



October 2010

Substantive editing: beyond spelling and grammar

Substantive editing (sometimes called developmental editing) is not as cut and dry as copy editing, although it is equally important. Substantive editing focuses on the function of the document and its intended use. A substantive edit is analytical and allows for negotiation between the author and the editor, since editorial decisions are more often based on style. Substantive editing aims for a document that is presented in a logical way, contains all necessary materials for the reader to make connections between ideas, and uses jargon and technical terms in a way appropriate for the intended audience.

Writers and their tools

Ardith asked a random sample of writers—novelists, short story writers, poets, and journalists—what they need to get their words organized. Computer or pen? Do you need to have a particular kind of notebook or is the back of a shopping list sufficient? Here's what they said...

"Nothing really beats a simple uni-ball roller on a Hilroy exercise book. When I can't use the tools I like best, it's by any means possible: eyeliner on the top of a newspaper, a highlighter on the back of a napkin—there's always a way."

"Totally computer. Pencil is only for ideas that come to me when I'm not near my laptop."

"I write longhand with uni-ball Vision pens in a Moleskine notebook."

"I like to begin writing by hand. My favourite is a Bic Clic Master #2. I prefer to put my first few drafts into cheap composition books from a dollar store, preferably the ones with a hard cover. I only write on one side of the page, so that I can put revisions on the page facing it."

"I always carry a notebook in my bag and use it to jot down notes and random ideas. Too many times I've not bothered to write the thought down, believing I'll remember it later but I've learned that I almost always forget, which then results in a horrible bout of pain and regret (as I wonder if the forgotten idea was 'The Best Idea I've Ever Had')."

"I use a pen or pencil when I'm taking notes. I use spiral notebooks (the high school kind), but don't have a favourite brand. My 'tools' are so commonly available that I'm never in a position to be without them!"

"I start by hand, pen and notebook. Once a draft is somewhat there, I move to the computer and play with lines. If I'm in a pinch, scrap paper and pencil will do, anything to get the idea/line/image down!"

"Long hours at the computer can be physically painful for me, so I print out drafts and edit them by hand while sitting on the sofa. Otherwise, I have a bit of a fetish for fine, black felt-tip pens and mechanical pencils."

"I have foolscap sheets from work that I write on and then I collate and write a good copy on the computer. Often, when I can't use the regular tools something good happens. A deficit is generative."

Ardith's Notebook is a monthly newsletter for writers and self publishers.

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