

William Faulkner – William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition

Some Tips On Editing Your Manuscript

1. **Spell Check.** Some entries we receive obviously have never been run through Spell Check. Spell Check is just a beginning, however, as it is impossible for Spell Check to catch such errors as “where” instead of “were” or “there” instead of “their” or incorrect spellings of names. Once you have used Spell Check a couple of times, do it again.
2. **Third Party Editing.** After you have spell-checked, then have two or three educated readers, people you trust, read the copy for typos, grammatical mistakes. Then Spell Check again, as mistakes often are made while correcting mistakes. We do not correct your manuscripts prior to submitting for judging.
3. **Bad Phrasing.** During Words & Music, 2012, literary editor Brenda Copeland of St. Martin’s conducted a self-editing workshop and warned writers to beware of such over-worked, often unnecessary phrases “There is,” “There are,” “There was,” which can lend a trite quality to a manuscript. For instance, you might replace “There was a time when Mary Shannon O’Brien would have hesitated to confront the church hierarchy about child abuse...” with “Until Sean was ruined by that dirty priest, Mary Shannon O’Brien might have hesitated to confront the Church hierarchy. Not now.”
4. **Over-used words.** One novel manuscript entered last year—which was a good concept but too long—used the word “the” 10,001 times. At least half could easily have been eliminated. For instance, “Marylin stood outside of the room and listened to the cacaphony of querulous voices in the room. When she entered the room, the quarreling ended abruptly.” Use instead, for instance, “Outside, Marylin listened as ranting voices reached crescendo level. Then, she entered and raving was replaced by a still angry silence.” More dramatic, six fewer words. Obviously, there are occasions when “The” is necessary for emphasis, e. g., The Help. “The” is, however, the most overused word in the language and especially overused for titles, chapter headings. For instance, Atonement is a great title, while The Atonement would have been trite. Sweet

Tooth is a terrific title. The Sweet Tooth would be less compelling.

(Atonement and Sweet Tooth are critically acclaimed novels by Ian McEwan.)

5. **Watch Your Titles.** Competition judges and, ultimately, editors and agents, are confronted with titles as their first impression of a manuscript's worth. One mistake writers make frequently with the titles they choose is to plagiarize a title from another work of art, such as selecting *Heard It On The Grapevine*, which is a direct steal from the hit song of that name. There may be a reason in the writer's mind for using such a title but it indicates a lack of imagination to a reader not yet privy to the contents of the manuscript.
6. **Other Important First Impressions.** Professional readers, such as agents and literary editors frequently read the first couple of chapters and the ending before deciding whether they want to invest more time in a manuscript. They know that readers looking for a new book to read frequently do the same thing. So, concentrate especially on strong openings and endings. A weak opening means a manuscript will not meet our general guideline of "ready for publication." Ditto, a poorly constructed ending to a story.
7. **Imagination Versus Reality.** There are perfectly marvelous stories based in reality and perfectly marvelous stories totally imagined. If your setting is imaginary, you can name a street and locate it within your imaginary city or town however you like. If your story is set in a real city or town, however, making up streets or having them run the wrong way or in the wrong part of the city are no-nos. Getting facts wrong about an historic incident or personage is another egregious error.
8. **Dialogue.** A majority of the manuscripts we reject are product of a poor command of dialogue, with characters uttering phrases which are either pretentious, pompous or simplistic to the point of boredom. And, talk about overworked phrases, too many of the manuscripts could have their word counts significantly reduced by elimination of unnecessary instances of "he said" and "she said."
9. **Characters and Voice.** A common failing in manuscripts which are rejected in our competition is the lack of a compelling central character and/or lackluster secondary characters. Take a close look at your characters. Is there a strong reason for a reader to

take the time to become embroiled with your characters? Get a reaction to your characters from several third party readers. If these readers don't "love" your characters, go back to work. Select a voice approach and be consistent. If switching from the voice of "all-seeing , all-knowing God" to the "ordinary mortal," a difficult task to achieve successfully, make it clear that a switch has occurred so the reader is not confused and does not lose the story line. If first-person voice is the approach selected, then make certain that voice can pull the reader into your story. If the central character is sufficiently compelling, his/her voice can carry a storyline.

10. **Setting the Scene.** If you are writing a scene set in a place you personally have never visited or a time before your own, your research had better be first class. Nothing is more disturbing to a reader than realizing that the author does not know what he/she is talking about. Beyond the simple fact of accuracy, however, is the writers's job to conjure a scene so vivid that the reader feels transported. Too many manuscripts we received are more like first drafts of TV screenplays, which could not possibly transport without accompanying visuals and audio.

These are just a few tips on basic editing to help you with your entries. We suggest you have a professional editor look at your work prior to entering if possible; if not, a friend who is an avid reader.