

# **Editing Your Own Work**



**Ali Luke**

**[www.aliventures.com](http://www.aliventures.com)**

# Introduction

---

Once you've finished your first draft, it can be very tempting to think you're done. You might have spent hours – or even years, in the case of a book – on this piece of work ... and you don't want to sink any more time into it.

Editing is important, though – whatever you're writing. Good, careful editing means:

- **You'll create a good first impression** (on the reader, or on the agent / editor you're submitting your work to).
- **Your work will be engaging for readers.** Great content needs to be structured and organised well so that readers can get into it.
- **You'll establish a reputation for quality.** We all make mistakes when we're drafting – but these don't need to make it into your finished piece.

This mini-ebook will help you edit any piece of writing that you're working on. The steps I take you through work for blog posts, magazine articles and non-fiction books, and almost all of them apply to short stories and novels too.

I've structured this ebook in ten short sections, with clear instructions and examples to help you get to grips with the editing process. Each section ends with an exercise, and suggestions for further reading.

## Before You Begin

You need a complete first draft (if you're working on a book, a complete chapter will do fine). Don't try to edit *while* writing – it'll slow you down, and you won't be able to see the big picture.

---

My blog [www.aliventures.com](http://www.aliventures.com) is updated regularly with new, free, articles about writing, blogging and self-publishing. You can get every article sent straight to your RSS reader or your email inbox if you want – details are at the top of the sidebar (on the right-hand side).

Cover image by Flickr user [vignetchishnet](#) and reproduced under the Creative Commons Attribution license.

This is a free ebook by Ali Luke, copyright 2011. Please don't republish it without permission. You're welcome to quote a short excerpt as part of a review, so long as you acknowledge Ali Luke as the author.

Please don't make copies of this ebook. If your friends would like to read it, ask them to sign up for the Aliventures newsletter at [www.aliventures.com/newsletter](http://www.aliventures.com/newsletter) to get their own copy. Thanks!

# #1: Read Through Your Work

---

Your first editing step is to read your piece of writing from beginning to end. This might sound a bit basic – but it’s a crucial place to begin.

If you’ve been drafting a book over several months or even years, or if you’ve been working on an epic blog post for three weeks, you won’t be able to remember everything you wrote. (You might well find that, reading back, you’re surprised to find you’ve completely forgotten writing some sections.)

To edit well, you need a clear view of your whole draft. It’s a great idea to:

- **Read away from your computer.** This helps you see your work afresh. You might want to print it out, or (if you’re working on a book) get a print-on-demand version produced. If you have a Kindle or other ereader, you could convert your manuscript into an ebook.
- **Read with a pen at the ready.** Jot down brief notes about any issues you notice – perhaps Chapter 5 doesn’t flow well, or you notice that you’ve overused a particular word or phrase throughout the piece.
- **Read fairly quickly, as a reader would.** At this stage, you’re not trying to spot every typo or fix every structural problem – you’re just getting an overview. You want to have a good sense of how your piece will appear to readers.

## **Exercise:**

Choose a short piece of your writing (perhaps one scene of a novel, or one blog post). It could be something you wrote and published some time ago. Print it out, and read it through. Write down three (or more) things that need to be changed.

## **Further Reading**

[Five Easy Steps for Editing Your Own Work](#) by Anna Goldsmith, on Copyblogger

This article offers some handy tips for seeing your work as a reader would.

## #2: Edit for Content

---

When writers think of editing, they often equate it with checking for typos or spelling mistakes. Of course, this is an important part of the editing process (and we'll cover it in #7) – but it's not the best place to start.

Think about it this way: if you were building a house, you wouldn't paper the walls before you were sure that they were all in place. In the same way, it's best not to fix typos until you're confident that the content of your piece is in good shape.

First drafts often have major content-related issues. These usually involve:

- **Missing information** – you realise, on reading through, that you need to add extra scenes to your novel, or a couple of extra paragraphs to your blog post.
- **Superfluous information** – you threw everything into the first draft, and some of it needs to come out as it's not really relevant.

You may find that your piece suffers from both issues.

### **Exercise:**

Ask yourself what's missing in your work – and what's present that doesn't belong there. If you're working on a short piece, print it out and go through with two coloured pens: circle superfluous sections in one colour, and note missing information in the other.

### **Further Reading**

[Editing Your Writing for Content, Cohesion and Coherence](#) (pdf), Australian School of Business, University of New South Wales

The first section of this university handout covers content, and suggests useful questions for non-fiction writers to ask themselves.

[A Content Editor's Checklist](#), Liz Strauss, Successful and Outstanding Bloggers

Another useful list of questions to ask yourself about your non-fiction writing.

[Copy Editing versus Content Editing](#) (pdf), Victory Crayne, Crayne.com

If you're writing fiction, this .pdf offers a list of potential problems that a content editor (in this case, you!) needs to look out for.

## #3: Edit for Structure

---

Once all your content is present and correct, it's time to think about the structure of your piece. Even if you planned carefully, your first draft may have some structural issues. (Generally, though, planning ahead means you're less likely to face lots of work at this stage of the editing process.)

**With a long project, like a book, you may find that you want to present information in a different order.** Perhaps you realised, on reading through, that it would be easier for readers if Chapter 6 came before Chapter 5 ... and that Chapter 9 really should be an appendix. With a novel, you might decide to move scenes around to delay a particular revelation and heighten tension.

Keep in mind that, as you move sections, you may need to rewrite other parts of your piece to ensure that references and transitions still work.

**With an article or blog post, it's not uncommon to find that you've produced two pieces in one.** Maybe you took on a slightly-too-big topic, and this would be best tackled if you rewrote your long article into two shorter ones.

You may also find, at this stage, that you come up with a good way to structure the sections of your piece in a consistent way. For instance, in this ebook, each numbered section ends with an exercise and further reading.

### **Exercise:**

If you're not too sure what needs restructuring, write brief descriptions of each section of your work onto index cards. (For a novel, you want one card per scene; for a blog post, one per subsection is about right.) Shuffle the cards around and think through different possibilities.

### **Further Reading**

[Editing Your Writing for Content, Cohesion and Coherence](#) (pdf), Australian School of Business, University of New South Wales

The second section of this university handout covers cohesion, and suggests useful questions for non-fiction writers to ask themselves when re-ordering material

[Top 5 Self-Editing Tips: Structure](#), Barbara Scott, Wordserve Water Cooler

This article focuses on novel structure, with tips for the beginning, middle and end.

## #4: Get Your Introduction Right

---

Every piece of writing needs an introduction (or beginning, if you prefer). After the title, this is generally the first thing that readers will see – and it definitely needs to be up to scratch.

Your introduction should:

- **Grab attention.** In a novel, this might mean opening at a moment of drama; in an article, it could mean posing a question to the reader, or making a strong, provocative statement.
- **Set the scene for what's to come.** The tone and style of your introduction will give the reader certain expectations. For instance, if you begin a blog post with a funny cat picture and a joke, the reader will expect the rest of the piece to be fairly humorous (or at least light-hearted).
- **Move the reader into the main body of the work.** Your introduction shouldn't meander or waffle. The reader definitely doesn't need pages of background information on all your characters, or several paragraphs explaining why you wrote this particular blog post.

Introductions can be tough to get right. If you drafted yours before writing the rest of the article / book / story, you may find that you need to do quite a bit of re-writing to bring it into line with what you subsequently wrote (especially if your plans changed a fair bit during the writing).

### Exercise:

Find three similar works to yours (novels in your genre, blog posts on your topic) and read the opening pages / paragraphs. Try to think of at least three things that are working well – or *not* working well! – in each. Now, decide what you could apply to your own writing.

### Further Reading

[A Proper Introduction](#), Guide to Grammar and Writing

This advice focuses on essay-writing, but has some great examples of introductions from various types of non-fiction.

[Opening Chapters](#), by Darcy Pattison, Fiction Notes

This article offers some good basic tips for the opening chapter of a novel.

## #5: Add a Call to Action

---

“Call to action” is a marketing term, and it means asking the reader to do something. In almost every form of non-fiction writing, this is a great idea. For instance:

- At the end of your blog post, you could ask the reader to leave a comment. (You might want to give them a particular question to think about.)
- At the end of your book, you could have a page telling the reader how to get in touch with you to hire you as a speaker or coach.
- At the end of each section of your ecourse, you could have short exercises (or one longer assignment) to get the reader to put the materials into practice.

Here’s an example from one of my blog posts:

*In the next part of this series, we'll be looking at the "how" of guest posting – how to decide which blog to write for, and how to craft a post that's very likely to be accepted.*

*Make sure you're [getting the RSS feed](#), or that you're receiving new posts by email (enter your email address below) so that you don't miss the next post!*

If you’re a fiction-writer, you have an implicit call to action in your work: you want the reader to buy your next novel, or read your next short story. This means getting the ending right – a great book with an unsatisfying ending is hugely frustrating to readers.

With fiction, you can also include a page at the end of the book to ask readers to join your mailing list so they hear when your next novel is out.

### **Exercise:**

Come up with three possible calls to action that you could use for your current work-in-progress. (If you write blog posts or articles, come up with three all-purpose ones that you could tweak for different posts.)

### **Further reading:**

[37 Calls to Action to Get People to Read, Click and Buy at Your Web Site](#), by Rich Brookes, Web Marketing Advice

Lots of examples of calls to action to help you generate ideas for your own blog posts or web pages.

## #6: Edit for Voice and Tone

---

By this stage, your piece of writing should be pretty much complete. You'll have all the right content in the right order, plus a strong introduction at the start and a call to action at the end. Now, you can dig down into individual sentences and words.

Your first task is to edit for voice and tone, making sure that you've successfully achieved the style you were going for. You might also decide, at this stage, that a different writing voice or a slight shift in tone would make your piece work better for its intended audience.

Think about:

- **How formal you want to be.** Will you use slangy terms and phrases, or precise language? In general, most readers today enjoy a chatty, informal approach – though if you're writing for a business or academic audience, you'll need to choose an appropriate level of formality.
- **How fast or slow your writing should seem.** If you've written a thriller novel, short sentences and paragraphs will work well, and complex words will seem out of place – the reader won't want to stop to reach for a dictionary. If you've written a memoir with a strong spiritual focus, though, calm and relaxed language will be much more appropriate.
- **How edgy – or not! – you want to be.** Some readers love language that doesn't pull any punches (which could mean swearing, or being fairly aggressive in your tone). Others will be turned off by this. Consider your audience, and what they're likely to want.

### Exercise:

Choose a short section of your writing and rewrite it twice, each time using a very different style. (You might like to choose two writers in your genre with strong styles and mimic them.) This can help you spot the hallmarks of your own writing, especially if you're struggling to develop your writing voice.

### Further Reading

[Improve Your Writing with these Editing Tips](#), Dustin Wax, Lifehack

Helpful tips for getting your words and sentences right (some of these overlap into #7, on spelling and grammar).



## #7: Check Your Spelling and Grammar

---

By now, your words should all be firmly in place – and you need to make sure that each one is correct. You may feel that a few slips don't make much difference, but they can be very jarring to readers – or even change your meaning completely.

**Don't rely on your word processor's spelling and grammar checker at this stage:** it won't always pick up on commonly confused words (in some cases, it will even suggest the wrong word). It might well not spot missing words, too.

As you edit for spelling:

- **Pay particular attention to words that sound the same but are spelt differently.** Know the difference between *you're* and *your* – as well as *they're*, *their* and *there*.
- **Watch out for apostrophes.** Apostrophes are used to indicate possession, as in *Joe's computer* and *Susan's lunch*. With possessive pronouns, though, you don't need an apostrophe: *his*, *hers* and *its* don't have apostrophes. An apostrophe is also used to indicate when a letter is missing from a word, such as in *don't* (do not), *it's* (it is) and *I'll* (I will).

You may find that it helps to read your work out loud: this can make it easier to spot ungrammatical sentences, missing words, and other problems.

### Exercise:

Make a list of five (or more) words that you commonly misspell. Practice writing them out by hand three times a day, every day for a week – and you'll remember them.

### Further Reading

[How to Edit Your Writing for Grammar, Spelling and Other Errors](#), eHow.com

A good basic guide to editing for grammar and spelling mistakes.

[100 Most Often Misspelled Words in English](#), YourDictionary.com

Each word has a brief explanation or suggestion about how to remember it correctly. Your mileage may vary on how helpful these are!

## #8: Make Sure You're Consistent

---

We're really into the nit-picky details now ... but details do matter. You might have a piece of writing where everything is correctly spelt, but where there are inconsistencies.

Some words can be written in several different ways:

- *ebook*, *eBook* or *e-book*
- *full-time*, *fulltime* or *full time*
- *government* or *Government*

**Each time you use a word, write it in exactly the same way.** (The only exception is if, say, you like to write *ebook* but you're quoting a title like *Publishing E-Books For Dummies* where the word is written differently.)

Pay especial attention to names of people, companies, websites, and so on. Check their website to see what style they use: for instance, **ProBlogger** has a capital B in the middle, but **Copyblogger** doesn't.

**Consistency doesn't just apply to words: it's also an issue for punctuation.** If you like to use the Oxford comma, then use it consistently. If you use round black bullet points, make sure you always use the round ones – don't suddenly switch to dashes or open circles.

### **Exercise:**

Decide on a personal "house style" for any words that you frequently use which could be written in several ways. For instance, I always use *ebook* unless quoting a title or another author, and I write *Aliventures* within an initial capital but no capital on the *ventures* bit.

### **Further reading:**

[Writing a Style Guide: What You Need to Know](#), Intelligent Editing

This article has advice about developing a style guide for your company or website.

[Ensuring Consistency in Your Writing](#), by Marco Manfre, Improve Your Writing with Papercheck

This short article points out some areas to be wary of, like the way you use numerals or letters for lists.

## #9: Add Formatting

---

At this stage, your writing is complete. Congratulations! If you're publishing your work yourself, though – perhaps on a blog, as an ebook, or as a print-on-demand book – then you'll also need to add some formatting.

(If you're submitting to a publisher, you may need to reformat your work to meet particular guidelines. Check their website for these.)

For non-fiction, particularly online, good formatting can mean:

- **Adding in subheadings**, if you didn't do this before.
- **Putting key sentences in bold** – this is especially important if you're writing for the web, where people have a tendency to scan. (Some writers overdo this, though; use the exercise to decide how much is too much.)
- **Setting quotes out from the text using a blockquote style**. This helps highlight these as quotes, and also adds visual interest. You'll often see this used in blog posts.
- **Using special formatting, like a coloured box, to highlight key elements**. (You can see I do this for the exercises in this ebook.)
- **Adding images** – perhaps at the start of your blog post, or throughout your course to break up the text.
- **Changing the font and colour** used for headings / subheadings.

Some of these issues shade into design, so if this isn't your forte, you might want to get a professional designer involved.

### **Exercise:**

Go through a recent piece – perhaps a blog post or a section of your ebook – and experiment with bringing out key points in bold. What seems like a good balance to you? You might find that single words or phrases in bold don't quite work and look choppy, but individual sentences, especially at the start of paragraphs, stand out well.

### **Further reading:**

[How to Format Blog Posts Effectively](#), by Darren Rowse, ProBlogger

A straightforward, practical post with great tips for bloggers.

# #10: Get Help with Editing

---

Finally ... you don't have to go it alone! Although it's a great idea to develop strong editing skills, you can also get assistance. Many excellent writers find it tough to edit their own work, or struggle with a particular aspect of editing, like spotting typos.

You could get help from:

- **Fellow writers.** This works really well if you're in a critique group (or online forum) where you can share work-in-progress with others. You could do this at an early stage for feedback on content and structure, or at a later stage for feedback on style, voice, grammar, and so on. Make sure you return the favour when they need some editing help in return.
- **Your readers.** Some authors use "beta-readers" to provide input on an early version of a longer work like an ebook or book. (These people act a bit like "beta-testers" in the software industry.) Your readers don't need to be expert writers – they just need to be representative of your intended audience. It's a nice gesture to give them a free copy of the finished ebook / book.
- **A freelance editor.** There are plenty of editors who work with writers just like you: all you need to do is contact them and hire them. Obviously, this means spending money – so get recommendations (or at least read plenty of testimonials) before choosing an editor. It's also a good idea to pay for a small piece of editing first, so you can check you both work well together.

## Exercise:

List at least three people who you currently know that might be able to provide editing support (either for free or paid). If you're working on a major project like a book, consider looking for potential editors – ask writer friends for their recommendations.

## Further reading:

[How to Hire an Editor](#), by Mark Nichol, Daily Writing Tips

Sensible, practical advice on what to think about and look for when hiring an editor.

[Copy-Editing And Beta Readers](#), by Joanna Penn, The Creative Penn

A first-hand account of working with beta-readers.

# Where Next?

---

Congratulations on making it to the end of this ebook!

If you're looking to take your writing even further, don't forget to check out my blog at [www.aliventures.com](http://www.aliventures.com). I write regular, in-depth articles about writing, editing, self-publishing and blogging.

The blog is totally free – and you can even get my latest articles delivered straight to your inbox.

I also run a writing teaching / community site, Writers' Huddle at [writershuddle.com](http://writershuddle.com). I open the Huddle every few months for new members, so check out the details today and (if the site isn't currently open), pop your email address in the box to be alerted when it opens up again.

## About Ali

I'm the author of two full-length books, *Publishing E-Books For Dummies* (Wiley, Sept 2012) and *Lycopolis*, a novel. You can buy both from Amazon.

I have a BA (Hons) in English from Cambridge University and an MA in Creative and Life Writing from Goldsmiths College, University of London.

You can contact me at [ali@aliventures.com](mailto:ali@aliventures.com) or find me on Twitter as [@aliventures](https://twitter.com/aliventures).

