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Editing Secrets

By Laura Backes

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Once you've plotted out your book, developed the characters and written the last word of text, the real work begins. As busy editors are bombarded with hundreds or even thousands of submissions a year, it's more important than ever that authors apply their own editing skills to their manuscripts before putting them in the mail. Checking your basic grammar and spelling are of course important, but authors need to go beyond surface editing if their work has a chance of catching an editor's eye.

* Trim, tighten, hack away. First, second and even third drafts of manuscripts are almost always laden with extra words and scenes. Take a break from your book and then read it through with a fresh eye. Write down your theme in one sentence (what the book is about, such as working through shyness on the first day of school or showing how Thomas Edison's childhood experiences influenced his adult life). The plot (or progression of facts and events in nonfiction) is your vehicle for conveying the theme to the reader. Ask yourself if each character and scene advance the plot toward communicating this theme. And decide at the beginning that you will give up your precious words and finely-crafted scenes for the betterment of the book. Pithy dialogue may be fun to read, but if it pushes your story off track, it's just a literary dead end. Take the publishers' suggested word limits seriously: no, you don't really need 3000 words to tell your picture book story about Freddy the Frog's adventures in the Big Pond.

* The elements of speech. Well-crafted dialogue can be a writer's most important tool. Dialogue is not just there to break up the paragraphs or show that your characters know how to talk; ideally, it adds to character development, moves the plot along and replaces sections of narrative. Each character should sound like himself, with speech patterns and phrasing that are unique. This is especially true with talking animal books. I see many of these manuscripts where, if I took away the words that identify the speakers, each character would sound exactly the same. Don't have dialogue repeat the narrative and vice versa; "Did you hear that? Someone's at the door!" does not have to be preceded by "They heard a sound at the door".

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* Show don't tell. How many times have you heard this? It's still true. Comb through your manuscript for sentences that tell the reader how a character felt (Sara was sad) and replace with sensory descriptions (Hot tears sprang to Sara's eyes and rolled down her cheeks.) Avoid telling the reader what to think about the story (Jason foolishly decided to trust Mike one more time.) Instead, present your character's actions and decisions to the reader, and let the reader draw his or her own conclusions (incidentally, this is how you "teach" without preaching).

* Wipe out passive writing. Search for verbs preceded by "would" (would go, would sleep, would eat) replace with the past tense (went, slept, ate). Also look for actions that seem to happen out of thin air. "The door was opened" is passive, because the sentence lacks a "doer". Remember, the reader needs to visualize what's happening in the story. "The wind blew the door open" is better, because the action can be attributed to something, and it puts the most important element (strong wind) at the beginning of the sentence. Simply rearranging the words ("The door blew open from the wind") puts emphasis on a door that won't stay closed, making that the subject of the sentence.

* Be precise. One of the best ways to make your writing come alive for the reader is to use exact nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. One well-chosen word is always better than three vague ones. Adjectives like big, little, cold, hot, beautiful, scary and silly; adverbs such as quickly, slowly, loudly, and softly; and general verbs like walk, went, stayed and ate don't draw a vivid picture for your reader. Of course, sometimes these words are appropriate, but try as a rule choosing words that describe specifically what you want to communicate. Words that sound and look interesting are also a plus. Tremendous, tiny, frigid, scorching, plodded, sauntered and gulped are more fun to read, and they each lend an emotional overtone to the sentence (if your character gulps his food, you don't have to tell the reader he's in a hurry).

And finally, make sure there's a logical cause and effect relationship between the scenes of your book. Each event should build upon the ones that came before. The plot should spring intrinsically from your characters; nonfiction should unfold because of the nature of your subject and your slant on the material. It's when everything comes seamlessly together that you have a winning book. Make it look easy, but don't skimp on all the hard work it takes to get there.

Laura Backes is the publisher of Children's Book Insider, the Newsletter for Children's Writers. For more information about writing children's books, including free articles, market tips, insider secrets and much more, visit Children's Book Insider's home on the web at

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Secrets We Keep From Those We Love

By Timothy Cole

Everyone keeps a few secrets from a husband or wife, boyfriend and girlfriend. And people keep their secrets for a lot of reasons. Often people are embarrassed or they are fearful of a partner's hostility or possible rejection.

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And research shows that it is in one's best interest to keep some things private, especially when partners or spouses are likely to respond poorly to the truth. Being rejected, scorned, or stigmatized does not help any one work through a serious issue.

But, keeping secrets can also be harmful.

Keeping secrets often prevents people from dealing with the problem at hand. Keeping secrets leads to increased stress, anxiety, and it often makes people think about the issue (event or topic) more frequently.

For instance, people who have a secret crush on someone often dwell on their feelings more than people who are able to talk about their feelings out in the open. More often than not, keeping something secret makes it seem more important than it really is.

Likewise, revealing secrets is very helpful when it is done right; that is, in a safe, non-judgmental environment. Revealing secrets can reduce stress, it helps people let go of an issue and think about it more clearly.

If a secret is bothering you, it really does help to get it out – as long people don't respond negatively or use the information against you.

In fact, research shows that the simple task of writing down a secret, even if no one ever reads it, makes people feel better. Writing a secret down reduces stress – it is cathartic.

With this in mind, we have created a place where people can anonymously reveal the secrets they keep. Maybe you will find that letting go of one of your own secrets is helpful and not so embarrassing after all.

Article by Timothy Cole, PhD. Take a look at the secrets people keep from their romantic partners at

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