EDITING YOUR WORK

The Writer’s Studio
University of Chicago
Graham School of Continuing Liberal and Professional Studies
WSEDYW–16U1, Summer 2016

Instructor: Jen McDonald, www.jenbmcdonald.com
Date and time: Tuesdays, 6/21–7/12, 6 p.m.–8:30 p.m.
Location: Gleacher Center

Editing gives the writer a chance that writing never will: to see what he is doing.
— Susan Bell, The Artful Edit

Course Description: Learn how editors approach manuscripts so you can bring these same insights and interventions to your own work. In this workshop for writers of fiction and nonfiction, we will practice techniques for reading and refining that will have you thinking and acting as your own editor and constructive self-critic. We will examine larger points — What are your good and bad habits? Are we drawn to the work’s narrative voice? Where have you held back or left crucial questions unanswered, or where have you told us more than we need to know? — as well as finer ones, analyzing how changes made at the sentence level can vastly improve one’s writing.

Exercises: Every week, during class, you will scrutinize your own work and that of fellow students. You will practice hands-on editing with pen and paper. And you will exchange writing, because editing someone else’s work can be a great eye-opener in how to approach your own.

Readings: Readings will be distributed to registered students in class and via email, and may be subject to change.

OVERVIEW

Week 1: First Impressions
First page, first paragraph, first sentence: This is what an editor sees when you submit your writing. Using the first two or three pages of a work, we can begin evaluating strengths and weaknesses in the material, and addressing points large and small. Does your story start in the right place? Are we drawn in? Do we have all the information we need to understand where we are and where we may be going? Does the writer have a grasp of grammar and other mechanics? Do we trust the voice of the narrator enough to feel as if we’re in good hands? In this class, we will distinguish among the various stages of editing and dissect our own first pages.

Week 2: Content and Structure
Attempting to summarize your writing concisely is itself an exercise in editing. Do you know what your story is about? Does the material on the page reflect the idea of the work in your head? We will take a bird’s-eye view to examine content and structure: Does the work flow? Is it
organized logically? What’s missing? What can be left out? Are we compelled to keep reading as we move from one paragraph to the next?

**Week 3: Line by Line**
Here we get into the nitty-gritty of sentence-making: We will focus on extraneous words (or sentences) and clichés; the overuse or misuse of adjectives and adverbs; antecedent problems; sentence-length variation and overall rhythm; and tricks for tightening scenes and transitions.

**Week 4: The Finest Points**
Paying attention to the tiniest details can transform your writing. We will discuss echoes and what to do with them; synonyms and how they’re not all alike; usage of the comma, the dash, the semicolon; simple structural fixes that can alter the effect of a sentence; and strategies for the final polish of your draft.

**GUIDELINES FOR DISCUSSION**
As you listen or read during workshop, be aware of your thinking and reactions:

- Where are you particularly engaged? Where are you bored? Where are you confused?
- Which images, turns of phrase, or descriptions stand out?
- Take note of what a certain event, word choice, or piece of dialogue makes you feel.
- Try going beyond a value judgment — “this is good / this is bad” — to say why: why a specific sentence or phrase misdirects you, for example.
- Remember that the point of these comments is to improve the work and that critiques should be addressed to the work, not to the writer.