

IndieAuthor Guide To Editing

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1. INTRODUCTION

Under the general heading of “Editing,” there are actually two types: ‘copyediting’, and just plain old ‘editing’. Copyediting concerns itself with the nuts and bolts of correct language: grammar, spelling, punctuation and the like. Editing, in the more general sense, is about flow, readability, and showing stylistic choices in their best light.

Consider an example in which three sentences in a row begin with the phrase, “He was all alone”. Because there’s nothing grammatically wrong with the three sentences, a copyeditor would sign off on them. As to the other editor, his response depends on whether the three appear to reflect a purposeful, stylistic choice on the part of the author, or seem merely to be an oversight on the author’s part. In the following passage, the usage seems purposeful:

He was all alone, he sensed it. He was all alone, he felt it. He was all alone, he knew it.

Clearly, the author intended to repeat the opening phrase for effect, intending a certain rhythm. Now look at this passage:

He was all alone, so now it would be up to him to complete the mission. He was all alone, Harold and Jessica wouldn’t be there to show him the way anymore. He was all alone, and the next week was looking like it would be a lot harder than he first imagined.

In this case, it doesn’t seem as if the repetitive usage of the phrase was a purposeful stylistic choice, and even if it was, it’s not effective. An editor would likely suggest these changes:

He was all alone, so now it would be up to him to complete the mission. Harold and Jessica wouldn’t be there to show him the way anymore. The next week was looking like it would be a lot harder than he first imagined.

You can see that deleting the second and third usages of the phrase actually punches up the prose considerably. Even so, notice that I said the editor would *suggest* deleting the phrases. When copyeditors and editors mark up your manuscript, they are *suggesting* changes, not actually *making* changes.

While grammar, spelling and punctuation rules are fairly constant, sometimes authors make the stylistic choice to go with usage that's technically incorrect but works for the sentence or passage in question. The word "library" may be purposely misspelled as "liberry" to convey a character's mispronunciation of the word. In the second "he was all alone" passage, even though the suggested edits seem to improve the flow of the prose, because it's a matter of taste and opinion the editor will leave it up to the author to decide.

Likewise, treat the contents of this Guide as just that: a *guide*. In the end it will be up to you, the author, to decide what's right for your book.

2. DIY COPYEDITING

You can probably catch 80 – 90% of your spelling and grammar errors with the proper use of the tools and techniques in this section, but you can't expect to do the job as completely or thoroughly as a professional copyeditor. Even so, an 80 – 90% copyedited draft probably does not require the services of a professional copyeditor. Moreover, hiring a copyeditor after most of the work is done doesn't make financial sense because they charge by the page or hour, regardless of error count.

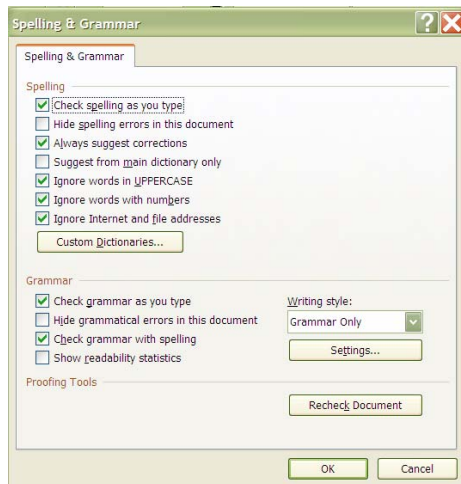
2.1. DIY COPYEDITING: TOOLS TO USE

If you're using MS Word™ 2003, or any competing word processor from that year or later, you should be able to manage most of your copyediting by yourself, using your word processor's built-in copyediting tools.

And if you're not using such a word processor, you can buy one for the same or less than what you'd typically pay a professional copyeditor to do the job for you. Therefore, this section assumes you're using a word processor with built-in copyediting tools.

The tools are very powerful, but they use a lot of system resources and memory. The larger your file is, the more resources and memory are required. For that reason, you will want to save each chapter of your manuscript in a separate file as you work, then combine them into a single file when you're confident you're finished with copyediting.

In MS Word™ 2003 you want to access Tools > Spelling and Grammar > Options.



The location for this tool varies with the version of MS Word™ and with different word processors. If you don't know how to access it in your program, consult your program's Help files and search on "Spelling and Grammar," or alternatively, search for each item separately: "spelling" and "grammar". In the screen shot above, the most commonly-used options are selected.

"Check spelling as you type" means the program will check your spelling on the fly, as you type, and immediately provide visual or auditory feedback to let you know when it detects a misspelled word.

"Always suggest corrections" means that when you run a spell check and/or grammar check, the program will suggest corrections for any items it has found to be misspelled or grammatically incorrect.

"Suggest from main dictionary only" means spelling will be checked only against the main dictionary, not any custom or user-populated dictionary files. The dictionary is discussed further below.

Leave "Hide spelling errors in this document" unselected, to display spelling errors.

"Ignore words in UPPERCASE" ensures acronyms will be ignored by the spellchecker.

"Ignore words with numbers" makes the spell checker ignore special words you may have made up as part of the world of your story, i.e., a nightclub called "Area61".

"Ignore internet and file addresses" is self-explanatory.

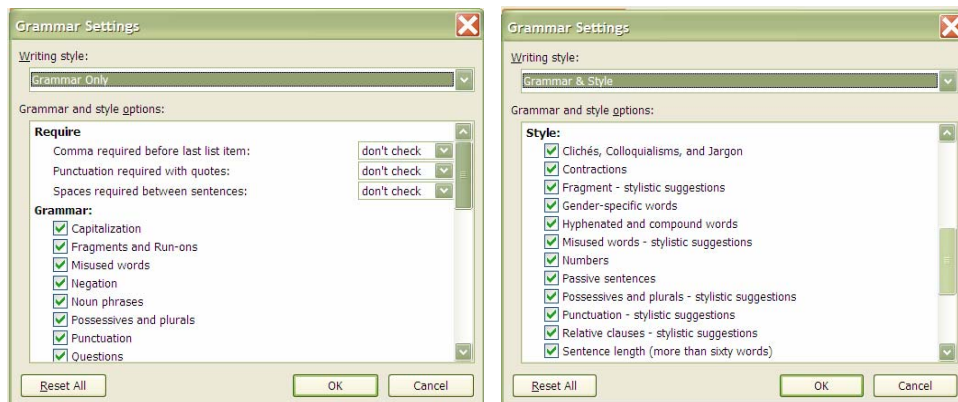
IndieAuthor Guide to Editing

In the Grammar section, “Check grammar as you type” and “Hide grammatical errors in this document” work the same as for spelling.

If “Check grammar with spelling” is selected, when you run a spell check your program will also check your grammar.

“Display readability statistics” is an option to display the calculated reading level of the writing after the spell check and grammar check are complete. This is a useful tool for authors who are writing books aimed at a specific reader grade level.

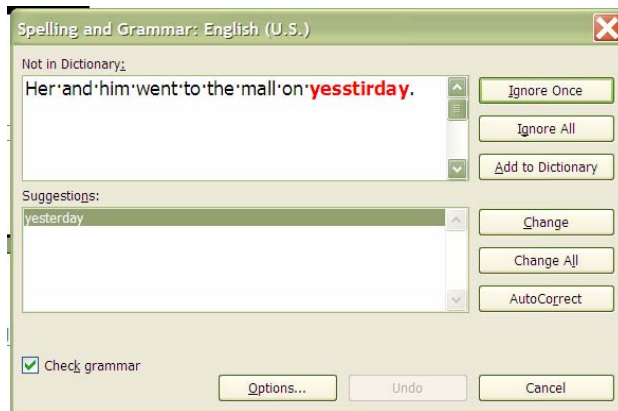
Under “Writing Style” you can select “Grammar only” or “Grammar and style”, and then click the “Settings” button to specify what types of things you want corrected:



Now let’s look at how these tools work. As you type, the program highlights the errors you’ve selected under “Options” and “Settings.” Look at the screen shot below:

Her and him went to the mall on yesstirday. ¶

The red, squiggly underlining means the word processor has detected a misspelling. The green, squiggly underlining means the world processor has detected a grammar error. When I select the text and run a spelling/grammar check, here’s what I see:

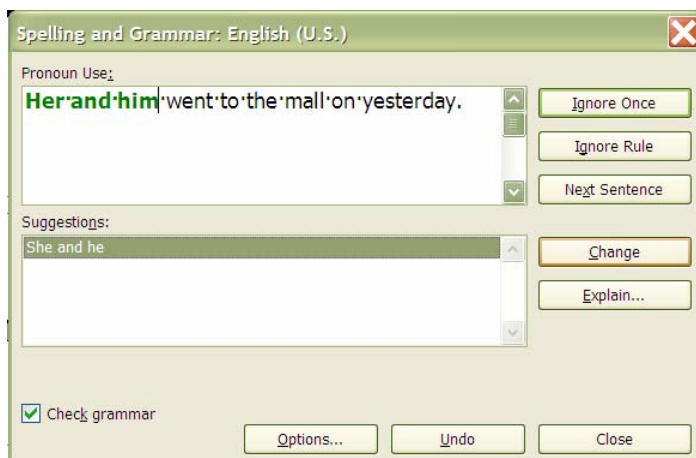


First, the spell checker will go through each misspelled word one at a time and suggest corrections.

I won't go into detail about how spell checkers work since their specific use varies from program to program and I assume anyone reading this already knows how to use them, but I do want to highlight the "Add to Dictionary" button. Your word processor may allow access to the dictionary elsewhere; if you don't know where it is, go to your program's Help files and search on "dictionary".

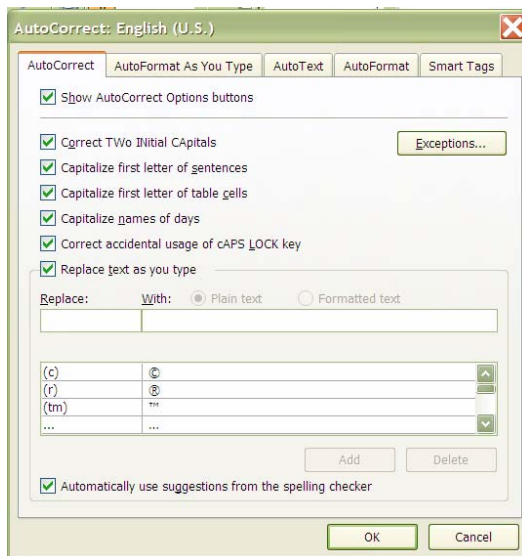
Use the "Add to Dictionary" function to add any proper names and made-up words to the program's dictionary so it will ignore them in future spell checks. Writers of fantasy, science fiction and possibly literary fiction will find this feature to be very useful. You can also choose to "Ignore" specific instances of misspelling.

When all misspellings have been reviewed, the grammar check shows its suggestions:



Note that while you can calibrate the grammar checker's rules and sensitivity with the "Settings" checkboxes, because the English language is so complex the grammar checker will never catch every single mistake. In this case, it caught the incorrect pronoun usage but did not indicate that "on yesterday" is also incorrect.

Most modern word processors have an autocorrect feature, which automatically corrects the most common typographical errors on the fly (i.e., changing "teh" to "the"). In MS Word™ 2003, autocorrect is accessed via Tools > AutoCorrect Options. Here, you can specify the things you want the program to correct on the fly, and how you want them corrected.



As you go through the next phase, regular editing, you can ask your readers to mark up any errors they find as they read, confident in the knowledge there shouldn't be so many grammatical errors as to be burdensome or interfere with the read overall.

2.2. DIY COPYEDITING: TECHNIQUES TO USE

Your manuscript should now be pretty clean in terms of grammar and usage, but there are still some problems you most likely won't have picked up on yet. This is where you hit the finer points.

2.2.1. OVERUSED WORDS AND PHRASES

Use your word processor's search function to locate and eliminate overused words and expressions. You are probably aware of certain words or phrases you tend to use as transition crutches or standby openers, but there are plenty of other 'go to' words and expressions you may not even realize you're using too often. While you may know you're supposed to avoid over reliance on -ly, -ing and -tion words, it's easy to lose track of how often they find their way into your prose while you're concentrating on plot and characterization.

As you do a search for the upcoming words, make note of their frequency. If it's low, the words may be fine as-is. But if you're seeing the same word or expression more than once in the same page or even the same ten pages, it's time to do some ruthless editing. Since overuse of certain words also exposes overuse of certain sentence structures, the best tack when eliminating those words is to rework the sentence. Turn to the thesaurus as a last resort. Look for:

actual, actually, almost, apparently, as if, basically, beautiful, beautifully, began, begin, beginning, but, careful, carefully, completely, doing, even, evenly, get, getting, goes, going, got, gotten, hard, hardly, hope, hopefully, hoping, important, importantly, like, likely, making, meaningful, meaningfully, okay, only, partly, perfectly, race, racing, raging, realize, realized, realizing, really, safely, say, scenario, simply, so, stunned, sudden, suddenly, surely, that, then, totally, try, trying, use, usually, very, virtually, well, what, whatever, yet

An excellent resource for this type of copyediting is [The Dimwit's Dictionary: More Than 5,000 Overused Words and Phrases and Alternatives to Them](#) by Robert Hartwell Fiske.

2.2.2. TRICKY GRAMMAR AND PUNCTUATION

There are many instances of incorrect grammar and punctuation that will be missed by your word processor's grammar checker because they're areas of nuance, or situations in which correct usage is dictated by context. Unless you intend to become a career grammarian, the best cure is prevention.

First, get a copy of the book [Eats, Shoots and Leaves: A Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation](#) by Lynne Truss. It's a small book, not very expensive or time-consuming. Read through it to acquaint yourself with the most common punctuation mistakes, then go on a search-and-destroy mission through your manuscript just as you did with overused words and phrases.

Next, when in doubt about grammar, try some online research. The following sites are excellent, free resources for grammar help:

Grammar Girl: <http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/>

Using English: <http://www.usingenglish.com>

Guide to Grammar & Writing: <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/>

Finally, when in doubt, cut it out. If you can't find adequate clarification on your grammar or punctuation quandary, change the sentence to eliminate the questionable thing or things.

2.2.3. CHECK YOUR JARGON

If your manuscript uses a lot of technical, historical, or idiomatic jargon, you will want to be sure you're using that language properly. Inevitably, there will be someone out there reading your book who just happens to be an expert in whatever it is you're writing about, and when the time comes he won't hesitate to criticize your ignorance in his Amazon review.

For specific terms, try Glossarist: <http://www.glossarist.com> For more general inquiries on a specific subject or time period, do an internet search (i.e., "15th century clothing," "computer terms," "human anatomy," "12th century food," etc.)

2.2.4. IMPROVE READABILITY

View your manuscript in full-page, or facing-pages, print preview mode to spot lengthy blocks of unbroken text and awkward page transitions.

Break up paragraphs to improve readability. In general, no paragraph should take up more than half a standard, trade paperback (6x9") page; ideally, none should take up more than one third of a page.

Look for instances of only one or two words on a line at the end of a paragraph, and see if you can't rework the sentences to eliminate these danglers.

Do some widow and orphan control. In copyediting, the term "widow" is used to describe the last line of a paragraph which appears at the top of a new page. An "orphan" is the first line of a new paragraph that appears at the bottom of the previous page. Look at the following example from www.textcontrol.com:

The real evils, indeed, of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself; these were the disadvantages which threatened alloy to her many enjoyments.	misfortunes with her. widow Sorrow came - a gentle sorrow - but not at all in the shape of any disagreeable consciousness.	beloved friend that Emma first sat in mournful thought of any continuance.
The danger, however, was at present so unperceived, that they did not by any means rank as	Miss Taylor married.	The wedding over, and the bride-people gone, her father and herself were left to dine together, with no prospect of a third to cheer a long evening.
	It was Miss Taylor's loss which first brought grief.	Her father composed himself to sleep after dinner, as usual, and
	orphan It was on the wedding-day of this	

Source: [Emma](#) by Jane Austen. Courtesy Project Gutenberg.

If you really don't want to alter your sentences to eliminate widows and orphans, consider judicious application of page breaks.

3. CONTENT RIGHTS

If your manuscript quotes commercial material originated by another person, living or dead, unless that material is in the public domain you cannot include it in your manuscript without securing the rights to do so first. Common examples are song lyrics, bits of poetry, excerpts from essays and product jingles from advertising.

3.1. SONG LYRICS

If you have a character singing along to a song and feel it's an important action on the part of that character, the easiest solution is to switch whatever lyrics you've got for lyrics from a song in the public domain. Do an internet search on "public domain lyrics" and "public domain songs" to find alternatives.

If the song in question is not in the public domain but isn't a current hit, it may be worthwhile to contact whoever owns the rights and ask permission to quote from the lyrics. In many cases, owners of older lyrics will allow you to use them at no charge so

long as you provide proper credit in a 'notes' section of your manuscript. If permission is only given for a fee, you will have to decide if use of the lyric is worth the asking price. Go to the American Society of Composers, Authors and Performers (ASCAP) and run a search of their database for the song by title, composer or performer:

<http://www.ascap.com/ace/search.cfm?mode=search>

The search results will provide contact information for the current owner. Politely ask if you may quote the lyrics in question, and specify that when the book is printed, you will provide a copy of it to the rights owner at no charge; this is a standard condition of rights permissions. Also provide the full context in which the quotation will appear.

If the quotation serves as a chapter opener, specify that the quotation will stand alone and will not take the form of character dialog. Conversely, if the quotation will take the form of a character quoting or singing the lyrics, provide a description of the character, a brief description of the setting and circumstances in which the lyric will be quoted, and an excerpt from the manuscript containing the proposed lyric quotation in the context of the scene in which it appears.

This is important, because the rights owner may give permission for a hero character to sing along to the song as he's rushing in to rescue the fair maiden, but might feel very differently about the story's villain singing along to the song as he's committing murders.

3.2. PUBLISHED MATERIAL

You can quote from public-domain published material without securing rights. To locate public domain material, do an internet search on "public domain _____," filling in the blank with the type of material for which you're searching (i.e., poetry, books, stories, plays, essays, etc.). You can also search sites that contain nothing *but* public domain material, such as Project Gutenberg (<http://www.gutenberg.org>).

In cases where the copyright has not expired, you will have to contact the publisher which currently holds the rights to the material and ask their permission to quote from it. As with the song lyric example above, you will want to provide as much information as possible about how the quoted material will be used, and you must be prepared to send a free copy of the published book to the rights holder. Again, if permission can only be had for a fee, you'll have to decide whether or not it's worth the cost.

3.3. COMMERCIAL JINGLES

Generally, jingles for companies and products that no longer exist are safe to quote without permission, simply because there is no longer anyone to provide that permission. Otherwise, you will need to contact the Public Relations department of the company in question, or the company that manufactures the product in question.

3.4. PUBLIC FIGURE NAMES AND LIKENESSES

As a rule, it's a bad idea to make references to contemporary public figures by name in your manuscript if you intend to have a character or narrator voice any opinion whatsoever of that public figure. Apart from the risk of being slapped with a slander or libel lawsuit, the more practical reason is that such references will date your manuscript.

In the case of historical fiction you still must tread lightly around living public figures, as well as deceased public figures with surviving relatives. It's fine to say, "Joe was looking forward to the debate between Gore and Bush," because you're only making reference to the fact that such a debate took place, which is already a matter of public record. However, it's very risky to say, "Joe was hoping [blank] would win the debate, because he knew the other guy had always been a two-bit, lying hustler in a designer suit." In the latter sentence, your character is expressing an opinion about a public figure with which that public figure or his living relatives might take issue.

Believe it or not, even a reference you believe to be highly complimentary may not pass muster with the public figure in question, or his/her surviving relatives. There could be a pop singer who's particularly well-known for her 8-octave range, but if your narrator or one of your characters speaks of admiring that facet of the singer it's possible the singer (or her surviving relatives) could be miffed that you didn't also mention the singer's ability with composing her own songs and dancing.

When in doubt, ask permission. When you can't get (or can't afford) permission, eliminate the reference completely.

4. DIY EDITING

It's somewhat misleading to call this task "DIY" because the truth is, you cannot fully edit your manuscript yourself. Obviously, if you had noticed the areas where your prose could be improved, you would've improved them. You need an outside, unbiased opinion, but this doesn't mean you must fork over the big bucks to a professional editor or book doctor. In fact, paying for such services will not necessarily get the best results. Seasoned, professional editors and book doctors are used to editing toward the goal of pleasing a major publisher. Pleasing a major publisher isn't your goal, since you're an independent. Your goal is to please the eventual reader. To that end, collection and consideration of input from multiple, informed readers can serve your needs as well, or even better, than the opinion of a single, paid professional.

4.1. CAN YOU HANDLE THE TRUTH?

Before going on, you need to be brutally honest with yourself in answering this question: can you receive constructive criticism gracefully? I'm sure you just answered 'yes' as a reflex, but really stop and think about it because this is a crucial juncture for the independent author, even more so than for mainstream authors. A mainstream author's agent or manager will solicit feedback from a professional editor and then share that feedback with the author in the most tactful, sensitive manner possible. When you solicit feedback, those notes and comments will be coming directly back to you in their raw, unfiltered form.

Imagine your most beloved, carefully crafted character; now imagine an incoming note that says the reader especially disliked that character, or found that character to be poorly written. How will you react to this news? Think about a cherished scene or dialog exchange in your manuscript; will you go ballistic if your reader suggests you summarily drop the passage because it doesn't add significantly to the plot or tone?

Finally, no matter how ill-advised or even downright crazy a given note seems to you, are you capable of simply absorbing it, appreciating the time and effort your reader has given and sincerely thanking him or her? Can you resist the overwhelming urge to correct the reader, or defend the choices you made to which the reader took exception? Books are a matter of taste, but you must also remember that very often, if you have to explain something to the reader it's a sign that you didn't write it well enough to be easily understood in the first place. After all, you won't be sitting there next to each person who will someday buy your finished book, ready to explain and defend every questionable item.

No matter how careful you are in selecting readers, occasionally you will still find yourself the victim of someone who doesn't know how to give truly constructive criticism, and may even seem to get a bit of a thrill from hurling insults at your work in the most personal and inappropriate terms possible. Even in this extreme situation, you must be able to politely thank the reader for his or her time and effort, and make no further attempt to respond to the notes. But do remove that reader's name from consideration in any future rounds of note-collecting.

If you can't maintain a professional demeanor when the notes come rolling in, your best option is to pay for the services of a professional editor or book doctor. You can be certain a professional editor or book doctor has no personal investment in your success or failure, because you are paying for his or her services and the price doesn't go up or down based on the reader's opinion. Therefore, you will be much more likely to accept the notes given in the impersonal, dispassionate tone they are intended.

4.2. HOW TO FIND EDITORS

Many aspiring writers will turn to their writing group at this point, to exchange manuscripts and share notes with one another. There is some value in that approach, but in my opinion it's primarily value based in bonding and mutual support. When you agree to such an exchange, you don't necessarily know the other author's skill level or style. Notes from someone who's just written the first chapter of a first manuscript probably won't be as useful to you as notes from a more seasoned writer. Likewise, if you write sensitive, coming of age dramas, notes from a writer of gory horror stories probably won't be too meaningful to you. Carefully targeted readers will yield much more useful feedback.

You need to find three writers whose work you admire, whose preferred styles and genres are in line with your own, and who are working at a level of the craft either at or above your level. These people do not have to be professional writers, though. You want three so that the vote on a given revision will never be split.

Start your search on the internet. Many, many aspiring authors have blogs and websites with excerpts of their work on display, and you can find some to match your needs by using keyword searches. For example, if you want to find authors of comic fiction, search on:

writer + "comic fiction"

You can search for writers in other genres the same way. Also try searching for writers' groups, as many of them include a showcase area for their members' work.

When you find some likely candidates, email three of them. Briefly introduce yourself (just your name, rough location in the world and the fact that you're an aspiring writer is enough), then explain where you found their work and what you liked about it. Finally, ask each writer if he or she would be willing to do a manuscript exchange for notes with you, and if not, whether he or she could suggest someone else for the task. Very clearly state your desire for constructive criticism, and MEAN it. Attach a chapter or excerpt from the work for which you're seeking help, so that the candidate will have some idea of what he or she is getting into before agreeing to the arrangement.

If the answer is no, graciously accept that answer and write back to thank the writer for responding to your message anyway. You never know when your paths may cross again, and you can't know for certain why the person turned you down. It may be that they didn't like your excerpt, but it could also be that they only do exchanges within their writing group or they're simply too busy at the moment to help you.

I guarantee if you keep trying you will eventually succeed in finding three writers with whom to exchange manuscripts. One of the advantages of this approach is that the writers with whom you connect will be virtual strangers, so you don't need to worry too much that they'll hold back on their constructive criticisms for the sake of your feelings.

4.3. WHAT TO DO WITH THE FEEDBACK

You've solicited feedback and graciously, profusely thanked everyone who's given it. Now, what do you do with it? Above all other considerations are the facts that it will ultimately be *your* name on the cover, and the finished book should reflect your unique sensibilities and writer's voice. Having said that, I have a few rules of thumb you may find useful in deciding what to change and what to leave alone.

First, when you sent the manuscript out there were undoubtedly some specific items or areas about which you yourself felt a bit iffy. If two or more of your three readers are likewise iffy on them, those things probably need to be changed.

Second, let the majority guide you. If the same change is suggested by two out of three readers, I seriously consider making the change. If it's suggested by all three readers, I make that change without much further consideration. Remember, these are all writers whose work you admire; their opinions are not to be lightly dismissed.

Third, anytime a change is suggested which strongly resonates with me, I make that change even if only one reader made the suggestion.

Beyond these guidelines, there are no other easy-to-follow, all-inclusive rules I can suggest. Even the three rules of thumb I've listed are entirely up to your discretion.

If you write the sort of material that tends to divide readers, eliciting only very positive or very negative reactions, your editing task is much harder because something one reader found particularly objectionable could be the exact thing another reader particularly loves about the work. Typically, this is the constructive criticism experience for authors of literary fiction; if you write literary fiction that will likely polarize readers, you're probably best served by a paid, professional book editor or book doctor.

Otherwise, you want to incorporate all the revisions that make sense to you, then go out for the next round of constructive criticism. Some of your readers probably expressed interest in reading the revised copy, but you will need to contact the others and politely ask if they are willing to read it also. If not, you will need to solicit some new readers to get your group of three. Rinse and repeat through additional iterations of review until you, and the majority of your readers, feel the manuscript is ready for a wider audience.

Then, seek out three new readers who've never seen a single draft of the work. If their reaction is substantially positive, you're ready to mark that draft "final". This is where connecting with like-minded writers pays off, in that there should be some consistency across the feedback. Nevertheless, remember that even published bestsellers are not uniformly well-liked by all readers, so it's not reasonable to expect that you can eventually reach a point where every reader you can find will love the draft.

Indie Authors: buy IndieAuthor t-shirts, mugs and totes at the IndieAuthorShop
<http://www.cafepress.com/IndieAuthorShop>
And check back for more IndieAuthor Guides - <http://www.aprillhamilton.com>