Revision Cheat Sheet #3: Sentences

This is the third cheat sheet in a series on editing your own novel at each key step in the revision process. Sheet #1 talks about revising your novel's characterization, conflict, and plot for stronger structure. Sheet #2 deals with revising your scenes for focused content, clearer descriptions, and stronger dialogue. This final cheat sheet assumes that you've already revised your content and are ready to edit your sentences for grammar, variety, clarity, and flow.

It's time to polish your grammar and style.

At this point, your novel is almost done. You have strong characters and conflicts, and you've reworked your scenes to focus on the most important parts of your characters' journey with engaging descriptions and dialogue. The story is all there. To help the reader experience that story with as few hiccups as possible, you need to purge your manuscript of grammar mistakes, tedious sentences, and overly-repeated words.

The longer you set aside your draft before this step, the easier it will be to notice your own weaknesses when you pick it back up.

As the writer, you're close enough to your own mistakes to miss many of them—after all, you're the one who made them in the first place. Eventually, it will be a good idea to work with a copyeditor so that another set of eyes can catch what you can't see from the inside. In the meantime, however, you can do a lot to clean up your own grammar, sentences, and flow.

Check #1: Grammar

Some people are stronger at grammar than others, but all writers will make some grammar errors as they produce their early drafts. Give your manuscript a break and then come back to it with a fine-tooth comb; you'll have a better chance of identifying and correcting your repeated mistakes and fixing your one-time errors.

- Root out your repeated errors. Do you need to work on parallelism or misplaced modifiers? Brush up on grammar structure rules and keep an eye out for the offending sentences. The more you fix, the better you'll get at catching and fixing the rest.
- Watch out for tense issues. If your story is in the present tense, make sure you keep all verbs in the present tense. If your story is in the past tense, make sure you avoid not only present tense verbs, but also words like "now" and "today"—the past is "then."
- Use a grammar checker, but don't trust it. Your word processor will mark the grammar and spelling points that it believes are incorrect, which will help you pick up on some obvious typos and patterns of mistakes. However, these automated services can only

guess at what you are trying to say, and I've seen programs like Grammarly insert more errors than they remove. If you're not sure whether or not a marked "error" really needs changing, consult a grammar guide or another human.

If you're not confident in your grammar abilities, take the time to read up on the basics before taking this step. Make sure that you also work with a good copyeditor who can fix your errors without messing up your voice. The more corrections you make ahead of time, however, the less work there will be for your copyeditor to do. Fewer hours for your copyeditor will typically mean fewer dollars required in your budget.

Check #2: Variety

When you're writing, your goal is to get the story out onto the page. When you're editing, you can take a closer look at how you actually tell that story. Without thinking about it, most writers fall into the habit of repeating certain words, writing patterns, and sentence structures.

To keep the story interesting, it's a good idea to add variety to the length, structure, and words of your sentences.

- Vary the lengths of your sentences. If all of your sentences are extremely long, your reader will have trouble tracking the flow of your story. Adding shorter sentences to the mix will force them to slow down and pay attention to what you're saying at important moments. If all of your sentences are short, work on combining them in a variety of ways. Too many short, choppy sentences will quickly become slow and monotonous, so it's a good idea to mix things up.
- Don't use the same structure for all of your sentences. Did you have trouble reading the opening paragraph for Check #2 (Variety)? That's because I wrote every sentence in the exact same format—I began them all with an adverbial phrase. It's easy to write similar sentences, but luckily, it's almost as easy to fix the monotony. Take a look at the structure of each sentence as you edit your scenes, and switch some of them up when you're varying lengths.
- Find your repeated words and phrases. Have you unintentionally given your main character a tic by having him shrug his shoulders whenever he has a conversation? Do you use the word "extremely" five times on the same page? Wherever words, phrases, and actions start to repeat themselves, change them up. For some words, finding a synonym will be good enough. For others, you might have to cut out the phrase altogether and say something different (or nothing at all). Your wording might be brilliant the first time you use it, but your readers will thank you if they don't have to read it over and over again.

Variety is another area where you might not always see your own mistakes.

Having an editor or writer friend check your first several pages is a great way to get another set of eyes to point out the words and structures you tend to repeat. When you know what to look for, it will be much easier to hunt down those phrases and sentences in the rest of the manuscript.

Check #3: Clarity and Flow

As you clean up your grammar and vary your sentences, there's one more ball to juggle: making sure your sentences make sense and flow clearly. Even grammatically correct sentences may come across as awkward or wordy. When you cut out extra words and rearrange sentences for better flow, you'll wind up with a more thoroughly-polished manuscript that doesn't bore and lose your reader.

- If there is any wordiness, cut it out—you should be using the best possible words to tell your story, and that often means using fewer words. This doesn't mean that you need to treat your novel like a Twitter post and trim it down to the bare minimum. Simply view every word with a critical eye to make sure it's truly pulling its weight.
- If there are sentences that are difficult to follow, rework them. They may be grammatically correct, but if they're full of complicated clauses or worded in ways that people don't really talk, they should be clarified. Readers don't want to take extra time to figure out confusing sentences, so make sure that they are easily understood before you call your book complete.
- Read your manuscript aloud—this will let you hear the flow of each scene and sentence in a new way. Whenever you stumble over a sentence or feel bored by what you're reading, make a note to fix that spot. Your goal is to help the sentences flow smoothly enough that a reader won't even notice they're there. They should only notice the story.

Reading your manuscript out loud is probably the best way of noticing style issues on your own.

Not only does it help you pick up on awkward or wordy sentences, it also will help you see where you need to use more variety in your word choice and sentence structure. It may feel silly at first, especially if you have other people in the house, but don't discount the step—it really helps.

If grammar is your bigger struggle, the best thing you can do is put some effort into understanding it better. My favorite guide to all of the basics of grammar is *The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation* by Jane Straus. This book gives brief, clear explanations and examples of all of the major grammar, word choice, and punctuation rules, and it contains short quizzes in the back for self-checking your understanding. I use it to help high school students review the rules, and I also recommend it to all adults who need a crash course in better writing.

It's a long journey from your first completed story draft to your final published book, but when you make it through the revision process, you should be proud of how far you've come. Many people's dreams of publishing their novels fall flat because they don't know what steps to take to make it better. That doesn't need to be you! Commit to taking the time to revise your structure, scenes, and sentences in separate drafts, and you'll wind up with a manuscript that is much stronger than the one you started out with.