

Copyediting Fiction for Traditional Publishers



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General considerations

Author's style, publisher house style, genre, audience

The copyeditor's focus

Suspension of disbelief, internal consistency, author's voice, reader's enjoyment

You have the manuscript; now what?

Review house style, ms.-specific notes/previous style sheet, tracked edits; apply template

First pass: get the bonbons . . .

Read the story! Get to know plot, characters, author's style

Make minimal essential edits, flag things for later, note level of detail

Second pass: the Big Edit

Word-by-word copyedit pass; compile style sheet(s) as you go

Plot, dialogue, consistency; diplomatic queries

Third pass: tidying up

Clear flagged items, resolve issues; restore publisher's template; final spell check; save final file

Clean up and format style sheet(s)

File management

Keep the original separate; save new copy after each chapter

Series style sheets: compile from previous style sheet, if provided; track old vs. new info

Managing the style sheet(s)

General style, characters, places, timeline; incorporate any previous info provided

General style sheet

Numbers: time, height, room numbers gun calibers, dialogue

Punctuation: color terms, ellipses, dialogue

Typography: dialogue, words as words/sounds, signs/writing, terms of address, epithets

Group oddball items by category: wines, magic spells, events, weapons

Characters/places style sheets

Avoid alphabetical lists! Group by relation; copy exact wording to aid searches

Note ANYTHING that could be contradicted later: appearance, habits, personal history; directions, architecture, landscaping, décor, right/left

Timeline style sheet

Note any mention of time, fixed or relative; weather, school/work days, plot events, ages

Balancing consistency and creativity

Creative license vs. suspension of disbelief

Elements of fiction

Structure: keep dialogue/narrative true to character/voice

Author may prefer unusual capitalization, comma splices, etc.

Dialogue: accents/elisions, sounds, slang, interruptions/pauses

Verbs of saying, punctuation of tags, interrupted speech

Adult themes: cuss words, slang not in dictionary, action in erotica

Fact vs. fiction: laws of physics; anachronisms; deliberate fictionalization

Picture the action. Could it happen? Use your Spidey-sense and look it up!

American vs. British style: punctuation/spelling; use of British terms in American publications

Frequent fliers: language bloopers

Pet phrases, alliteration/rhyme/echo, redundancy, dangles/mixed metaphors

But be mindful of voice; OK to allow irregularities in speech, first-person POV

Frequent fliers: action bloopers

Red herrings, “drop-in” characters, remembered inscriptions/speech, missing scene breaks

“As you know, Bob ...”

Frequent fliers: trademarks

Publishers generally want to avoid legal issues, but keep it natural.

Styrofoam, Listserv, Realtor; Laundromat, Dumpster; Band-Aid, Kleenex, Coke

Queries: putting on the kid gloves

Be tactful, suggest fixes, ask questions, advocate for the reader

Final thoughts

Be flexible, use your Spidey-sense, respect the author, serve the readers, have fun!