does that mean?"

Insert sound of game show buzzer here! All of the above are wrong, wrong, and...you guessed it, wrong! Remember, the power of fiction is that we pull the reader in for a vicarious experience. When you tell about emotions rather than showing, the reader stays at arm's length from the story and characters, and that's a major problem.

But the *confused*, *with confusion*, and *feeling confused* aren't the only problems here. You don't need "he asked." The question mark shows he's asking a question, so the attribution is not only telling, but redundant. Far better to drop the speaker attribution unless it's really needed to show who is speaking. And to show the confusion with a beat.

What, you may ask, is a beat? It's action interspersed in the midst of dialogue. And the beauty of beats is that they not only replace telling and unnecessary speaker attributions, but they help give readers more of a sense of place, action, and characters. So an edit of the telling lines could be as follows:

"Telling?" A frown pinched his brows together. "What's that?"

A helpful tip on dialogue: read it out loud. Many writers end up with dialogue that's too formal (unless, of course, you're writing about formal people in a bygone era), but we can't tell just by reading that we've fallen into that trap. So read it out loud. You'll be surprised how different it sounds. And, sometimes, how bad. If you find yourself tempted to change your dialogue after you read it aloud, give in. Not all temptation is bad!

Checkpoint #3: Don't let the dreaded *-ly* adverbs get your story down! Most adverbs just don't belong, not in speaker attributions or text.

For example, Noah is reading Sheau's story, which he's written for their next class. Upon reaching a section that does *every*thing wrong, Noah reacts as follows:

"I'll never write as ridiculously as that," said Noah emphatically.

Oooo, bad form, Noah ol' chap! Not one, but TWO missteps here. First, both adverbs (*ridiculously* and *emphatically*) should be exterminated. Get rid of 'em. Don't tell us Noah is disdainful of his buddy's writing, or that he's being emphatic. SHOW these things in dialogue, actions, or expressions.

As for the second misstep, "said Noah" is an antiquated format for speaker attributions. It should be "Noah said," not the other way 'round.

So, how to edit the above? Simple:

A sneer touch Noah's thin lips. "I'll never write like that!"

Voila! The beat shows he's disdainful; the exclamation point shows he's emphatic. (For even more emphasis, you could italicize the last word.)

Checkpoint # 4: Watch out for words that weaken!

Noah hands his story to Sheau. "I'm really certain you'll find my story extremely well written and very different from yours."

Ummm, no. I know it's hard, but 99.99% of the time, it's best to just say no to superlatives and modifiers (*very*, *quite*, *extremely*, *super*, *really*, etc.) Unless, of course, such things are part of a character's personality. For example, if you have a character who is always exaggerating or a drama queen. But if you do that, be sure to keep those particular traits to just that one character.

Checkpoint # 5: Don't be done unto. Avoid the passive voice. Passive voice is a more archaic form of writing. But what's worse, it's what the term implies: passive. Passive writing is weaker writing. Powerful fiction is active, immediate, full of energy. So, rather than:

Sheau grabbed the story of Shaun's and threw it.

You make the action more immediate with:

Sheau grabbed Noah's story and threw it.

Checkpoint # 6: Just the Facts, Ma'am! Don't use exposition in either dialogue or narrative if there's no real reason to share the information. We read and research so much when writing fiction, and we discover a LOT of neat things—especially those doing historical fiction. But make sure you only include the information that's necessary to your story for plot advancement, character development, or creating a strong sense of place. For example:

Noah stared at Sheau. "Look, I know you're upset, but showing rather then telling is an important facet of writing fiction well. Most authorities on writing fiction, including Sol Stein, Renni Browne and Dave King, and Robert McKee, speak out against telling."

Anyone asleep yet? Sure, those of us who've studied the craft know all that. But is it necessary to the story? No. So don't include it unless you need it.

Checkpoint # 7: Strong hooks. Don't leave home--or a chapter or even a scene--without 'em. Hooks keep the pages turning; they create a sense of anticipation, dread, excitement, fear, or whatever. A solid hook can be positive *or* negative (something that makes people

laugh or creates a sense of impending doom), but whatever you use, it should kept such momentum going that the reader can't bear to put the book down.

Well, there you have 'em, the Lucky Seven. Using these checkpoints during your self-edit of your writing may well help you discover patterns you need to break, which will benefit not only you as a writer, but your readers. And isn't that, after all, what we're all about? Writing stories that engage, move, and change readers with the power of God's truth.

Now, have at it--and have fun!

Freelance author, editor, and speaker Karen Ball has been in publishing for more than twenty years. Previously Executive Editor of fiction at Zondervan publishers, she has had the honor of working with such authors as Francine Rivers, Robin Jones Gunn, Liz Curtis Higgs, Terri Blackstock, Gilbert Morris, Angela Elwell Hunt, and Bill Myers. Karen lives in Oregon with her husband and their "kids": Bo, a mischief-making Siberian husky, and Dakota, an Aussie-Terrier mix who should have been named Destructo.