

TIPS AND TRICKS

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AS AN EDITOR

It is an editor's job to make sure a story is written as well as it can be. Editors look carefully at each word, phrase and sentence to check that it plays its part in building the overall message of the story. As a young editor, your job is to make sure that the manuscripts are well written and interesting to the intended readers.

These tips look at different elements of good writing. You can refer back to these as you work.

THE BASICS OF AN INTERESTING STORY

It is important that the editor makes sure the story the author wants to tell will be interesting to the intended readers. The elements listed below are some of the basics of good writing.

Plot

The "plot" is the plan or structure behind a story. The story should have a clearly structured plot which the reader can follow.

Most plots start at the beginning and go to the end – this is often best. If the plot jumps about – for example, in time or place – then it is important to make sure the reader can follow what is happening at all times.

As an editor, it is important to make sure the structure of the story engages the reader and makes them want to find out what is going to happen next. Barrington Stoke books aim to be action-packed, so most jump right in with the action and then use cliff-hangers at the end of chapters to keep the reader wanting to push on to the end.

The plot should contain one or more conflicts that the main character(s) must

attempt to overcome. If there is no conflict, the story is not likely to be very interesting.

An editor should be able to identify any points of conflict in the story and how the characters handle these conflicts.

Conflicts can be internal or external. An example of an internal conflict might be what happens in the mind of a character who knows that his brother has committed a crime – should he tell the police or not? External conflicts include arguments, obstacles or any difficult situation.

Theme

A theme is a message that the story conveys to the reader. Sometimes this is conveyed through a lesson that the main characters learn by the end of the book. Good writing tries not to tell the reader what the theme is – this can feel too “preachy”. Instead, the reader can make up their own mind. Not all stories need to have a theme, and it is important that the editor makes sure an author does not outright tell the reader the theme.

Characters

Readers should be able to relate to the characters or at least be interested in them enough to want to read about them. A writer does not have to describe what the characters look like, but they should give the reader a good idea of what sort of people they are. It is best to do this with the characters’ actions and speech, instead of saying things like “John was a bad man.”

Setting

Writers should aim to set their story somewhere that will be interesting to the reader. This could be anything from a familiar city to a fantastical world. The setting helps the reader to imagine the story, so it is important that the editor makes sure the setting feels “right” and “real” to the reader.

For a story to feel “real”, it doesn’t have to happen in the real world. What is

important is that all the details have to fit with the setting. For example, a story set in 1716 would seem a bit silly if all the characters went off to watch TV every night.

Style and tone

It is important that the tone of the story and the author's writing style match the content of the story. It is up to the editor to spot any areas that may need to be improved.

POINT-OF-VIEW

Good writers want their readers to feel like they are in the middle of the action and one way to do this is to establish a strong point-of-view.

It is important that point-of-view does not switch about too much. Often it is best to use the same point-of-view for the whole story.

But sometimes the writer will want to use different points-of-view in order to give different takes on the same scene – for example, thrillers often give the point-of-view of victims and police officers, which sometimes lets the reader know more than the police. This must be done with care.

Different narrators can affect the point-of-view of a story. The narrator is the person who tells the story. There are many different types of narrator:

First-person narrator

A first-person narrator is involved in the action of the story and tells the story. This type of narrator is easy to identify because they will use the word “I” to describe their actions.

Readers often identify more with a first-person narrator, but it is important to remember that a first-person narrator tells the truth as he or she sees it – and may fib about his or her part in events! This type of narrator is also a bit limited – they can only guess what is going on in other people's heads.

Third-person narrator

This type of narrator is not a character in the story. They do not use the word “I” to describe actions within the story. This type of narrator can let the reader see much more of the action and also the thoughts and feelings of more of the characters.

As an editor, it is important to make sure the author has adopted the most effective point-of-view for the story they are telling. For example, a story about a soldier in the First World War that is told by his brother at home might not be so interesting as the same story told by the soldier himself as a first-person narrator.

SHOW DON'T TELL

A well-written story makes the reader feel as though they are “in” the action with the main character(s) – the story should make the reader feel like they are “there”, as this will make them keen to read on.

To do this well, the author needs to use a “show don’t tell” method in their writing.

Here is an example of two sentences. One tells the reader how the character is feeling, while the other shows the reader:

Susie was nervous about the interview.

Susie’s palms started to sweat and her heart began to race when she thought about the interview.

The first sentence tells the reader how Susie is feeling, while the second sentence shows the reader. The second sentence is much more effective at helping the reader understand how the character is feeling because readers can imagine having sweaty palms and a racing heart and work out for themselves that Susie is nervous.

The reader is more likely to remember times he or she has felt like that and be interested to see what happens to Susie.

Another way to avoid telling and not showing is to avoid adverbs to describe speech.

It is less interesting to write:

“I don’t care!” Andrew shouted angrily.

than

Andrew slammed his glass down. “I don’t care!” he yelled.

Questions to ask when you are editing:

- Can you find examples in the story of sentences that tell when they could show? Can you find a way to re-write the examples so that the sentence is now showing the reader?
- Are there any specific parts of the story that you feel should be rewritten so they do a better job of showing the reader what is happening in the story?
- When reading the story, did you feel like you were experiencing the events along with the characters? If the answer is no, can you explain why this might be?

DON'T USE TOO MUCH DETAIL

To tell a good story it can be better to think “less is more”. Too much detail can leave no room for the reader to use their imagination.

Below are two examples of writing the same idea. One is very detailed and the other is not. Which one do you think is more effective?

A truck drove past Susie, splashing a puddle of water over her head. Susie was very wet. Drops of water were falling off the ends of her hair, which moments before had been in a perfect bun. Her make-up was running in black lines down her face. Even her eyelashes had droplets of water falling off them. She even got some water up her nose. Her sunshine yellow dress had been soaked to a depressing shade. Her feet made squelching noises as she continued to walk, and she left wet footprints behind her as if she'd just stepped out of a swimming pool.

A truck drove past Susie, splashing a puddle of water over her head. Now Susie looked like she'd just been plunged into a swimming pool and plopped back on the sidewalk a dripping mess. Even her shoes made squelching noises as she walked.

Both of these paragraphs get the point across, but the second example allows room for the reader to imagine what the character looks like. Too much detail can slow a story down and leave the reader feeling bored.

MAKING WRITING COLOURFUL WITH METAPHORS

One way to show the reader what is happening in a story in a creative way is to use metaphors. A metaphor is a figure of speech that describes something by saying it is something else. (Don't confuse it with a simile, which describes something as being like something else.) Metaphors can explain complex ideas in a single image so that the writing doesn't get bogged down with too much detail.

The following are some examples of metaphors. Can you figure out what these metaphors are trying to convey to the reader?

His candyfloss words did not appeal to her taste.

He pleaded with her to forgive him, but Janet's heart was cold iron.

The test was a walk in the park.

Questions to ask when you are editing:

- Can you identify any metaphors used in the story?
- Can you identify a specific passage of the story that you think would benefit from using more metaphors?
- Can you create some of your own metaphors in relation to the story?

tone

When you edit a story, it is important to make sure the tone used by the author suits the content. The tone can affect how a reader feels about what is happening in the story. Another way to describe the tone of a book is to think of the feeling the author wants to convey with their use of language. Sometimes the tone of a story can change as the plot develops.

Ways to create different tones can include:

Using different sentence lengths – for example, short sentences can give a sense of panic or fear. This is because people in a panic often think in short bursts, and short sentences can also give the text a rhythm like a loud heartbeat. When people are afraid, their heartbeat seems loud.

Formal language can make the reader feel distant from a character or from the action of the story. Chatty language can make a book or a character seem friendly and fun.

Questions to ask when you are editing:

- How would you describe the tone of the story?
- What influenced your ideas about the tone?
- Can you identify any passages in the text that point to your understanding of the tone?
- Does the tone change throughout the text? Is this tonal change intentional?
- Do you think the tone of the story matches the content and message the author is trying to convey?
- Do you think the tone of the story would be different if it was from another character's perspective? How would it be different?