

A Sampling of Book Editing Tips

from Flo Selfman,

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Make the title legible at a distance of six feet.

The title should stand out even when reduced to 1 ½" high and black and white.

Choose the best classification(s) for your book (top of back cover). The wrong category can cause your book to be shelved in the wrong section ("The Art of Breathing" was shelved under "Art" at Borders.)

Make every word count. Don't fill up too much space with words; just make them riveting and compelling.

Make your testimonial quotes relevant. If your book is about the Civil War, get a quote from a Civil War authority (author, professor, head of Civil War re-enactment organization). If it's a cookbook, get quotes from top chefs, cookbook authors, or top food writers.

Make sure the quotes have proper attribution. Don't just say Dean Koontz. Identify him as best-selling author Dean Koontz.

Make your book's title relevant. Have a subtitle that further explains it. But the title is most important, as often the subtitle will often not be printed in reviews. Which is better, *Tortured By Sound: Beyond Human Endurance*, or *Beyond Human Endurance: Tortured By Sound*?

Proofread carefully to see if you any words out.

Think from the outside in: what does a potential buyer of your book need to see and know – not necessarily what *you* want, but what *they* need.

DO NOT leave proofreading to graphic designers. They usually see words as *graphic* elements, not *grammatical* elements. The graphic designer does not take responsibility for proofreading; the client does (except in rare cases where a graphic designer hires a proofreader). Be sure the person or people who proofread your manuscript and/or cover know how to proofread. *Don't entrust your precious book to someone who is not a proven expert.*

The Chicago Manual of Style is the bible for the publishing industry. It is not practical for everyone to use, however, as it is highly complex and specific. If you don't know exactly what you are looking for, you probably won't be able to find it easily in this book.

The *AP Styleguide* is the bible for journalism, but not for book publishing.

Dan Poynter's book *The Self-Publishing Manual* is highly useful, whether or not you are self-publishing. So is Sylvia Cary's book *The Therapist Writer*, whether you're a therapist or not.

There are many excellent grammar references available. If you are going to buy one, don't do it in a rush. Spend some time at a major bookstore (if you can find one) browsing the section. Get the bookseller's advice, or ask a librarian first. Have the most recent dictionary handy, as new words

and usages are added yearly (I still use a paper dictionary and thesaurus, in addition to online ones).

Be better than your technology. Spell-check and grammar-check are wonderful but they don't catch everything.

Some common errors to avoid:

Unless your book has a special syntax, it should be written in standard American English. That means: use complete sentences, don't use symbols in sentences (use the words "at" and "and" – not the symbols "@" and "&"; write out state names or use the correct abbreviations: Ca. or Calif., not CA, which is only a postal designation).

Try not to break up words at the end of a line.

Know the difference between a hyphen and a dash. Grammatically, they have *opposite* functions.

The hyphen is a connector, connecting words or parts of words (two-day sale; twenty-three-year cycle). You may use more than one hyphen at a time to create a one-word adjective directly modifying a noun (The twenty-five-hundred-year-old building will be demolished next week; the 2500-year-old building...).

The dash is a separator (My best friends – Charlie, Rose, Andy, Sue, Joey and Mark – will always be there for me)

Know the difference between singular, plural, and possessive, especially for words or names ending in s or z.

Singular: Jose Martinez

Plural: The Martinezes (add -es)

Singular possessive: Jose Martinez's (add 's)

Plural possessive: The Martinezes' car (add -es to make it plural, then add 's for possessive)

Know the difference between possessives and contractions:

Its (something belonging to "it" (The book is missing **its** cover)

It's (contraction for "it is") (Do you know if **it's** time to go home yet?)

Its' (is NOT a word)

Know the difference between British and American English usages.

In American English, periods and commas go **INSIDE** quotation marks. Colons and semicolons go **OUTSIDE** quotation marks. Period. (Brits do it the opposite.) Question marks go inside *or* outside, depending on the sentence.

Alright is *not* a word in American English. It is used in British English, rock music ("The Kids Are Alright"), and is acceptable in scripts (although I always mark it when I proofread scripts). All right is correct.

Some more words you should know:

Alot is *not* a word. It should be "a lot." Always.

Mantel: a shelf on a fireplace. NOT mantle; that's a cloak or covering.

Restaurateur: the person who owns a restaurant.

Regimen: a routine (My exercise **regimen** includes sit-ups.) NOT regime.

Regime: a rule (Mussolini's **regime**)

Criterion (singular, takes a singular verb): The criterion for membership is to pay dues.

Criteria (plural; takes a plural verb): The criteria for membership are paying dues and providing two references.

Every day is almost always two words: Every day I walk in the garden. The only time it should be one word is when it is an adjective directly modifying a noun: My **everyday** shoes are brown and my Sunday shoes are white. Our everyday prices are the lowest in town every day.

Work out is two words when used as a verb with “to”: I am going **to work out** later.

Workout is one word when it is an adjective or a noun. My **workout** clothes are blue and white. My **workout** (noun) takes forty-five minutes.

Do not proofread only once. Proofread again...and again...and again. Errors that were supposed to have been corrected sometimes do not get changed or saved and will only show up upon subsequent reading. Once the book is printed, it's too late!

Make sure your proofreader has the opportunity to proofread *everything*, every word in every part of the book, not just the main chapters: that includes all photo captions, cover, front matter, footnotes, etc.

Beware of “ad-speak”: “Pant” is not the singular of “pants.” “Jean” is not the singular of “jeans.” “Trouser” is not the singular of “trousers”; “eyeglass” is not the singular of “eyeglasses.” The words are pants, jeans, trousers, and eyeglasses.

Consistency:

It's a good idea to provide your proofreader with a list of characters, with names spelled correctly, as well as a list of technical terms or other unusual words.

Make sure your characters' names are spelled the same way throughout. Check for variations in capitalization, spelling, and punctuation. A name might be spelled Sueanne, Sue Anne, or Suanne. Use only one spelling throughout your book.

Make sure charts are consistent with the accompanying text. If your text says Fahrenheit, don't use Celsius in the chart, unless it contains both F. and C.

Sentence structure should be grammatically consistent. Don't say, John loves skiing, cycling, and to try new restaurants. Change to: John loves skiing, cycling, and trying new restaurants; or John loves to ski, to cycle, and to try new restaurants; or, John loves to ski, cycle, and try new restaurants.

A proofreader/copyeditor will create a style sheet for your manuscript, in order to keep spelling of names and other details consistent throughout the book as they go along.

There is a correct way to spell foreign words and phrases, dialect, jargon, patois, and slang and still retain grammatical integrity. (ole or ol' for “old” [not ole']; li'l for “little”; lil') Yay and yeah are different. Yay is a cheer (like Yippee). Yeah is slang for yes.

Oh, and did I mention to **proofread again**? Especially your book cover, front matter, captions of photos or diagrams, and first few pages. Nothing says non-professional like a glaring typo.

