

Vinnie Kinsela's editing class covered a lot of material; we looked at the whole spectrum of editing, from the nitpickiness of character-by-character copyediting to the more creative grand overview of developmental editing. In this section I've reproduced two pieces; the first is a paper that attempts to answer the question "what does an editor do?" This is a piece of pure theory that describes the different facets of editing and attempts to capture the values common to all of them. The second piece is a developmental letter to David Wilma, the author of a manuscript entitled *Down the River*. Mr. Wilma submitted the manuscript to Ooligan, and while the acquisitions department enjoyed it, they thought that it needed more work than they had time to give it. Instead of rejecting it outright, they offered Mr. Wilma the opportunity to send it through the editing class for a developmental edit by 15 students.

Clarity, Consistency, Coherency, and Correctness Throughout the Editing Process

WHAT DOES AN EDITOR DO? There's more to it than simple spell checking and grammar fixes, though that is probably the most common perception of an editor's job. Editing actually covers a lot of ground, from the popularly imagined spell checking to the borders of ghostwriting. Many describe editing as a spectrum, but I prefer to see it as a fractal; all editors work to bring clarity, consistency, coherency and correctness to a manuscript, but they do so at different scales, from the big picture to the minutiae. These scales are dealt with roughly in order from largest to smallest in the publishing process, beginning with the developmental editor.

Developmental editing is likely to be done before the author gets a work accepted by a publisher. It's very similar to the critiquing that a good writing group will give to a manuscript: "your main character's tone is inconsistent," or "I don't buy the premise; what about if you tried x instead?" Clarity at this stage is clarity of plot and character. Is the narrative arc clear and understandable, or did the author get lost in details and neglect the story line? Are the important characters clearly drawn and believable? Consistency is also important at this stage: are the characters portrayed the same way, both in physical description and personality? Is the theme of the book consistent throughout, or does it begin as a serious period drama and end as a high-spirited fantasy? Coherency is vital as well; authors who are experts in their fields but unused to writing may find it difficult to put together a manuscript that flows well from one point to another, and it is one of the developmental editor's jobs to help the author organize her thoughts in such a fashion that the reader will not become confused. Correctness at the developmental level applies to the themes of nonfiction works and to the settings of fictional ones. Does the author use the existence of Atlantis as the centerpiece of his arguments without any evidence to back himself up, or has she written a historical romance between Henry V and Eleanor of Aquitaine, who lived 200 years apart?

It is the role of the developmental editor, then, to look at the big picture and to help the author organize and refine the themes that are present in the manuscript. At this stage, characters might be omitted or combined, subplots may be elevated to the level of the main story or vice versa, and nonfiction works may have their structures and arguments rearranged or further analyzed. It is often after this level of editing has been done that a manuscript is accepted by a publishing house. The acquiring editor has at this point examined the manuscript and found it to fit the press's backlist and to not require too much of an investment of time, so the manuscript is accepted and moved along to a substantive editor.

The substantive editor (who is often, strangely, called a developmental editor in publishing houses) operates one level of magnification in on the fractal that is the manuscript, again using the values of clarity, consistency, coherency, and correctness. The main story arc is established at this point, the main arguments made, and the main themes introduced, but the substantive editor still has a fairly large picture in his head. For clarity's sake, the substantive editor may suggest that an extraneous chapter be eliminated or combined with the preceding chapter, or that some scenes be added to explain a character's motivation. Problems of consistency that are dealt with at this level may include things like the author straying from her point in the course of a chapter and not addressing the issues she initially outlined or descriptions of locations not matching each other. Issues of coherency might be arguments not well stated, or dialogues written in such a way that the reader isn't sure who is doing the speaking. Finally, when a substantive editor looks at correctness, he may be ensuring that the graphs the author has included actually support her arguments or that the address of the main character's apartment is actually in the proper borough of New York.

The substantive editor, in essence, does to chapters what the developmental editor does to the manuscript as a whole. The themes of the story or the thrust of the arguments are refined by the developmental editor, and it is the job of the substantive editor to ensure that each section of the manuscript contributes to that theme or reinforces that argument—the theme is tweaked a bit if needed, but mostly the editor's job at this point is to ensure that the preexisting theme is expressed well. Substantive editors have some freedom to change content, but not to the extent that a developmental editor does.

Once substantive editing is done, the next level of magnification is brought into focus and the copyeditors take over. In copyediting, the focus continues to be away from the ideas themselves and toward the expression of those ideas. Issues of clarity deal more with grammar and syntax at this point; the copyeditor may suggest that a comma be inserted in order to clear up a potential misread in a sentence, or may note that rewording a sentence would clear up the confusion cause by a pronoun with an unclear antecedent. When a copyeditor looks for problems of consistency, she evaluates word choices and punctuation: are graphs in the first few chapters captioned as “figure x,” while later chapters are “fig. Y?” Do the hero's eyes go from being grey to being gray? Is the first word after a colon capitalized or not? Does the tense shift in the middle of a sentence? Does the author use the second person plural as a generic pronoun, default to he/him, or alternate the masculine and the feminine for generic examples?

In order to ensure consistency, a copyeditor will make use of a style sheet, on which he will note all relevant decisions the author has made about word and punctuation choice. Proper names for all characters go on the style sheet, as long as decisions about what gets capitalized and what does not. If a word has alternate spellings, the author's choice is noted to ensure consistency. In addition to a style sheet for a given manuscript, most publishing houses maintain their own style sheet or style guide, which ensure consistency across all the works published by that publisher. Style sheets ensure that consistency is maintained through the process of copyediting and through the later phase of proofreading.

Coherency to a copyeditor is a question of whether sentences and paragraphs make sense. Does the language flow as well as it can within the limits of the subject and the author's style? Do the sentences in a paragraph come in the proper order, or should some of them be transposed? Are there run-on sentences that need to be broken up? Finally, there is the question

of correctness at the copyediting stage. This one small segment is what most people think of when they imagine an editor's job. When a copyeditor corrects spellings or capitalizations, or changes a reference to the interstate that ends at Morgantown, WV from I-86 to I-68, she is ensuring that the manuscript is correct.

Once the manuscript has been copyedited, it is sent to design. The designers dictate the page layout, cover, and interior design of the finished book, and then send the book back to editing for a final look. This final look is proofreading, the last chance to catch problems. Pure proofreading is the first time the editor's job involves nothing but the pursuit of correctness; ideally all errors in consistency, coherency, and clarity have been caught and the only thing left are small errors introduced by the design team as they worked. In this ideal world, the proofreader's only job is to ensure that every letter in the final book matches the proper letter in the edited manuscript. In the real world, of course, it is not possible to catch all the errors. Proofreaders need to be alert to all other copyediting-scale errors; it is too late at this point to do anything about errors at the substantive or developmental level unless they are particularly egregious, but if the proofreader catches a misspelling that slipped through copyediting or a mislabeled illustration, he should certainly take the opportunity to fix it.

While that is a fair description of the editing process, it is important to note that editors should have input into all stages of a manuscript's transformation into a book. Editors should work with designers to ensure that the cover of the book accurately reflects the subject and tone of the book, and that the interior design isn't at odds with the feel of the work (A science fiction novel with chapter headings in Rosewood?). Marketing should get feedback from the editors about which markets are likely to be good for each title, and which aren't. In all of these interactions, it is the role of the editor to bring her deep knowledge of both the theme and expression of the manuscript to the other departments and to ensure that the resulting work is clear, consistent, coherent, and correct.

Mr. Wilma,

Thank you for the chance to read *Down the River*. It's a well-written story, and I think it holds a lot of promise. Your dialogue in particular is very strong; characters really come alive in their conversations. Your use of dialect helps this immensely, and you have a good hand with it; all too often dialect can be clumsy or get confusing, but you include just enough of it to give real flavor without overpowering any of the story.

There are some areas of *Down the River* that could be improved though, and I would like to go over those in some detail. I'll start with the more over-arching concerns, and work my way from there to more particular points.

Large-scale concerns

The letter format: To begin with, I'll say that the structure of the story made a lot more sense to me when I heard that you are a descendant of the Morgans, and wished to tell their story from a more sympathetic viewpoint than that of a slave owner. Your choice of Phyllis as a narrator was a good one, I think; she has a good story to tell, so it makes sense to follow her. The problem comes with the fact that her story and the story of the Morgans are not the same, and do not share the same dimensions; that is, the story of the Morgans ends long before Phyllis's own story does. This problem is accentuated by the letter format you have chosen to tell Phyllis's story in; because the story is a letter to her children and full of mentions of Phyllis's later life, the reader becomes curious about that later life—this is particularly true when it comes to hearing about particularly momentous events, such as meeting with Lincoln. When these later events are not revealed, it seems as though something foreshadowed does not actually happen, which sets up a dissonance of sorts. Reader expectations are left unfulfilled.

There are other issues with the letter format as well; in particular, the scenes involving meeting Saul and giving birth to Pirey and Ben do not ring true as a letter from a woman telling her children about her first husband or the existence of their half-siblings. Pirey's birth occurs on page 133, at the beginning of Chapter II, and is introduced as so: "Something much more significant altered my situation in the cabins. God, who was still then a stranger to me, saw fit to bless Saul and me with a child, which surprised apparently only me." I think it is fair to say that this occurrence would probably also surprise her children by her later marriage, who are the intended audience of this document. While the remainder of the chapter does go on to describe the wonder of new motherhood for a few pages, at no point does Phyllis acknowledge how strange this must be for her later children. Her second pregnancy and the birth of Ben seems even more casual; the whole matter is introduced and wrapped up in a paragraph on page 213 that begins with the sentence "I gave birth to little Ben in the fall." Again, there is no mention made of how her other children must feel in learning that they have a half-brother. As you can see from these two passages, there is little to no acknowledgement of her children's likely shock and confusion.

The letter is constructed as it is to explain the sudden cessation of the narrative; the children know the story of Phyllis's life after she was freed, and Phyllis is explaining to them the earlier period. The central problem with this, though, is that the readers do not know the details of

the latter period of Phyllis's life, and are left feeling that the story has come to an abrupt end, with information hinted at but never revealed.

The central conflict: Another problem is that the conflict between Morgan and Osborn takes far too long to develop. We are treated to some excellent and vivid description of life as a slave, but there is no real tension driving the story for the first hundred and fifty pages or so. The Morgan/Osborn conflict is hinted at, but comes off more as a subplot than anything else. By the time that it escalates to the point that it assumes real relevance to Phyllis's life, we're halfway through the book. I would suggest starting the story much later than you do; perhaps with Phyllis, Saul, and Piney being sold off to Osborn. The backstory leading up to that could be told in flashbacks. In addition, I would suggest that Phyllis be made a bit more complicit in the spying than she currently is; perhaps have Morgan tell her that is why she is being sold off. Opening the story with a moment of high tension and a definite conflict will help to hook the reader and give them a reason to continue reading.

The level of detail: Daily life at the Morgan place is very well painted; in some ways, a bit too much so. Scenes like the following from page 138 are beautifully written, but tend to bog down the narrative with details that don't need to be included:

The structure was little more than a roof covering the mechanism of wooden gears and bevels and the two millstones and the platform for feeding the hopper. A leaky flume of rough boards on spindly legs ran from the top of the falls a few rods to the wheel. The paddles of the water wheel caught the thin stream splashing from the flume and as much water spilled sideways from the wood channel as down. The hardwood mechanism, shiny with grease, turned with a soft, repeating groan, like some sick animal. Slowly, the great wheel moved, and with it, shafts and gears in an intricate meshing of design and power. One device bent upon another and the force of the waterfall translated underneath into the revolution of one heavy stone upon the other. Hamilton stepped deliberately around the moving parts to watch their work and to guarantee harmony. I imagined what would happen should he make a careless move and be consumed by his own creation.

In this particular case, the text also foreshadows some harm to come to someone or something from getting caught in the gears, and when this never occurs the reader is left confused, to a certain extent distrusting the author. This foreshadowing is reinforced by Phyllis's later description of the "hungry gears" (page 141). It is very clear that you have put a lot of effort into exhaustive research of the era, but the information that you have worked so hard to come by needs to be in the background, rather than the foreground. To do otherwise gets in the way of the story, and the story is really the important part.

This same principle applies to scenes as well as to details. There are many scenes throughout the book that are well-written and provide a compelling snapshot of daily life, but that do little to advance the story line. This contributes to a meandering, aimless feel to the book. I would suggest that you consider evaluating each scene in terms of how much it does to move the story along and contribute to the overall plot. Chapter 3 is an excellent example of this; it's quite short, and doesn't seem to introduce any ideas that are particularly relevant to the later story. It's well written and interesting, but it doesn't advance any story lines; I would suggest cutting it in its entirety.

Characters: Many of your characters are strongly-drawn and well-realized; Esther in particular stands out, as does William Morgan. Some characters could use more work or seem inconsistent, however. Saul, for example, arrives at the Morgan farm and immediately comes off as a charismatic, daring young man likely to befriend almost anyone he meets, but within a few chapters seems to be more a hermit who prefers the company of horses to that of people.

Small-scale concerns

Confusion between general and particular: The smaller-scale concerns that I have are essentially stylistic quirks that frequently brought me up short. The first one that I noticed was an occasional blurring of general and particular. This occurred most frequently in reference to time, as in the opening sentence of Chapter 4: “The summer after Morgan hanged Ruth, I don’t know what was hotter, the fire burning in front of me or the rest of that August day.” The way that this sentence begins, it seems as though an entire summer is being described in general terms, but by the end of the sentence it is clear that one particular day is being discussed. Page 42 holds another example of this in its description of O’Hara mounting a horse:

Infrequently, he stirred and, after finding a drink of water (or something else) he stumbled after his old spotted horse. He tugged the worn-out saddle to see if the cinch had come loose – or had been loosened – and then he started his comical act of mounting. Too short to just step into the stirrup of even that small horse, he had to lead the animal to a fence or a rock and climb up on that before finding the stirrup. He held the animal still with one hand while he worked his foot into the iron with the other. Sometimes the horse stepped away just as O’Hara yanked at the top of the saddle, forcing him to kick helplessly as he hung there before dropping off to try again.

Because of the use of the simple past here (he tugged, he held), the reader gets the impression that we have entered particular time—that is, we are discussing one particular incident. Introducing the final sentence with “Sometimes” contradicts this impression and makes the narrative flow seem a little jerky.

Viewpoint shifts: Phyllis seems to get inside the heads of other people sometimes; she tells us what they are thinking or feeling. She tells us Morgan’s rationale for displays of anger on page 26: “If some act of negligence or even rarer act of malice came to his attention, he made certain he delivered an extreme display of temper, not widely viewed, but in front of one or two.” On page 129, she speaks to Morgan, “startling Saul with my temerity.” Both of these instances temporarily take us out of Phyllis’s head and put us into another’s, which is jarring to the reader.

False Foreshadowing: False foreshadowing also seems to crop up frequently; the scene at the mill has already been mentioned, but there were other instances in the story as well. The first one I noticed was the mention of Shawnee by the slaves on their march to the new Morgan home (page 18), and it left me expecting to read of the Morgan’s death by Shawnee attack for several more chapters. A much stronger foreshadowing that came to nothing was the character of Rabbit; from the moment Saul mentioned him, it was clear that this character would have

some role to play in the story. He is mentioned many times throughout the book, and we even get to meet him, but after that he just fades away, in the end nothing but a vague possible explanation for Esther and Peter's escape from the slave catchers. The wolves in Chapter 7 similarly come to naught, despite our being told on page 93 that "For an entire season the pack had its way with sheep and goats and calves all over the country."

Phyllis's mulatto heritage, though, is probably the biggest thing that went unexplained. Clearly, this was a big deal and explained to a certain extent her treatment by the other slaves (though this was not as clear to me as it might have been; it was only in discussion with a classmate that I put that together). That being said, it doesn't go anywhere after that. I expected to learn that Phyllis was the daughter of one or the other of the Morgans, but that never happened (though the elder Morgan did seem to have a certain paternal interest in her). What's more, the issue of her mixed blood was never even explicitly discussed; it was hinted that there was some hard feeling on the subject from the other slaves, but that was it.

I realize this may seem like a lot, particularly because you'll be getting many other letters than just mine. Please bear in mind that this is all just my suggestion; feel free to discard any or all of it. I do think that the writing is well done and the story is compelling. The biggest challenge *Down the River* faces, in my opinion, is that it lacks a central conflict driving it. I would suggest that you sit down, figure out which story you want to tell, and then spend some time evaluating each character, subplot, and scene to see if it drives the story that you are trying to tell. Work with the conflict that you choose, and use it to draw out your theme of society's control of all those who are part of it, master or slave. There is a lot of potential here, and I'm excited to see where it goes.

Sincerely,
Tom McCluskey