



Ten Steps to Editing Your Memoir

Jo Parfitt



1

Accept that you may need to **go through your draft many times** before it is ready. Ten, twenty times or more.

2

Less is more. Too much detail can make the story drag. Remember, it does not have to be included 'just because it happened'. Content only stays if it has a purpose. It shows something. You are writing in scenes, yes? So you can skip over things that happened that are a bit dull without worrying.

3

Keep your style sheet constantly updated and check you are consistent with things such as:

- a. UK or US spelling and punctuation (yes, they are different. Consider *practice* is a verb and a noun in US spelling but *practice* is the noun and *practise* the verb in UK, for example).
- b. Ensure your subheadings have not only the same layout and font, bold, italic and capitalisation but they use the same leading too (that is the space between the lines).
- c. It's easy to write, say, *wellbeing*, *well-being* and *well being* in your text and not realise you are doing it three different ways. Pick one and stick to it.
- d. Are you writing *Dr* and *Mr* and *USA* and *ie* without 'dots' or with? *Dr. Mr. U.S.A.* and *i.e.*
- e. Times can be a total minefield. Had you realised you can put them several different ways? Again, be consistent.
 - i. 7am
 - ii. 7 am
 - iii. 7 AM
 - iv. 07:00 AM
 - v. Seven o'clock
- f. Dots and dashes. Had you realised there are three sorts of dashes and they need to be consistently the same length and have the same spacing either side:
 - i. Hyphen -
 - ii. En dash –
 - iii. Em dash —

4

Consistency is king. So, not only must you set and stick to a style sheet but you must also be sure you always make things match that need to. So, your chapters all need to start and end the same way, with the same kind of content. If you usually start with a centred title and a quote, ensure ALL chapters do so. If you usually end with a summary of bulleted items, ensure all chapters do so.

5

Layout is important. Chapters always start on a new page, so add a fixed page break rather than press Enter several times. Use the Tab key to tab in the text rather than press the space bar five times. Pages need to look pretty and uniform.

6

Your writing voice is incredibly important. Write your book in consistently the same voice and polish it to make it absolutely shine. 'A memoir hangs 100% on voice,' writes memoirist Mary Karr (see *The Art of Memoir*).

7

Check your punctuation. Only one space after a full stop. Ensure your ellipses are all the same (dot dot dot ...). Did you realise that you only ever have three and never more?

8

Avoid libel. They say all memoirs are fiction because the stories are from your point of view only. Always check you say nothing that will offend someone who is still alive, and if you think this may happen, either disguise them with new traits and name or get their permission.

9

Get ready for read-throughs. In Step 1 I said you would need several edits. Well, I think it's easier to go through the manuscript focusing on a different aspect each time. It's really hard to spot everything at once. I suggest you focus on at least the following, one at a time:

- a. Voice
- b. Punctuation
- c. Spelling
- d. Layout
- e. Characters. Are they all strong enough? Can the reader imagine them?
- f. Setting. Can the reader picture the scenes in their mind's eye?
- g. Cut repeats. Avoid using the same word twice or more in the same sentence or in consecutive sentences. Vary your vocabulary.
- h. Cut the cliches.
- i. Cut the material that has no point.
- j. Check for consistency. Does every chapter follow the same pattern?

10

Get feedback. Feedback is crucial and the best memoirists always obtain second opinions. Here is a list of the different kinds of editors you might need:

- a. Content or Developmental Editor – to help you with important aspects such as plot, pace, characters, moving or cutting scenes, consistency of themes and so on.
- b. Line Editor – advising on or rewriting lumpy or weak sentences and helping you polish the text, ensuring it is clear, idiomatic and has flow.
- c. Proofreader – checking work against the style sheet and ensuring consistency of content and layout.
- d. Your friends. Ask your friends by all means but be aware they may be neither honest nor discerning. All feedback should be taken with a pinch of salt. This is your book!

Summertime Publishing | Springtime Books