

Manuscript CPR+

by Mick Silva

This quick master course is for anyone who needs to resuscitate a dying manuscript.

We know editing is vital, but beyond punctuation, what do you actually do to bring the life back? This is a compendium of the key revision questions you can apply immediately—what to do and how to do it. This is how a professional book doctor assesses your work.

The nuts and bolts of specific editing fixes are based on a series of key questions. When you know the right questions to ask, you can decide which tool will best work to better fulfill readers' expectations.

"Is all editing subjective?" Yes and no. Every editor will notice some different things, but every content editor should notice the same big problems. And every editor will have different ideas of how to best resolve those, but there is a best way. The goal is to get as close as possible to the ideal and make your work the standard other books are judged by. That's a high bar, I know, especially for writers who just want their book not to stink.

But these ideas should help you revive a dying manuscript, and also greatly improve it and its chances of being life-changing and getting shared.

The purposes of editing

- Setting *and* satisfying the right expectations.
- Deciding the vision *and* revising it.
- Efficiency *and* accuracy.
- Diagnosing the work *and* applying the right tools.
- Augmenting what works *and* diminishing what doesn't.

The value of editing

- Objectivity: “Good editing is the difference between believing you're hitting the mark and *knowing* you are.”
- Broadening your perspective on your work, your reader, and your abilities.
- Editing improves the work by introducing *better ideas more fully expressed*.

Ultimately, good editing reveals the deeper truth of a subject. Anne Lamott says, “If you're a writer you have a moral obligation to tell the truth as you understand it. And it is a revolutionary act—truth is always subversive.” A good edit makes the book more engaging, more exciting.

What is Editing?

- Macro vs. Micro: Proofreading is the last step, what most people think of as “editing.”

- What is a “sub edit?” Substantive editing is concerned with the outline and chapters.
- What is a “line edit?” Line editing ensures sentences and paragraphs progress naturally.
- What is a “copyedit?” Copyediting finds the right phrasing, words, and punctuation.

Macro edit is concerned with the things you didn’t go far enough with yet, concepts you didn’t go deep enough with yet. And usually we need to develop the theme more and bring it out in some specific ways—ex: through the tone and symbols and the whole style—before moving on to the micro edit and fixing what’s there.

Diagnosing what’s *not* on the page is the first step.

- There are some initial questions every reader has: *What’s wrong? Who’s in charge here?* Your reader is disoriented and expectant. You have to meet their expectations head on, but also set the proper expectations.

Key question: “So what?” Augmenting the promise, deepening reader interest, and strengthening the hook are all ways to respond to the question, “So what?”

Macro edit walk-through

- A “sub edit” (content/developmental/macro edit) involves the process of applying and answering several specific “big questions.” Knowing the questions to ask your work is even more valuable than knowing the answers. And not answering too

quickly is more important, because trust in your Inspirer to guide you is what you need, not certainty in your own ability or knowledge.

- First draft, remember, “Do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.” Editing comes after the book is written. And macro comes before micro, which is what we’ll cover here.

Foundational Macro questions

- Nonfiction: Is the objective clear and specific enough? is it well supported? is anything missing? have you over-explained? do the examples fit?
- Fiction (and memoir): pacing, more than one plot line, obstacles big enough, goal large enough and believable enough.
- The goal of this is to see the big picture clearly. Before you diagnose what’s wrong, you’ve got to assess the situation. Reading aloud can help you diagnose the problems, but not necessarily what to do about it yet. That comes after you've considered the options.

Macro editing reveals 95% of the time, your vision for the book is a bit off.

- The vision form: 10 questions that define your book
- Setting the right expectation or benefit for the right audience:
 - *Who are you and who are you writing to?*
- Breaking down the process: the key to organizing and simplifying. A good edit effectively gets the writer out of their own way.

Specific macro questions

- Nonfiction: What's the big point? (How do all roads lead to this? Why is this the big point? Does it need refining?) This is asking you to define your theme. So ***what is theme?***
- If nonfiction/Christian living, it's the big idea, your argument. If fiction or memoir, it should be another way of stating the plot. Like, "What happens when a man with high moral standards suddenly realizes he's guilty and is driven to despair." As much as your plot is the central, unifying concept behind all the action, that's basically your theme.
- Is the work consistent and are these elements correct for the piece? (tone, style and voice, but also intent and motive)
- Is there movement? Is there an arc? Are the parts progressive and building?
- Fiction: What's the emotion and impact intended for this chapter? (What elements are involved, where's the desire and conflict? Are you using those to their fullest potential? Can you deepen readers' appreciation of the theme, subthemes and their situations? Am I intending to unify many parts into a singular theme here, or is it branching into more complication? What is my intent?)
- Where's the tension/conflict? (Is it strong and obvious? Can it be strengthened, made more immediate or clear?) Is it internal *and* external?
- Does every page make me want to read more? (Can it be simpler AND deeper?)

- What am I setting up and paying off here? (What's added, what's taken away?)
Does this lead readers to invest more deeply in this [story/these ideas]?

How to gain more perspective

- Best practical tools and tips on micro edits come from editors who can show you what you're doing and how to change. Pay to have your chapters professionally critiqued ([The Christian PEN](#) is a good service run by my friend, Kathy Ide).
- Books can be very helpful: *The Artful Edit* by Susan Bell, *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* by Renni Browne and Dan King, *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott, and your own favorite books can teach you how to do what you want to do.
- Courses and classes at conferences and online. This class came from several I've taught over the years.
- Find a writer or two you can trust, who is as good or just a little better than you! Trade chapters and read aloud with each other.
- There is much more to learn about editing, of course. But keep learning from the books and writers you love—they're your best mentors. (And sign up to receive my weekly posts at my website, [MickSilva.com](#).)

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