

# The Five Stages of Editing

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--Originally Published at Lit Drift

"I thought editors filled in missing commas and fixed misspelled words." — Hazel, *alt.punk*

The recent release of my debut novel *alt.punk* was extraordinarily exciting; however, maturing the novel from first draft to publication was not without editing pains. Similar to the Kübler-Ross theory, I progressed through what I refer to as the "five stages of editing."

## **Stage One: Ignorance**

Yes, I was guilty of querying *alt.punk* to Casperian Books thinking, "I've revised and edited this to death. There is no way this could get any more perfect."

Oh, how I was wrong. It's embarrassing to admit just how wrong.

The Casperian Books team shot back a list of global revisions I needed to make, and after making those and resubmitting, they responded with something to the effect of, "better but it still needs a lot of work." From there, I was paired up with an editor who, little did I know, would launch *alt.punk* into an extreme manuscript makeover, which to date, remains one of the most challenging ordeals of my life.

Dramatic? Yes. But it was a shock to learn just how wrong my visions of "perfect" were. Little did I know that I was progressing through the five stages of editing rather quickly.

## **Stage Two: Shock**

For me, it was a jaw-mangling shock to learn that my scrupulous self-editing seemed to be all in vain. It was also hard for me to see my "baby" filled with Microsoft Word's strikethrough font of deletions, comment balloons, word or phrase additions, a few I didn't understand so I had to keep a dictionary very close at hand.

However, Nathan Holic, the editor behind *alt.punk*, did soften the initial shock for me. One of the first things he said was, "I always tell my students to divorce themselves from the original when they

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begin the revision process, and I think that this is helpful to remember as we move forward; in other words, while there are a lot of great things happening in 'alt.punk,' we should never cling to any moment/image/scene/word/ sentence/etc. just because 'it was in the original, and we liked the original.' Things will change, and a new draft will emerge, and we shouldn't be bound to original ideas at the expense of this new draft."

He was right. It's embarrassing to admit just how right he was because it proves just how wrong I was. (And I won't say the editor always knows best, there are never "right answers" when it comes to any art form, but an editor certainly has professional and experienced insight into manuscripts, literature, and the market. He/she also knows no one is going to want to read a book riddled with inconsistencies, weak or nonexistent scene and character introductions, dialogue that goes nowhere, voice delivery that falls flat or possibly makes no sense whatsoever, and so on.)

By the time I began to understand where Nathan was coming from, I also found myself growing a backbone. And I was well on to the stage of denial.

### **Stage Three: Denial**

Like many inexperienced writers, I said to myself, "Whatever. He doesn't know my story the way I do. He isn't emotionally connected to these characters or these storylines, nor does he understand why I've set the scenes the way I have. There's a reason behind everything and he just doesn't see that. I should try to force him to see things the way I do."

I wish I could go back and lecture my naïve self about being open to feedback and interpretations, especially with a professional. Sharing your writing with an editor or even your family and friends will prove its weight in gold. These "outsiders" are not emotionally connected to your work the way you are, and they'll read it with a virgin pair of eyes. They'll see inconsistencies in characters or storylines, weaknesses in plot development, scene setting, overall intent of a chapter, paragraph, or sentence, and they won't be shy to point it out. Share your work with as many people as you can, and

seek out their most honest opinions. Had I been open to feedback and suggestive revisions when I started editing *alt.punk*, I would have preserved a lot of time and self-esteem. Plus, it doesn't take an editor to point out how Landon's Mustang that I mentioned in chapter 13 was destroyed in a graphic display of descriptive theatrics back in chapter 8. Obvious, right? It wasn't to me until the editor pointed it out.

So don't be me. I pushed back on the editor's revision suggestions with things like, "Yes, this behavior is inconsistent with this character, but isn't that often the case? Isn't the sweet and innocent librarian secretly a sadist?" I recognize now that I was making up excuses, denying that I could have written anything erroneous. Little did I know just how much I was slowing down the editing process.

#### **Stage Four: Acceptance**

Over time, I saw *alt.punk* progress into a strong and meaty manuscript. It shrunk in length but grew in content and tone. I realized just how intuitive and intelligent my editor was. He brought out the true colors of characters. He taught me to "never make the reader do all the work." Scenes were introduced to their fullest, and characters as well. He used examples of Diaz, Listi, and Meno to help me see the importance of detail, structure, and voice.

One day, I suddenly found myself *trusting* him. He had the ability to look globally for manuscript problems but also locally at phrasing. I accepted that he knew what he was talking about when he asked that I rewrite the ending numerous times.

Editors do so much for a story. Not only do they challenge a writer to dig deep into themselves to produce the best scene setting and the most intimate dialogue.

Though *alt.punk* may have needed more work than other debut novels, hardcore revisions are nothing new to the industry. PS Books' submission guidelines ask writers to submit "a manuscript that you've revised and revised and revised until you're sick of it. But not too sick of it—because if we accept your work, we'll probably ask you to revise it some more."

In the end, my journey with the editor resulted in scenes hacked, scenes added, chapters torn apart and restructured, dialogue polished, and a new ending engineered. The editor didn't change the story or manipulate it into his own, but he asked the tough questions, dug deep, and coaxed out the novel's potential.

### **Stage Five: Enlightenment and Possibly Helplessness**

It still surprises me how much *alt.punk* has changed since that “perfect” manuscript I queried to the novel that is currently available for purchase through Casperian Books' website and all major online retailers. (Too much?)

Though I had a great run with my editor, today, I find myself more self-conscious than ever. My confidence in my own eye for editing and revisions have been drastically altered, and I no longer ever see any of my work as “perfect” anymore because I know something could always be better. At times, I'm fearful of querying shorts or blog posts. I often second-guess my phrasing, choice of content, I ask myself if I'm lacking necessary description in one area, am I going on for too long in another, am I even making sense, do I even have a point?

Which leads me to my final advice: never underestimate the power of self-editing, something Andrew Boryga has outlined well in his post “Being Your Own Editor.” He has great points, my favorite being that you can delete what you've written and go back and completely rewrite it.

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Though these may not be the literary world's official five stages of editing, my experiences with *alt.punk* seem to have fallen within these buckets. I'd be interested in hearing your experiences editing, whether it be with an editor, a writing group, or on your own. Feel free to leave a comment, shoot me an email at [lavinia\(dot\)ludlow\(at\)gmail\(dot\)com](mailto:lavinia(dot)ludlow(at)gmail(dot)com), or visit me at <http://ludlowlavinia.wordpress.com/>

There's one last thing I did learn as we were wrapping up revisions on *alt.punk*: a copy editor fills in missing commas and fixes

misspelled words, not the editor. You are more than welcome to give me a hard time about it too.

