

The Nuts and Bolts of Editing Fiction

Amy J. Schneider ~ Featherschneider Editorial Services

www.featherschneider.com

The copyeditor's focus

- ▶ **Spelling, grammar, punctuation: sure! But also...**
 - ▶ Suspension of disbelief
 - ▶ Internal consistency
 - ▶ Author's voice
 - ▶ Reader's enjoyment



Getting Started

an overview

First pass: get the bonbons . . .

- ▶ Just read it!
- ▶ No style decisions
- ▶ Fix absolute errors only
- ▶ Make mental notes; flags in ms.
- ▶ If no chapter numbers, add them



Second pass: the Big Edit

- ▶ Main word-by-word copyedit pass
- ▶ Save new copy after each chapter
- ▶ Compile style sheet(s) as you go
 - ▶ General
 - ▶ Characters
 - ▶ Locations
 - ▶ Timeline/plot



Third pass: tidying up

- ▶ Deflagging passes
- ▶ Final spelling/consistency check
- ▶ Save final file
- ▶ Clean up and format style sheet(s)



File Management

or, staying organized

Managing the style sheet(s)

- ▶ Four categories; I keep separate docs (YMMV)
 - ▶ 1 general style sheet.doc
 - ▶ 2 characters.doc
 - ▶ 3 places.doc
 - ▶ 4 timeline.doc
- ▶ Incorporate author notes
- ▶ Previous style sheet?



Series style sheet(s)

- ▶ Update/add to previous style sheet(s)
- ▶ Identify info from previous books
- ▶ Compare/update as you go
 - ▶ Amazon “Look Inside”
 - ▶ Previous facts cannot be altered!
- ▶ Note “(series style)”/“(au pref)”



Style Sheets

or, the nuts and bolts

General style sheet: Numbers

- ▶ Time:
six forty-five, 9:00 p.m., oh five hundred
- ▶ Height:
five foot three, six-six
- ▶ Dates:
August 4 (narrative), but **August fourth** (dialogue)
- ▶ Room numbers:
room 1156, treatment room one
- ▶ Numbers in dialogue:
Call 911!, back in 1865
- ▶ Addresses/street numbers:
12 Royal Ave., No. 4 Primrose Lane, Forty-fifth Street



General style sheet: Punctuation

- ▶ Ellipses:

“But . . . ,” she said.

- ▶ Color terms:

a sea[-]green dress, her dark blue eyes

- ▶ Commas around *too/either/anyway*:

I love you, too; me, either

- ▶ Exclamations:

Oh[,] God! / Oh[,] no!

But **Oh, stop it! / Oh, Cliff, what will we do?**

- ▶ Possessives of names ending in s

(especially plurals: **the Sanderses' house**)



General style sheet: Typography

- ▶ Generally, italic for “not real” exchanges: internal thought, remembered dialogue, telepathic communication:

Fluffy meowed as if to say, Feed me!

- ▶ Words as words:

the word bumfuzzled

- ▶ Words as sounds:

the clank-clunk of his walker

- ▶ Letters as letters:

the envelope marked with a B

- ▶ Letters as shapes:

the buildings formed a U shape



General style sheet: Typography (cont.)

- ▶ Signs, handwriting, text messages, e-mails, inscriptions, clothing:

a NO SMOKING sign

My phone vibrated. *r u ok? call me*

I began reading the letter. *Dear Tyler, she wrote...*

- ▶ Terms of address:

in place of a name: **Detective, Officer, Your Ladyship**

generic: **pumpkin, sweetheart, my lord**

- ▶ Epithets:

Miss High-and-Mighty, Cowboy Guy



General style sheet: Miscellaneous

- ▶ Publication names, organization names, other proper nouns that don't fit elsewhere

Witch Watch (blog)

Channel Nine (TV station)

Clan Willow; the Willow clan

- ▶ Wines, magic spells, events, weapons

Fall Folk Art Festival (October)

- ▶ Group by category



General style sheet: Word list

- ▶ Unusual plurals/spellings/capitalizations:
the Force, Earth Mother, Lust-love
- ▶ Variant word forms:
dreamed/dreamt, leaped/leapt, toward
- ▶ Invented words and terms:
Jedi (sing/pl), a Jedi knight; anima-spark
- ▶ Dialogue forms: dialect/accents, slang, vulgar words
don'tcha, a'course, idjit, if'n, dammit/damn it
- ▶ Sounds
hmm, uh-uh/uh-huh, shh, oohs and aahs, mmphf



Character style sheet

- ▶ Avoid alphabetical lists!
- ▶ Group by affiliation
- ▶ Animals are characters too

“Josie”: liver-and-white springer spaniel

- ▶ Inanimate objects, deities, sentient objects
- ▶ Unnamed characters

barman: graying hair, mustache



Character style sheet (cont.)

- ▶ Physical descriptions

blue eyes, pointed ears, 6 feet tall

- ▶ Right/left (scars, injuries, tattoos, etc.)

shot in left thigh; missing his right eye

- ▶ Ages/birthdays

just turned 24; her brother is 2 years older

- ▶ Relationships

**was married twice; has a brother and a sister
mother died when she was a year old**



Character style sheet (cont.)

- ▶ Education, employment

PhD from Harvard; has been a CPA for 8 years

- ▶ Abilities, personal history, activities, habits

empath; has never left the country

avid golfer; favorite drink is rum and Coke

- ▶ Phone numbers, e-mail and postal addresses, etc.

- ▶ Negative attributes

can't swim, hates cigarette smoke, afraid of dogs



Character style sheet (cont.)

- ▶ What if you find a contradiction?
 - ▶ **Bryan** 8 times, **Brian** 3 times
 - ▶ **Luna grew up with a brother in the previous book in the series, but in this book she was an only child**
- ▶ Suggest fixes, if possible



Character style sheet (cont.)

▶ SAMPLE ENTRY

Joseph (Joe) Longworth

age 34; curly brown hair; freckles; blue eyes, thin lips; wire-rimmed glasses

missing left arm below the elbow

has one older brother

grew up on an island in the South Pacific

was stabbed in the upper right thigh

has known Elsa since she was a toddler



Places style sheet

- ▶ Avoid alphabetizing (again)
- ▶ Group by relation/location
- ▶ Check against reality
- ▶ How much detail should you record?



Places style sheet: General

- ▶ Cardinal directions:

5 miles south of the border

the morning sun streamed through the window

- ▶ Proper nouns:

the Waldorf Building, the village of Snodsbury

- ▶ Right/left:

there's a bathroom on the right

- ▶ Business hours, regular events:

the gift shop is closed on Mondays

soccer practice every Wednesday at 6 pm



Places style sheet: Interiors

- ▶ Décor:

 - a green velvet sofa under the window**

- ▶ Structure:

 - creaky wooden floors; an old screen door**

- ▶ Number of floors/locations of rooms:

 - Jack's bedroom on the 3rd floor**
(up 2 flights of stairs)

- ▶ Watch out for British usage!

 - ground floor, then first floor**



Places style sheet: Exteriors

- ▶ Architecture:

- 2-story house; a wraparound porch with 3 steps**

- ▶ Landscaping:

- 5 large oak trees**

- ▶ Navigation:

- on the corner of Park and 11th**

- they turned right onto Main Street**

- ▶ Geography:

- the mountains to the south; a river flowing west**

- ▶ Distances:

- a 10-minute walk, 50 miles to the airport**



Places style sheet (cont.)

► SAMPLE ENTRY:

Reynaud's studio

in Crystal Falls; on a dead-end street; converted warehouse
main workroom is huge, roughly twice as long as it is wide
south end: windows face the woods
east end: storage rooms



Timeline style sheet

- ▶ My pref: calendar page
- ▶ Historical events, actual dates
- ▶ Slack time
- ▶ Breaks in the action
- ▶ Parallel timelines, flashbacks



Timeline style sheet (cont.)

- ▶ Any mention of time, fixed or relative:
**midmorning; 3 weeks later; at sunset
every Friday; the week of Martinmas**
- ▶ Weather, moon phases, seasons:
starting to rain; full moon; crisp fall air
- ▶ School days, workdays:
**“No video games on a school night!”
the bustle of morning commuters**



Timeline style sheet (cont.)

- ▶ Critical plot events:

“The auction is a week from Friday!”

- ▶ Character ages/birthdays, whether relative or absolute (can be flexible here, but query large discrepancies):

I had just turned twenty-seven (what time of year?)

Cole was born last fall

- ▶ Watch for “missing” holidays and big events, if their absence is remarkable (depends on genre)



Timeline style sheet (cont.)

▶ SAMPLE ENTRY:

MONDAY

(Ch. 1) story begins; January

(2) Alison flies back to NYC

(2) later that evening

(2) full moon



The finer points

a balancing act

The fine line

- ▶ Creative license vs. suspension of disbelief:
 - ▶ “Don’t mess with Art! Author reigns supreme!”
 - ▶ *but*
 - ▶ Let the author know about potential problems
- ▶ Advocate for the reader too



Formal vs. informal structure

- ▶ Uneducated characters using \$5 words
 - “I thought she sounded noncommittal”**
 - “George’s mercurial behavior unsettled him”**
- ▶ Authors make mistakes that characters would not **educated character using the wrong word**
- ▶ Breaking the rules
- ▶ Stay true to character/voice; don’t overcorrect!



Dialogue

- ▶ Dialogue tags: verbs of saying
she screamed, he muttered, I wheezed: YES
I grimaced, she shuddered, he encouraged: NO
- ▶ Punctuation of tags
“I never said that,” she said.
“I never said that.” She frowned.
“I don’t understand,” she said, and looked away.
- ▶ Speech interrupted with action/expressions
“Hey”—he looked into her eyes—“I never wanted to hurt you.”



Adult themes

- ▶ Cuss/sexual words: **ALWAYS** on the style sheet
- ▶ Beware the –ass words:
smartass, badass, big-ass, lazy-ass
- ▶ BuzzFeed Style Guide, Google Ngrams
- ▶ Don't let Romeo take his pants off twice!
- ▶ It's OK to turn down genres that disturb you



When fact and fiction collide

- ▶ “I canna break the laws of physics, Cap’n!”
 - ▶ **looking out the window at night in a brightly lit kitchen**
- ▶ Anachronisms of both fact and language:
 - ▶ **a pro football game in June**
 - ▶ **story set in late 1800s, character uses word dated 1915 in MWW**
- ▶ Deliberate obfuscation:
 - ▶ **non-intersecting streets, obscured locations**
 - ▶ **query e-mails/phone numbers/etc.**
- ▶ Picture the action. Could it happen?



American vs. British style

- ▶ Punctuation: usually Americanized
- ▶ Spelling: usually Americanized, but sometimes retained to preserve a certain flavour
- ▶ British terms unfamiliar to Americans: is it clear in context?



Frequent fliers: language bloopers

- ▶ Pet phrases (query)

he shoved his hands in his pockets; he tailed off

- ▶ Alliteration/rhyme/echo (query)

squelching through a slough of snow and sludge

- ▶ Redundant body parts (can usually delete):

nodded his head, shrugged his shoulders

blinked/squinted his eyes

glancing up at him from under her eyelids

- ▶ Dangers/mixed metaphors:

Let's bury the past and begin with a clean slate.



Frequent fliers: action bloopers

- ▶ Chekhov's gun
- ▶ Similarly, “drop-in” characters
- ▶ Remembered inscriptions/speech: Do versions match?
- ▶ Missing scene breaks (space breaks for POV change)
- ▶ **“As you know, Bob, ...”**



Frequent fliers: trademarks

- ▶ Publishers generally want to avoid legal issues
- ▶ Commonly encountered:

Styrofoam, Listserv, Realtor

Laundromat, Dumpster

Band-Aid, Kleenex, Coke



Queries: putting on the kid gloves

- ▶ Tact is your friend!
- ▶ Suggest fixes when possible
 - ▶ **“Perhaps change this word to _____?”**
 - ▶ **“Did you perhaps mean _____? (Either is correct; just checking.)”**
 - ▶ **“But in Ch. 2, _____. Is this a contradiction? Please clarify.”**
 - ▶ **“Is [unusual word choice] intentional?”**
 - ▶ **“Readers may be confused by this, because _____.”**



Final thoughts . . .

- ▶ Be flexible
 - ▶ Use your Spidey-sense
 - ▶ Respect the author
 - ▶ Serve the readers
 - ▶ Have fun!
-
- ▶ Questions? amy@featherschneider.com
 - ▶ Social media links: www.featherschneider.com

