

Edit as You Write, the Right Way: 5 Steps

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<http://greatstorybook.com/edit-write-right-way-5-steps/>

This entry is part 5 of 5 in the series [Editing Refined](#)

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I've been asked a few times about this: "What do you think of the whole, 'Don't edit as you write' thing?" This is about why I feel very strongly that writers should edit - but also the steps to do it without going nuts. I'm going to share with you how you can edit as you go, so your story will be cohesive by the time you reach the last page.

Perhaps one of the worst bits of writing advice ever given is also one of the most commonly spread: "Don't edit as you write. Just finish your first draft."

Well, don't believe it. Here's what to do instead, step-by-step.

The intention of the "don't edit as you write" is a good one: just write. Finish your manuscript. Many writers have a hard time finishing what they started, and so what they might need most is *completion*.

If what you need most as a writer is to actually complete a manuscript, then do that. Throw words onto pages until you have the proper word count. Just don't expect it to be anything salvageable - because it might not be.

The biggest problem with NOT editing as you go

If you burrow through your first draft, working from page 1 to The End, your chances of having a story that can ever be edited to a point where it's ready to publish aren't that good.

The organizers of NaNoWriMo argue the exact opposite. But the National Novel Writing Month is just that: it's a short-term exercise to finish a novel-length manuscript in 30 days. That doesn't mean you'll have a real story at the end of 30 days.

It doesn't even mean you'll have a manuscript that's good enough to edit. What it does mean is that you'll likely have a manuscript that needs a complete rewrite.

So the question you should ask yourself first is this: do I want to write 50,000 words or do I want to write a novel? If you need a sense of completion and you just want to see if you can physically do it before you die, like a bucket list item – then do the NaNoWriMo. But if you want to be a writer, just don't.

Not even Stephen King, one of the most prolific authors, writes a novel per month. (While some of his novels are quite long, not all are. **Carrie** is about 63,000 words). Remember too: this is what King does full time. It is his day job.

So don't beat yourself up if you need a year to write your first novel.

Don't write from start to finish

As a writing teacher, I've seen over and over that the process of writing a story isn't so clear cut, isn't so A-to-Z, and that *if you do not edit as you go, your story will unravel completely.*

So write scenes as you envision them most strongly and vividly. If you know exactly what you want in the [inciting incident](#), then write that scene.

There's nothing wrong with writing your manuscript out of sequence. In fact, I recommend it. [Just be sure you've written an outline first.](#)

Why you should edit as you go

Scene to scene, it's really important that your style, your narration, your character details – that all the things you put into your story – come together, work together.

If into page 30 you realize that your narrative voice is wrong, then you should definitely go back and edit the first 30 pages.

Don't just push forward and write the whole manuscript, switching around your narrative voice – or worse, staying in the voice you originally chose, determining to edit it later. You're just creating more work for yourself.

It's much easier to edit the first 30 pages, fix what you feel strongly should be fixed – and then see if you're right. You won't really know whether your narrative voice should actually be changed or not *until*

you try it. So try it.

You could edit perhaps 10 pages of what you've written so far. Test it out and see what happens. Does the story work better? If it does, then you can edit the rest - and then keep moving forward with your new narrative concept.

The EDIT-AS-YOU-GO 5 Steps

Step One

Write any 10-20 pages of your manuscript – any pages at any point in your story. They can be at the beginning but don't have to be.

(I like to start at the end of my story. That way, I know [my story end will be really strong.](#))

But you should write what *you* want to write first.

Step Two

Read your pages critically. Do they work? Do they flow? If not, *find out* what you could do to make the story stronger. **There are 5 very specific aspects of writing you should be looking at in this stage:**

1. physicality,
2. action,
3. reaction,
4. inner thoughts and
5. speech.

These are what you need to build strong characterization. ([For details on these 5 key points, go HERE.](#))

Step Three

Make your edits.

Step Four

Go back and re-read what you've now edited. How is it now? If it still doesn't quite work, then **you need to look at another key aspect of your writing: narrative voice.**

Sometimes it's Bigger Decisions that are preventing your story from really shining. Any weaknesses in your **character profile** would have been revealed in the first editing step, so you've already worked that out by this point. ([For details on creating great characters, start HERE.](#))

If your story still isn't jiving, then the problem is most likely a matter of **writing style**, and that's established through your narrative voice. ([For details on narration, start HERE.](#))

Step Five

Make your edits.

At this point, *after just 2 rounds of careful and intentional editing*, you'll fully understand where you are in the story creation process. You'll also be ready to write the rest of your manuscript *just as intentionally*. Not by accident, not with luck.

Now you can really write, and finish your manuscript.

More Problems

That isn't to say that you won't ever run into problems with your manuscript ever again. But the problems you'll face will be much easier for you to tackle.

Why? Because anything after this point will be a cinch. You'll be so well equipped to handle other decisions you need to make as a writer, you'll be able to simply make them. It won't take you days or weeks to work through those problems – it will take you hours, or maybe just minutes.

If you do have hiccups in your writing after these steps have been taken, they'll most likely stem from Plot. ([For details on building plot, start HERE.](#))

What Works

You should always do whatever works for you. If you honestly feel your best work is done without editing, then do that. But it's my experience that this isn't likely.

What's much more likely is that when you're struggling through a story draft, you know instinctively that it isn't working; you're sensing that it's getting out of control and that you might not be able to bring it around.

The only thing to do is to stop writing, start editing. But don't look for spelling errors or any of the technical aspects of writing that we tend to associate with the process of editing. There are various types of editing, steps you should do at certain points in your writing.

(For a run-down on the different [types of editors, and what they do when, go HERE](#). For details on [how to give and get good feedback on a manuscript, go HERE](#).)

Go through the 5 editing steps I've outlined here for you. I promise that if you do, you'll feel much more in control of your writing process. In the end, you'll have a manuscript that isn't just finished. You'll have a real story.

What are you working on right now? If you're stuck somewhere, just write below, let me know - or, as ever, send me an email. You know I love getting those.

Keep creating, no matter what.

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