

“I know of no other writing guide that is so wise,
or so totally useful!”

– Dinty W. Moore, author of *The Story Cure* –



Seven Drafts

**SELF-EDIT LIKE A PRO
FROM BLANK PAGE TO BOOK**

Allison K Williams

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Allison K Williams has edited and coached authors to deals with Big Five publishers and inspired thousands of writers with her *Brevity* blogs. She leads Rebirth Your Book retreats around the world.

www.allisonkwilliams.com

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Seriously, it's not done yet. We probably missed some typos. Just enjoy what's here and let us know if you have a question.

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INTRODUCTION

Do any of these sound familiar?

I've got a great idea for a book. Now what?

How do I create a fictional protagonist who readers will love and identify with?

I don't know when to stop writing, when to say my book is "done."

Maybe you've been writing for a while and you want to get to the next level:

I just finished a draft and I know the next step is editing. Ummm...how?

I want my manuscript to be polished enough to attract an agent.

I want to improve my feedback skills for myself and my writing group.

Maybe you've got a more existential problem in your book or your writing life:

I need help tapping into the universal—how do I address the “so what?” factor in my memoir?

How can I get helpful critique when my friends don't want to hurt my feelings?

I'm having trouble getting my ass in gear. My project has stalled. My work is unfocused.

This book will help you with those. Any of them. All of them. Plus, it will help you dispel that lingering doubt about whether you're really creating anything worthwhile. By the time you've gone through seven drafts, your manuscript will be in the best possible shape before querying, self-publishing, or hiring a professional editor. You'll know, one way or the other, if it's worth trying to publish your book.

That's a little ominous, right? If you're worried, that's a good sign. The Dunning-Kruger effect helpfully covers this: the more competent someone is at a particular skill, the more self-critical they're likely to be. The less someone knows about a skill, the better they think they are at doing it.

You're going to raise your writing skill level no matter where you're starting. Right now, you don't know what level of craft you're capable of—and that's a great place to start.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

(with apologies to Bob Dylan)

How many drafts must a writer draft

Before you call it a book?

How many times must you read the text

Before your editor looks?

*Yes, how many times should it be
revised*

To get a reader hooked?

The answer my friend is...seven.

As a freelance editor, I work with writers throughout their careers, from beginners with an idea to award-winning, full-time authors. I see many of the same challenges in everyone's essays, stories, memoirs and novels:

- Technical issues like wrongly formatted dialogue tags or overused words.
- Voice issues like stiff, unnatural narrative or characters who sound the same.
- Point-of-view issues like head-hopping or characters who see or understand things beyond their emotional range or physical ability.
- Structural issues like too many subplots, final

acts without enough set-up, and stories that start too many pages into the book.

As an editor, I can identify these issues for authors who want to revise their own work, or address them myself for authors who prefer to throw money at the problems. But most of these writing missteps can be found and reworked by the writers themselves before spending money on professional editing or using up a “please give me feedback on my manuscript” favor. This work is time-consuming and thinking-intensive, but it’s not a secret or a talent—it’s a set of skills anyone willing to go through seven drafts can acquire.

The Seven Drafts are organized from big-picture elements of story and structure to narrower areas of line-by-line writing craft. If you’re starting from a rough/first draft (or no draft at all!) go in order. Working on the big picture first helps keep story continuity through subsequent sentence-level tinkering—there’s no point in fixing the spelling in a scene you discover isn’t needed. If you’re already in a third or fourth draft, you may want to flip to the Self-Editing Checklist, which shows how you might group some of these tools.

If you’re at the “I can’t believe I even started this crazy project” stage, revive your enthusiasm by picking a smaller element from the Technical Draft, like dialogue tags or chapter endings. Work through those challenges to feel some progress and get back into the writing groove.

Whatever order you use, try to make it through a whole draft. One of the biggest challenges of writing a book is distraction. Committing to a series of steps and

persevering through boredom, frustration, and shiny new ideas (write them down and get back to the current book!) will help you finish your manuscript and feel good about your creation.

1) The Vomit Draft

Get it out get it out! It doesn't matter if all the words are spelled rite. Don't worry about complete sentences because. Sure, there's a plot hole big enough to drive a truck through, and in the second-to-last chapter you realize you really do have to put in Aunt Ermintrude. Just finish. If you hit a creativity wall, put in a placeholder like "NEED SCENE WITH MOM HERE SOMETHING HUMOROUS," or "SWORDFIGHT RAKA WINS," or write *about* what belongs there:

Write scene about that time they were in the kitchen and Patricia just knew they were going to fall in love because of the way Malik's fingers wrapped around the saltshaker.

Then let your manuscript rest for at least a week. Don't let impatience or your drive to finish cut this resting time short—fresh eyes help us see issues that our enthusiasm sped past.

2) The Story Draft

Summarize your story with "In a World" format (described in Chapter 2), with a clear problem, protagonist/hero,¹ action, obstacle, stakes and goal. If

¹ The protagonist is the character whose goal drives the plot. Usually that's one person, and it's the person who changes the most. In a memoir, that's you. We'll

you're missing any of those elements, go back to the Vomit Draft and pour forth more words.

During this draft, fill in placeholders and discover any missing events, random extra scenes (why does my hero get a haircut?) or places where the plot doesn't make sense. Raise the level of conflict in your novel. See if anyone cares about your memoir.

After the Story Draft, let your manuscript sit for another week.

3) The Character Draft

Does each character want specific things and work to get them? Are the protagonist's actions and reactions motivated and urgent? You may discover that a character needs more on-page time or doesn't belong at all.

In the Character Draft, make sure the bad guys have clear motivations that make sense to themselves and (eventually) the reader, even if they're a mystery to the protagonist. Characters are treated fairly and the reader judges their actions and speech rather than being told who the "good guys" are (this is especially important in memoir).

Point of view (POV) gets a careful edit. Physically, a four-year-old child can't see the top of the kitchen counter. Mentally, a character can guess at other people's thoughts but cannot omnisciently know them.²

use "protagonist" and "hero" interchangeably.

² If your premise involves telepathy or deep empathy, set the rules of what those powers allow and observe your own world's limitations.

Review the dialogue character by character. Make sure that each person sounds like themselves and that it's pretty clear who is speaking even without dialogue tags.

Examine your world-building. Is your setting clear in time and place? Is there a clear way of life, even if it's one the protagonist is defying or abandoning? Can the reader discover societal customs, history, technology and backstory from the action, without needing a lecture from the narrator? Do any elements feel anachronistic or out of place?

Revise; let sit. Waiting is key, so if you can't stand not writing for a week, draft an essay or a short story to clear your palate. If you write in multiple genres, work on a manuscript in another genre—pick a task that won't plunge you in so deeply you can't come back to this book.

4) The Technical Draft

Working chapter by chapter, ask:

Does each chapter start with a compelling action or image? Does each chapter end with both satisfaction and forward motion?

With each scene, have you gotten in as late as you can and still set the scene, and have you ended the scene as early as you can and still have it feel complete? Are the physical actions possible and in logical, realistic order? Are you showing more than telling, and choosing when telling is needed?

Check sentence structure. Have you carefully placed the strongest words? Do paragraphs end with strong sentences? Do chapters end with strong paragraphs?

Purely technical corrections happen at this stage: searching for -ly and removing unnecessary adverbs; eliminating most “was verb-ing” constructions; and removing or replacing overused words.

By now you know what you want to say—the Technical Draft refines how you say it.

Revise; let sit.

5) The Personal Copyedit

A nice, easy draft. This is a once-over for cleanliness.³ Run spellcheck with the grammar turned on. Print the manuscript and see what shows up when you’re turning a physical page. Read your book out loud or use a text-to-speech program to catch errors your eyes got used to.

The Personal Copyedit is the be-kind-to-your-reader draft. Yes, it’s still a work in progress, but you want reading your work to be a pleasant experience for the next step....

6) The Friend Read

Sometimes called a beta read. Exchange manuscripts with a writing buddy or call in favors from the people who keep offering to read your book. Arm your friends with specific questions: Did the story make sense? Where did your attention wander? Which character do you want to see more of? Try to get readers’ comments in writing, even if you’re taking notes while they talk. **Do not**

³ A professional copyedit will catch things authors miss. A Personal Copyedit is free—and will make you better at spotting future errors.

defend your book. Do not assume their lack of understanding means they missed something.⁴

Set the notes aside for a few days. When your feelings have cooled down, go back and see what rings true. Revise accordingly.

7) The Editor Read

This doesn't have to mean forking out cash. The Editor Read can be exchanging manuscripts with someone you know to be harsher or more technically demanding than the previous reader. Or this could be the first time you share your manuscript with your agent. And yes, it can mean hiring a professional editor or writing coach.

This draft is where it's worth paying to have just your first three chapters edited, then applying those changes throughout the rest of the book before getting any more full-manuscript reads. Chances are good that problems in the beginning are problems through the whole book.

Read your manuscript one more time before you send it out. Knowing that an Editor Read is imminent, you'll see more issues.



The Seven Drafts often take more than one revision each. You might repeat the Story Draft when a Character Draft

⁴ You asked for their opinion. You won't agree with everything. Listen respectfully, or they won't read for you again. More on this in "How to Get Useful Feedback."

uncovers a plot hole. A second Friend Read is useful after incorporating the first round of feedback. Some drafts take days, some take weeks or months. You might backtrack and revisit the Technical Draft after an on-paper Personal Copyedit.

Let your book sit for a week or more between drafts.⁵ At least once, print out your pages; edit the manuscript by hand on sloppy, satisfying paper; and *retype the whole thing*⁶ so you can feel the flow.

I've found this method to work for everything from essays to memoirs, short stories to novels. Drop me an email or DM and let me know how it goes for you. And if you've got a different method or a variation, please tell me about it.

WHO AM I...

...and why am I telling you all this? How does someone get to proclaim, "Do it this way!"

As The Unkind Editor,⁷ I've spent ten years editing for money, and longer still editing for friends and classmates. I've worked on books published by Big Five

⁵ "I have a life and it needs me" is also worth a break.

⁶ Every writer I have ever told to retype the whole thing has looked at me with horror. Every one of them has told me later, "Good grief, that's exactly what I needed to do."

I dare you.

⁷ Why "Unkind"? Because praise makes you feel good, but direct and specific feedback makes your work better.

publishers⁸ and small presses, self-published books and just-for-family-and-friends projects. I'm a published author myself (credits in the bio at the back of this book). As an editor, I'm thrilled to have contributed to some prestigious literary and commercial books. I'm prouder still of helping first-time authors go from the roughest of rough drafts to publication, while learning how to write a book.

I'm an editor by nature. As a seventh-grader writing bad middle-school poetry, I copied poems over and over by hand before inscribing final drafts in a hardback journal.⁹ For each draft I asked, "Does every word belong?" The poems got shorter, and I learned to write with economy, to make every word the right word in the right place.

In college, I studied theatre and earned an MFA in playwriting. Ten years as an actor/director and ten more as a circus and street performer taught me how fast audiences get bored—how only genuine, meaningful connection keeps their attention. Writing for live theatre showed me the challenges every editor must watch for and helped me develop skills every writer needs.

Playwrights write better dialogue. The audience doesn't hear adverbs written in the stage directions and the writer doesn't dictate how actors say their lines. If you want "angrily" or "joyfully," the words out of actors' mouths must take them there.

⁸ The "Big Five" traditional publishers are (as of 2021): Penguin/Random House, Hachette Book Group, Harper Collins, Simon & Schuster, and Macmillan.

⁹ With a silver unicorn on the cover, of course.

Scripts must show instead of telling. Onstage narration and voiceovers are rare. Information the audience needs must be in the scene. World-building happens as characters interact with their surroundings and embody their culture. Backstory (“exposition”) is death on stage. When one character tells another something they both already know, you can *feel* the audience start rustling.

The writing is actively questioned. Yes, we receive feedback in writing groups and workshops, but it’s a whole new level of pain/wonder to see your characters get up and act out the scene. This shows immediately which parts work on stage and which only make sense in your head.

Rehearsals mean fast revision. Maybe you hated the feedback. But there’s another rehearsal tomorrow night and unless you show up with new pages that solve the problem, the same actor will give the same exasperated look and sigh, “I still don’t know why my character is in this scene.”

But most of all...

Playwriting is about structure. Most plays have clear dramatic arcs. The protagonist has a problem or lives in an untenable situation. She takes actions toward a specific goal. She must change in order to reach the goal. She has specific internal and external obstacles. The audience knows if the protagonist has succeeded or failed. Every character has an arc, and there’s a person playing that character who is paying attention to whether it makes sense.

Spending so much time in dark rooms hearing people question my (and other playwrights’) work, watching

them act out my words, seeing audiences fidget when they're bored or confused, and focusing intensely on structure has given me specific tools and techniques for writing and editing. They're precise. They're detailed. And they are the foundation of all my work.

ABOUT EDITING

When I'm reading a good book, the story plays like a movie in my head. If a book drags or is poorly written, I become conscious of individual words, aware of sentences and paragraphs. Editing your manuscript streamlines the reader's experience so they can read immersively instead of noticing words on the page. Unpolished writing yanks the reader out of the world of the book. They are not moving forward in the story. They're seeing typos or noticing what they "should" be feeling. Or they're just plain confused.

If you wish to publish, either independently or through a traditional publisher, editing marks your work as *finished*. Your book is sharply dressed and well-groomed, ready to make a good impression and engage the reader. Sloppy books—with incorrectly formatted dialogue or story continuity issues or a hero whose quest just doesn't pay off—insult the reader. They say, "The author didn't care enough to make me great." They say, "I'm not ready...but I took your time and money anyway."

Your work deserves better than that.

When should you edit your manuscript?

Write your first draft without judgment. Fixing and cleaning a whole first draft is much easier than staring at the empty page silently mocking you, thinking, *Mom was right, I should have gotten a real job.*

After the story is fully on the page, go back and edit. Start with the big picture: story and structure. Move through character and dialogue. Refine the voice. Accentuate the themes. Then get picky about punctuation and spelling. Clean as much as you can before asking outside readers to spot the things you missed.

Why is it hard to edit your own work?

Because you already know what you want to say. The story, the characters, their voices, the personal truth of what happened (whether real or fictitious), *you were there*. Your brain naturally fills in gaps between the story you want to tell and what's actually on the page. You have turns of phrase, regionalisms, slang, and cultural knowledge about the world you're building, or the one you lived in.

The reader does not have that background. They need a careful mix of hand-holding, prodding, education, mystery, and maddening deception. You must make the reader the detective who turns every page thinking, *I must find out what happened*, giving them just enough information to sustain that desire without satisfying them prematurely. So to speak.

But you can edit your own words with the reader's experience in mind. You can sidestep your own knowledge and focus on improving what's actually on the

page. Each time you thoroughly overhaul a manuscript your craft will increase, and your next draft (and your next book!) will be better written and a little easier to finish. If you commission a professional edit, it will cover deeper issues and/or cost less, because manuscripts in better shape are less time-consuming to edit. When you've gotten your story as tight as you can, the editor can focus on more subtle elements.

Don't despair if you examine your manuscript and discover a great many issues you'd like to fix. Truly bad books are fast to edit because there's only so good they can get. When your book has potential, it takes more time. Why stop at "a quick proofread" when you could revise heavily and make your work really amazing?

But isn't editing just a bunch of stupid "rules" like in English class? Isn't creativity all about breaking the rules?

Nope, and yes but nope.

Editing isn't about getting an A from your teacher—it's about ushering the reader into a world where they can imagine with abandon, knowing they're in competent hands. The rules of writing¹⁰ make the words themselves invisible. Think about walking down a well-maintained sidewalk in a beautiful, pedestrian-friendly area, earbuds in, or having a conversation. You can look around, listen, and enjoy the journey. Smooth writing is that sidewalk, taking you someplace cool and exciting. Rough writing is like crossing the street to avoid construction, every half-

¹⁰ Yes, yes, James Joyce, Cormac McCarthy, William Faulkner, Jane Austen, etc. If you're that good, put this book down immediately and go finish your own.

block, against the light. You'll still get there, but the journey's not fun.

Sometimes the writing is an obstacle course on purpose, but even then, consistency allows the reader to feel the “rules” of that particular book. Going against the reader’s cultural expectations about the way stories work, and the ingrained rules of language, requires knowing the craft of writing and making deliberate choices. As in fashion, breaking “rules” through ignorance is not useful. Lady Gaga rocked that meat dress, and Björk made an amazing powder-puff swan. I, personally, could not pull off either of those looks. Nor do I write hundred-word sentences like James Joyce, move fluidly through points of view like Hilary Mantel or telescope time like Tayari Jones. That doesn’t mean you can’t—as long as you do it beautifully.

Editing is not bending your words to a generic form. Editing is wedding your passion, creativity, and imagination to technical tools so the reader connects deeply, personally, and viscerally with your story.

This book will stock your toolbox.

Every toolbox has a hammer and a screwdriver. You don’t have to use them, and they won’t be the right device every time, but you don’t want a pipe wrench to be your only tool. Writers spend their lives adding techniques and skills to their toolbox. Not every technique is right for every book. You’ll have tools you prefer—maybe you’re a structure person, or a language person, or a myth-masking person. But the more tools you know, the easier writing gets, and the more options you have when a chunk of words isn’t responding to your usual process.