**How to Improve Your Self-Help Book *Before* You Hire an Editor**

Are you ready to hire an editor to help you clean up your manuscript?

I think of writing a self-help book as being similar to peeling an onion. The first draft is simply taking off the dry skin; then you have many “rounds” to peel and improvements to make to create a quality book.

If you want readers to take your book seriously, look closely at every word, sentence, paragraph, and chapter—perhaps several times—and keep refining until everything is perfect.

Want to simplify your editing process? The amount of improvement you can make *before* hiring a developmental editor or copy editor can make a huge difference in the number of red marks and suggestions you get back from your hired pro. Plus, when you can correct a bunch of the smaller issues, your editor can then focus on more substantive input to make the book really shine.

Here are some ways to start peeling your onion (and making your editor’s day).

**The basics**

1. Write your book in Microsoft Word or Google Docs, which will make it easy for you to see your editor’s suggestions and comments.

2. Keep your sentences relatively short (no run-ons).

3. Keep your paragraphs relatively short (3–6 sentences max).

4. Break up dense text by shortening or breaking up long paragraphs.

5. Include subheadings to provide structure and break up text.

6. Include all the elements of a book: a title page, a copyright page, a table of contents, acknowledgments (people you’re thanking), an introduction (written by you), a preface (written by someone else; optional), references (if applicable), and your author bio.

**Big-picture stuff**

7. Start each chapter with something intriguing, entertaining, or reader focused, such as a “fun fact,” question, quotation, or anecdote.

8. Write in an engaging way to draw your reader in. Don’t bore them. Don’t just do the bare minimum. For example, don’t use a one-word subheading. Make the book a joy to read.

9. Get to the point. Cut out all extra words, sentences, and even entire paragraphs that aren’t relevant, particularly compelling, or likely to be adding value for your reader. The shorter and sweeter you can make the book, the better.

10. End each chapter by summing up your message in a way that will leave your reader feeling inspired.

11. Be logical. Make sure every single sentence in a paragraph relates to and connects with the one before and after it. Make sure every single paragraph relates to the one before and after it.

12. Make the book accessible to a wide audience by writing in a simple, straightforward way (not in a stuffy, long-winded academic style) for all reading levels.

13. Use informal language as much as possible. Imagine that you’re having a one-on-one conversation with your reader.

14. Avoid making generalizations (“We’re all so busy!”).

15. Avoid sounding biased (sexist, racist, ageist, elitist, etc.). For example, don’t address your readers as if they’re all men who are married with kids.

16. Don’t be preachy or tell readers they “should” do anything. Instead, present them with options they can relate to and that could inspire them.

17. Don’t plagiarize (steal other people’s content without crediting them). Want to include someone else’s work, such as a poem? Get their permission.

**Focus on your reader (not yourself)**

18. In general, stick to the reader’s perspective and needs. They’re reading the book to get insights and action tips.

19. Unless the format of your book requires it, avoid sharing details and stories about yourself. Save any powerful personal anecdotes, and the reason you wrote the book, for the introduction.

20. Directly address the reader as “you.”

21. Avoid using “we” or “us” to refer to humanity or a subgroup (for example, people who suffer from a certain condition). Implying that everyone is the same can come across as condescending and alienate readers who don’t think of themselves as sheeple.

22. Don’t alternate using “I” and “my” with “we” and “our” in the same paragraph.

23. Don’t quote yourself (even if you consider yourself an authority).

24. Avoid referring to things you said earlier (“As I wrote in Chapter 1…”) and to advice you’ve given in other books.

25. Avoid marketing your services and promoting your business. Your readers want helpful information, not a sales pitch. Save your promo blurb (if appropriate) for the back page or back cover.

**Get the details right**

26. Be concise. Prune every sentence. For example, instead of “Why is that?” write “Why?”

27. Avoid the future tense (“You will learn about this in Chapter 5.”). Instead, use the present tense. (“I cover these issues in Chapter 5.”)

28. When referring to a statistic, cite the source by either mentioning it in the text (“According to…”) or footnoting it (or both).

29. Use contractions (“You’re”) for a friendly tone.

30. Don’t start a sentence with “This” or refer to “this” if it’s not clear what “this” is.

31. Be elegant: avoid ending a sentence in a preposition (“…what you’re looking for.”)

32. Use one space (not two) between sentences.

33. Fact-check everything, including the spellings of people’s names.

**Peel the onion**

34. Rewrite your first draft. If you’re like many writers, you throw thoughts on the page and eventually arrive at the point you want to make. Unfortunately, this does not make for an easy-to-read book. Do an edit to better structure all that information.

35. Set the book aside for a week. Then pretend you are your target reader and read it from their perspective.

36. Have friends and family members read the book and give you their honest input.

37. Check for missing transitions and rewrite for a natural flow.

**Follow conventional style**

38. In chapter titles, capitalize major words (this is called “headline case”).

39. Capitalize only the first word of subheadings (“sentence case”).

40. Emphasize words by italicizing them. Don’t use ALL CAPS (it’s the equivalent of shouting). Italicize only words that are *begging* to be emphasized.

41. Don’t use bold for emphasis.

42. Don’t use italic as a contrasting font or to set off a large block quotation.

43. Don’t overuse exclamation points. Use them to occasionally indicate something truly amazing, otherwise they lose their impact.

44. Do a spelling and grammar check.

**Have fun!**

45. Don’t prematurely agree to a publishing date before you’re finished with the editing phase.

46. Give yourself time to correct and improve everything that may not be quite right, whether the process takes you two days or two weeks.

47. Enjoy the editing process and the moments of “flow” you may experience as you focus on creating a relevant, positively reviewed, and (we hope) best-selling book!