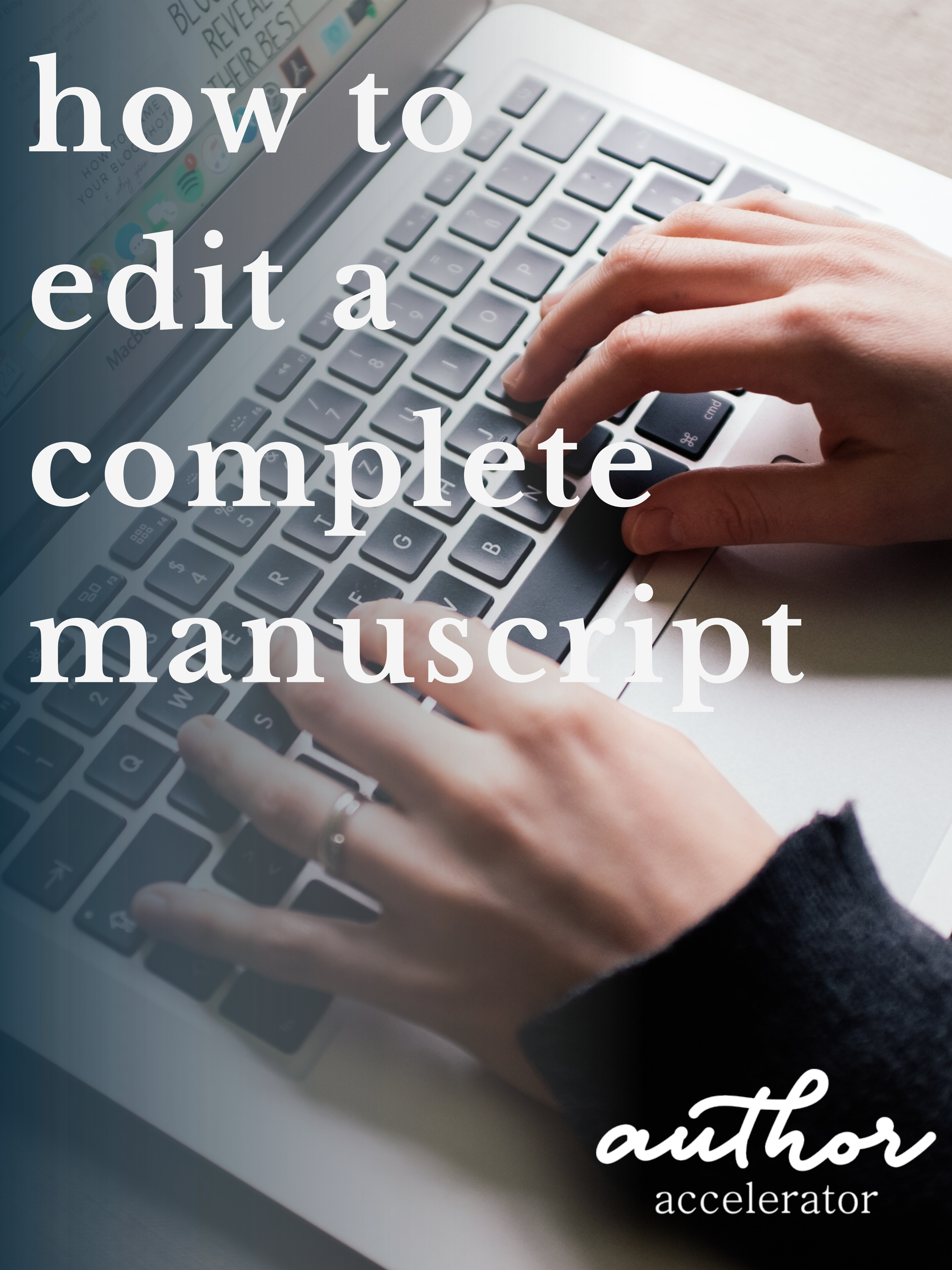
how to edit a complete manuscript



author accelerator

PART 1:
PREPARE YOUR MIND

INTRODUCTION

I have a client whom I shall call Victoria. She is person who comes to writing after a very successful career in another realm. She has a story she is burning to tell that is set in that other realm. She had been working on it for years before she came to me – taking classes, going to workshops, completing whole drafts that somewhere deep in her bones she knew were lacking. They just didn't have the depth, the oomph, or the power of the books she loved as a reader, and she couldn't understand why. She had a great idea, a clever setup, a clear vision of the story, a command of the English language, and big passion for what she was doing. So what was missing?

Note that Victoria happens to be writing fiction, but this same process happens all the time with non-fiction, too, and everything I am saying here applies to all genres.

Victoria and I did what I usually do with new clients who are deep in frustration: we went back to square one, to the origin of her story – the spark that first fired in her brain. We dug down into what her story was really about, and to what she was really trying to say, and to how the character could embody that idea. It turns out that she only had a vague idea of what she wanted to say, which is kind of like only having a general idea of where to pour the foundation for a house. In non-fiction, we would go through this exact same process, but instead of a character embodying the idea, a structure or argument would bring it to life.

Victoria gamely took on every assignment I gave her, and it seemed like we were cracking the code of the story – she got it in a way she hadn't before – and then she began to write scenes again, trying to nail down where her story should start. In fiction and memoir, this is the moment when the character first becomes aware that the clock is ticking, when the teeter-totter has tipped, when change is imminent and unavoidable. In non-fiction, it's about your reader's point of greatest pain, the place where their problem or need is most clear, the moment where your ability to help or serve or guide meets their deepest desire.

Victoria tried, but she kept not getting it. She kept writing scenes that were flat, she kept lapsing into backstory, she was telling the reader everything rather than showing it and letting it unfold. I would say, "Give us more emotion here, show us more, let us in more," and she would give more backstory, sometimes pages of backstory, because she did, after all, finally understand the story. I would then say, "No, that's too much information. The reader doesn't want all that right now. Prune it back."

A few days ago, Victoria got mad at me. I mean, not really. She's a super sweet person. But she said, "You keep telling me the opposite thing! Show more, show less! I guess I have no idea what you mean."

I took some time to explain to her exactly what show don't tell means, and exactly the skills a writer needs as they edit their work – skills which I believe anyone can learn. Here is what I said to her:

"Show, don't tell" is not literal.

It's not about the color of the sky and the clock on the wall and the bowl of lemons on the table. It's about meaning. It's about emotion. It's about letting the reader FEEL what the people on the page are feeling, letting the reader be in their skin, letting the reader experience what they are experiencing as things unfold.

And yes, this absolutely applies to non-fiction. Atul Gawande's *The Checklist Manifesto* – a stunning book about complexity and failure – is a master at show don't tell, both with the examples he gives, and with his own curiosity and quest. We can feel what motivates him. We can feel what he feels. We are with him as he drives his point forward.

Checkov famously said, "Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass." I sometimes wonder if this isn't where the "show don't tell" misunderstanding originated. Because YES, please don't just tell us about the moon, show us the light on it. That's very good. But writers take this to an extreme and they take it to mean, I shall now show you the sun and the moon and the curtains on the window and the couch in the room with the hand embroidered pillows and the dust bunnies under the couch. But that's not what Checkov means.

Look more carefully at the quote: *The glint of light on broken glass.* That broken glass is not just a random physical detail. The words are spotlighting something that matters in the story. Broken glass? And is there blood? Did something bad happen? Why? To whom? Seven words – *The glint of light on broken glass* – and already you have the readers' attention. Already you have the start of a story.

Checkov also said, "If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise don't put it there." This quote is actually a more accurate encapsulation of the show don't tell concept than the thing about the moon. What he's saying is: show us what matters and (equally critical) don't show us what doesn't matter. What he's saying is: *let us into the world where we can see and feel what matters.* That's what show don't tell is really about.

So how does a writer do it, exactly? How can you let the reader into your world so that the world feels real and whole and compelling?

A writer must hold multiple perspectives in her head.

This means that she must first step back from the creative impulse needed to write. This is THE key editing skill, THE key revision skill, THE key concept you need to master to hook and keep your reader. Writing is a completely different undertaking than editing. Writing is about creation, it's about flow, it's often unconscious, we often have no idea why we write what we write – and that is as it should be.

But once you step back to assess and improve the work, you have to bring a new kind of logic to the work. You have to consider multiple perspectives beyond that of the creator.

Those perspectives include:

1. You, the writer, the creator, the architect, the god of your story.
2. You, the person who has lived a long life, who brings a billion experiences to bear on the work, the person who has opinions and biases and the burden of all kinds of knowledge.
3. The reader, for whom you are crafting an experience or an argument.
4. In fiction, the characters, who themselves have lived long lives, bring a billion experiences to bear on their life, who have opinions and biases and the burden of all kinds of knowledge

As soon as I explained this, Victoria suddenly said, “WAIT! This is exactly the same thing my cello teacher has been telling me! I totally get it now!”

I am privileged to hear all kinds of revelations about the creative life, but this one was new to me. How could a cello teacher be talking about the same thing as a book coach?

Victoria explained:

“He asks me to isolate and identify issues, which requires me to listen while I'm playing. Harder than it sounds, trust me. The (impossible) goal is to listen to a recording of my own playing and not notice anything amiss in the recording that I didn't notice while I was playing. He asks me to focus on the following separately when practicing until I can integrate them all – tone, pitch, tempo, phrasing and articulation, which is how the notes connect.”

As Victoria spoke, I realized that there are other things at play, too – how you hold your hands, how you bow, the emotion you are trying to convey. I am not a musician, but my sister is a professor of music theory, and I grew up playing piano and flute and singing in the church choir so I at least have a working knowledge of these concepts – and this suddenly made perfect sense to me, too.

Although any of us can make music and have a grand old time by banging on a drum or belting out a Disney song, to make really good music that makes people feel something requires an understanding of the layers and nuances of some very complex concepts. And the only way for most people (those of us who aren’t native geniuses) to gain that understanding is to break it down – to strip the music apart – so that you can build it back up as one integrated whole.

The same is true for writing. In order to write like a virtuoso, you need to break down the work and evaluate it from each of the four perspectives, and ask yourself four key questions:

1. Am I, the god of my story, imposing my will on it to too high a degree?
2. Am I, the person who has lived a long life, failing to consider what the reader doesn't know about my world?
3. Am I, the person serving a reader, understanding their experience of every moment – knowing when they might have a question, when they might pick up a clue, when they might not be able to put the book down because of what I have promised will happen next?
4. Am I, the creator of these characters, considering what these characters know and what they fear and what they want and what their life experiences are bringing to bear on this piece.

Sounds quite impossible, right? It's not. It can be learned. One of the greatest compliments I get from my students is when they say that they begin to hear my voice in their heads. Because it's not really MY voice they hear – it's theirs. They are just using mine to access theirs, to build up their inner writing-voice. Hearing me continually asking, "Why, why, why, why, why?" or "What do you mean?" or "And so?" (which is to say, why should we care?) becomes a habit, and through that habit, the writer begins to integrate all the perspectives they need to write work that can touch a reader.

Let's take each of the four perspectives one at time so that you can become a better editor.

Oh, and for the record, the cello teacher Victoria refers to is Steven Polage, a Juliard graduate who teaches at the University of Oregon.

STEP 1:
STOP PLAYING GOD

The first of the four perspectives you need to have in order to edit your own work is an understanding of your role as the creator, architect, and god of your story.

Most of us implicitly understand the joy of this role. It's often why we are drawn to write in the first place. It's pretty heady stuff: you start with nothing – the spark of an idea – and you create a story or an argument, or a lesson that can go out into the world and resonate with other people – and not only in this lifetime, but long after your time on earth is over. I am often reminded of Mickey Mouse in the *Sorcerer's Apprentice*, waving his paintbrush around like a conductor in order to color the world and cause the seas to rise. A writer has so much awesome power!

I often tell my students, "You are the god of your own story!" I say this to help them tune into their own voice and their own power, because you HAVE to have authority in order to write a book other people want to read. You have to OWN your words, and OWN your right to speak, and OWN the point you set out to make. A vast number of writers are afraid of their own power, and need to be convinced that they have the right to wield it.

You are the god of your own story.

But there is a danger to being the god of your own story, too. Our friend Mickey got in some pretty big trouble because he gave into the thrill of being a creator. He believed too much in his own power. A writer has to be mindful of his motivation and purpose—which is why I am constantly on my soapbox about knowing what you are writing before you start to write, knowing your point, knowing your structure. It's what my entire Blueprint for a Book Program is all about –*thinking* before you start to write, using strategy to harness your creative power. Without that kind of consciousness, you run the risk of serving your ego instead of your work.

What does a writer who serves his ego look like? A writer who loves the process of writing, who thrills to sit and create, who loves to talk about what they are doing, but who refuses to step back and assess, ever. They write whatever they want to write (they are the god of their story!), they are frequently dazzled by their own writing, they hold on tight to everything, and then they get to "the end," and they believe the world should roll out a red carpet for them, no questions asked. No matter how much effort and energy goes into the work, this almost always turns out badly. They try to get an agent and amass a pile of rejections. They self-publish and end up giving most of their books away. They often become those people who say that the whole publishing system is rigged and that you have to know the right people to get published these days.

So the first step in learning to edit your own work is learning to set your ego aside. It's as simple and as profound as that. Imagine that you have a hat that says, "I am the god of my own story." You wear it while you write, and while you write you are a badass warrior poet who takes no prisoners. But then you take it off. You set it down. You step back and look with logic and humility at what you have created.

The first step in learning to edit your own work is learning to set your ego aside.

When do you take your god hat off? It totally depends. I once knew a writer who did it at the end of every single page of prose she wrote, but she was a little crazy. In my one-on-one work with writers, I usually guide them to stop at the end of every chapter, unless they are really trying to get some momentum and crank out a book, in which case I suggest stopping at 50 pages. At 50 pages, you get the benefit of knowing that you can write 100 pages, which means you can write 200, which means you can write a book, and that knowledge feels pretty great. Also, when you have 50 pages, you won't mind throwing out 10 or 20 of them, so you are giving yourself a certain amount of freedom.

No matter when you stop, print the work out. I know it uses trees and I hate that, but writers use a lot of paper. We just do. Then, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Are there places where I know things are illogical?
2. Are there places where I know the writing is weak?
3. Are there places where I know I was emotionally stingy?
4. Are there places where I tried to get away with something because I knew the alternative was going to be too hard/scary to pull off? (Hint: you didn't get away with it.)
5. Are there places that bore me when I read them over? (Hint: they will bore your reader, too.)
6. Are there places that are so *sweet* that I can barely stand how clever I am? (Big red flag! These are the darlings you're supposed to kill.)

These are some fairly big and broad questions, but by asking them, you are training yourself to assess your own work. This is a skill you can absolutely master. Doctors often say that patients come into their appointment knowing precisely what's wrong with them, even when what's wrong is something obscure. The same is true with writers. I often have writers come to me saying that they fear their opening is weak, their middle sags, their ending doesn't pay off – and they're almost always right. Writers who are this self-aware are *smart*. They have assessed their work, found the weaknesses, and sought help in trying to fix it.

So what if it's just you, and you have answered yes to some of those questions. You know there are places where things don't make sense, where the writing is weak, where you bored even yourself. This means you have more revising to do. Don't be afraid. Throwing out all 50 pages? Every writer has done it. Starting someplace completely new? Easy. Totally re-casting a tack you take in an argument (non fiction) or the way you develop a character (fiction)? Totally do-able. (They did it with Woody in *Toy Story*! That story is in *Creativity Inc*. Woody was at one point a sniveling, mean, jealous little cowboy. Sweet Woody who just wants to be loved!) Anything is do-able if you are writing in service of the story, not your ego.By all means, wear the god hat and indulge your awesome power as you write. Just make sure you take it off, set it aside, and look with a critical eye at what you have created.

STEP 2:
SHAKE OFF YOUR CURSE OF KNOWLEDGE

The second step in learning how to edit your own work is to remember how much you know and to realize that your reader doesn't know the same things. This sounds like a simple task – I just have to remember that my reader doesn't know everything I learned in my ten years on the tennis circuit, or I have to remember that my reader doesn't know that in the world I created, dragons can't kill unicorns – but it's actually a very complex and morally profound task, not to mention technically impossible.

Remember how much you know and realize that your reader doesn't know the same things.

In many fundamental ways, we CAN'T shake off the burden of knowledge simply by our intention. We are all a product of our era, our culture, our family, our religion, our system of government, our geography, and the gazillion experiences we have had that are specific to us. We can't shake these things off, nor, when it comes to writing, would we want to, because they are precisely what gives our story power. I just have to remember that my reader doesn't know what it's like to grow up poor and black in Alabama in the '50s. I have to remember that my reader doesn't know what it's like to be the persecuted genius who saved England from the ravages of war (that was from *The Imitation Game*...great movie!)

Psychologists refer to the phenomenon of not being able to "un-know" things as the "curse of knowledge." What exactly does it mean? Chip Heath, who is a professor of organizational behavior at Stanford Business School, and his brother, Dan Heath, a new media business consultant, wrote a book called *Made to Stick*, which was about how businesses can make their messages more "sticky." (It's a fabulous book about writing great stories, too. I highly recommend it.) They talk a lot about the curse of knowledge in those pages, and in this Harvard Business Review piece, which gives a shortened explanation of it:

> *"In 1990, a Stanford University graduate student in psychology named Elizabeth Newton illustrated the curse of knowledge by studying a simple game in which she assigned people to one of two roles: "tapper" or "listener." Each tapper was asked to pick a well-known song, such as "Happy Birthday," and tap out the rhythm on a table. The listener's job was to guess the song.*
>
> *Over the course of Newton's experiment, 120 songs were tapped out. Listeners guessed only three of the songs correctly: a success ratio of 2.5%. But before they guessed, Newton asked the tappers to predict the probability that listeners would guess correctly. They predicted 50%. The tappers got their message across one time in 40, but they thought they would get it across one time in two. Why?*

When a tapper taps, it is impossible for her to avoid hearing the tune playing along to her taps. Meanwhile, all the listener can hear is a kind of bizarre Morse code. Yet the tappers were flabbergasted by how hard the listeners had to work to pick up the tune.

The problem is that once we know something—say, the melody of a song—we find it hard to imagine not knowing it. Our knowledge has "cursed" us. We have difficulty sharing it with others, because we can't readily re-create their state of mind."

Our knowledge has "cursed" us. We have difficulty sharing it with others, because we can't readily re-create their state of mind.

This is a giant problem for writers, of course, because we are in the business of trying to communicate. Our very JOB is to make clear what is most likely not clear, for the very reason that we thought it up or we made it up or we lived it and are trying to recreate it for the reader. One of the most frequent critiques I make on a piece of writing is, "It's not on the page." What I mean by this is that the story or argument may well be crystal clear in the writer's head, but it has lost something – usually a lot – in translation.

There are the obvious bits of knowledge that the writers leaves out when something is not on the page – things such as a technicality about, say, the foot fault in tennis (going back to the person who spent ten years on the tennis circuit), and those are relatively easy to spot and correct. You think, "Oh right, not everyone has played five million sets of tennis. Not everyone would know this." But there are also a million nuanced things the writer knows, as well – particularly in the realm of emotion.

Writers are so paranoid about not telling the reader anything (see what I wrote about show don't tell in the Intro) that they end up bending over backwards to *keep* information from them. So they might write a line like this:

MaryJane swallowed and looked away.

Now the writer surely knows what the swallowing and looking away meant, but there's no way the READER can know.

- Is it that MaryJane was so thrilled about what happened that she could barely contain her glee and had to swallow to keep from screaming and had to look away so that no one would see her smile?
- Or is it that that MaryJane was sure she was about to be caught red-handed in her horrible crime and so out of shame and regret for what she had done, she swallowed and looked away?
- Or is it that MaryJane was about to give the most important speech of her life, and before she stepped up to do it, she swallowed to moisten her mouth and looked away because she knew if she caught someone's eye, she would lose it?

Context would certainly help the reader some, but not as much as you probably think. You have to tell the reader what you know.

Show them how things unfold (arguments in non fiction, scenes in fiction and memoir), show them what things mean (to you, to them, to the characters), but TELL them what you know about what's going on. That's another place where the "show don't tell" mantra messes readers up. We MUST tell what things mean and why they matter.

Failure to do this will cost you readers – and fast. The next time you stop reading something – a book, a magazine article, a blog post – try to think about why. There are all kinds of reasons to stop reading things, but odds are very good that among those reasons were several places where the writer didn't tell you some critical piece of information. We lose trust in writers who don't let us in. We actually get sort of pissed at them.

We lose trust in writers who don't let us in. We actually get sort of pissed at them.

As Steven Pinker, Professor of Psychology at Harvard University, writes in The Wall Street Journal, "The curse of knowledge is the single best explanation of why good people write bad prose. It simply doesn't occur to the writer that her readers don't know what she knows—that they haven't mastered the argot of her guild, can't divine the missing steps that seem too obvious to mention, have no way to visualize a scene that to her is as clear as day. And so the writer doesn't bother to explain the jargon, or spell out the logic, or supply the necessary detail."

Here is the opening paragraph of a novel by a client who allowed me to share her work-in-progress with you. She is the person I mentioned in the Intro. Her curse of knowledge about the way the Senate works is B-I-G. She spent many years in key positions in the Senate. Read these lines and see if you can notice where you, as a reader, feel either left out, unsettled, or flat-out confused.

Draft #1

> I stood on the Senate floor in the red silk dress that looked great on camera and separated me from my dark-suited colleagues. Matching shoes with 3" heels made me taller than most other Senators. My black hair was fashionably coifed without being flirtatious. The dress was hot and the shoes hurt like hell, but comfort didn't count. What mattered was that voters admired what they saw. The game had bizarre rules, but the point of playing it was to win. I wanted to become captain of the winning team and was aware that women must navigate the razor's edge between shrill and weak, between bitch and kitten.

You can see that in just ten lines, the writer failed to tell us all kinds really critical things, and in telling us the few things she DID tell us, unintentionally led us in a direction she probably didn't want us to go.

So how can you avoid this? What can you do when you sit down to edit your work so that you might shake off the curse of knowledge to the best of your ability?

- First, be aware of your particular curses. What do you know? What is in your bones? What are your beliefs? Be aware of them, and aware that your reader doesn't necessarily share any of this.
- Next, read through the work looking for places where you have left things out. Be like a dog on a hunt, sniffing out omissions and places where you failed to give the reader the information they need. Be conscious about this. Write these omissions in the margin.
- Err on the side of going too far. More writers make the mistake of being stingy than they do the mistake of being generous.
- Remember that what readers want to know is usually not physical detail (unless the physical detail is critical to the story.) We don't, for example, want to know the designer of the red dress in that Senate story, and whether it had sleeves, and whether there was a jacket, and whether it hit below or above the knee. That would drag the opening down. But we DO want to know – why a red dress that people would admire? How does that help a person stand out, gain power? What does this dress say about this woman in this moment?

Here's the same piece with my comments on this paragraph are in red italics and brackets. You can't always have an editor commenting on your work, but it's helpful to see what one might say.

Draft #1 with Jennie Edits

I stood on the Senate floor in the red silk dress that looked great on camera and separated me from my dark-suited colleagues. Matching shoes with 3" heels made me taller than most other Senators. **[Only use physical details when they tell us something important that we need to know right now. I don't think it's important that we know NOW that she's tall…so this line ends up feeling a bit like an information dump.]** My black hair was fashionably coifed without being flirtatious. **[Ditto above comment…and also this actually tells us nothing. Was it in a bun? A ponytail? A bob? And what would be the difference between flirtatious and not flirtatious? And by fashionably coifed, do you mean that she spent $300 a week at month at a high-end hairdresser? Or $500 a week having someone come to her office? Or an hour each morning doing her own hair in front of the mirror?]** The dress was hot **[Could be perceived as CUTE hot not temperature hot. Which did you mean?]** and the shoes hurt like hell, but comfort didn't count. What mattered was that voters admired what they saw. **[Admired their LOOKS? Really? Is that the right word? Is that what is actually considered most important in a Senator?]** The game had bizarre rules, but the point of playing it was to win. I wanted to become captain of the winning team **[So she wants to be President? Okay, but it's a little – flat. Obvious. Can we get more of a sense in here of WHY she wants it? Was she born to lead? Did she feel she deserved it?]** and was aware that women must navigate the razor's edge between shrill and weak, between bitch and kitten. **[But how is she doing that? We're not seeing that at all – either shrill or weak, either bitch or kitten. Also, is she referring to her clothing here? This is a position of huge power – the end of the opening paragraph, a place to really cement your point. Is this the point of your story? That women have to navigate the razor's edge?]**

Draft #2 – Writer Responds to Edits

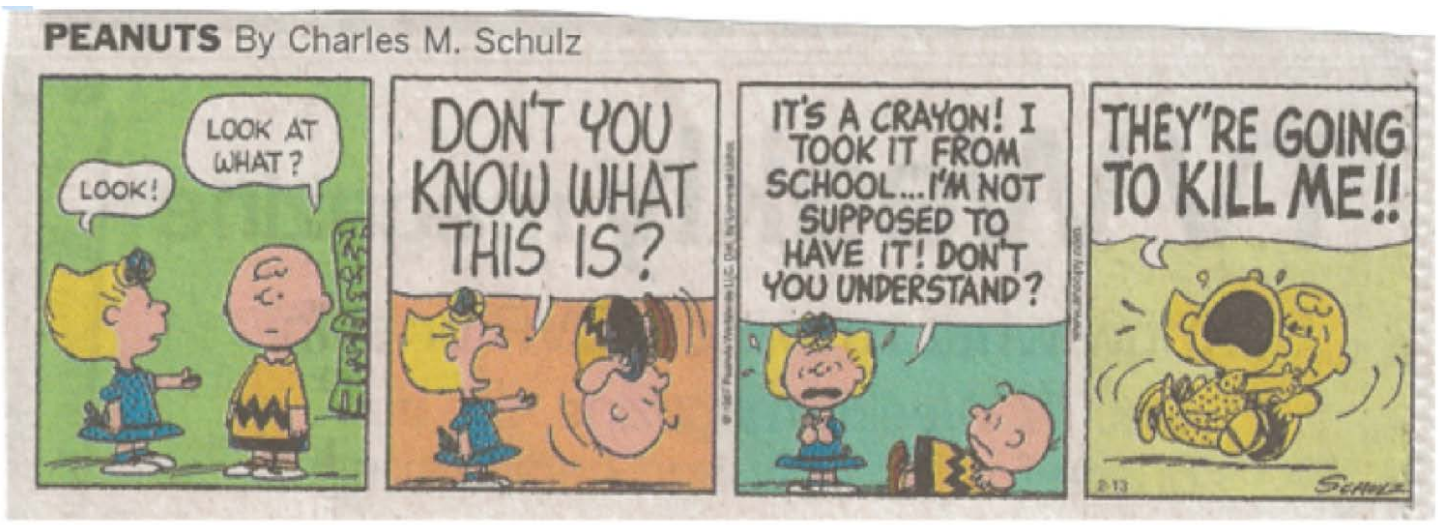
> I stood on the Senate floor in the red silk dress that looked great on camera and separated me from my dark-suited colleagues. Matching shoes with 3" heels made me taller than most other Senators—an advantage I loved and was always careful to cultivate. The dress was too warm and the shoes hurt like hell, but comfort didn't count. What mattered was that voters admired what they saw in photos and videos and vines. The political game has bizarre rules and awards too many points for appearances, but the goal of playing it was to win. I was there to win, to prove I was as good a politician as my father, even if, as a woman, I had the added burden of having to navigate the razor's edge between shrill and weak, between bitch and kitten. Unlike my father, I was going to navigate it all the way to the White House. But that afternoon, my top priority was to be seen as an effective Senator, a leader of the new generation, which is why I was the first freshman Senator in 15 years offering an amendment that was almost certain to become law.

This is a much better piece of writing.

Steven Pinker sums up how to do this kind of editing to your own work:

> *"The other way to escape the curse of knowledge is to show a draft to yourself, ideally after enough time has passed that the text is no longer familiar. If you are like me you will find yourself thinking, "What did I mean by that?" or "How does this follow?" or, all too often, "Who wrote this crap?" The form in which thoughts occur to a writer is rarely the same as the form in which they can be absorbed by a reader. Advice on writing is not so much advice on how to write as on how to revise.*
>
> *Much advice on writing has the tone of moral counsel, as if being a good writer will make you a better person. Unfortunately for cosmic justice, many gifted writers are scoundrels, and many inept ones are the salt of the earth. But the imperative to overcome the curse of knowledge may be the bit of writerly advice that comes closest to being sound moral advice: Always try to lift yourself out of your parochial mind-set and find out how other people think and feel. It may not make you a better person in all spheres of life, but it will be a source of continuing kindness to your readers."*

But the late great Charles Schultz sums it up best of all in this comic.



In a few square inches, this comic captures the central challenge of a writer's job. It illustrates the enormous gap between the storyteller and the receiver of the story. It is in that gap that you work your magic.

- You, the writer, are Sally. You hold something in your hand that is bursting with meaning and alive with significance, and you know exactly why.
- Your reader is Charlie Brown. They have no idea why they should pay attention to what you are showing them. They have no idea why they should care. They are standing there saying, "Look at what?" at every single moment, on every single page.
- Make sure you have an answer, and make it be as powerful, visceral, specific, clear and poignant as Sally's answer.

STEP 3:
GET IN YOUR READER'S HEAD

The fourth perspective that you need in order to edit your own work is a clear sense of what the experience is like for the reader who is reading your work. This is the perspective that the vast majority of new writers never seek. They may step back and look at their work objectively, they may stop playing god, they may try to shake off their curse of knowledge, but holding the reader's perspective in their heads seems too difficult and mind-bending. And so they don't.

I would venture to say, however, that this skill – the ability to think about the reader's experience of your work – is one of the primary things that elevates a piece of writing from good to great. If you can craft an experience that lets the reader into your protagonist's head (and make no mistake – there may not be a protagonist in works of memoir and self help, but the theory still applies**) they will actually feel what that character is feeling – not *sort* of feel it, but actually feel it.

Recent MRI studies have proved this phenomenon. A piece by Annie Murphy Paul in the *New York Times* explains:

> *"Raymond Mar, a psychologist at York University in Canada, performed an analysis of 86 MRI studies, published last year in the Annual Review of Psychology, and concluded that there was substantial overlap in the brain networks used to understand stories and the networks used to navigate interactions with other individuals — in particular, interactions in which we're trying to figure out the thoughts and feelings of others. Scientists call this capacity of the brain to construct a map of other people's intentions `theory of mind.' Narratives offer a unique opportunity to engage this capacity, as we identify with characters' longings and frustrations, guess at their hidden motives and track their encounters with friends and enemies, neighbors and lovers."*

In other words, as Paul's article goes on to say, "The brain, it seems, does not make much of a distinction between reading about an experience and encountering it in real life."

The writer's job is to deliver that experience to your reader. How do you do that? There are four main ways – and when you are editing your own work, you want to be conscious of each of them. This will be clunky at first but as you practice doing it, it will become more and more automatic:

1. Let the reader know what the protagonist is thinking and feeling, not just what they are doing or what is happening.

In memoir, that means you let the reader know what YOU were thinking and feeling. In how-to and self help books, you let the reader know what someone doing or experiencing the thing you are talking about could expect to think and feel. The thinking and feeling part is how we connect to the work. It's our way in. As agent Ann Rittenberg said, "I see plenty of writing that has kernels of good in it, but it's hedged around with so much tentativeness, or uncertainty, or excess, or stinginess, that it doesn't allow the outsider – the reader – in." The upshot? Be generous in sharing what your protagonist is thinking and feeling. It's a gift you are giving your reader.

2. Let the reader know why those feelings matter to the protagonist.

It's not enough just to show or describe the feelings. You also have to tell us (yes, tell) what they mean to that person and why that meaning matters to them. Our readers are constantly asking, "Why should we care?" and we need to answer.

One way to think about all this in terms of your writing is SAY-MEAN-MATTER. Those are the three levels they use to teach literary analysis at my kids' high school. *Say* is the surface level of things – what the writer is saying. *Mean* is the next level down – what does this actually mean to the writer, to the reader, to anyone? *Matter* is where all the richness lies – the answer to the "why should we care?" question. As writers, our job is deliver on all three of those levels.

If you want to explore more about why humans are so hell-bent on finding meaning, check out these two fabulous videos:

- Comedian Louis CK. Three minutes long. The "why" part starts around 1:37. Note that there's some bad language if that offends you
- Business guru Simon Sanek on how great leaders start with why. This Ted talk has 20,000,000 + views for good reason.

3. Let things unfold.

The reader wants to be in the moment as if we are experiencing it. We want to feel it. If you race through, and things whiz by, we won't be able to have the pleasure of immersion. One of my dear friends said that in times of typical teenage upset, her mother used to always say, "Let life unfold. You can't force a flower to open any faster than it's going to open." I love this mother and this advice – and it applies to stories and arguments as much as it does to teenage angst. Give your work the space it needs to unfold and let the reader be in it as it does. I sometimes say to my students, "Let it breathe," and this is the same principle. The work needs time and space to unfold.

4. Raise questions and answer them.

Readers are curious. Indulging our curiosity is one of the great pleasures of reading. A book should have one primary question that it is answering (what your point is), but along the way, it should raise and answer a gazillion other, smaller questions. Writers who have mastered the rhythm of how to do this – how long a reader will wait before they get frustrated, how long a reader can hold a piece of information in their head – tend to write the kinds of books that become blockbusters.

A prime example of this is the opening chapter to the first book in the Harry Potter series. You've all no doubt read it. Read it again, and this time, note down how J.K. Rowling raises and answers questions — and when.

Right from sentence one, we know that there is something "not normal" afoot.

We want to know what it is – so a question is raised. From sentence two, we know whatever is happening is strange and mysterious, so it's a bit of information, a bit of an answer.

On page 2, we get more information: there is a cat reading a map and then there are owls swooping overhead, so we begin to think magic? This is a second question that builds on the first, and we get to be in on the game as it unfolds – the game of what's happening here? And why does it matter?

On page 6, actual magic begins to take place and we begin to understand the world we are in…. It's very satisfying. We feel IN it. We have been allowed to watch it unfold. And while it unfolded – this main story question – we met several interesting and intriguing character, who raised many questions we now want answered, as well. See how Rowling is in control of your curiosity here? It's such a pleasure to read. Which is, of course, the whole point….

** In memoir, the character you are creating on the page is the protagonist. You are also the narrator, and you are also the author who is creating that narrator. All the same rules apply about asking question, letting things unfold, and letting the reader into what you are thinking and feeling and what it all means.

In how-to and self help, there is also a kind of protagonist, although we wouldn't use that word to describe it, but it is a mirror of ideal reader, the person you are teaching or guiding or serving. It is someone who has some sort of specific pain that you are setting out to alleviate by your wisdom. Your reader wants to know that you feel this pain, that you understand it, that you have a solution for it, that you have the authority to fix it. They want to know at every turn why you, the author, believe it to be painful and what you, the author, know about why it matters and what it means. Being in control of the questions you are raising and answering is critical in this genre, too. You want to be like a master guide, leading your reader through the wilderness, showing them the way with authority and grace.

STEP 4:
GET IN YOUR CHARACTER'S HEAD

This step is for fiction & memoir writers only. How-to and Self-help writer skip to the next section

Just as YOU come to your writing with an entire lifetime of experiences, so do your characters. Good editing requires you to understand what they know at every moment in time.

What, in other words, is HER curse of knowledge? This is not just what she knows about, say, hunting dragons, it's also what she knows or believes about love and power and evil and mothers – whatever, in other words, *you are actually writing about*. What does she believe about it? And how is she wrong about it – or as Lisa Cron (*Wired for Story*) says, what is her misbelief? And how does it change over the course of the book? How does the world force her to see the truth? Entire novels can turn on these questions, and they can also fuel powerful smaller moments.

How? I talk a lot in my classes about writing in the "gap" – which is the space between the surface of things and the real story. It's where all the action unfolds. For example: on the surface, it appears that Juliet is dead, but the real story is that she is only pretending to be dead. The audience knows this, Juliet knows this, the apothecary knows this, but Romeo doesn't. Within that moment of not knowing, Romeo's tragedy unfolds….

That is an extreme example, but think about all the times we betray what we believe, or act in a manner that is different from our "truth," or even say one thing when we mean another. That happens pretty much constantly and these gaps are important, too.

Here's an example. This is not Shakespeare. This is just me writing in a hotel room in Portland, Oregon. So first, a flat scene with no "gap," nothing happening underneath the surface, nothing that is not as it seems:

> "Hey Jill," Dave asked, "Do you want to grab dinner?"
> "Sorry," she mumbled, "I'm busy."

We might imagine that Jill doesn't like Dave or that Dave is a creeper stalker dude or that Jill has a boyfriend, or any number of scenarios -- which is a problem. You want to be in charge of your story, to have authority over it. Now here's the same moment with the gap in play:

> "Hey Jill," Dave asked, "Do you want to grab dinner?"
>
> Jill had to stop herself from laughing out loud. Dave, the adorable and charming boy from the swim team knew her name! And he was inviting her to dinner! She wanted to squeal and jump up and say, "Yes, yes, yes," but in almost the same instant, she remembered how much her best friend, Alicia, liked Dave. He was in Alicia's math class, and just last night, Jill had helped Alicia make a plan for how Alicia might find a way to talk to Dave after class. Jill couldn't accept Dave's offer. She couldn't do that to Alicia. She forced herself to turn away from Dave's blazing eyes and look at the floor. "Sorry," she mumbled, "I'm busy."

A juicy set-up, right? A love triangle in the making. And it all hangs on our knowing what Jill really thinks and seeing her misrepresent herself. It's all about the gaps in knowledge -- what Dave can't know (because Jill hasn't given any indication of how she really feels), what Alicia doesn't know (because it is only just now unfolding) and what Jill knows but is choosing not to say (which is where the real story will unfold -- WHY is she not saying anything? What is the MEANING of that? And will her belief about it change?)

When you are editing fiction, you need to make sure you know what your character knows at every point, and you need to make sure that the reader can see it, too.

The Special Case of Memoir

Memoir writers need to think of themselves as characters in a story. You are no different to the reader from a character in a novel, so all these same rules apply to you. What makes it tricky is that you are ALSO the narrator of your story.

These differences particularly matters if you are writing about a time in your life when your NOT KNOWING something made all the difference to your story. In other words, let's say you are writing about the summer you turned 16. At the time of writing, you are 32. So you have 16 more years of knowledge and life lived than you did when you were 16. You need to choose: is your narrator standing in time where you are at age 32? Or are they standing in time where you were when you were 16. You need to make sure that your burden of knowledge remains consistent throughout -- either 32-year-old you, or 16-year-old you, but not a combination of both.

PART 2:
9 STEPS TO AN EDITED MANUSCRIPT

Step 1: Gather Your Tools

- ☐ Get some 8 1/2 x 11 colored paper – any color will do.
- ☐ Get three different colored Post-It notes
- ☐ Get a big piece of cardboard, some foam core or an empty bulletin board where you can place the Post-It notes
- ☐ Pens and pencils – whatever you like to write with
- ☐ Find a place where you can read in peace, and where you can leave all your tools scattered around without anyone yelling at you. A big table in a room of your own would be perfect. A small table in the corner of the den will work, too. If you don't have these kinds of spaces, get a plastic tub or crate so you can keep all your stuff in there while you are editing

Step 2: Prepare the Pages

- ☐ Put all your chapters together into one document. Start each new chapter on a new page.
- ☐ Set the margins of your document to 1 inch all around, the lines to double spaced, and the font to 12 point Times Roman. This is standard manuscript formatting, and it is the easiest format to edit.
- ☐ Number all pages – I like page numbers on the top right.
- ☐ Print everything out.

Step 3: State Your Intention

- ☐ Use a piece of the colored paper and one of your pens to write out, in no more than two sentences, what your book is about. Note that this is not the same as what happens in your book. You want to ask, instead, What's your point? Why would anyone read this book? Why would they care? What are you offering? That is why you are writing, and that is what is guiding you. Put this statement in front of you while you work and let it be your guide in everything you do.

Step 4: Chapter-by-Chapter Read-Through

- ☐ Work one chapter at a time.
- ☐ Start by writing the purpose of the chapter on a Post-it note. What happens in the chapter? What problem must be solved? What question must be answered? What is the point? If this sounds similar to the statement of intention for your whole book, it is.
- ☐ Put the Post-It note at the top left corner of your storyboard. You will put other chapter intentions along the top, going left to right. Details of each chapter will go down vertically from the top.

- [ ] Now read through the chapter, taking one of the four perspectives as a time.

1. **Stop playing god.** Does everything in the chapter serve the point of the chapter? Does it serve the point of the book? If not, cut it out. This includes lovely passages of description, moving stories about you or your character's childhood, flashbacks that don't belong where you put them, backstory that halts the forward progress of the book, and anything that is so boring and flat that even you can't bear to read it. Be ruthless.

2. **Shake off your curse of knowledge.** Have you assumed your reader knows something they would have no way of knowing? Make the change so that they are in on the secret.

3. **Get in your reader's head.** Show don't tell. Let things unfold. Do you have any questions that arise in this chapter that you're not sure are answered later in the book? Any seeds you planted that didn't bear fruit later? Anything you promised you didn't deliver? Designate a Post-It note color to be for "loose threads" and write the question down. Something like, "Double check that that X is crystal clear later in the book." Put the Post-It note in the vertical column for this chapter. Don't go fishing through the manuscript now to answer it. You will come back to answer all these questions later.

4. **Get in your character's head (fiction and memoir.)**

    - [ ] Is there something you need to research in order to solve a problem? Designate a Post-It note color for "research" and write the item down. Place it in the vertical column for this chapter.
    - [ ] If you have any "flashes of brilliance" about things you can or should add later in the book, write these on the third color Post-It note and put it in the vertical column for this chapter.
    - [ ] Are there any holes in logic and continuity? If so, shore them up right now. Go anywhere in the document where you need to make changes to make the fix – forwards or backwards. If you need to write just a few lines to make the fix, write directly in the margin of the page in question. If you need more than a few lines to fix something, use your colored paper. Either hand-write it out or write it on the computer and print it out (but make it a separate document – don't write in your main book document.) Now slot the colored paper into the physical manuscript just after the place where it will be inserted. The color will alert you when you go to enter changes that there is a big chunk that needs to be added.
    - [ ] Evaluate your dialogue. Does it sound natural? Do we know who's talking? Is there subtext to what's going on?
    - [ ] Check for the following in your chapter transitions:
        - [ ] Chapter opening: is it clear where we are in time and space?
        - [ ] Chapter closing: is something propelling us forward to the next chapter? Some question? Some crossroads? Some new idea?
    - [ ] Repeat for each chapter – but before you start each new chapter, scan your "loose threads" and "flashes of brilliance" Post-In notes to see if the new chapter is the place to insert information that would take care of those items. If you suspect it might be, move that Post-It into the column for the new chapter. Once you integrate a "loose thread" or "flashes of brilliance" Post-In note, throw it out.
    - [ ] When you are finished reading through the entire manuscript in this way, conduct all the research on your Post-It notes and insert all the information onto the pages.

Step 5: Input all Changes

- ☐ Take your manuscript back to your computer.
- ☐ Begin entering all the changes, one chapter at a time. Include the new writing on the colored pages.
- ☐ Don't just be an input-machine – this is another chance to evaluate and improve the work on every level. This can be a place where magic happens.
- ☐ You are allowed to jump ahead in the work or jump back in the work to shore something up or add a nuanced thing here or there (and you can choose whether or not to do that on the pages or the computer – often it makes sense to do it on the pages themselves since they are currently the most up to date), but the main focus should be the chapter you are working on. Don't move on until that chapter is as good as you can make it.
- ☐ Work through the whole manuscript in this way.

Step 6: The All-at-Once Read-Through

- ☐ Print the whole manuscript out again and read it all the way through – try to do this in one or two sittings. You want to read fairy quickly, as fast as a reader might approach the work, or even faster since you know the material well.
- ☐ Look for any word, line, or moment that snags you as you read. If you stop, or gloss over something, or read a line three times in a row, something is wrong. Trust your instincts and fix it right on the page.
- ☐ Don't be afraid to cut, or even to move whole scenes and chapters around. Your manuscript it still like clay; it is still malleable.
- ☐ If you encounter big problems that need more time and attention, flag the page with a Post-It note and keep reading. You will come back to these at the end.
- ☐ Now is the time to work to make the sentences pretty and rhythmic.
- ☐ Now is the time to focus on spelling, grammar, consistency and continuity.
- ☐ At the end, go back to your flagged pages and fix those issues.

Step 7: Seek Outside or "Beta" Readers

- ☐ Find outside readers to read the entire manuscript.
- ☐ Choose them specifically for what they can offer – insight, experience, expertise or guidance on how you have presented your topic. You want ruthless readers, not people who will tell you what a good job you did or how awesome it is that you wrote a book. It's nice to be told that you did a good job, but it's not helpful.
- ☐ Ask them specific questions about areas where you have concerns. If something is bothering you, this is the perfect time to determine if it bothers your readers, too.
- ☐ Ask them if they would prefer a bound manuscript or an electronic copy.
- ☐ Give them a clear deadline.
- ☐ Welcome them to make any comments on it they would like.

Step 8: Evaluate the Feedback

- ☐ Work through the feedback all at the same time. In other words, if you have three readers, you want to have all three manuscripts open to the same page and to your master copy. If one person makes a comment on one page, check to see if the other readers did, as well. When multiple readers find the same flaw, you may want to pay extra attention to that feedback.
- ☐ If a negative comment resonates with you, make changes accordingly.
- ☐ If a negative comment does NOT resonate with you, feel free to ignore it.
- ☐ What you want is an overall enthusiastic response. You want your readers to be saying, "When will this book come out? I have five people who I can't wait to share it with!"
- ☐ If your readers come back to you with feedback that feels much more lukewarm than that, or "fatal" to your book (i.e. "The middle sagged," "I lost the thread of your argument," "The ending fell flat," or "I didn't have time to finish because my houseplants got sick") don't despair! It takes many writers many drafts to produce the kind of writing that can hook and hold a reader – which is what an agent is on the hunt for. You may want to seek out the services of an editor for a more nuanced understanding of what is and isn't working, and for clear guidance on how to fix it.

Step 9: Hire a Professional Editor

A book coach or an editor is in the business of evaluating manuscripts, identifying weaknesses, and helping writers produce the best possible book they can. Some coaches or editors specialize in "developmental editing," which means that they look at the big sweep of the story or the way the content is structured. These kind of professionals can help you understand what's going off the rails in your book, and why. If you have received a pile of agent rejections, a developmental editor will be able to tell you why.

Other coaches and editors specialize in "line editing" which means that they go over the work line by line, giving detailed and careful edits on every element. These kinds of professionals can help you tighten and polish a book, taking it from good to great.

Where can you find a good editor? Author Accelerator is my premier coaching company that provides book coaching at every level. I hand pick and train every coach and we specialize in delivering tough love feedback as well as guidance and support. You can learn more on the next page.

DID YOU FIND THIS WORKBOOK HELPFUL?

PRO-TIP:

Do you know you need help, but aren't sure what exactly you need?

Visit our website to start your research.

We invite you to check out what we have to offer at Author Accelerator:

BLUEPRINT FOR A BOOK

An intense weekend of live video, Q&As and building the foundation to your novel. Personalized feedback on all your assignments from a book coach within a week.

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STORY GENIUS WORKSHOP

A 10-week program based on Lisa Cron's Story Genius method. Personalized feedback on all your assignments from a book coach.

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A 6-month no-excuses for starting and *finishing* a rough draft — and finishing strong. Working with a coach is the best way to make your dream of writing a book a reality.

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