Ultimate Self-Editing Checklist

This guide is designed to help you revise your work-in-progress more effectively (and painlessly). As you scroll through the sections below, remember that these are *self-editing* tips. You still need beta readers and editors! We intentionally excluded questions like "Do readers quickly bond with my protagonist?" since you can't accurately assess that yourself. Instead, we're focusing on problems you can identify without external feedback.

With that in mind, open your manuscript, take a deep breath, and plunge in!

Big Picture

Plot

- If I compare each of my plot points to [traditional story structure](), am I hitting them at roughly the right moments?
- Am I constantly advancing my main plot, or does it go stagnant for long periods of time?
- Could I cut any subplots without drastically affecting the main plot?

Characters

- Do each of my protagonists have relatable fears, [flaws](), and desires?
- Do each of my antagonists have an understandable motive and [justification]() for his actions? Do all of them drive the plot, or are they [too weak]()? Are they as realistic and human as my protagonists?
- Do each of my characters have a [distinct voice]() (in narration as well as dialogue)?
- Do each of my major characters have a [backstory]()? Does it add depth to who they are?
- Could I remove any character without significantly changing the story? If one is somewhat important, could I transfer his role to a more prominent character instead?

Theme

- Is the thematic question I'm asking [truly compelling and difficult]() to answer?

- Am I slowly and intentionally building my protagonist's [character arc](#) over the course of the story?
- Am I connecting each of my major characters to the theme by giving them their own arcs or making them foils of the protagonist?
- Do I force the protagonist to [make a sacrifice](#) to prove his dedication to the truth?

Scenes

- Could I trim or cut this scene without altering the story?
- Do I start this scene at the latest suitable moment, or do I perform the literary equivalent of clearing my throat first?
- Am I writing this scene from the best point of view? And am I staying inside that point of view, or am I randomly hopping between characters?
- Does this scene advance some aspect of (a) character development, (b) plot, or (c) theme?
- Does my protagonist have a perceivable goal in this scene, and is it presented early enough that his actions make sense? Is it a [goal that consumes him](#), or is it a transitory goal that might not be worth writing about?
- Is this scene asking a narrative question that the protagonist (and reader!) want to know the answer to?
- Is this scene answering the narrative question with [either a setback or a decision](#)?
- Have I considered what [other characters](#) are thinking and given them realistic reactions?
- Could I make this scene any more interesting or impactful?
- Have I prevented this scene from becoming a conversation without setting (talking heads) or [internal monologue](#) without action (navel gazing)?
- Am I avoiding info dumps by relaying information in a natural way that either advances the plot or characters' relationships?
- Does this scene end with a moment that raises questions and entices readers to turn the page?

Prose

- Am I using active voice instead of passive voice?
- Am I reducing prepositions (*as, in, to, of, from, for, on, by, up/down, through, above/below*) and state-of-being verbs (*is, are, was, were, had, had been*) to create tighter, sharper sentences?
- Am I replacing adjectives/adverbs with vivid nouns/verbs?
- Am I being specific ("a golden retriever") instead of generic ("a dog")?
- Am I avoiding telling verbs (*knew, saw, felt, thought,* etc.) and directly showing what the character is experiencing?
- Am I rooting out pet words/phrases/mannerisms that appear over and over?
- Am I being creative with my wording instead of resorting to clichés?
- Am I keeping distracting and overdramatic punctuation (ellipses, exclamation marks, and em dashes) to a minimum?
- Am I replacing dialogue tags with action beats when possible?
- Is my dialogue bloated with small talk and fillers that don't contribute anything to the scene, or is it to-the-point and meaningful?
- Am I ensuring that the cause comes *before* the effect ("When the spider landed on her arm, she shrieked."), or am I putting reactions in the wrong order ("She shrieked when the spider landed on her arm.")?
- Does my sentence structure match the scene's pacing (terse for fast scenes and flowing for slow scenes)?
- Am I varying the length, structure, and beginning words of my sentences?
- Am I choosing words that effectively convey the characters' emotions, especially in pivotal moments?
- Am I trying to *impress* readers with my vocabulary and clever metaphors (resulting in purple prose), or am I aiming to *communicate* clearly and immersively?