

# **The Nuts and Bolts of Copyediting Fiction**



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of Copyediting Fiction**

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Even the best writers need editing . . .

PEANUTS  
these years in Paris were to be among the finest of her life.

Looking back, she once remarked "these years in Paris were among the finest of my life." That was what she said when she looked back upon those years in Paris

where she spent some of the finest years of her life.

I THINK THIS IS GOING TO NEED A LITTLE EDITING...

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Who's this Featherschneider person?

- ▶ Full-time freelance copyeditor/proofreader since 1995
- ▶ Started with textbooks/nonfiction; began some fiction editing in my first year; more fiction as time went on
- ▶ Frequently edit series novels (cozy mysteries, paranormal, romance)
- ▶ Mentor: Karen Judd, *Copyediting: A Practical Guide*

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General considerations

- ▶ Author experience, preferences, writing style
- ▶ Publisher house style (exceptions are sometimes made)
- ▶ Conventions of the genre
  - ▶ Fantasy: special terms, lots of backstory, blood & gore
  - ▶ Military: lots of technical info, blood & gore
  - ▶ Erotica: even sex needs an editor!
- ▶ Audience: often a consideration in series books, queries

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The copyeditor's focus

- ▶ Spelling, grammar, punctuation: sure! But also...
  - ▶ Suspension of disbelief
  - ▶ Internal consistency
  - ▶ Author's voice
  - ▶ Reader's enjoyment
- ▶ You are the continuity director
- ▶ Fiction is pleasure reading! Nonfiction conveys information; fiction tells a story, sets a mood, provides an escape.

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Getting Started

an overview

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You have the manuscript; now what?

- ▶ Ms. likely to arrive line edited, styled, ready to go
- ▶ Review publisher house style
- ▶ Review ms.-specific notes/previous style sheet, if provided
- ▶ Review publisher's tracked edits, if any
- ▶ Apply template, if appropriate
- ▶ You are ready for the first pass!



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First pass: get the bonbons . . .

- ▶ Just read the story! Get to know the characters, the plot, the author's style.
- ▶ Two approaches:
  - ▶ Untracked, typographical cleanup only: stray italics/spaces, reversed quote marks, obvious bad paragraph breaks, etc.
  - ▶ Tracked: Macros for above, plus fixing absolute errors (wrong word choice, hyphens, etc.; nothing requiring a style decision)
- ▶ Flag things for later if needed; mostly mental notes
- ▶ Note the level of detail



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Second pass: technical considerations

- ▶ Use Document Map, Styles Pane
- ▶ Tracking on and showing (my preference), but use toggle to review
- ▶ Use macros for flagging/deflagging, queries
- ▶ Set up style sheet(s)



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Second pass: the Big Edit

- ▶ Main word-by-word copyedit pass
- ▶ Compile style sheet(s) as you go
- ▶ Considerations:
  - ▶ Spelling/grammar/punctuation/etc.
  - ▶ Plot problems (query only; make suggestions if you can)
  - ▶ Dialogue: diction, accents, grammar (allow leeway, but query awkwardness)
  - ▶ Consistency: creative license vs. suspension of disbelief (call possible issues to author's attention, let him/her decide)
  - ▶ Queries: diplomacy is king! ("Perhaps ..."; "Does this contradict ..."; "May confuse readers ...," etc.)



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Third pass: tidying up

- ▶ Multiple mini-passes: clear flags to yourself, resolve other issues
- ▶ Remove copyeditor's working template and styles, apply publisher's template
- ▶ Final spelling/consistency check
- ▶ Save final file
- ▶ Clean up and format style sheet(s)



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File Management

or, staying organized

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Managing the manuscript

- ▶ Keep the original separate; save versions as you go
- ▶ Use folders: Original File(s), Working Files, Final File (optional)
- ▶ Save after each chapter with new name: ch 01 Title reading.doc, ch 02 Title reading, etc.
- ▶ If no chapter numbers, add some! [[Ch 01]], [[Ch 02]], etc.

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Managing the style sheet(s)

- ▶ Four categories; I keep separate docs (YMMV)
  - ▶ 1 general style sheet.doc
  - ▶ 2 characters.doc
  - ▶ 3 places.doc
  - ▶ 4 timeline.doc
- ▶ Author may include character bios, backstory, description of worlds; lucky you! By all means add them to the style sheet.

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Series style sheet(s)

- ▶ For series, update/add to style sheet(s) from previous book(s), if you have them
- ▶ Choose a way to indicate info from previous books (font color, highlight, text tags); macros help
- ▶ Compare/update as you go to ensure continuity; Amazon "Look Inside" can help
- ▶ Remember, "facts" from previously published books in the series cannot be altered now
- ▶ Note "(series style)"/"(au pref)" as needed

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Style Sheets

or, the nuts and bolts

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General style sheet

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- ▶ Essentially same as for nonfiction; note publisher/author preferences where appropriate
- ▶ Number style: time, height, room numbers, phone numbers, fractions; treatment in dialogue
- ▶ Punctuation: serial comma, ellipses, hyphenation of color terms, commas around *too/either/anyway*, possessives of names ending in -s
- ▶ Abbreviations: both real and fictional

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General style sheet (cont.)

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- ▶ **Typography in fiction:**
  - ▶ internal thought, remembered dialogue, telepathic communication (generally italic for “not real” exchanges)
  - ▶ words as words, words as sounds, letters as letters, letters as shapes
  - ▶ foreign terms
  - ▶ signs, handwriting, text messages, e-mails, inscriptions, clothing
  - ▶ terms of address: Detective, Officer; pumpkin, sweetheart

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General style sheet (cont.)

- ▶ Usage: *that/which, further/farther, etc.*
- ▶ Miscellaneous: publication names, organization names, other proper nouns that don't fit elsewhere
- ▶ General word list: generic terms, unusual plurals/spellings/capitalizations, variant word forms (-ward words, *dreamed/dreamt*), invented words, foreign terms, frequently corrected/changed words

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Character style sheet

- ▶ Avoid alphabetical lists!
- ▶ Group by affiliation instead: family, coworkers, neighbors, members of an organization, etc.
- ▶ Animals are characters too!
- ▶ And even sometimes inanimate objects: sentient weapons and objects, fictional deities, etc.

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Character style sheet (cont.)

- ▶ Note ANYTHING that could be contradicted later (with chapter number):
  - ▶ Physical descriptions, ages/birthdays, relationships, employment
  - ▶ Abilities, education, personal history, regular activities
  - ▶ Right/left (scars, injuries, tattoos, etc.)
  - ▶ Phone numbers, e-mail and postal addresses, etc.
  - ▶ Negative attributes: things a person can't or won't do, or has never done
- ▶ Copy exact wording from the ms., for ease of searching later; abbreviate to save space, but be aware of keywords

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Character style sheet (cont.)

- ▶ **What if you find a contradiction?**
  - ▶ If only a few instances (say, a misspelled name) and/or not critical to the plot, change and query
  - ▶ If the variation is closer to an even split, or if the attribute is critical to the plot, query author to resolve.
- ▶ **Help the author out by making suggested fixes, if possible.**
- ▶ **List unnamed characters too; they may come up later**

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Places style sheet

- ▶ (aka geography and buildings)
- ▶ **As with characters, avoid alphabetizing; group by relation to each other**
  - ▶ Exception: I will alphabetize (after the edit) lists of minor items with little or no description that were mentioned in passing
- ▶ **Check against reality when possible, but allow for deliberate fictionalization (query if unsure)**
- ▶ **Let the first read be your guide to how much detail to record**

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Places style sheet (cont.)

- ▶ **Cardinal directions**
- ▶ **Regional/city/street/building names; any proper nouns**
- ▶ **Descriptions of interiors**
  - ▶ décor, colors, furniture type and placement, windows/doors
  - ▶ right/left: rooms off hallways, doors, wings of mansions
  - ▶ where the sun rises and sets
  - ▶ number of floors/locations of rooms (watch out for British usage)
- ▶ **Descriptions of exteriors: landscaping, architecture**
- ▶ **Business hours, regular events**

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Timeline style sheet

- ▶ I use a Word table that simulates a monthly calendar
- ▶ Again, check against reality, but allow for fictionalization of historical events, actual dates (query if unsure)
- ▶ Some dates/days may be vague (a Tuesday on the chart is not necessarily positively a Tuesday in the story; indicate whether this is the case)
- ▶ Indicate breaks in time flow
- ▶ Parallel timelines/flashbacks: can be tricky!




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Timeline style sheet (cont.)

- ▶ Note any mention of time, fixed or relative
  - ▶ midmorning; three weeks later; sunset; Wednesday
- ▶ Weather, moon phases, seasons
- ▶ School days, workdays
- ▶ Critical plot events
- ▶ Character ages/birthdays, whether relative or absolute (can be flexible here, but query large discrepancies)
- ▶ Watch for "missing" holidays and big events, if their absence is remarkable




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The finer points

or, balancing consistency and creativity

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Food for thought . . .

“Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn't.”

~ Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson's New Calendar*

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The fine line

- ▶ Creative license vs. suspension of disbelief:
  - ▶ “Don't mess with Art! Author reigns supreme!”
  - ▶ OR
  - ▶ Call issues to the author's attention, explain why readers might stumble, let the author decide

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Elements of fiction

- ▶ Often informal structure: sentence fragments, incorrect grammar, creative punctuation/capitalization
- ▶ Dialogue: accents, poor grammar; sounds, dialogue tags
- ▶ Adult themes: naughty words, sex scenes, offensive/illegal behavior
- ▶ Deliberate fictionalization or obfuscation; fictional worlds
- ▶ American vs. British style: various levels

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Formal vs. informal structure

- ▶ Watch for uneducated, “simple” characters using “five-dollar” words, especially in first-person POV
  - ▶ “I thought she sounded noncommittal”
  - ▶ “George’s mercurial behavior unsettled him”
- ▶ But at the same time, watch for errors in narrative or dialogue that are not the characters’ but the author’s
  - ▶ Authors make mistakes that characters would not!
- ▶ May be asked to violate rules/conventions
- ▶ Bottom line: Keep dialogue/narrative true to character/voice

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Capitalization

- ▶ Author may have a stated preference for the unusual
- ▶ Terms of address: Doctor, Detective, Lieutenant
- ▶ Unusual terms, especially in fantasy
  - ▶ the Stone, Seeing/the Sight, NoonTide, She
  - ▶ *Warlord* capped only for a specific person
- ▶ Religious terms
  - ▶ pronouns for God: *He* or *he*?
  - ▶ *the Devil* or *the devil*?
- ▶ Sun/sun, Moon/moon, Earth/earth, Universe/universe

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Dialogue

- ▶ Accents/elisions: yuh, ag’in, ; ’cause, ’em, ’er
- ▶ Sounds: uh-huh (yes), uh-uh (no), mmm-hmm
- ▶ Slang: geez, dammit, outta here, whoop-de-do, helluva, young’uns
- ▶ Interruptions (dashes) vs. pauses (ellipses)
- ▶ Some publishers say “Don’t edit dialogue; query only”

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Dialogue (cont.)

- ▶ Dialogue tags: verbs of saying
  - ▶ she screamed, he muttered, I wheezed: YES
  - ▶ I grimaced, she shuddered, he encouraged: NO
  - ▶ watch for overuse/underuse in long exchanges
- ▶ Watch punctuation of tags
  - ▶ "I never said that," she said.
  - ▶ "I never said that." She frowned.
  - ▶ "I just don't understand," she said, and looked away.
- ▶ Speech interrupted with action/expressions
  - ▶ "Hey"—he looked into her eyes—"I never wanted to hurt you."

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Adult themes

- ▶ Cuss words can have many variant spellings/hyphenations; ditto sexual terms. Put 'em on the style sheet, especially those that aren't in MWII (which will be most!)
- ▶ Beware the -ass words: smartass, badass, big-ass, lazy-ass
- ▶ Don't let Romeo take his pants off twice!
- ▶ It's OK to turn down genres that disturb you

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When fact and fiction collide

- ▶ "I canna break the laws of physics, Cap'n!"
  - ▶ looking out the window at night in a brightly lit kitchen
  - ▶ "When a halftone has spots caused by surprinting dots, that's a moiré!"
- ▶ Historical facts vs. deliberate fictionalization; anachronisms of both fact and language
- ▶ Deliberate obfuscation
  - ▶ streets may not intersect/locations may be obscured
  - ▶ query e-mails/phone numbers/etc.
- ▶ Bottom line: Picture the action. Could it happen? Use your Spidey-sense and look it up!

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American vs. British style

- ▶ Punctuation: usually Americanized
- ▶ Spelling: usually Americanized, but sometimes retained to preserve a certain flavour
- ▶ British terms unfamiliar to Americans: is it clear in context?
- ▶ Floor designations
  - ▶ American: first, second, third
  - ▶ British: ground, first, second
  - ▶ And a word about flights of stairs, as long as we're here ...

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Frequent fliers: language bloopers

- ▶ Pet phrases (query)
  - ▶ he shoved his hands in his pockets; he tailed off
- ▶ Alliteration/rhyme/echo (query)
  - ▶ Squelching through a slough of snow and sludge
  - ▶ Consecutive sentences that end with the same phrase
- ▶ Nodded his head, shrugged his shoulders, blinked/squinted his eyes (can usually delete)
- ▶ Danglers/mixed metaphors
- ▶ Common general issues: subjunctive, misplaced *either/only, there is/are* (often deadwood), smothered verbs (*made a decision*). Watch for these, but be mindful of rhythm and mood.

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Frequent fliers: action bloopers

- ▶ "If a gun appears in Act One, it should go off by Act Three."
- ▶ Similarly, "drop-in" characters
- ▶ Remembered inscriptions/speech: Do versions match? If not, which one is preferred? Memory is fallible, but differences could distract from the story. Query.
- ▶ Missing scene breaks (space breaks for POV change)
- ▶ Show, don't tell: Characters telling each other things they already know about each other. Query, but it's probably too late.

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Frequent fliers: trademarks

- ▶ Publishers generally want to avoid legal issues
- ▶ But let's not get carried away! Keep it natural.
- ▶ Commonly encountered:
  - ▶ Styrofoam, Listserv, Realtor
  - ▶ Laundromat, Dumpster
  - ▶ Band-Aid, Kleenex, Coke

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Queries: putting on the kid gloves

- ▶ Tact is your friend!
- ▶ Suggest fixes when possible, to make the author's job a little easier.
- ▶ "Perhaps change this word to \_\_\_\_?"
- ▶ "Did you perhaps mean \_\_\_\_? (Either is correct; just checking.)" (walking world/waking world)
- ▶ "But in Ch. 2, \_\_\_\_\_. Is this a contradiction? Please clarify?"
- ▶ "Is [unusual word choice] intentional?"
- ▶ "Readers may be confused by this, because \_\_\_\_."

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Final thoughts . . .

- ▶ Be flexible
- ▶ Use your Spidey-sense
- ▶ Respect the author
- ▶ Serve the readers
- ▶ Have fun!
  
- ▶ Questions? amy@featherschneider.com
- ▶ Social media links: www.featherschneider.com

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