



# **Beyond the First Draft**

**Self-Editing Your Way  
to the Second Draft  
And Beyond**

**Andrew Park**

**Authors Publish**

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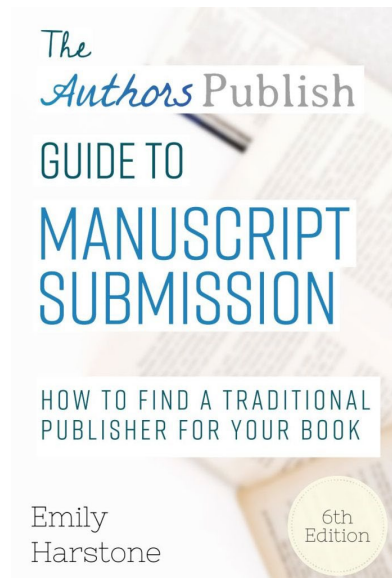
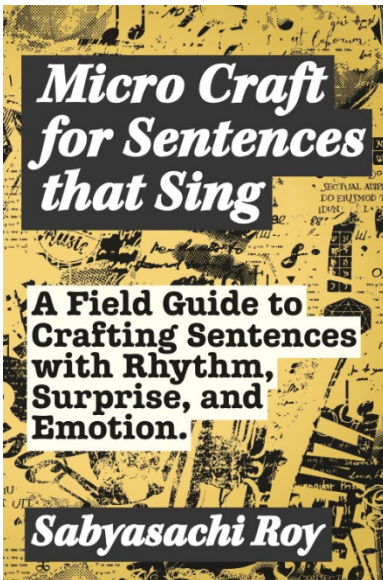
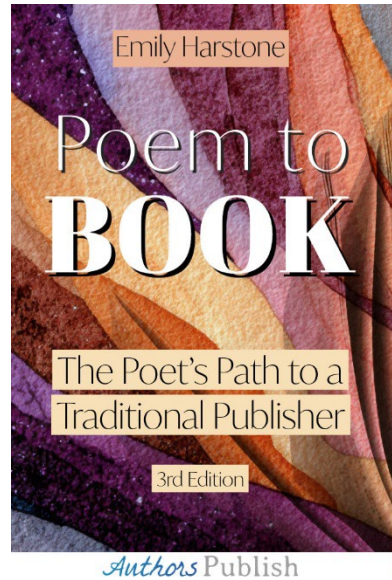
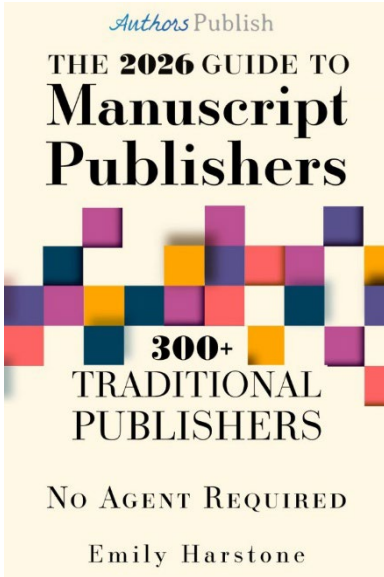
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## Introduction: Writing is Rewriting

Congratulations! You've successfully completed the first draft of your book. It's a major achievement, especially since only a small proportion of people who begin a book-length writing project actually complete it. Depending on the survey quoted, it might be as low as 3–10%.

I also mentioned that you had written your **first draft**. Experienced authors understand that their initial draft is a work in progress. Chances are they'll write anything from three to five drafts before they're ready to type 'The End' and really mean it. I was lucky enough to receive some informal writing mentorship from a prize-winning author who confided that their first book went through 12 drafts before finally getting published.

Twelve drafts! It's a lot, but maybe it doesn't have to be that extreme. In *Bird by Bird: Some instructions on the writing life*, author and writing coach Anne Lamott suggests that three drafts just might be sufficient:

“A friend of mine says that the first draft is the down draft—you just need to get it down. The second draft is the up draft—you fix it up. You try to say what you have to say more accurately. And the third draft is the dental draft, where you check

every tooth, to see if it's loose or cramped or decayed, or even, God help us, healthy.”

So, as an aspiring author, you have to accept that **writing is rewriting**, and your first efforts are the beginning of something rather than its end. Indeed, if you take some time away from the manuscript and return to it with fresh eyes, you might sense that something is a little “off.” Perhaps your writing style feels a little rough around the edges. Or maybe parts of the dialogue ring false, or one or more characters are less than convincing. And reading through the whole thing, you might conclude that the rhythm or flow of your story could be improved.

In short, you need an editor. But professional editors are pricey, so at this stage of your writing journey **that editor is probably going to be you**, and that is what this e-book is about.

### **Who is this e-book for?**

This e-book is targeted at writers who have completed the first draft of a book-length work and want to improve on it. Most likely, you'll be a relative beginner, and you may or may not have spent time studying writing craft. In writing it, therefore, I've tried to foresee what I would like to have known after writing the first draft of my own work in progress (WIP). I've also tried to capture lessons learned while editing the work of other writers as a professional editor.

Self-editing requires that you transition from a writing to an editorial mindset, which means that you'll have to analyze your story structure, probe your plot for holes and omissions, and interrogate the motives and plausibility of your characters. As such, the self-editing writer should be widely read in their genre of choice and in other genres. They should also be willing to study writing craft and to perform editorial surgery based on the insights they glean from that study.

### **My approach to self-editing**

If you look at online editing resources and books, you'll see that there are many ways to edit a completed first draft. The approach I present here is focused on addressing **big-picture issues** of story, plot, characterization and style. In editing circles this is called a developmental or structural edit, and the second draft that comes out of the process would be Anne Lamott's "fix it up" draft.

I'm going to further suggest that you approach self-editing and revision in a **hierarchical way**, starting with story-wide issues before you drill down to finer, more granular details of your writing. I've presented this approach as a **manuscript hierarchy of needs** in Chapter 1. I hope that this hierarchy will help provide structure and logical guidance to your editorial efforts. Throughout the chapters that follow, I try to provide actionable advice, illustrated with actual examples, to guide you through each step of editing and revision.

Finally, I'll note that there are few hard and fast 'rules' of writing, despite what some online writing 'gurus' might say. However, there are what I'd call '**strong editorial guidelines,**' and I'll list these and explain them in the chapters that follow.

### **What's not included in this e-book**

This is a 14,500-word e-book, not the encyclopedia of story. It's impossible to give you every possible technique or guideline that you might end up needing in this format. What I am offering is a **minimal framework and set of techniques** that will get you started on your second draft.

I'm also not going to talk about writing software, except for Microsoft Word. First, I haven't used programs like Scrivener or Atticus. I'm frankly suspicious of the complexities and learning curves involved in using these tools. Dammit; you're a writer, not a software engineer!

You'll find no mention of AI-assisted writing here either. Let me be clear; if you use large language models (LLMs) to generate outlines, or even (shock, horror!) write your book, then you have outsourced your human creativity to an algorithm and you're no longer a writer. Further, these models, including ChatGPT and all the rest, have been trained through the wholesale appropriation of real writers' voices, without compensation or attribution. Please don't go there.

All that said, let's begin, and good luck with your self-editing journey.

## The Big Picture

It is a truth universally acknowledged that authors should step away from their messy first drafts for at least a month or two. They get too close to what they've written, which inhibits the more objective editorial mindset needed for successful revision. So, resist the urge to look at it or tweak it, and focus on something else for a while.

Second point: Whether you are a plotter (one who writes from a detailed outline) or a pantsier (also called a 'discovery writer') who likes to write spontaneously, you need to have **a plan** for transforming your first draft into a more complete, polished second draft.

The first step toward making that plan is to read through your manuscript with those freshly minted editorial eyes on the page and a notebook and pencil in hand. Actually that's step 1b. Step 1a is to consider **the length of your book**. Table 1 lists the average length of manuscripts in different genres, as compiled from a variety of online sources.

While some established authors (you can probably guess who) get away with word counts that are more bloated than a beached whale, **debut authors** (see <https://wordcounters.com/>) should probably stay close to these guidelines. So, if your

manuscript is longer than, say, 120,000 words, you might want to look for a few places to trim it down. On the other hand, editor and writing coach C. S. Lakin doesn't hold with obsessing over word counts, [saying that books should be as long as they need to be](#).

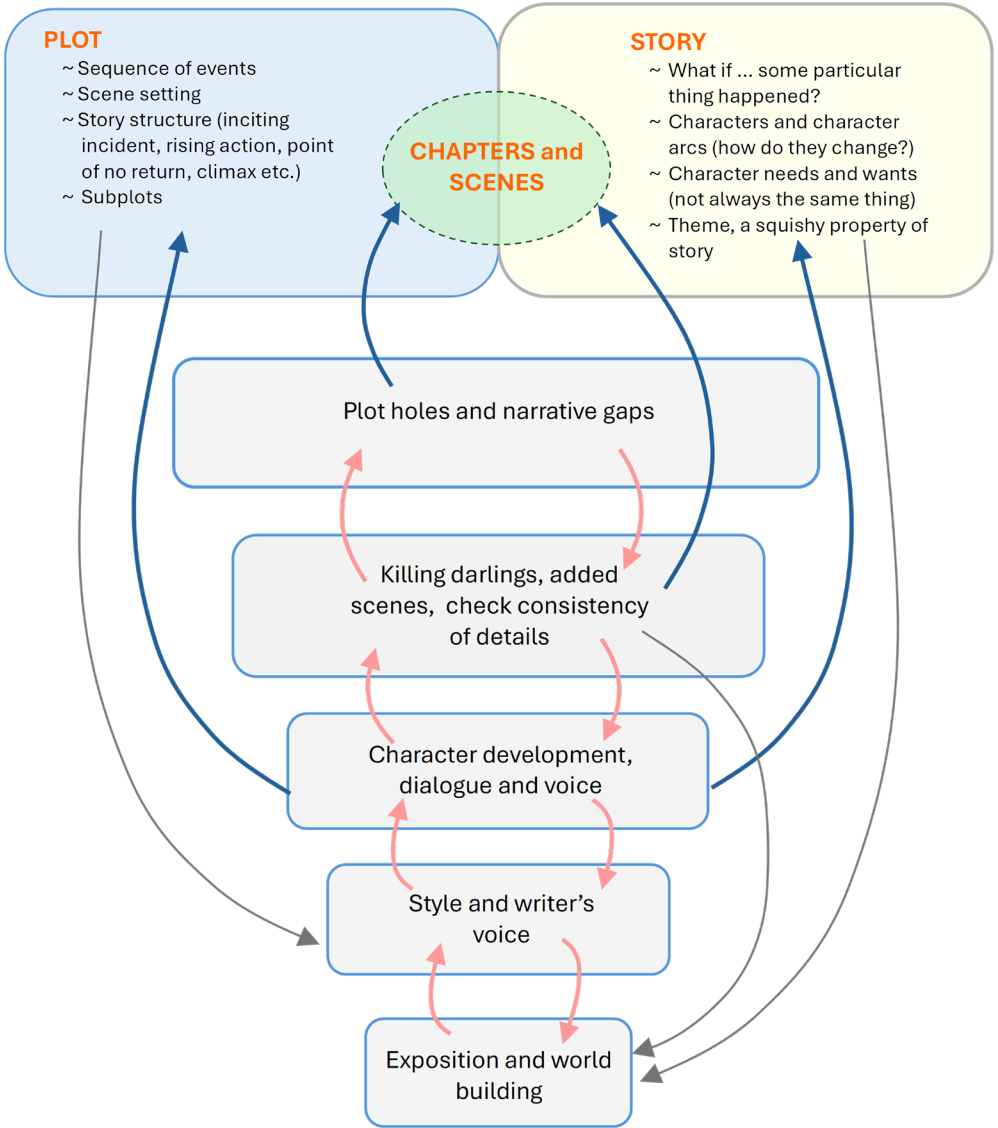
Nevertheless, words cost money to print, and traditional publishers will seldom risk publishing a 500,000-word memoir of what you did last summer. And if you've really produced that many words, most professional editors will advise you to cut your manuscript down to size or split it into two or more volumes.

**Table 1:** Word counts for fiction and nonfiction

Category or genre	Word count ranges
Flash fiction	≤ 1,000
Short story	1,000–10,000
Novelette	7,500–20,000
Novella	17,500–40,000
Middle Grade (MG)	30,000–55,000
Self-Help/Nonfiction	40,000–80,000
Memoir	50,000–100,000
Young Adult (YA)	55,000–100,000 (or greater in YA fantasy)
Romance	45,000–90,000
Literary Fiction	60,000–110,000
Mystery/Thriller	70,000–90,000
Historical Fiction	80,000–100,000
Science Fiction	90,000–120,000
Fantasy and epic fantasy	100,000–120,000 (though longer occasionally possible)

## **The manuscript hierarchy of needs**

You may be aware of [Maslow's hierarchy of \(human\) needs](#), which proposes that your basic requirements for food and shelter have to be fulfilled before you can think of things like personal security, social life, self-esteem and self-actualization. I'm going to propose an analog to this idea from psychology, namely the manuscript (or self-editing) hierarchy of needs (or MHoN; Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Manuscript hierarchy of needs (MHoN). Plot and story coalesce into chapters and scenes within chapters. Blue and grey arrows show major lines of feedback/influence between levels of the hierarchy.

The vertical arrangement of elements in the MHoN doesn't reflect their absolute importance. Rather, their placement illustrates the order in which you would consider them when strategizing your revision. That is, when reviewing your manuscript with an editor's eye, you should start by identifying big-picture plot and story problems. Plot holes and narrative gaps contribute to those big-picture problems, and in the course of fixing these, you'll likely change what characters do and think and feel. It's for this reason you'll probably want to make notes on all of the MHoN elements simultaneously as you read through, but always with an eye to overall plot coherence and story logic.

Note also that while plot and story overlap in the diagram, they're not identical. Plot is logical skeleton of your story, the important sequence of events that transports the reader from one event to the other until you deliver them to a resolution. Story, on the other hand, answers "What if ..." questions, explores character arcs and dynamics, and themes that emerge from your story, which may be the parts that readers will care about in the end.

### ***Chapters and Scenes***

Hopefully, you divided your first draft **into chapters** as you wrote. If you thought a little more deeply about it, your chapters might have been **subdivided into scenes**.

**Definition:** A scene can be defined as a discrete unit of action and dialogue which advances your plot and story toward their resolution.

Ultimately, your self-editing process will be about modifying, moving, generating, and deleting scenes and chapters. The key editorial criterion for keeping any scene in your story is that it **advances the plot** in some way. Otherwise, it's failing to contribute to the story and is probably slowing down the narrative. In other words, it's a darling and needs to be killed (see Chapter 2).

Scenes tend to follow a common structure, which James Scott Bell describes well in his short writing craft book, *Super Structure*. The scene should have **an objective**, which usually means the lead character or antagonist are trying to achieve something. It also has **opposition or conflict**—something is standing in the way of achieving the objective. And, inevitably, there is **an outcome**. A scene can end well (objective achieved, yippee!), ambiguously or not so well, or terribly (objective further away than ever).

There's a lot of information and opinion about scenes out there. Some people divide scenes into categories of **'scene' and 'sequel,'** where the 'scene' captures more intense action or consequential events, and the 'sequel' describes characters' reactions to the previous scene or simply a quieter moment in another plot line.

### ***Taking those notes***

As you read through and make notes, ask yourself whether the overall story and its associated scenes makes for a satisfying read. On a story mechanics level, look for **plot holes** (unexplained or

nonsensical events) and scenes that **fail to move the plot forward** (the infamous ‘darlings’ of Chapter 2). Make notes on your characters. Are they **relatable**, which does not necessarily mean ‘likeable’ (Chapter 3)? The way they speak and their unique ‘voice,’ which includes their internal thoughts and the way they see the world around them, is intimately connected to how they will appear to readers on the page (see Ch. 4). Are your major characters active or passive?

As the author, your own writer’s voice will also come through on the page (Ch. 5). I’ve separated out character and writer voices because the writer’s voice inevitably introduces itself into exposition. This is where we’ll address **point of view (POV)** and a concept called **‘psychic distance,’** which is the writer’s way of controlling how close we are to our characters’ thoughts and feelings.

Finally, it’s on to world building and exposition (Ch. 6). You might be surprised that worldbuilding appears last in the hierarchy. Surely the way I frame my story world is fundamental to telling my tale? Well, yes, and also no. Even in hard science fiction with space-based technology, world building has to be secondary to character and story. In other words, you build your world like an iceberg. The reader sees the ten percent that pokes its way through the surface of your narrative to enter the story. This is the part that’s relevant to telling the story. The other ninety percent that

you've painstakingly constructed and researched remains firmly below the surface. It's relevant, but mainly to you.

In Figure 1, I've also placed arrows flowing from the lower levels of world building, character development etcetera back to the primary levels of story and plot. These arrows are a reminder that your story elements do not exist in isolation. If, for example, you change a key development in your story, then your protagonist's motives or personality may need to change. Or if you decide to change a key aspect of your world building later on (what, faster-than-light travel isn't possible?), certain elements of your plot will be forced to change. In story world, everything is connected to everything else. And when you actually begin the revision process, likely you'll work on all of these elements simultaneously.

### **Some tools to help you**

I can't list every possible tool you might use to help you organize your thoughts and revisions. Myself, I'm somewhat old school. I use paper and pencils to analyze my own writing. The humble notebook has a lot to recommend it. You can organize it into sections according to elements in the MHoN diagram, or however else you want to. You can rip pages out of it; stick them on a cork board, shift them around. One writer friend carefully cuts out handwritten paragraphs of revision and rearranges them like a collage on her table.

If you are writing in Microsoft Word, the ‘Read Aloud’ function is a great way to pick up on the rhythm of your prose. ‘Read Aloud’ is found under the Review tab in Word and gives you a number of choices for voice and accent. Some people think Word’s voices sound robotic, so there are other (paid) software solutions you can consider, such as ‘Speechify,’ or ‘Natural Reader.’ Regardless of your choice, having the manuscript read back to you will trick your brain into processing your words in a different light. You’ll hear awkward turns of phrase and typos that your eyes might have glossed over. You’ll sense where the narrative or the conversation lags. Try it for yourself.

Another tool I’ve found useful, both as a writer and editor, is **the book map**, or book template. A book map is a chapter by chapter, scene by scene breakdown of your story, envisaged as a table, either in a spread sheet program like Excel or on paper.

What goes into a book map? Basically, anything that’s important for you to analyze and revise in your story. At minimum, I would say you need columns listing chapter titles and scenes, your POV characters, and of course, a short summary of plot developments. In my own Excel spread sheet, I include the word counts for each scene and chapter, as these can be useful in identifying overwritten scenes or ‘darlings’ that need cutting. Then, if I’m editing a manuscript for a client, I’d have a column listing questions or issues I noticed, and another for potential solutions.

The book map idea may seem a little like bean counting at first, but it can be an invaluable tool for summarizing your whole story and organizing the revision process. I've put a made-up example in the Appendix to illustrate the general idea.

Consider writing **a style guide** for your manuscript. The style guide can be regarded as your story's memory bank. In it you can note down everything from the correct spelling of names (is a character called 'Smith' or 'Smythe,' for example). You can note down details of geography, your protagonist's house, the street layout where they live, their car, or the recipe for their favourite cocktail. In short, everything that needs to be consistent and accurate throughout your book.

A professional editor would also note details of spelling style (British, Canadian, or USA?) and punctuation (to Oxford comma or not to Oxford comma, that is the question).

### **Strong guidelines**

1. Step away from the manuscript for at least a month, preferably longer.
2. Re-read your story (or have a computer voice read it for you) and make notes on each area of the MHoN. Make those notes with references to the scenes that you have in each chapter. Do all of your scenes move the plot forward, even if just a little bit. Your notes will form the basis of guideline three.

3. Whether or not you planned your first draft in advance or wrote it on the fly as a pantsier, you need to generate a plan for your revisions. Having a plan will save you all sorts of time. The goal of your plan is to edit and revise your way to a more coherent, satisfying **second draft**.
4. In making your plan, give big-picture story issues initial priority. Then, consider how they'll change what your characters do and feel, and how characters, voice, worldbuilding and the rest must change to serve the story.

## Knives Out and Spare-Part Surgery

In his writing craft book, ‘Damn Fine Story,’ Chuck Wendig suggests that story should be **a series of echoes**. That is to say, story events in one part of the book have consequences in later stages. Character A misses an important appointment, and *because of this* he fails to meet Character B, who then thinks she has been stood up, and *because of this* she ends up marrying Character C, and so forth.

Note the keyword here is ‘*because*,’ not ‘*and*.’ Events and characters push on the plot in one part of your story and therefore change events that happen later on. Or, to channel Wendig once more, events are rocks thrown into a pond, which create narrative ripples that flow out into your story.

So, a big part of your plan is to identify those parts of your story that do echo, those that can be successfully **made to echo**, and those that just hang there or fade out without apparent consequence. As a result, your second draft will be more coherent and interconnected than your first one. The story will flow, and you’ll strengthen the relevance of plots and subplots to the ultimate goal of the narrative (or answering the questions it asks). All of which means that plot points, subplots, characters, and scenes that

do not serve the story should be eliminated (with varying degrees of prejudice!).

### **Plot holes**

In *Lord of the Rings* (LOTR), the great eagle Gwaihir rescues Gandalf after the grey wizard was imprisoned by Saruman the White at the top of Orthanc. It has often been pointed out that if the eagle rescued Gandalf, he could just as easily have flown the One Ring over Mount Doom and that would have been the end of the story. For me, that is a bit of a plot hole, or at least, an event requiring further explanation. And the internet has dutifully provided many explanations as to why it isn't a plot hole.

Another example. In the classic noir movie (and novel), *The Big Sleep*, Owen Taylor, a chauffeur and murderer, is found dead in his submerged car under a pier. He may have been killed, but although private investigator Philip Marlowe investigates the death, a murderer is never caught. When the movie's director, Howard Hawks, approached the novel's author, Raymond Chandler to ask who had killed the chauffeur, Chandler said he was damned if he knew. Call it a plot hole or a loose end, but I suspect many modern readers wouldn't stand for such a sloppy lack of resolution.

Another type of plot hole is the plot inconsistency. For example, in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the title character drives to her parents' place for a social gathering. Late in the evening, she is

offered a ride back to London by Mark but replies that she'll take the train.

A third type of plot hole is a type of narrative failure called '*Deus ex machina*,' or '*god from the machine*.' The idea originates from Greek tragedy, in which characters who were apparently doomed are rescued by a god character lowered from the rafters. In H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, the use of a common earthly virus to dispatch the apparently omnipotent aliens is often cited as an example of *deus ex machina*. Another example appears in Jodie Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper*, in which Kate's sister Anna was essentially conceived to be a bone-marrow doner to her sister. However, when Kate needs a kidney, Anna refuses to donate. *Deus ex machina* enters the picture when Anna is declared brain dead after an accident, and her kidney is harvested. This leaves buckets of guilt for the parents but avoids a potentially messy and tragic resolution of the obvious moral dilemma.

The moral of all these stories is that plot holes should be resolved or avoided whenever possible. Where do you see them in your story? And incidentally, in the unlikely event that I were ever to own a juice bar, I'd call it '*Juice ex machina*.'

### **Back to the echoes and ripples**

After causing mayhem among your darlings, you need to cross-check the rest of the manuscript to see whether your changes are rippling out into other scenes and plot lines. Are they causing

continuity problems? Do they change what your characters know about their missions/lives/pet hamsters in other parts of the book? Do they fundamentally change the way characters interact?

If the answer to any of these questions is ‘yes,’ you need to flag the relevant sections of your story and possibly perform some more narrative surgery. Suppose, for example, that Character A’s relationship with Character B makes more sense if the writer her into his love interest rather than, say, his cousin. Okay, if that is the case, you’d typically want to show some foreshadowing of their mutual attraction earlier in the story, which will entail crafting scenes where that attraction can be on view. Thus, several earlier scenes may have to change and new vignettes may have to be added later on.

## **Strong guidelines**

1. **You have to search out plot holes and inconsistencies** and find ways to solve them. If the scene containing a given plot hole seems unavoidable, then the hole should be repaired by introducing scenes that resolve it one way or the other. In the case of Chandler’s dead chauffeur, several solutions present themselves. A telling piece of evidence could have been found in the car, leading to a killer. Alternatively, the guilt-racked chauffeur may have committed suicide, leaving a note to that effect or making a telephone confession of his crime.

2. Be honest with yourself and **identify scenes that fail to move the plot forward**, or which initiate subplots that trail off without resolution. Kill them, move them to where they're relevant, or if appropriate, amalgamate them.
3. If you identify the problems from points one and two in your manuscript, you should **scan the rest of your story for the narrative consequences of your edits**. These echoes and narrative ripples should be satisfying, not jarring.

## **Killing your darlings**

“Kill your darlings” is writing advice often given but not explained adequately. At the risk of mixing metaphors, I could counsel writers not to throw their ‘darling’ narrative babies out with the bath water.

What then, is a ‘darling’? Chuck Wendig describes it as a story element that only exists to please the author. A more relevant definition is that they are subplots, characters, scenes or sentences that fail to move your plot forward. Removing these elements will improve the overall flow of your story and will reduce the word count if you have overwritten it (see Table 1).

How do we go about editing these darlings? If they truly fail to move the plot forward, and especially if they leave dangling loose ends, then you should kill them outright. Alternatively, you

can move your favourite darling away from where it's doing no good to a place where they actually contribute to the story. Perhaps two or more darlings can be combined and shortened to reduce story drag and increase relevance. The same observations go for characters, particularly if your manuscript is overloaded with personalities (see Ch. 3).

In my own WIP, I had a character who was a mysterious, potentially ageless woman. She had great intuition and travelled my future Earth as a bard of sorts. She had information the protagonists needed to learn, *and* she intuits things about the protagonists and their mission that she couldn't easily have known, except by magical means or being told them off-scene. Because I already had the scene in my head, I chose to transmit her message and reveal her intuitions in a fan-filled concert at a pop-up theatre.

This scene had everything. It had dancers and drummers from multiple cultures, noise and confusion, and it showed off the woman's charisma by having her deliver a sweaty, passionate performance where she her intuitions were embedded in a song.

Whoof! It was a lot, but I loved it and felt it was well written. However, the scene had several problems. First, the world I'd built has some far-fetched technology but nothing magic. She couldn't have intuited so accurately. Second, the mysterious woman's knowledge was needed by the protagonists, but her intuitions were a character flourish. They created confrontation

(good) but didn't move the plot forward (bad). Finally the scene was s-o-o-o-o long—over 4,000 words worth of long.

I tried various solutions to these challenges. First, I had her performing in a basement bar. Then I had her avoiding the protagonists so that they had to find her busking in the street. But none of this worked because the implausible intuition element and irrelevant performance still infected the story.

Finally, I had one of my protagonists search her out where she held vigil over the bed of an unconscious friend, who was another main character. At this point, we've ditched the musical instrument and instead catch her singing improvised poetry to her friend. The protagonist reveals their mission to the woman, who reacts angrily and reveals her information with reluctance. Thus the implausible intuition on her part was avoided, the conversation contained narrative tension, and the overall scene was about 1,500 words shorter.

## **Character Development: Who are These People Anyway?**

In this chapter, we'll examine whether your cast of characters is up to the task you set for them in the first draft. Everyone's got an opinion on how characters should be developed and behave on the page, and after you've done it, everyone's a critic.

Advice on character development proliferates on the web and in books on writing craft. You'll see countless techniques and exercises supposedly designed to get you up close and personal with your characters. There are character profiles that go on for pages—practically whole biographies, including where they went to school, their favourite colour, and so on. You'll be asked to sit your character down and discuss their wants and needs over coffee. You'll be told about traits that every character just has to have. Self-declared story gurus will tell you—with the absolute certainty of Moses delivering the Ten Commandments—that your hero has to be likeable, high agency, quirky, whatever.

Frankly, I find many of these exercises to be more of a distraction than a help. And any advice that main characters just have to have a particular set of traits is, in my humble opinion, plain wrong.

That said, how do we get to know our characters, and what qualities do they have to embody to engage readers? Having sifted through semi-trailer's worth of character advice I've come up with a minimum list of **main character qualities and attributes**:

- **Characters have problems**, either those they've produced for themselves or those the story has imposed on them. In literature (and film), maybe the mother of all problems is foisted on Frodo Baggins after Bilbo is forced to give up the One Ring in LOTR, though in fairness Frodo signed up for the mission.
- **Characters have wants and needs**. Those wants and needs may be connected to the character's problems, but they are not always the same. In the movie *Die Hard*, John McClane's problem is that he's trapped in a hotel full of terrorists. His immediate need is to survive. His want is to reconcile with his estranged wife, and his inner need in that regard is to return to a peaceful life (whatever that might mean).
- **Characters (at least major ones) should be relatable**. That is, whether you like them or not, you should, as a fellow human, be able to understand or even empathize with what they are going through. *Breaking Bad's* Walter White (masterfully played by Brian Cranston) is not exactly likeable, either as a down-at-heel chemistry teacher or as the drug kingpin Heisenberg. But you can relate to him. His first problem (of many) is that he's trying to secure his family's

future in the face of a terminal cancer diagnosis. This is relatable and elicits sympathy.

- **Characters are flawed.** Relatable characters have character flaws. A hero with no flaws whatsoever is frankly unbelievable. At its most extreme, Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer is a private dick who never hesitates to use violence and murder in the cause of 'justice.' At the very least, that shows some flawed thinking, and perhaps psychosis. Walter (Heisenberg) White's spiral of moral decay is fuelled by his hubris and need for control. Makes Sherlock Holmes's opium addiction and questionable violin playing seem pretty mild by comparison.
- **Characters have unique voices.** We'll talk more about this in the next chapter, but suffice to say that your characters should be distinguished from one another by the way they speak, including turns of phrase, vocabulary, social class indicators, and other features of speech.

The next three points are covered at length in Chuck Wendig's *Damn Fine Story*.

- **Characters interact with each other.** This is an obvious one, but Wendig expands on the point to show that interactions have multiple dimensions. Here are three important ones. First, characters all want something, and they interact in pursuit of that something. Character interactions create essential plot tension (more on that in the next

chapter). And the collision between characters leaves each character changed in some way. In Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*, schoolgirls Elena and Lila are like twin planets orbiting each other. Elena is devoted to Lila, yet jealous of her prowess and bravery until a fateful day when she tells Lila some home truths. Another great example comes from the movie, *The King's Speech*, in which England's future King George IV (Colin Firth) seeks the help of speech therapist Lionel Logue (Geoffrey Rush) to cure his debilitating stutter. The future king is a crippled authority figure while the linguist is an apparently powerless knowledge worker. The tension between these two figures drives the film's narrative and the changes that each of them undergoes by the end.

- **Characters and their interactions drive the plot forward.** At minimum, your story will be about the characters attempting to solve their problems or pursue their wants. Key plot points will arise from this effort. Frodo's entire mission in LOTR is driven by the problem of getting rid of the One Ring before it corrodes his soul. In Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge's unacknowledged need is to redeem the spirit of generosity he once had before he succumbed to the lure of filthy lucre. And (spoiler alert), his interactions with the spirits accomplish just that.
- **And finally, characters exercise agency.** That is to say—and we're echoing stuff from the previous two points a bit

here—characters’ wants and needs generate the plot, not the other way round. External forces may buffet your characters, but they respond in ways that change what happens in the story. In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss Everdeen sacrifices herself by standing in for her sister as a tribute. That’s some agency, right there. But if Katniss had said, “Oh, hard luck sis; sucks to be you,” it would have been a whole different, potentially much shorter story!

The foregoing bullet points represent desirable character attributes for your main characters. Those attributes work for villains as well. Readers these days expect villains to be fairly complex and to have some sort of origin story.

Whether you can cram every single one of those attributes into every main character is questionable, however. And I suspect, based on a lot of reading and book store browsing, that a lot of authors follow these injunctions to the point of stereotype. We all know the stereotypical film noir detective for example: tough, wise-cracking and cynical, ghosts of dark deeds in their past, possible drinking problems in the present.

What can I say? Such characters are so tempting, and writing truly original characters is difficult. The best I can advise you is to dig deep and read some of the resources I offer at the end of this e-book, particularly Donald Maass’s *The Emotional Craft of Fiction*. I also want to offer a few thoughts from my own experience of

writing the sort of character who often gets ignored or remains unwritten in fiction.

### **Quiet characters and introverts.**

I'm writing a novel, and my main POV character is fairly quiet, speaks only when he's got something to say, and experiences the world intensely but watchfully. The developmental editor on my draft manuscript suggested that he seemed **rather passive**. Ouch!

To add to my POV character's challenges, he's in the situation he's in because someone forced him into it, and he'll spend a good chunk of the story in thrall to those who hold authority over him.

So, what can you do if you have a character like that? One solution is to put them in situations where they can exercise agency and show initiative. In his book *27 Essential Principles of Story*, Daniel Joshua Rubin suggests an exercise in which you identify 50 different actions your hero could perform that will move them toward their goal. I've done that exercise, and although I haven't got to the 50<sup>th</sup> action yet, I have identified many points in the story where I could make my character more active, intelligent, or assertive.

My point here is that you don't have to rewrite quiet character's as wise-cracking kick-ass heroes. That is the way of the stereotype. You do, however, need to give them agency and the means to push your plot forward. As it happens, others have

thought through these challenges. Sura, who writes at *athistleinthewind*, has written [a comprehensive description](#) of the various subtypes of introvert and how they can make compelling characters on the page. Among other things, she suggests making them notice things other characters miss, giving them plot-relevant expertise, and making their (quiet) presence in the story feel like an advantage, not a limitation.

### **Describing your characters: Less is more**

Many authors seem to think that they have to treat readers to a head-to-toe word picture of their characters. Her hair was this, her eyes were that, she wore this, that, and the other thing, and walked in a particular way. These descriptions can easily occupy a whole page, and they are mostly unnecessary.

Please, writers, do not write your character descriptions in such forensic, and potentially irrelevant detail. Character descriptions need to do at least one of three things. First, they need to give the reader a feeling about or dominant impression of the character. Laundry lists of character traits don't do this. Here's how Raymond Chandler introduces the character of Moose Maloy through the eyes of Philip Marlowe:

“He was a big man, but not more than six feet five inches tall and not wider than a beer truck.”

I'm betting you now have a distinct mental image of Mr. Maloy, and will have concluded, rightly, that he's a tough character.

Descriptions can also reveal telling details about aspects of a character's personality that are relevant to the plot. Here's Rudyard Kipling describing aspiring poet Charlie Mears in *The Finest Story in the World*:

“He wrapped himself in quotations – as a beggar would enfold himself in the purple of Emperors.”

Charlie may be aspiring, but he may also be pretentious or a charlatan.

Another reason to keep character descriptions economical is because characters become known to readers through the senses of the POV characters who meet them. Your POV character will not notice every detail of a character's appearance. They'll get an initial dominant impression and notice other aspects later. As a writer, therefore, it's probably a good idea to add further details of character description **at intervals**. I adopted this strategy to introduce a major character in WIP. Nadezhda Simonova is a local agent or fixer who will end up helping the rag-tag group of adventurers to whom she's introduced:

“Chock; what have you bring me this time?”

Nadezhda Simonova, their new best friend,

eyed them warily through the merest sliver of an opening in the doorway.

“*Clientii,*” said Chock. “*Paying clientii, Nadia.*” The door opened another crack, then wider, as though it had been pried open by the yellow light that now flooded the garden. Out of that light stepped a very tall woman whose backlit hair framed and shadowed her face. She kept one long-fingered hand resting on the edge of the door frame, like slamming it in their faces might still be on the cards.

“Mr. Jarrott here has argent, *nalishniye*. He’s prepared to pay you well for services only you can provide.”

Nadezhda Simonova stepped forward, all the while scanning Lake up and down in a frankly forensic fashion. When her face angled into the light, Donovan saw she was wall-eyed. One eye was black or brown, the other icy blue or grey.

“C’mon Nadia, let us in. Hear out Mr. Jarrott’s proposition.”

She sighed the sigh of someone who needs argent but fears what she’ll have to do to

get it. “Come then,” she said, turning away from them. “Shoes off.”

Here, we learn about Nadezhda Simonova through a combination of speech patterns, body language, and a minimum of physical description. Meanwhile, the characters and the story are in motion throughout the scene. By the time we get to the end of the extract, we’ve learned something about Nadezhda Simonova’s physical appearance, her way of speaking and her personality (“Shoes off”).

### **Strong guidelines**

As you read through your manuscript, ask yourself whether your ideal reader would find your characters compelling. Read your own characters with the following guidelines in mind:

1. **All characters** in fiction have problems, desires, and needs. These three aspects of their lives may or may not coincide.
2. **Compelling main characters tend to have some traits in common.** They have agency, meaning they are active in the plot; they have unique voices, and they interact meaningfully with other characters.
3. If any of your main characters are introverted, shy, or apparently passive, you should search for ways they can act upon the story **without compromising their fundamental personalities.**

- 4. Take it easy with character descriptions.** Minimalism when describing characters is preferred over complete descriptions these days. When you do include details of appearance, speech or manner, make sure they make the reader feel something or that they are relevant to the plot.

## Character Voice: You are What You Speak

In the last chapter, I said that every character should have their own unique voice. This means they'll have their own way of talking, which has the handy side-effect that readers will know who is speaking without having to have the speaker named in every dialogue tag. Character voice should be seen in their internal thoughts as well, and that internal voice should not be substantially different to their spoken voice.

Writing dialogue is challenging for all writers, but particularly so for less experienced ones. As an editor, I've seen some common dialogue-writing habits, which if they occur in your manuscript, will need to be addressed. But first, let's look at a few qualities of good conversations that'll keep readers turning pages.

- Dialogue should *feel* realistic but not *imitate* reality. Real conversations tend to be fractured and boring. Unless a character is genuinely hesitant in their manner, keep the “ums” and “ahs” to a minimum.
- Characters should generally speak only a sentence or two at a time. Allow space for back-and-forth exchanges between characters.
- “Said” is a four-letter word that is a perfectly adequate dialogue tag in *most* situations. You should usually avoid

using adverbs to qualify dialogue tags. Let's say you have Susan tell an intruder, "Get out of my house this minute." You don't need to add ",Susan shouted angrily" to the actual dialogue. The "angrily" is self-evident from the words themselves and the context of the scene.

- "Said" is a useful tag, but you shouldn't have to name characters or use dialogue tags in every line of an exchange. Of course, if you have three or more characters in a scene, you might need to identify them more often, but this is where unique character voices come to the rescue.
- Now for a slippery one: **subtext**. When characters speak, the superficial meaning of their speech is in the literal meaning of words. Subtext has to be read between the lines. Subtext both conceals and suggests what a character is really driving at. Thus, if you're telling some British person about your crazy schemes, and they say, "That's an interesting idea," odds are they mean the exact opposite.

Here's an excellent example of dialogue that incorporates unique voices, plot-moving tension, and a dash of subtext. In Dashiell Hammett's classic noir novel, *The Maltese Falcon*, Sam Spade is hired to find the mysterious bird from the title. But others are looking for it, including 'The Fat Man,' Casper Gutman. In this scene, Gutman and Spade meet for the first time. The extract begins after they've already been introduced:

“We begin well, sir,” the fat man purred, turning with a proffered glass in his hand. “I distrust a man that says when. If he's got to be careful not to drink too much it's because he's not to be trusted when he does.”

Spade took the glass and, smiling, made the beginning of a bow over it.

The fat man raised his glass and held it against a window's light. He nodded approvingly at the bubbles running up in it. He said: “Well, sir, here's to plain speaking and clear understanding.”

They drank and lowered their glasses.

The fat man looked shrewdly at Spade and asked: “You're a close-mouthed man?”

Spade shook his head. “I like to talk.”

“Better and better!” the fat man exclaimed. “I distrust a close-mouthed man. He generally picks the wrong time to talk and says the wrong things. Talking's something you can't do judiciously unless you keep in practice.” He beamed over his glass. “We'll get along, sir, that we will.” He set his glass on the table and held

the box of Coronas del Ritz out to Spade. “A cigar, sir.”

Spade took a cigar, trimmed the end of it, and lighted it. Meanwhile the fat man pulled another green plush chair around to face Spade's within convenient distance and placed a smoking-stand within reach of both chairs. Then he took his glass from the table, took a cigar from the box, and lowered himself into his chair. His bulbs stopped jouncing and settled into flabby rest. He sighed comfortably and said: “Now, sir, we'll talk if you like. And I'll tell you right out that I'm a man who likes talking to a man that likes to talk.”

“Swell. Will we talk about the black bird?”

The fat man laughed and his bulbs rode up and down on his laughter. “Will we?” he asked and, “We will,” he replied. His pink face was shiny with delight. “You're the man for me, sir, a man cut along my own lines.”

I think you'll agree that Gutman and Spade are very different humans. Contrast Gutman's pompous, long-winded statements with Spade's clipped, to-the-point statements. For a man who says “I like to talk,” he's pretty stingy with his words. As for

subtext, there's more than a dash of it here. Among other things, it's obvious that Gutman is using cheap praise to ingratiate himself with Spade. Each character's conversational strategy—Gutman running on at the mouth and Spade inserting exactly two short phrases, like a boxer probing his opponent—demonstrate that verbal combat is substituting for the physical kind, for now.

### **Tags, beats, and white space**

The extracts from my own WIP (previous chapter) and *The Maltese Falcon* demonstrate the use of dialogue tags and action beats in framing conversations. Learning when and where to apply tags and beats is something of an art, but it's essential to learn because it influences the pacing of a scene, helps identify which characters are speaking, and reaffirms where characters are in space.

Dialogue tags can influence how readers perceive the cadence of speech. Consider the difference between:

“Really,” said Mara, “you don’t know what a credenza is?”

and

“Really, you don’t know what a credenza is?” said Mara.

The placement of the tag in the first example implies a certain pause after the “really,” whereas in the second example, you can imagine the words tumbling out.

A general rule of thumb for both tags and beats is to use them economically. Don't have characters stroking chins, fiddling with pens, or reaming their ears out with cotton buds unless these actions are pertinent to the story or establishing the mood of the character. And keep those beats fairly short:

‘Andy stroked the polished wood. “So that’s a credenza.”’

Definitely not:

‘Andy walked over to the furniture, dodged several hazardous Lego bricks on the Persian rug, carefully placed his coffee on a coaster, and (finally) stroked the polished wood. “So that’s a credenza.”’

Once you’ve established who is speaking, you can get away with tags for sentences at a time.

“Credenza,” said Mara incredulously. “Your mother called you Credenza?”

Andy stroked the polished wood. “Maybe she thought it was to prepare me.”

“For what?”

“I dunno, for life as a fixture, as a storage unit for every crazy idea that she wanted to set loose in the world?”

“That’s a bit mean.”

“She was mean.”

“No, I meant you’re mean to say that about your mum.””

An ancillary function of short passages of dialogue is to insert white space onto the page. That white space allows readers to rest their eyes for a beat. Including that white space is also a good reason to keep your paragraphs of exposition and description fairly short.

With that, let us set fancy-named furniture aside. As you might imagine, a lot more could be written about dialogue. It is, after all, the soul of great fiction and relatable characters. See ‘Resources’ for further reading on this essential subject.

### **Some additional dialogue ‘donts’.**

There’s a few additional dialogue habits that distinguish beginning writers from more experienced authors. As you read through your own manuscript, be on the lookout for them, and if you spot them, eliminate them or find a way to write your way around them.

- Do not use dialogue to infodump on the reader. One author I edited was concerned that he was relaying tons of information in writerly exposition, and so he had his characters infodump the information during conversations. But the problem was not so much the placement of the infodumps as the infodumps themselves. As you read your manuscript, ask

yourself **what information readers absolutely need to know**. If an event or a feature of your world fails to impact the plot, it is probably not needed.

- A special case of infodumping is the infamous “as you know, Bob” problem, where one character tells another character **stuff that both of them know**. Example: “As you know, Bob, our mum died last year and we’ve been fighting over the estate ever since.” Okay, this is clearly an extreme case, but how could you convey the same information differently? Maybe like this:

Frank slammed the front door.

“Another set of estate documents from those damned lawyers, and a demand to settle a year’s worth of fees.”

“Damn,” said Bob, “Mum must be rolling in her grave. All this infighting’s getting too expensive.”

- Another no-no is **phonetic renditions of dialect**. There is a successful novel—I won’t mention the title, but it may feature swamps and crustaceans—in which certain characters’ dialects are rendered so phonetically as to be indecipherable. This is not just a disservice to the reader but insulting to those who speak in dialect. If you decide to render some words

phonetically, don't overdo it. Instead allow the patterns of speech to do the work of distinguishing dialects and accents. Tana French does a great job of this in her Irish detective stories. She may allow the odd 'eejut' (idiot) into her character's speech, but she conveys most of her Irish accents through word order, cadence, and characteristic figures of speech, such as "Fair play to you."

- Watch out for clichés in dialogue. A given cliché may once have performed a useful service, but it has become stale through overuse. One I hate in particular is when a villain confronts the hero with the phrase, "We're not so different, you and I," or some variation on that message. I've lost count of the movies where I've seen that trope played out. The irony is that the cliché is sometimes true. Consider the methods of Batman. But if you need to demonstrate that hero and villain are, um, not so different, please find a different way to do it.

### **Strong guidelines**

1. When you read over dialogue, apply the basic test that it should convey essential information and move the plot forward—even if only a little bit. At the beginning of a story, the essential information can include establishing the personality of your characters.

2. Dialogue should feel realistic, even though well-written dialogue differs markedly from everyday speech. In general, characters should speak in fairly short sentences, unless pontificating is a part of their personality (like Gutman in *The Maltese Falcon*).
3. Following from point 2, resist the temptation to have characters infodump on the readers. This habit feels false, and it can lead to characters speaking in huge wedges of exposition. Readers need to know enough about your story world to serve the plot, no more.
4. Do not have your characters speak in phonetic dialects. Suggest the dialect through speech patterns and word choice. The occasional deliberately misspelled word is okay to establish the feel of an accent.

Pulling these suggestions together, consider the difference between “I say, old sport, I hardly think it appropriate that you be seen talking to me,” and “I dinna think you and me should be seen flapping our mouths together in the one place.”

Arlene Prunkl has an excellent blog post on dialect and accents [on her web page](#).

## Writerly Voice, Psychic Distance and POV

Voice is the secret sauce of your novel. Voice, as writing coach James Scott Bell has said, is what every commissioning editor and literary agent claims to be searching for in new writers. And yet, these people are hard pressed to define voice beyond assuring you that they know it when they see it.

As a reader, the chances are that you will recognize a compelling writerly voice when you read it. Voice sets the tone of the story; voice keeps readers turning pages; voice distinguishes great writers from the merely competent.

So, there's a lot riding on your writer's voice. The previous chapter dealt with character voice, and how to distinguish between characters through dialogue. In this chapter, we'll deal with how your voice as the narrator of the story interfaces with characters on the page via the woo-woo sounding concept of psychic distance.

First, let's look at a few examples of voice that clearly establish the tone of a story:

‘Everything starts somewhere, although many physicists disagree.’

Terry Pratchett, *The Hogfather*.

"I've watched through his eyes, I've listened through his ears, and I tell you he's the one. Or at least as close as we're going to get."

"That's what you said about the brother."

Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game*

'Some days hang over Manhattan like a huge pair of unseen pincers, slowly squeezing the city until you can hardly breathe.'

Mickey Spillane, *The Killing Man*

I hope you'll agree that these three examples of opening lines establish a certain mood right off the bat. Pratchett's opening is a little wry, a little off kilter, and that's definitely the prevailing mood in his *Discworld* series. Scott Card makes the brave choice of beginning with dialogue, and you immediately realize that there are something serious is at stake in this story. Spillane is establishing a particular mood in his description of New York, and it's the gritty mood of classic noir. Note that he could have said something like, "There are days when Manhattan is so humid it feels like a wet sponge." But he doesn't; he uses the language of torture: pincers, squeezing, breathing difficulties.

My first injunction about your writer's voice is that you shouldn't stress about finding your writer's voice. You've already been developing your writer's voice the whole time you've been working on your first draft. In fact, you may find that your writer's

voice reads differently on the last page than it did at the beginning. If that is the case, you should aim for greater consistency in voice and tone as you revise.

### **It's show *and* tell, not show *don't* tell**

In his book, *Voice* (see 'Resources'), James Scott Bell makes the powerful point that voice grows from your characters. In particular, it's your POV characters' **subjective reactions** to story events and their surroundings that establish the tone of the story.

However, you the author are writing this book. You write it in a sort of dialogue with your characters, and early on you'll likely adopt one or a few subjective POVs. Back in Dickens's day, writers frequently employed an **omniscient POV**, in which they observed the landscape of his characters actions, speech and thoughts from the proverbial 30,000 feet. Nowadays, that POV is less fashionable, and writers either deploy **close third person** or **first person POVs**.

A first person POV is often employed in gritty noir-style thrillers. Here's an example from the opening pages of Raymond Chandler's *Farewell My Lovely*:

'A hand I could have sat in came out of the dimness and took hold of my shoulder and squashed it to a pulp. Then the hand moved me through the doors and casually lifted me up a step.'

In deep third person POV, you the writer are narrating the story through the senses of the POV character. Chuck Wendig demonstrates deep POV in his Miriam Black series, whose ethically questionable main character can foresee the moment of a person's death by touching them:

“The lights need to be on,” she says to nobody, foretelling the future.

She clicks the lamp by the bed. Piss-yellow light illuminates the ratty room.

“Shoo,” she says. “Fuck off, you're free to go.”

The roach does as it's told. It boogies under the pull-down bed, relieved.

Back to the mirror, then.

“They always said you were an old soul,” she mutters. Tonight she's really feeling it.’

There are a few notable features to this extract. First, although Wendig is narrating what is happening, we are largely seeing the objects in the room (cockroach, mirror, piss-yellow light) through Miriam's eyes, employing words she would use and her attitude in this moment. Second point: Although Wendig is close enough to Miriam to give us language, thoughts, and feelings, he's not stream-of-

consciousness deep in her head. He even uses what some people call a **filter word**, namely *feeling*.

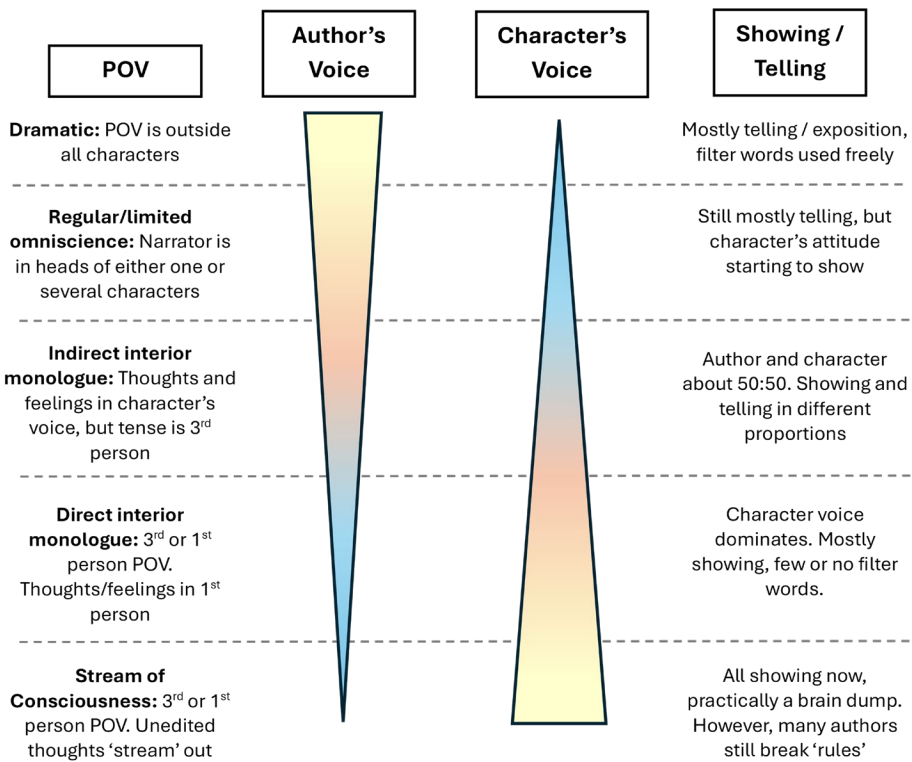
The subject of filter words brings us to the most often repeated axiom in writing, namely **show don't tell**. Show don't tell (especially applied to close third person POV) is often repeated as though it were an absolute law with iron-clad rules, such as avoiding all filter words, including emotional telling and direct reporting of sensations (he saw, she heard). Writers are even told to recast scenes in which characters appear to be thinking nothing.

All of these ideas are just fine in their place, but they're loose guidelines at best, and potentially damaging advice at worst. Lee Child, who has sold a few books, [pours scorn on show-don't-tell mythology](#), saying "There is nothing wrong with just telling the story ... So liberate yourself from that rule."

In reality, skilled writers **do both**. They show *and* tell, and they mediate narrative intensity along a spectrum of **psychic distance** (see Figure 2). Psychic distance refers to the degree of intimacy that readers feel with characters. If readers are entirely outside of the character's sensory universe (equivalent to omniscient POV) to being thoroughly immersed in the character's sensory universe. In the case of thorough immersion, we are in close POV and experiencing thoughts and sensations as the POV character would.

Another way to understand this spectrum is to think of it in cinematic terms. Omniscient would be a long shot, establishing the scenes. The camera can then zoom in closer and closer, tightening in on character surroundings, the scrape of their shoes on the sidewalk, and eventually seeing the scene through their eyes.

There's a very useful, albeit rather academic article by David Jauss that deals thoroughly with the subject of psychic (narrative) distance (See 'Resources'). Emma Darwin [deals with the subject in a slightly more readerly way](#), and Arlene Prunkl thoroughly dissects the showing-to-telling spectrum [here](#).



**Figure 2.** Psychic distance and POV. For POV, I've used the language in Jauss's seminal article on psychic/narrative distance. Triangles illustrate the sliding scale of relative dominance between the author's and character's voice.

We can reinforce the message of Figure 2 with an example. Let's say that our character is a hard-bitten private eye, Dirkly Dickman, PI:

**Dramatic:** Dickman emerged from the subway into the first dirty snowstorm of November.

**Limited omniscience:** Dickman emerged from the subway, and the cold instantly chilled his face and ungloved hands. He really didn't need this.

**Indirect interior monologue:** Dirty snow fell in thick flakes from out the unforgiving November sky. Who the hell needed this?

**Direct interior monologue:** Snow, that dirty November snow chilling his cheeks and ungloved hands.  
*Man, do I ever not need this.*

**Stream of Consciousness:** Like every November, that dirty snow. And just like always I'm here, still wearing the same worn-out raincoat, still no gloves, no common sense, and less revenue.

## **Practical implications for editing and revision**

How can you use all this information in editing and revision? First, as part of your read through of the manuscript, try to gauge how much of your narrative is telling relative to showing. Note in particular how you describe character reactions to the situations you put them in. Do you describe most of your characters' actions

as if you were an outside observer? Or do you sometimes get closer to your characters' inner thoughts and experience the action directly through their senses?

If you find that you already adopted at least part of the spectrum of psychic distance and a judicious mix of showing and telling, then you are ahead of the editing and revision game. By contrast, if your readers experience your characters' lives via your omniscient, predominantly telling author's voice, you're likely going to give them a boring read. However, the opposite problem can arise. A story that consists of a continuous stream of consciousness from inside the POV character's fevered imagination can be exhausting. Learn how to balance your authorial and character voice through psychic distance. It won't happen overnight, and I've offered several resources to assist you.

A couple of final points. First, don't sweat about the filter words (e.g. thought, saw, heard, feared loved, etc.). You will find a hundred posts advising beginner writers to avoid filter words in deep third person POV, and in general, I'd say avoid using them **where possible**. However, sometimes the simplest thing to say is, "Dickman **thought** it was the dirtiest, wettest November snow he'd ever **seen**." Lee Child would see nothing wrong with it, and neither would the majority of readers.

Second, you may notice that deep showing that avoids filter words frequently makes for a much lengthier read than simple telling. The examples in [Arlene Prunkl's blog](#) on showing versus

telling illustrates this point well.

### **Strong guidelines**

1. Your authorial voice meshes with your character's voices to make the secret sauce of page-turning fiction. It's seen through both the author's and character's diction and syntax.
2. Skilled writers have learned to manipulate psychic distance and to balance showing and telling. If your story is all of one or all of the other, you need to identify opportunities to vary psychic distance, POV, and the balance of showing versus telling (as in Figure 2). Perhaps scan your manuscript for scenes of higher and lower emotional intensity to identify opportunities to get into your character's head or observe them from a distance.
3. Don't tie your prose into word pretzels in an effort to avoid filter words at all costs. Most published writers use some filter words to describe what characters are thinking or feeling, and they still manage to sell books! That said, don't use filter words as a lazy default; option when the intensity of a scene requires more creative ways of describing your characters' feeling.

# World Building and Exposition

How much of your **story world** do you need to describe?

Cyberpunk pioneer William Gibson once sat down with some game designers who [wanted to turn \*Neuromancer\* into a board game](#):

‘They set me down and questioned me about the world. They asked me where the food in the Sprawl comes from. I said I don’t know. I don’t even know what they eat. A lot of krill and shit.’

And the Sci-Fi writer M. John Harrison said, “Every moment of a science fiction story must represent the triumph of writing over world building.” In other words, writing the story comes first, and the world should grow organically out of the telling of the story.

Sci-Fi writer Charlie Jane Anders disagrees. In a post titled *7 Deadly Sins of Worldbuilding*, she counts not thinking about your world’s infrastructure as sin number one:

‘How do they eat? What do they eat? Who takes away the garbage? Who deals with their bodily wastes? How do they get around? What do the majority of people do to survive?’

You're not just constructing a society, you're creating an economy.'

So who's right. Personally, I lean toward M. John Harrison's view of world building, which is why I placed it at the bottom of the manuscript hierarchy of needs in Figure 1. Your characters inhabit and move through a story world where they will take careful note of some details but not others. Some aspects of the story world will impose themselves on your characters, but not others.

In some stories, key aspects of the world are characters in themselves. In Mick Herron's *Slough House* novels (made into TV as *Slow Horses*), Slough House itself is a character, inhabited by mice, ghosts, cats and other beings who explore its grimy decay in detail at the beginning of each book. The world building in Slough House isn't gratuitous because the building is both infrastructure and a symbol of the despair and career decay of the disgraced MI5 agents who work there.

On the other hand, think about the famous bar scene in *Star Wars Episode 4: A New Hope*. What if the writers had felt the need to explain the origin and biology of every bug-eyed alien drinking there, or how the house orchestra came to be playing 1930s jazz in a galaxy far far away? The scene would have lasted for hours.

## **Growing story world**

Perhaps the best way to think about world building is to extend the cinematic analogy of Jauss's long-shots-to-X-rays article. If a

given detail of your story world is incidental but serves as scene setting, it's best to briefly note it and then move on. Thus, if we take our fictional, PI from the last chapter, the dirty snow may be an incidental part of his surroundings:

‘Dickman emerged from the subway straight into to a blizzard of dirty snow. He hunched into his worn-out greatcoat and headed down 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue.’

Let's say, however, that the snow is consequential to the story. Maybe the snow is dirty because someone detonated a dirty atomic weapon in Chicago, and maybe the weapon detonated because Dickman acted too late to stop it from happening. Now we have greater stakes:

‘Dickman paused at the top of the subway steps. It had been less than a week, and already the Chicago snow was as grey as a cheap motel bedsheet. The northeast wind had taken the nuke's radioactive plume over the lake, and now a change of wind was bringing it back to remind him that he'd been minutes too late.’

World building incidentals, such as food and infrastructure can be added into the action as they occur:

‘Dickman stopped by one of those stand-up noodle joints and ordered a krill sandwich. He

ate in silence and the snow kept falling,  
leaving little rosettes of radioactive soot on the  
beige material of his great coat.’

Getting back to the question at the head of the chapter, I’d say you need to do only the world building needed to understand the story, plus a little extra for atmosphere. You’ll want to reserve detailed descriptions and impressions for those aspects of your world that are most relevant to your characters. Scene setting can be accomplished in ‘long shot’ as the introductory sentence or incidental details of a scene

As you read through and take notes on your draft, you’ll be revisiting all the scenes in your story. Take note of the most story-relevant features of your world, the details that can be sketched out in ‘long shot,’ and those that are mere decoration, and which can therefore be eliminated.

### **Magic systems and Sci-Fi tech.**

Magic and futuristic tech are special cases in world building. Both have to be explained in a way that causes readers to suspend disbelief. One way to do that is to have them appear perfectly normal to your characters. Thus the ‘handwavium’ explanations of faster-than-light ansible communications in Ender’s Game or the *mélange*-enhanced spatial abilities of Guild navigators in Dune are never questioned. They are inherent to their respective worlds.

Keep explanations of future tech brief. Over-explaining it will only focus readers on its inherent impossibility, unless you are describing something near-future that is technically plausible. In *Leviathan Awakes*, the first book in James S. Dorey's *Expanse* series, the author explains how engineering innovation allowed humans to become asteroid miners:

‘Then Solomon Epstein had built his little modified fusion drive, popped in on the back of his three-man yacht, and turned it on ... The Epstein Drive hadn't given Humanity the stars, but it had delivered the planets.’

And there you have it in one technical word (‘fusion’) but no technical details, and no further explanation required.

Magic systems, almost by definition, defy the known laws of physics. When done well, however, they do have rules, costs, and limitations. In Jim Butcher's *Dresden Files*, magical energy is created by living beings and their emotions and souls. The skill of magic involves gathering magical energy from within and then releasing it through spells. It's a physically exhausting process that can leave the wizard's ‘batteries’ drained.

### **Strong guidelines**

1. When describing the features of the world, tread lightly and don't belabour the details (we're looking at you, Moby Dick). Focus on the details of your world that are

most relevant to the plot. Edit out over-description (see also ‘Killing your darlings’ in Chapter 1).

2. If you are writing in first person or deep third person POVs, remember that you are experiencing the world through the sensibilities of those POV characters.
3. Remember too that the world itself can be a character in your story. The west African rain forest in *Heart of Darkness* and the deep reaches of space in *The Expanse* come to mind. And as a character, your world is going to push on your living, human characters, and it’ll set the tone for their actions.
4. Special rules apply to Sci-Fi tech and magic systems, which have to appear natural in the context of the story world, have consistent rules and limitations, and (hopefully) not descend into cliché.

# Bringing it All Together

Writing stories is hard, complex work. It's tempting to say that if it was easy, everyone would be doing it. Now, thanks to LLMs like ChatGPT, many are doing it, or at least they're writing prompts to have the AI do it for them. And the results are not just terrible but frequently incoherent.

As a human reader, you have a few advantages over LLMs. First, as a reader, you know when the story you are reading satisfies that very human need to be engaged by a compelling narrative. If I adapt Hemingway and write a six-word story as follows: 'For sale, baby shoes, good condition,' it reads, well, rather flat. Maybe the kid grew out of them. But if I write (as Hemingway did), 'For sale, baby shoes, never worn,' that is a story, probably a tragic one.

Second, you have the ability to empathize with the imaginary people, animals, and even places you invent on the page. No LLM can do that, and they never will; they are algorithms generated by computer code.

Third, you have experience of the world. You've probably been in a snowstorm, fallen off your bike, loved and lost etcetera. You need to bring those experiences to the table.

## Back to the hierarchy

I suggested in Chapter 1 that you can make some sense of story complexity by treating it as a hierarchy of needs (Figure 1). I've suggested ways to think about each of the major story elements and given **strong guidelines** for how to treat them in revision. You, using whatever note taking or mapping tools you wish to adopt, now have a lot of thoughts about what needs to be changed. Perhaps you now have a clear **scene-by-scene idea** of **what needs changing**.

Good.

Now comes the tricky part. You have to make all the elements in the hierarchy of needs work together in revisions and rewrites. Think about it. If major plot points change, then characters also undergo change. Their goals may have to change; what they know may have to change; maybe the way they speak has to change. Suppose, for example, that Harry Potter, instead of being brought up in the Dursley's closet, had been a homeless kid in East End London. That would change a few things about him, including his accent and speech patterns and attitude to large, hairy strangers.

The previous example touches on three or possibly four levels of the hierarchy shown in Figure 1. To take another example, consider Chuck Wendig's struggles in writing *Blackbirds*, which he relays with swearsy honesty [here](#) and [here](#). Among other things, he had to take several incomplete attempts at the novel, and in his words, "blow them up," meaning virtual complete rewrites.

When faced with such complexity, some writers opt to face the blank screen and write a new draft from scratch. That's not for the faint of heart, but if a scene or chapter does need major surgery, I'd encourage you to rewrite it, rather than trying to torture your first draft of it into compliance with new priorities.

For scenes that just need modification, you'll now be working on several levels of the hierarchy simultaneously. Maybe the objective or stakes of the scene have changed for your characters. Their actions will therefore change, as will the content of their dialogue. If you've decided to fundamentally change a main character, the way they talk is likely to change. If you changed some aspect of world building earlier in the novel, then the environment through which your characters move will have changed. Although revising your story will be challenging, if you've understood the changes that are needed and formulated a plan to make them, the process may go quite smoothly.

### **Some additional tools to help you**

The keyword in successful editing and revision is **organization**. I already suggested some tools that can help with that, like the book map (see Appendix) and the notebook. You can make a new copy of the book map, then move the various chapters and scenes around to see how they fit. Use it to identify darlings and page counts. As a rule of thumb, chapter lengths should not differ dramatically from each other.

Other tools I use to accomplish similar things can be a lot more basic. Those coloured two-by-two-inch sticky notes can be invaluable. Write plot points on them, stick them on your wall, juggle them around to see what fits. Five-inch index cards serve much the same purpose, and they can fit more information.

In my own writing, I also use large sheets of newsprint and felt pens to brainstorm ideas. Brainstorming is an excellent tool for getting unstuck from persnickety plot points. There are a lot of brainstorming techniques out there. One I particularly like is called “The Five Whys.” If you are faced with some intractable plot point, you state the problem, and then ask and answer why several times, each time homing on the best answer to the original problem.

**Here’s an example:**

The hero saying “yes” to the call to adventure feels unconvincing.

**Why?** Because he has no particular stakes in the adventure.

**Why?** Because there is no obvious connection between him and the McGuffin that is the subject of the quest.

**Why?** Because the other people on the quest are not his friends

**Why?** Because they are from a different tribe/country/culture.

**Possible solution:** The hero needs to be intimately connected to the other characters to justify answering the call to adventure.

## What about story structure?

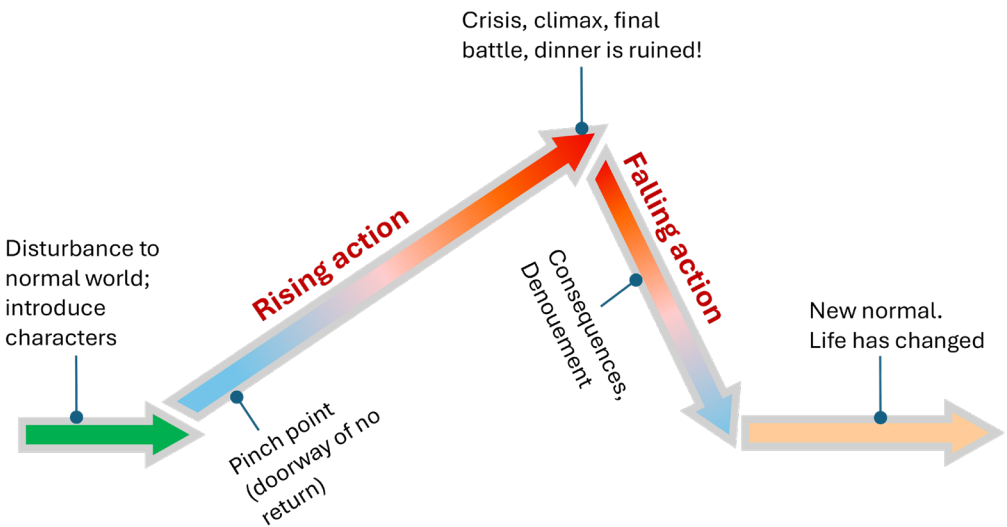
I placed big-picture story and plot issues at the top of the hierarchy in Figure 1, but I haven't talked a whole lot about the 'shape' of the story. One reason is that many story structures are possible and there just isn't space to deal with all of them. Another reason is that your story already has a certain 'shape' to it that may have appeared organically as you wrote. There's a lot of opinions about 'the right way' to structure a story, but I don't want to warp your revision process by recommending one (or any of them) over another.

We can list a few examples, however. Perhaps the simplest is Classic story structure (Figure 3), which captures a consistent pattern of rising (or intensifying action) which culminates in a climax and falls to resolution. In Figure 3, there are some essential plot points that usually become defining points in any novel. Note that the story begins with a 'disturbance' to one or more characters' normal worlds. Thinking of Harry Potter again, Hagrid's tumultuous entrance to the Dursley residence was definitely a disturbance to the 'normal' world (though why a beaten-down existence in the British suburbs should be considered normal escapes me!).

Novels usually feature a general pattern of rising or accelerating action, with the stakes at each level of intensity rising and an ultimate crisis approaching. Then the crisis hits—Bam! The Death Star appears and approaches the rebel planet (*Star Wars*).

Winston Smith confronts his worst fears in Room 101 (*1984*). No one emerges from these crises unchanged (except maybe James Bond in the original Fleming novels).

The classic structure in Figure 3 contains five essential plot points. As you might guess, plots can get a lot more complex than that. George Lucas famously based *Star Wars* on *The Hero's Journey*, as described by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. [The Hero's Journey contains about 12 plot points](#): Normal world/disturbance; call to adventure; refusal of the call; Meeting the mentor; first pinch point/test/crisis; tests, allies, and enemies; the innermost cave (e.g. Shelob in *LOTR*); ordeal; reward; the road back; resurrection; return with the prize).



**Figure 3.** Classic story structure with some essential plot points

Phew! That was a lot, but you can go even more complex. The *Save the Cat* story beat sheet has 15 different points in it. All of which raises the question of how many plot points do you need, and which of these are essential? [Writing at Jericho Writers](#), [Jadie Robins](#) suggests that the magic number is seven:

1. **Hook.** Something unique about the story world or protagonist that intrigues readers and introduces the story's central question.
2. **Inciting incident.** The moment when something happens which disturbs equilibrium of story world.
3. **First Pinch Point.** As a result of #2, the protagonist faces a critical decision. Think Mobius presenting Neo with the choice between the blue and red pills in *The Matrix*.
4. **Midpoint.** Characters are forced into action by the pinch-point choice. It is a moment of enlightenment and potential change for the character. If they go on, life can never be the same. James Scott Bell calls this 'The Mirror Moment.'
5. **Second Pinch Point.** Things aren't working out well, forcing the protagonist to adopt Plan B (or C, or Z), which leads inevitably toward the climax.
6. **All is lost.** This is the moment of crisis where your protagonist faces the prospect of failure or death. In a James Bond movie, this is the moment when the villain says, "But I don't expect you to talk, Mr. Bond, I expect you to die." In *LOTR*, it's the Battle of the Black Gate, where the mouth of Sauron taunts the Middle Earthers with some of Frodo and

Sam's possessions, implying that all is lost. In *A Christmas Carol*, it's when the last spirit shows Scrooge his own unmourned grave.

7. **Resolution or denouement.** Your protagonist(s) may have succeeded or failed, but regardless of what happens, they return to their 'normal world' changed. Frodo triumphs but returns to the Shire with an unhealable wound. As to Scrooge, 'it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge.'

These seven plot points seem like a reasonable number. I suggest you note their presence or absence as you go through your manuscript and make your notes. If one or more of the plot points is absent, you should ask yourself **a)** whether your story needs the missing point, and **b)** how to insert it into the story if you do need it.

### **Theme, a squishy presence that may or may not materialize**

Theme is tough to define, but you'll know it when you see it. It's the message that emerges from between the lines on the page, or it's the central idea that an author may or may not have realized they were exploring all along. And because the concept is so squishy and amorphous, readers may infer different themes from the author.

What theme is definitely not is a topic or simple assertion. ‘Family’ or ‘love versus hate’ are not themes, because a theme would have to say something about these subjects. ‘Returning to family brings mixed emotions,’ or ‘Love triumphs over hate, but hate exacts a price’ can be themes.

When I finished the first draft of my own WIP, I realized that ideas about memory were threaded throughout the narrative. As I get into my third draft, a solid theme has yet to attach itself to that one word. Perhaps it’s that ‘acting in the present based on old memories ends in grief.’ Or maybe it’s ‘trying to redeem the past through present action is sometimes necessary.’ I’m still not sure, and when it comes down to it, I’m just trying to tell a compelling story. The theme will be whatever it is after I finally type ‘The End.’ And I think that should be your attitude toward it too.

### **A few final strong guidelines**

- Avoid weird dialogue tags, such as “‘Give me more champagne,’ he bubbled,” or the impossible, “‘I expect you to die, Mr. Bond,’ Blofeld chuckled.”
- Avoid **head hopping** within scenes. Head hopping is where you change the POV character, often without apparent reason in mid-scene. This habit can confuse readers and dilute identification with characters in deep third person POV. That said, many authors head hop with abandon. Lee Maracle does it in *Celia’s Song*. Hemingway did it in *The*

*Old Man and the Sea*. In general, though, I'd recommend sticking to one POV character per scene.

- I've touched on this earlier, but do try to avoid clichéd sounding dialogue. Examples include 'You'll never get away with it,' 'Don't you die on me,' or 'Let's do this thing.' But these can be so useful, I hear you say. Sure, maybe, but if you must use these or any other dialogue clichés, attempt to freshen them up a bit.
- Finally, don't let this e-book be the only craft book you ever read. There's a whole world of opinion and advice out there that can take you beyond what you learn here. So, refer to the resources in the final section and deepen your knowledge and your craft.

## Conclusion

I hope that you have enjoyed this e-book, and that you will have found useful, actionable advice within its pages. The approach I've suggested may feel highly systematic, and perhaps even a little regimented as you write your notes on the hierarchy of needs depicted in Figure 1. When you start to actually revise the manuscript, however, the arrows connecting the different levels of the hierarchy will become more important, and the revision process may start to feel quite complex.

Among other things, you'll see how changes to scenes influence character behaviours and motivations. As a result, the personalities of your characters and how they speak may change. The ways in which characters act to drive the plot forward will almost certainly change. You'll also start seeing those parts of the manuscript that "echo" with other parts, and as a result, you may become increasingly aware of an undeclared theme running through your work.

Yes, self-editing and revision is complex. So do be patient with yourself and with your process. You've elected to go on the hard mission of generating imaginary people that readers will want to live with for 300 pages or more. You've already lived with them for months, perhaps years, and you'll continue living with them

through your second and subsequent drafts. So, best of luck and happy writing!

## **Author's Bio**

Andrew Park spent 20 years as a professor of ecology at the University of Winnipeg before retiring to focus on freelance editing and writing. He holds an editing certificate from Simon Fraser University in BC, and completed the Developmental Editing for Fiction course at Editorial Arts Academy.

Andrew is an editorial generalist who edits fiction, non-fiction, academic papers, and book proposals. His fiction editing experience ranges from eco-fantasy through thrillers to fictionalised historical biography. He is currently working on the third draft of his first novel. You can find him at <https://www.wordfishereditorial.com>

## Resources

It's impossible to impart every advice on every single aspect of editing or skills you'll need in a ~14,500-word e-book. Fear not, there are many worthwhile writing resources out there. But beware, addiction to writing craft books is a real thing! This is why I've whittled my resource suggestions down to a few that I've found particularly useful. They should be available in your local library, book store, or at online retailers. I've included a few helpful podcasts and YouTube videos that impart good advice as well.

### Books

**James Scott Bell.** *Voice! The secret power of great writing.*  
Compendium Press, 2015.

— — — *Plot and structure.* *Writer's Digest Books*, 2004. Part of the 'Write Great Fiction Series.'

— — — *Writing unforgettable characters: How to create story people who jump off the page.* Compendium Press, 2020.

**Tom Chiarella.** *Writing dialogue: how to create memorable voices and fictional conversations that crackle with wit, tension and nuance.* Story Press, 1998.

**C. S. Lakin.** First Pages of Best Sellers: What Works, What Doesn't, and Why. Writer's Toolbox Series, Ubiquitous Press, 2020.

**Ursula K Leguin.** Steering the Craft: A Twenty-First Century guide to sailing the sea of story. Harper Perennial, 2015

**Donald Maass.** The emotional craft of fiction: How to write the story beneath the surface. Writer's Digest Books, 2016..

**Robert McKee.** Dialogue: The art of verbal action for the page, stage, and screen. Twelve, 2016.

**Chuck Wendig.** Damn fine story: Mastering the tools of a powerful narrative. F+W Media International, 2017.

## **Podcasts and YouTubers**

### **Helping Writers Become Authors.**

<https://www.helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com/> if you want to learn a lot about story craft, enneagrams and archetypal characters, K. M. Weiland is your woman. I find her quite theoretical sometimes, but she does have a lot of knowledge, and she's good at imparting it.

### **John Mathew Fox.** YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/@Bookfox> and blog: <https://thejohnfox.com/blog>. J. M. Fox is a professional writing teacher, and it shows in his clearly communicated and professionally presented videos. His blog is full of

actionable advice and many examples drawn from excellent novels.

**Page One podcast.** <https://www.writegear.co.uk/podcast> Tariq and Marco are Scottish podcasters who do long-form interviews with great authors. Their interview style is relaxed and empathetic, and authors respond by revealing their struggles and strategies for writing.

**Writing excuses.** <https://writingexcuses.com/> A rotating cast of professional authors and teachers present short (ish), pithy and actionable writing advice. Their motto is ‘15 minutes long, because you’re in a hurry and we’re not that smart.’

## Appendix:

### Book Map Example (Drawn From My Own WIP)

Many structures for a book map are possible. There's a famous one online which shows J. K. Rowling's [handwritten book map](#) for *Harry Potter and The Order of the Phoenix* broke down the plot and actions of individual characters. My example, which I've anonymized—the details don't matter much—illustrates a work still very much in progress, hence the notes and ideas for changes. Word counts are useful for earmarking rate of progress or scenes that are overwritten.

Chapter	Scene	Notes	New Materials (draft 3)	Words in Chapter	Cumulative Words
<b>Prologue</b>	How the world collapsed	Alternative prologue structures: The shipwreck; cowtown Zoo; Soldier's act of terror; or delete	These were the days of the beautiful dreamers, introduce the splintering of religion, mysticism, seeing endangered species everywhere	1,306	1,391
<b>Part I: Age, memory, extinction</b>					
<b>Ch. 1. River City.</b>	Sc.1.1. Protagonist arrives in the city	Introduce events that got him here in first paragraph.	Cut some exposition about city and introduce raven as distraction showing protag's vulnerabilities. Grandma told him; pay attention to the human	1,991	3,382
<b>Ch. 2: Damage.</b>	Sc. 2. Protagonist meets the old man, gets kicked out of the tower			3,318	6,700
<b>Ch.3 Old man's bulldog</b>	Sc.3. Protagonist meets the soldier.	Protag's participation in doubt, has to win soldier's confidence	soldier kicks DR out, DR's curiosity aroused	1,699	8,399
<b>Ch.4 Curiosity</b>	Sc.4. Remains of the Day.	Protag reflects on his own backstory and how he got here	Protag has to determine to stalk Soldier. Convince her that he can be valuable.	1,273	9,672
<b>Ch.5. McGuffin!</b>	Sc.5. Soldier and Protagonist meet Lake together.			2,717	12,389
	Sc. 6. McGuffin.	Inciting incident. First evidence for mcGuffin	McGuffin has to come like a spear to the chest for protag	1,777	14,166