

## Taming the Beast: Eight Steps to Editing Your First Draft

By Fleur Bradley

You've finished the first draft of your novel—congratulations! Maybe you wrote it NaNo-style in one month, or maybe it took nine months (or more) to grow your baby. Whichever the case, you knew this day would come: first draft editing time. Suddenly, that baby you thought was really beautiful turns out to be more of a beast—a screaming, red-faced Cyclops of a baby that you would rather toss in the drawer than look at again.

This is normal, because of course your first draft is not a baby, but a work you'll have to mold, starting with the second draft. It can be daunting to edit, even for those of us who've been there before. Before you begin, remember this: **second drafts are for big-picture editing**. The biggest mistake beginning (and even veteran) writers make is to dive into their manuscript and get lost in the language, the spelling, the punctuation. This type of polish is for third (and consequent) drafts. Second drafts are all about making sure that the scenes are in the right order, plot/character arcs are there, and the ideas are strong and in the right place. The big stuff. It's like remodeling a house: you have to make sure the walls are in the right place before you start painting them.

Here's a quick guide to get you on your way:

1. Make a chapter-by-chapter outline of what your first draft looks like, if you haven't done this already. Use only a paragraph to describe what happens in each chapter. This step will provide you with a clear overview of what you have (and will come in handy when you have to write a synopsis).
2. Write down your logline and theme/message. This is your **plotline**, the yellow line on the road that is your novel. Now write down your protagonist's name, and answer this question: how does he/she change over the course of your story? This is your **character arc**. Keep the plotline and character arc nearby as you edit: they're the focus of your novel. If your novel has subplots, write these down as 'subplot 1,' subplot 2,' etc., with a brief description.
3. Using your chapter outline from step one, start breaking your novel into three parts: **Part I**, where you introduce character, plot, and problem, **Part II** (also known as the chunky middle) where plot gets more complicated, and **Part III**, the climax of your story. Don't worry too much about where these breaks are exactly; chances are that your three acts flow into one another. Just find where these three parts roughly are—we just break them up so you can easily oversee your editing process. Part I and III each make up about  $\frac{1}{4}$  of your manuscript; Part II makes up about half.
4. Now that you have your novel's plotline(s) and character arc defined, and have split your novel into manageable chunks, it's time to edit Part I. This part of your novel needs to get a lot done, and in only  $\frac{1}{4}$  of your manuscript. Part I needs to introduce your character, his/her arc, plot question (think: "Will Detective Bob find the killer?"), and subplots. At the end of part I, your character needs to be fully invested in his/her quest, with no turning back. Ask yourself if all the components are there, and what might be missing. Make notes about scenes to

add, and ones to delete or move. Part I is all about establishing what your book is about; it's the foundation on which Part II will be built.

5. Part II is your middle, and should comprise about half of your manuscript. This is where Detective Bob makes a plan to find the killer. He interviews witnesses, checks out leads. Whatever your genre, the first half of your middle is where you build on Part I: complicating the plot, subplots, and allowing your protagonist to struggle with his inner life (that's the character arc we established in step 2). By the middle of Part II, you may want to add a pivot—a point where things change. Maybe Bob's partner gets hurt or killed, or maybe the investigation reveals there are two killers instead of one. Whatever your plot, it'll help you if around the middle of Part II, you have something of a turning point. This way you'll have a mini climax to work toward during the first part of the middle.
6. The second half of Part II will ramp up the complications you've created in your plotline and character arc. This is where you push your protagonist to his/her limits, and beyond them, to add extra drama. By the end of Part II, you should have wrapped up your subplots, and your main character should be nearing the end of his character arc. In Bob's case, maybe he realized that he really wants to be a good father more than he wants to be a cop. If you have a mystery in the works, this should be the point where your sleuth figures out who the killer is. For literary works, the end of Part II will be all about that *aha* moment your character has about his/her arc.
7. Part III is your climax, where your protagonist plans his final steps to get what he/she wants. This is what you've been working toward, so it is usually not too difficult to write. However, a common flaw in first draft climaxes is writer fatigue: you just wanted to get this thing over with, so you rushed to the finish line. Look over this part to see how you may be able to milk it for all it's worth. Add build-up, expand what happens—you've worked hard to get to this point, so make it count.
8. Once you've made notes to add or delete scenes, look at your current chapter outline. Are there parts where you drop a subplot? Does your character change gradually throughout the manuscript, or abruptly so that it's not believable? Now is the time to move scenes around, and get the bones of your manuscript right.

This is a very basic approach to second draft editing, and I definitely recommend that you read more reference manuals on editing fiction, if you haven't done so already. Expect this process to take at least as long as it took you to write the first draft, and likely a lot longer.

Remember: writing is silver, editing is gold. Or platinum, even.

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