

How to Keep Track of Your Novel When You're Editing Transcript

This is a transcript of the seminar, edited slightly for easy reading. You can find the audio version, plus worksheet, at: <http://www.writershuddle.com/seminars/mar2018/>

Hi, I'm Ali Luke, and this is the March seminar, how to keep track of your novel when you're editing.

I've edited a fair few novels over the years, three of which I've published – which is the Lycopolis trilogy – and three before that which went through some stage of drafting and a bit of rewriting. One of those I edited and sent to agents. But those three never saw the light of day.

I feel like I've done quite a lot of editing novels, and quite often I've not gone about it the best way.

I know from talking to other writers, including some in the Huddle, that novel writing can feel quite tricky or quite messy. You might feel like you've got lost part way, or you just get very bogged down because it feels like such slow progress.

Why Editing is Inevitably Messy ... and Why Working in a Linear Fashion Will Help

In today's seminar, we're going to talk about some ways to keep track of things when you're editing – and also we're going to talk about the fact that whatever you do, however careful your plans are, however great your drafting and editing system is, it probably will be a bit of a messy process. That's just part of creativity.

That's not something to be feeling bad about – don't feel you've done something wrong because it's a bit of a mess. It's just sometimes how things have to be for you to get the finished product.

What really matters is that you end up with a great novel that's well paced, with interesting characters that go on interesting journeys – whether that's a physical journey or more like a psychological journey – and that it all hangs together at the end.

It doesn't matter too much how you get there, though obviously you want to get to your finished novel with a minimum of angst (for you, maybe plenty of angst for your characters).

My best piece of advice is to edit, as much as possible, in a linear fashion. So by that I mean that each time you finish a draft (and you'll do multiple drafts), you go back to the beginning and you edit forwards from chapter one.

You may not do that 100% consistently all of the time, but I think if you can work in that linear way, it tends to make things more straight forward than if you just jump around and edit chapters and scenes here and there, piecemeal.

Does More Planning = Less Editing?

Although to some degree, the more planning you do upfront, the more likely it is you'll end up with a fairly coherent first draft and the editing will go more smoothly ... even if you spent months planning out your novel, you're not necessarily going to find that there's no mess or no difficult bits in the editing.

Certainly in my experience of planning, I can have a really worked-out plan for my novel, and once I start writing I realise that some bits of that plan are not really hanging together. Or maybe something that I've planned that I thought was going to take, say, two chapters, ends up taking five chapters ... and it needs to be adjusted accordingly.

So by all means plan and get the plot and structure of your novel nailed down, ideally before you get too far with drafting (if that works for you) – but don't think that just because you're good at planning means that editing will, or should, be easy and not at all messy.

Hopefully it'll go smoothly, but there will be some bits where things don't go quite as ideally as you would've liked.

Let's go through all the stages, then, of writing a novel – the different drafts. I'll talk a bit about what I do at these different stages.

You may have different ways of approaching editing, and that's absolutely fine, but I'm hoping some of the things I do will resonate with you and some of them might give you ideas for how to tackle problems you might be facing with your own novel.

Stage #1: The First Draft (Keep Going Forward)

Stage #1 is the first draft. This might seem a weird place to begin thinking about editing – you might think you're not editing yet! – but if your first drafts are anything like mine, you might come to a point ten chapters in or twenty chapters in where you realise that you need to go back and change something.

In the first draft of *Lycopolis*, I had two characters who got completely cut out eventually and never made it into the second draft.

The crucial thing here is to avoid getting ten chapters in then going back to the beginning to restart. If you do that, you could end up starting over and over again and not really progressing with the story.

What I'd definitely recommend is that, when you realise something has to change in the portion of the novel you've already written, make a note, obviously – write down exactly what needs to change – then keep going forward as if you'd made the change.

Imagine that you've done it all and just write forward from that place. Then you can later go back and rewrite it for real. By the time you've finished the first draft, there may be other things you want to change in the first few chapters.

You may even decide that the character you thought wasn't working or the subplot that didn't seem to fit has somehow come together in your mind as

you wrote. So it may even be that you change your mind about the edit you were going to make.

When I'm doing my first drafts these days, I draft into Scrivener, which you've probably heard of. If you haven't, Scrivener is a program for novelists and screenwriters and people working on big written projects, where you can lay out your project as separate chapters and you can see those in a card interface. You can pull the cards around and move the chapters about.

Sometimes I like to flag different cards, so I might flag one as *"this chapter needs a lot of work"* or *"this chapter is maybe going to be cut"* or *"this chapter is quite polished and it's pretty much done"* – so then I can see what stage different bits are at as I work on the subsequent drafts.

Sometimes I'll put notes on the index cards. Mostly I just put the notes in the start of each relevant chapter – so I put Chapter 2, these things need to change, then it's the actual chapter itself.

Once you've got a first draft, congratulations! That's further than a lot of people get. Now you're onto the second draft.

Stage #2: The Second Draft (Rewriting)

I like to draft quickly and then redraft a lot. That may not be a good fit for your own process, and that's fine – you may be a much more meticulous writer than me! – but it works for me.

So when I do the second draft, I start completely over from scratch with a brand new Scrivener project. I set the whole thing up again; I don't just have the existing draft and go in and edit sentences. I'm literally starting with a new document.

Sometimes I'll copy and paste little bits, often bits of dialogue, from one draft to the next ... but quite often I'm rewriting every scene or every chapter.

I'm finding that as I've written more books, I'm doing that slightly less. I'm finding that my first draft is maybe coming out a bit closer to how I want it the

first time round, which is nice. But I'm prepared, if necessary, to rewrite every word of the first draft.

That might sound hideously inefficient but for me it works well because it means I'm keeping track of everything. I've already got the rough shape of the novel, I've got the draft, but I'm now able to shape the scenes with more care, I'm able to get the pacing, I can really think about are the characters interacting in the right way at this point in the novel, I can change the dialogue, and it can all come together in a more polished form than it previously was.

Sometimes as I go through it in more detail, line by line, I realise that there's a detail in the first draft that maybe I never picked up on quite enough that I want to make more of in the second draft and so on.

So at this stage for me, my focus is on what I call "rewriting" rather than actual editing. I'm not necessarily worried about getting every single word right – obviously I'm hoping that the writing itself is improving and that I'm getting better with the dialogue and the description and stuff! But my main focus is, does the plot work, is the pacing working, is the characterisation consistent ... the slightly bigger picture things. I'm not too worried about perfecting every sentence.

I try to not get bogged down at this point by thinking about, should there be a comma here, or should I make these two sentences into one, or one sentence into two. I'll fine-tune those details in the editing stage.

Creating a Timeline for Your Novel

Something else I do at this point of the second draft, if I haven't already done it in the first draft (which I always should, and always slightly mess up on!) – I put in the dates and times of different scenes.

My novels tend to take place over a fairly short span of time. So in Lycopolis, for instance, the whole of the action takes place over about one month. It matters which characters are where on which given days and how events fit together in terms of what's happening on a Monday or a Tuesday or a Friday and so on. Some of my characters work or are in school, so it matters when it's a weekday versus a weekend, stuff like that.

Some of this stuff may not be relevant for your own novel, if it takes place over a bigger span of time – or if your characters are leading lives where it doesn't really matter what day of the week it is, or they're all in one place anyway or something.

But for me, it really helps to nail down, what day is it, what time of day is it for this particular scene, and – possibly – what characters are in this scene, who's the point of view character, that sort of stuff.

I'll put that information in the chapter headers. I've done it different ways in the past, with spreadsheets, but now I think it's easiest just to put "Chapter 1 – [character's] point of view – Monday 3rd March, afternoon" or whatever it might be.

Then I know where we are in the timeline of the novel. If I don't include this information, I end up screwing things up when I move scenes around – I end up with characters who take improbably long or bizarrely short journeys from one place to another.

Stage #3: The Third Draft (Fine Tuning)

Then the third draft, for me, usually comes after I've got feedback from my editor. So this is the point where I'm thinking about fine-tuning the editing. Sometimes I go through the second draft and try to get it as good as I can in terms of the writing and look out for the stuff I always screw up – the words I always repeat a lot and so on – before I send it to my editor.

But the next *major* draft is when it comes back from my editor with lots and lots of things to change and correct and think about.

I read through my editor's report, which is about the whole novel, and I think – okay, do I need to make any major changes? With *Lycopolis*, the first book in the trilogy, I cut that from about 135,000 words to about 85,000 words – so I cut a lot of material out.

It was a much better book for it, and it was really good that my editor encouraged me to do that – she could see issues with it that I couldn't quite

see – but that was quite a major redraft! It still went through a few more drafts after that.

With my novella that I've been editing recently, because it's a much shorter thing to begin with, it's stayed pretty much the same, most of the chapters are basically the same – I'm just making a few tweaks, taking out a little bit here and there.

So when I go through the edits, normally, as I say, I read through the report, figure out whether there are any really big picture things to do – does it need a complete rewrite? If not, I just go through chapter by chapter, looking at my editor's comments and tweaking things as I go along.

Sometimes I might write a whole new bit of material, sometimes I'm just changing words here and there.

I try to go through the comments on the chapters sequentially. Sometimes there'll be something I want to come back to, for whatever reason, rather than make the changes straight away. Maybe I want to think about it some more, or maybe it's going to be quite a bit change and I want to get all the little ones done. So then I flag that up with a comment or some yellow highlighter so I can come back to it at a later stage.

Stage #4: The Fourth Draft (Final Tweaks)

Then the final stage for me – and this is probably at least three drafts in; with Lycopolis it was five or six drafts by the time I got to this point! – is when I do the proofread, essentially, and any final tiny little edits.

I turn my manuscript into a Kindle document, put it on my Kindle, and then I go through and highlight words or sentences or phrases that I want to change. I put in some notes on the change I plan to make, unless it's completely obvious – like it's a typo or something.

Then I type those changes into the actual manuscript. So the reason I separate "detailing the changes" from "making the changes" is so that I've got some time to reflect on them.

For instance, I might think, oh, I want to change this sentence here ... and then I realise that the way I want to change it will make it too similar to a sentence in the next chapter or something.

If I went through and just started typing in the edits as I went along, it'd be very easy to lose track of what I changed and so on. So I want to record all the edits on my Kindle (and you can do this on paper or whatever suits you) first, and *then* I want to type all the edits into the manuscript.

That way, it's easy to see what exactly I've actually changed and what I'm thinking about doing. It avoids making the whole thing into a massive mess of changes.

Different Approaches to Editing

So, that's how I edit – and this is far from the only way to edit. There are probably as many different systems as there are different authors. So you may have a process where you much prefer to jump around in your manuscript and maybe you like to make all the big changes first, so you change all the chapters that need a lot of work first, then you work down to the smaller changes – so you don't work in such a linear fashion from start to end within each draft.

(Obviously, whatever your process, I'm still recommending you do the big changes in, say, draft two and then think about the tiny changes in draft four or five ... don't try to do absolutely all of your editing in one single redraft!)

One reason you might want to switch around how you're editing and when is if you need an excerpt of your novel for something. So maybe you're going to share it with your writers' group for feedback, or maybe it's going to be published in an anthology.

Obviously you'll want to take that chapter and polish it and make it as good as you can at this time ... even if that means you'll later have to go back and do more edits to it in the light of other changes you've made within the novel.

Keeping Track of All the Changes You're Making

In terms of organising all of it and keeping track ... it can be tough! I think this is where it often does get messy. You might have loads of changes to make. Don't try to keep it all in your head, especially if – like me and like most writers – you don't have lots of time to edit all at once.

You might be putting it down one week and picking it up the next week; it can be really hard to figure out where you left off. I'll often use a spreadsheet to keep track of which characters are where and what's happening in which scenes, and what time is it and what date is it and so on. As I've said, I also use the chapter headings to do that. (I do then take out the chapter details from the headings before I publish the book – so I don't have "Chapter 1 – Monday 3rd March – [point of view character]" and so on. It's just that the information is there for me, so I can keep it straight in my head while I'm drafting.)

Then you could use the little cards in Scrivener, as I've said, to flag – okay, this chapter needs editing, this chapter is pretty much done, this chapter is a disaster, this chapter has these five changes I want to make, and so on.

Or you could use almost any tool that works for you. It could be some sort of task management or project management program – I know Sean was saying in the Huddle forums that he uses Trello to keep track of different edits, where you can put different items on different boards and move them around as you work through something.

Or you could use a notebook. You could have a different page for each chapter and write a list of all the things you want to edit, and you could check them off once you're done.

It really doesn't matter what system you use, so long as you have some kind of coherent way of organising what you're doing with the edits, and you can keep track.

It may be that you use comments in a Word document, like I do with my editor.

How to Handle the Messy Nature of Editing

Whatever system you use, though, there'll be times when it feels messy and confusing and you're struggling to keep track. Maybe you're a bit unsure about what needs to change or what you've already changed and so on.

That doesn't mean you're doing it wrong. Editing is still part of a creative process. It can be a bit haphazard, or it can be something where inspiration strikes you at odd moments: you're in the shower and you're thinking about your characters, then you realise – ha, wouldn't it be cool if *this* happened. Or, it would really work if *this* character had this particular thing in their back story – I need to work that in.

And sometimes it's a little detail, but it comes to you and then you need to figure out a way to bring it into the edits.

One tool you can use here is just a notebook: have a notebook where you write down all the stuff you want to change, and you can check it every so often and see if you've made all those changes.

Another way to do this is to have what's called a writing journal. So when you've finished a writing session, you jot down – what did I write during this session, what edits was I making, what new thoughts have come up, what else do I need to do? That way, if you get confused about what was happening or when you made changes, or which changes you might want to undo, or where exactly did you get to, or what were you thinking about doing ... any of that, you can just go back to your journal!

Read through your notes of each writing session and then you can see, oh, okay, three weeks ago I was working on this chapter, and that reminded me I wanted to change this and I haven't yet made that change.

So the idea here is to keep as much of your thinking on paper or on your computer as possible. Don't just keep it all in your head: don't think you'll be able to remember it all or track it all within your brain.

A novel is such a complicated thing – it's not like writing a short story, where you might well have everything in your head. There'll be bits you forget and bits where you know you intended to do *something*, but you can't remember

how you were going to pull it all together. So do find some way of recording what you want to do to your novel, before you actually make those edits.

I would love to hear how you keep track of novels when you're editing. If you haven't quite got to that stage yet, maybe share what you're thinking about doing – have you got ideas of what would work best for you in your own writing process, so you can keep track of edits and progress as smoothly as possible through the editing phases, until you get to a finished and polished novel.

So do come by the forums and share your thoughts on the seminar there.

Further Reading and Useful Resources

Blog posts:

[6 Tips for How to Organize Your Novel's Edits](#), K.M. Weiland, Helping Writers Become Authors

In this post, K.M. takes quite a different approach from me, suggesting that you start with small edits (like typos) so you've cleared those out of the way, before going on to the bigger picture stuff. She's particularly focused here on helping authors who are integrating feedback from beta-readers.

[The Three Stages of Editing \(and Nine Handy Do-it-Yourself Tips\)](#), Ali Luke, Aliventures

This post applies to all sorts of writing projects, not just novels. I explain the three different editing stages (rewriting, editing, proofreading) and give you some tips for each one.

Software:

[Scrivener](#), from Literature & Latte

Many novelists (me included!) use Scrivener and find it a great tool for drafting and editing novels. There's a generous 30-day free trial (non-consecutive days) so you can try it out before you commit.