

## WHAT EDITORS (REALLY) DO

By [Renni Browne](#)

In one of my favorite *New Yorker* cartoons a cat is maniacally clawing an upholstered chair, obviously not for the first time. In the caption its owner explains to her guests: “We believe that in a former life she was an editor.” Over the forty-five years I’ve been an editor, I’ve met plenty of people who think my job is to tear writers’ manuscripts to shreds. Other people think I correct spelling and punctuation and grammar, catch typos, and make sure that if the heroine began an evening wearing a blue sweater it hasn’t turned green by the time she comes home.

It’s not surprising that confusion about what editors do abounds, because we do a lot of different things and we never do them the same way—every manuscript is different, every writer is different, every story or nonfiction subject is different. What stays the same is the purpose of the editing: to help the author make the work as good as it can possibly be. So good that literary agents want to represent it, publishers want to publish it, and readers in significant quantities want to read it.

Adding to the confusion, there are also different kinds of work done on manuscripts—all loosely referred to as editing. If you get notes on your characters with ideas to make them more captivating or convincing, that’s editing. If you get ideas for strengthening your plot or filling plot holes or fixing plot credibility problems, that’s editing. If you get architectural suggestions—your book really starts with Chapter Two, or most of the flashbacks need to come out—that’s editing. If your writing style is polished, made smoother, given more snap and bite, that’s editing. And yes, if your grammar, typos, and inconsistencies are fixed, that too is editing.

Defining some terms can help. *Developmental* or *conceptual* editing is what you get when an editor critiques your manuscript. If it's a novel, the editor should give you feedback about your plot, characters, and writing style, and at The Editorial Department that feedback includes specific suggestions for improving anything that needs strengthening in these areas. If your manuscript is nonfiction, the feedback will focus on the impact of its content, its clarity and conviction, the flow of ideas, and the effectiveness of the writing style. You might say that developmental editing addresses the forest.

In *line editing* the editor gets involved with the trees, line by line, and I'm not just referring to comma faults and misspelled or misused words. Just as developmental editing helps you make the book's content as effective and appealing to the reader as possible, so line editing helps make your writing style as consistently effective and appealing as possible. A gifted line editor can do more than that. He or she can bring out the author's voice. And a distinctive narrative voice gives writers a real edge when they're trying to get a literary agent, or their agent is trying to get them a publisher.

Good line editors never impose their own style on the manuscript. If we make a change in wording, it sounds like the author at his/her best, not the editor. The changes we make are, in fact, inspired by the author's writing. The idea is to make all of the manuscript read as well as the best parts read. Think about what a difference this can make in the overall impact of an entire book.

We often annotate our line editing, query a change rather than going ahead and making it, or explain why we're making a change. Whether or how much we annotate for our clients depends on the relationship and arrangement with the author. We also sometimes prepare a self-

editing memo in which we edit and coach the author extensively through a portion of the manuscript in order to empower him/her to line edit the rest without our help.

The reason good writers need line editing is the same reason they need developmental editing. They're too close to see everything. Your manuscript is your child, and who among us is capable of 100% objectivity about our own children? I'm certainly not. I wouldn't dream of writing anything for publication without having it critiqued by at least one of our editors and the final draft line edited.

Usually included in line editing is *copyediting*, which corrects punctuation, typos, incorrect grammar (unless intentional, as in dialogue), inconsistencies (right down to capital letters and hyphens), errors, misspelled or misused words, unintentional word repetition, and so on. Copyediting is highly skilled work, but it's substantially different work from line editing.

The first chapter in *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* is about showing and telling, and "show, don't tell" is probably the single most oft-repeated and most valuable piece of advice handed out to writers. (Although, as Dave King and I make clear in the book, telling does have its place.) I follow my own advice, so with the author's permission I'm going to open a window on the editorial process with a first novel: *Still Missing*, by a fine Canadian writer named Rene Unischewski, who chooses to publish under the name Chevy Stevens. (She thought it might be helpful if readers could easily find her on the internet and pronounce her name in a bookstore.)

In any case, she sent her 500+-page manuscript to The Editorial Department for our most popular initial service, a \$2.00-a-page Preliminary Evaluation that addresses plot, characters, and style with specific recommendations throughout. I don't want to give away Rene's plot—I'm

sure her novel will be published, and it's highly suspenseful—but suffice it to say that I found the novel powerful, disturbing, and well written.

I made recommendations for intensifying relationships—intensifying and complicating two of the characters themselves, in fact. I did something else all our editors do, combed the manuscript for opportunities to increase the story's impact on the reader. They lurk within virtually every story if you know how to look for them. For example, inspired by a small but potent element in the story, I came up with an idea I thought would make the heroine's desperate situation even more excruciating. I threw the ball over the plate and held my breath—the idea was shocking—and Rene knocked it right out of the park. When I finished reading the scene she wrote, I was shaking.

I immediately fired off an e-mail to that effect. This is another part of the editor's job: encouraging the author, letting him/her know when revision is going particularly well, and why. E-mails and telephone calls also served to brainstorm editorial questions from time to time. A lot of e-support got sent Rene's way via the internet or over the phone. I meant every encouraging word. Rene's novel was very good when it came to us, but a manuscript that's likely to break into today's super-tough market for first fiction needs to be good enough to blow the socks off literary agents, publishing editors, and ultimately its readers. Rene had to do a lot of hard work, and she needed her editor's support along the way.

We went through two and a half drafts, with considerably less work needed each time around. Rene was a quick study, and I was starting to get really excited about *Still Missing*, a title Rene came up with and I recommended over *Behind the Mountain* as more intriguing. Rene agreed.

The manuscript was now ready for line editing. The example I've chosen from the opening chapter shows off Rene's distinctive narrative voice and gives a general idea of her heroine's circumstances, but I promise it doesn't reveal anything that would spoil the pleasure of reading *Still Missing*.

After The Freak injected something into my leg, I remember the sensation of his hand burning into my back, the scratchy blanket against my face and right before I passed out, the faint scent of perfume. Waking up, I wondered why I didn't feel my dog beside me, but I thought maybe she just went outside for a pee. That is until I opened my eyes and saw a white pillowcase. Mine were yellow.

I sat up so fast I almost blacked out. My head spun and I wanted to throw up. With my eyes wide open and my ears straining to hear every sound, I scanned my surroundings. I was in a basic log cabine, probably only around six hundred square feet or so, and I could see most of it from the bed. It didn't take me too long to realize he wasn't there. At first I was relieved, but then my body turned to ice. If he wasn't here, where was he?

On my left, I could see part of a kitchen was visible. In front of me was a wood stove and to its left, a door. I thought it was night at first but I wasn't sure—because the two windows on the right side of the bed had shutters on them or were boarded up. A couple of lights were on but only ceiling ones and one mounted to the wall by the bed. They were all behind some sort of protective covering.

Once I got my bearings my first impulse was to run to the kitchen to look for some kind of weapon. But whatever he'd injected me with hadn't worn off. My legs

turned to jelly and I nailed the floor. Stunned, I laid there for a few minutes, then crawled. Most of the drawers and cupboards—even the fridge—had padlocks on them. Leaning heavily on the counter, I rifled through the one drawer I could open but I couldn't find anything more dangerous than a tea towel. I took a few deep breaths and tried to figure out where the hell I was.

Disoriented from the drug, I crouched in the corner of that cabin for what felt like hours. I felt cold all over and couldn't stop shaking. All the crime shows I've watched on TV cycled through my mind. I pictured some morgue guy touching my mangled body and describing me like a piece of meat. Every second The Freak—that's what I called him in my mind—left me alone, I imagined more and more brutal deaths.

I used to love watching that CSI show—the one set in Las Vegas was my favorite. Grismom, he's the main character, would've just gone to the house where I was abducted and by the way a leaf was broken known exactly what happened and where I was. I wondered if Clayton Falls even had a CSI division. My image of RCMP officers was of them polishing up their saddles to ride their horses in a parade once a year. I guess that's why they're called the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The only time I ever saw them on TV was when they'd busted another marijuana grow-op.

Who would tell my mom when they found my body? What if my body was never found? I still remember her screams when the phone call came about the accident, and from then on my image of her is distorted by the glass of vodka she was usually holding. I only remember a few times when I saw her outright drunk, though. Generally she was just, as I called it, "blurry." She's still beautiful, but she seemed-- to me, anyway—like a

once vibrant painting that's colors have bled into each other.

The passage is well written, has a good sense of detail that puts the reader on the scene, conveys a good deal about the narrator, and although you'd have to read much more to know it, cleverly plants a few seeds in the reader's mind that will bear fruit later. The narrative pace is also a bit leisurely considering how desperate the heroine's situation is. An experienced editor will figure: no heavy lifting required, but it could benefit from tightening and a little smoothing here and there. Here's what I did:

After ~~the Freak~~ injectioned something into my leg ~~and before, I passed out, I~~ remember **two things** ~~the sensation of his hand burning into my back,~~ the scratchy blanket against my face; ~~and right before I passed out,~~ the faint scent of perfume. Waking up, I wondered why I didn't feel my dog beside me, ~~then~~ **but I thought maybe she just went outside for a pee. That is until I** opened my eyes and saw a white pillowcase. Mine ~~are~~ **were** yellow.

I sat up so fast I almost blacked out. My head spun, ~~and~~ **I** wanted to throw up. With my eyes wide open; and my ears straining to hear every sound, I scanned my surroundings. I was in a basic log cabine, probably only ~~around~~ six hundred square feet or so, and I could see most of it from the bed. It didn't take me ~~too~~ long to realize he wasn't there. ~~At first I was relieved, but~~ **My relief lasted only a few seconds** ~~then my body turned to ice.~~ If he wasn't here, where was he?

~~On~~ **To** my left, I could see part of a kitchen ~~area was~~ **visible**. In front of me was a wood stove and to its left, a door. I thought it was night at first; but I wasn't sure--

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Comment [rb1]: Tightening this paragraph makes it edgier and scarier. Your more relaxed pace lessens the tension.

Comment [rb2]: It's okay to separate two complete sentences with commas instead of periods in fiction occasionally. You do it to get an effect— immediacy, intensity. Linking these two with "and" actually has the effect of softening the content a little.

Comment [rb3]: We've already had her nearly passing out and wanting to throw up. I think instead of another physical symptom it's more effective if her relief is really short-lived.

Comment [rb4]: "I could see part of a kitchen was visible" is wordy and just a bit awkward. Keep it simple.

~~because~~ the two windows on the right side of the bed had shutters on them or were boarded up. A couple of **ceiling** lights were on, ~~but only ceiling ones,~~ and **another one** **was** mounted to the wall by the bed. ~~They were all behind some sort of protective covering.~~

**Comment [rb5]:** Since we're looking for things to cut, I think this detail can go. Anyway, I never saw a ceiling or wall light that didn't have a protective covering.

~~Once I got my bearings in~~ My first impulse was to run to the kitchen ~~and to~~ look for some kind of weapon. But whatever he'd injected me with hadn't worn off. My legs turned to jelly and I nailed the floor. ~~Stunned,~~ I **layid** there for a few minutes, then crawled, **finally pulled myself up**. Most of the drawers and cupboards—even the fridge—had padlocks on them. Leaning heavily on the counter, I rifled through the one drawer I could open, ~~but I~~ couldn't find anything more dangerous than a tea **towel**. I took a few deep breaths and tried to figure out where **the hell** I was.

**Comment [rb6]:** Never, ever explain the obvious to your readers.

**Comment [rb7]:** I added this not just because she has to pull herself up (she can't reach the drawers from a crawling position) but also to suggest that this foray is really effortful.

**Comment [rb8]:** Love this sentence!

**Comment [rb9]:** This sounds like Annie's voice. In addition to being scared to death, she's bound to be angry. And her interior monologue in other scenes is peppered with profanity, sometimes even obscenity, so it doesn't seem right that we see nothing of this trait. I'm not going to do any more along these lines, but you might want to.

My watch was missing and there were no clocks or windows, so I couldn't even guess ~~at the~~ **what** time of **day** ~~it was~~. I had no idea how far ~~away~~ from home I was, because I had no idea how long ~~I'd been~~ **was** unconscious. My head felt like someone was squeezing it in a vise. I made my way to the furthest corner in between the bed and the wall, put my back into it as far as I could, and stared at the **door**.

**Comment [rb10]:** Changed because you don't want to end two phrases in a row with "it was."

~~Disoriented from the drug,~~ I crouched in the corner of that cabin for what ~~seemed~~ **felt** like hours. I felt cold all over and couldn't stop shaking. ~~All the~~ **eCrime** shows I've watched on TV cycled through my mind. I pictured some morgue guy touching my mangled body and describing me like a piece of meat. Every second The Freak—that's what I called him in my mind—left me alone, I imagined more and more brutal deaths.

**Comment [rb11]:** I put a double linespace here. Annie needs to take in what's happened, and the pause gives readers a chance to think for a second about how alone and trapped she feels—or maybe to worry about what David has in store for her.

**Comment [rb12]:** Don't spell this out for the reader. Her head feels "like someone was squeezing it in a vise." She feels "cold all over" and can't stop shaking. The reader will figure out from these clues and from her falling when she tried to go to the kitchen that she's disoriented from the drug. Whenever you spell things out for readers you choke off their imagination. Whenever readers figure things out for themselves they're involved in the story at a deeper level—because they've invested a little piece of themselves in it. This is perhaps the most important secret of writing seductive fiction.

**Comment [rb13]:** Changed because you use "felt" in the next sentence.

I used to love watching that CSI show—the one set in Las Vegas was my favorite.

Grisom, ~~he's the main character,~~ would've just gone to the house where I was abducted and by the way a leaf was broken known exactly what happened and where I was. I wondered if Clayton Falls even had a CSI division ~~or just the.~~ ~~My image of~~ RCMP ~~officers was of them polishing up their saddles to ride their horses in a parade once a~~ ~~year.~~ ~~The only time I ever saw~~ ~~I guess that's why they're called~~ the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. ~~The only time I ever saw them~~ on TV was when they'd busted another ~~M~~marijuana grow-op.

**Comment [rb14]:** Always assume your readers to be smart and up on things—don't ever write down to them. For those who don't watch CSI Las Vegas, it's clear from the context anyway that Grissom is the main character in the show.

Who would tell my mom when they found my body? What if my body was never found? I still remember her screams when the phone call came about the accident, and from then on my image of her ~~is~~became distorted by the glass of vodka she was usually holding ~~in front of her.~~ I only remember a few times when I saw her outright drunk, though. Generally she was just ~~what,~~ ~~as~~ ~~I thought of a~~ ~~called it,~~ “blurry.” She's still beautiful, but she seems ~~sed-~~, to me, anyway ~~--~~, like a once vibrant painting ~~whose~~ ~~that's~~ colors ~~have~~d bled into each other.

**Comment [rb15]:** We need to move. One comment about the RCMP is enough.

No fancy rearrangements or deep cuts here. I deleted unnecessary words that don't add (a word may be unnecessary but add nonetheless), along with explanations to the reader, things readers can figure out on their own. The total effect is to quicken the pace, thus heightening the intensity, also to make the narrative voice a bit smoother and more natural, make it flow a little more easily.

Read the pages again with the editing incorporated, undistracted by colored changes and

deletions, and see if you agree:

After the injection into my leg and before I passed out, I remember two things, the scratchy blanket against my face and the faint scent of perfume. Waking up, I wondered why I didn't feel my dog beside me, then I opened my eyes and saw a white pillowcase. Mine are yellow.

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how long I'd been unconscious. My head felt like someone was squeezing it in a vise. I made my way to the furthest corner in between the bed and the wall, put my back into it as far as I could, and stared at the door.

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But these aren't big changes—are they really important?

Little changes over the course of an entire book can make a big difference—to the quality

of the work, even to its fate in the marketplace. Line editing used to be provided by editors at publishing houses but hardly ever still is. Nowadays, if your manuscript needs any kind of editing it gets rejected—most likely by the literary agent who could place it in the hands of publishers. (Click [here](#) to read my interview with Owen Laster shortly after he left William Morris Agency.)

But there's another way to look at it. The writing of any author who receives line editing is going to be strengthened in the process. Over the course of our work together, Rene went from being a good writer capable of breathtaking moments to being a writer whose entire next draft took her editor's breath away—exceeding every expectation I had. The narrative voice, which I would now describe as inimitable, held up all the way through. It does a superb job of telling Rene's riveting story, the story behind the story, and the story behind the story behind the story that make *Still Missing* an extraordinary reading experience.

At the end of the day, what editors do is make writers better at what *they* do.