

Is Your Book Ready for Line & Copy Edits?

A Comprehensive Readiness Checklist for Debut Authors

Line and copy editing are the final professional polish your manuscript receives before publication. These stages focus on sentence-level refinement, grammar, punctuation, consistency, and flow.

However, sending your manuscript to a line or copy editor before it's truly ready wastes time and money. This checklist will help you assess whether your manuscript is prepared for this critical stage of editing.

What's the difference?

- Line editing addresses flow, word choice, sentence structure, and readability.
- Copy editing tackles grammar, punctuation, spelling, consistency, and adherence to style guides.

Both assume your story is structurally sound. If you're still wrestling with plot holes, pacing issues, or character development, you need developmental editing first.

Part One: Big Picture Issues

Before investing in line and copy editing, these structural and content issues must be resolved. No amount of sentence-level polish can fix fundamental story problems.

✓ **Your story structure is solid**

Why it matters: if your plot has holes, your pacing drags, or your character arcs don't land, a line editor can't fix it. A line editor will polish sentences in scenes that might need cutting or rewriting entirely.

How to check: Can you clearly articulate your protagonist's goal, the obstacles they face, and how they change by the end? Does each major plot point feel earned and necessary? Have beta readers or critique partners pointed out confusion about what's happening or why? If you're uncertain, you need developmental editing or a story coach first.

✓ **Your point of view is consistent and intentional**

Why it matters: Head-hopping (switching between character perspectives mid-scene without clear breaks) confuses readers and weakens emotional connection. A copy editor will mark these inconsistencies, but fixing them often requires rewriting entire scenes.

How to check: Read through a chapter and note every time you reveal a thought, feeling, or piece of information only one character could know. If you're jumping between heads within a scene, you have POV issues. Decide on your POV structure (single first person, multiple third person with scene breaks, omniscient narrator) and stick to it ruthlessly.

✓ **Your characters have distinct voices**

Why it matters: If all your characters sound identical, the problem isn't grammar or sentence structure. It's characterisation. Readers should be able to tell who's speaking without dialogue tags.

How to check: Cover the dialogue tags and read the conversations aloud. Can you tell who's speaking based on word choice, sentence length, and speech patterns? Does your teenage character sound different from your elderly professor? If not, spend time developing individual character voices before moving to line editing.

✓ **You've resolved all placeholder text and research gaps**

Why it matters: You can't polish what doesn't exist. Brackets with notes like "[add description here]" or "[check this fact]" indicate unfinished work. An editor's job is to refine completed prose, not write it for you.

How to check: Search your manuscript for brackets, TK (“to come”), question marks in parentheses, or any notes to yourself. Replace all placeholders with actual content. Complete any outstanding research. If you’ve marked sections that you’re unhappy with but haven’t fixed, do that work now.

✓ Your timeline makes sense

Why it matters: A copy editor can catch small continuity errors, but if your protagonist gets pregnant in chapter three and gives birth in chapter four set two months later, that’s a structural problem requiring significant rewrites.

How to check: create a timeline of your story’s events. Track days, weeks, or months as appropriate for your narrative. Note any time jumps. Make sure character ages, seasons, pregnancy timelines, travel times, and healing from injuries all track logically. If your timeline doesn’t work, fix it before editing.

Part Two: Craft-Level Elements

Address these writing craft issues before professional editing. While a line editor will help with some of these, arriving with these problems already tackled shows professionalism and makes the editing process more effective.

✓ You've eliminated most filter words

Why it matters: Filter words (saw, heard, felt, thought, wondered, realised, noticed, seemed) create distance between the reader and your point-of-view character. They're not always wrong, but overuse weakens your prose.

How to check: Search for these words. In each instance, ask if removing the filter strengthens the sentence. 'She saw the door slam shut' becomes 'The door slammed shut.' 'He felt anger rising' becomes 'Anger rose in his chest.' You're in their head already; trust your reader to understand that.

✓ You're showing when it counts, telling when it doesn't

Why it matters: The show-don't-tell rule isn't absolute, but important emotional moments need concrete details, not summary. Showing takes more words, so save it for moments that matter.

How to check: Identify your key emotional beats. Are you telling us 'She was devastated' or showing us that her hands shaking as she tries to unlock her car, her vision blurring? For minor moments, telling is fine. For moments your reader needs to feel, show them through action, dialogue, and specific sensory detail.

✓ Your dialogue does real work

Why it matters: Realistic dialogue isn't good dialogue. Real conversations meander and include filler. Fiction dialogue should reveal character, advance the plot, increase tension, or deepen relationships. Ideally, it does several at once.

How to check: Read your dialogue scenes and ask what each exchange accomplishes. Cut pleasantries unless they reveal something about power dynamics or character. If characters are simply exchanging information, find a way to add conflict or subtext. Make sure people don't speak in paragraphs unless that's a specific character trait.

✓ Your dialogue tags are unobtrusive

Why it matters: *Said* is invisible. Readers' eyes skip over it. 'Exclaimed,' 'interjected,' 'retorted,' and other fancy tags draw attention to themselves and slow the pace.

How to check: Search for dialogue tags that aren't *said* or *asked*. Question each one. Does 'whispered' add necessary information, or is the dialogue itself quiet? Can

an action beat replace the tag entirely? In rapid back-and-forth exchanges between two people, you often don't need tags at all once you've established who's speaking.

✓ You've cut unnecessary adverbs

Why it matters: Adverbs aren't evil, but they're often lazy. 'He ran quickly' is weaker than 'He sprinted.' 'She said angrily' tells us what her dialogue should show.

How to check: Search for -ly words. For each adverb, ask if a stronger verb would work better. 'Walked slowly' could be 'trudged,' 'shuffled,' or 'dragged his feet,' depending on the character's emotional state. Keep adverbs that add meaning you can't get elsewhere, but challenge everyone.

✓ Your sentences vary in length and structure

Why it matters: Repetitive sentence structure creates a monotonous rhythm that lulls readers into inattention. Variety in sentence length controls pacing and emphasis.

How to check: Read your work aloud. Listen for the rhythm. If every sentence follows the same pattern (subject-verb-object, subject-verb-object), restructure some. Use short sentences for impact. Let longer sentences build tension or convey complex thoughts. Mix simple and complex constructions.

✓ You're not repeating information

Why it matters: Readers don't need to be told the same thing multiple times unless repetition serves a specific purpose. Trust your reader's memory and intelligence.

How to check: Look for information that appears in multiple places. Do you describe a character's appearance every time they enter a scene? Do you remind readers of backstory they already know? Cut repetition unless you're deliberately emphasising something for emotional or thematic effect.

✓ Your metaphors and descriptions are fresh

Why it matters: Clichés make readers' eyes glaze over. Original imagery engages them. Your job is to help readers see, hear, and feel your story world in ways they haven't experienced before.

How to check: Hunt for phrases you've heard before. Eyes like sapphires, heart pounding, breath catching, stomach dropping, blood running cold. These might be physiologically accurate, but they're so overused they've lost impact. Find fresh ways to convey the same information—ideally filtered through your character's specific worldview and experience.

Part Three: Manuscript Cleanliness

These technical elements ensure your manuscript is professionally formatted and internally consistent. While a copy editor will catch many of these, arriving with a clean manuscript makes their job easier and your editing investment more valuable.

✓ Your formatting is consistent

Why it matters: Professional manuscripts follow standard formatting. Inconsistent formatting signals amateur work and makes the editor's job harder.

How to check:

- Use a standard, readable font (Times New Roman 12 pt or Arial 11 pt)
- Double-space your manuscript
- Use one-inch margins on all sides
- Indent paragraphs consistently (either first-line indent or block formatting with space between—never both)
- Use only one space after periods
- Indicate scene breaks with a centred # or three asterisks
- Start new chapters on fresh pages

✓ Your punctuation choices are consistent

Why it matters: Whether you use the Oxford comma, how you handle em dashes, and whether you prefer single or double quotation marks are style choices. What matters is consistency.

How to check: Choose your style guide (the *Chicago Manual of Style* is standard for fiction in traditional publishing; many indie authors follow it as well). Make decisions about punctuation preferences and stick to them throughout. Your copy editor will work within your chosen style guide, but they can't impose consistency if you haven't established your baseline.

✓ Proper nouns and character names are spelled consistently

Why it matters: If your character is *Katherine* in chapter one and *Catherine* in chapter fifteen, that's not a spelling error your copy editor should catch—it's a consistency error you should fix.

How to check: Create a style sheet listing every character name (including nicknames and titles), place name, and invented terminology. Include correct spelling and capitalisation. Search your manuscript for each term and verify consistency. Pay special attention to names with multiple common spellings or characters who might be called different things in different contexts.

✓ Your verb tenses are consistent

Why it matters: Unintentional tense shifts confuse readers and disrupt narrative flow. While you might use different tenses for different timeline layers (present for now, past for flashbacks), those shifts should be deliberate and clearly signalled.

How to check: Decide whether your story is told in past or present tense. Read through your manuscript, watching for unintentional shifts. Present tense is particularly tricky because writers often slip into past tense habits. If you use multiple timelines, make sure each has a consistent tense and that transitions between them are clear.

✓ You've run spell check (but didn't rely on it exclusively)

Why it matters: Obvious typos make you look careless. However, spell check won't catch correctly spelled wrong words (*their/there/they're*, *your/you're*, *it's/its*).

How to check: Run spell check but also read your manuscript carefully. Consider reading it backwards (sentence by sentence) to catch errors your brain autocorrects when reading forward. Pay particular attention to commonly confused words. If grammar isn't your strength, consider hiring a proofreader before the line editor—catching basic errors yourself saves money.

✓ Your manuscript is complete and in order

Why it matters: Sending an incomplete manuscript or one with missing scenes wastes everyone's time. The editor will edit what you send, but if you later insert new material, it won't match the edited portions in style and quality.

How to check: Read your manuscript from beginning to end. Verify that all chapters are present and in the correct order. Make sure you haven't accidentally duplicated sections or left gaps. Confirm that your chapter numbering is sequential. If you're sending sample chapters for an editing quote, make sure they're consecutive and representative of your overall writing quality.

What Comes Next?

If you've worked through this checklist and can confidently tick every box, your manuscript is ready for professional line and copy editing. Well done. You've put in the foundational work that will make the editing process more productive and your final book stronger.

If you've identified areas that need work, don't despair. Every writer faces these challenges. The fact that you're catching them now saves you money and frustration later. Address the issues systematically, working from big picture down to small details.

Remember: Writing is rewriting. Your first draft's job is to exist. The second draft's job is to make sense. The goal of your third draft is to make it good. Only then are you ready for an editor to make it publishable.

Professional editing is an investment in your work, your readers, and your career as an author. Make that investment count by arriving prepared.