PROFESSIONAL TECHNIQUES
FOR WRITERS AND EDITORS

LINE EDITING FOR CRIME, MYSTERY AND THRILLER WRITERS

LOUISE HARNBY

Try the method:
Momentum - Reducing drag

A scene can move slowly and still pull readers forward. This sample shows you how to examine that forward movement and uncover what is slowing it down.

Inside this sample

- The full contents list, so you can see the scope of the book.

- The introduction, explaining the approach and how to use it.

- The complete Momentum chapter: the six-link momentum chain, practical line-editing questions, and a before-and-after scene with explanations of the edits.

READ THE MOMENTUM CHAPTER

The contents list describes the full book. Original book page numbers are retained in the extracts; the sample is not a continuous run of pages.

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Proofreader: Rian Harnby-Swainston

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Introduction and overview

Chapter purpose and outcomes

What you'll learn

You'll learn what line editing is and why it can make a difference.

After reading this chapter …

You'll understand what line editing requires in practice, the way this book's structured and how to use it to improve your own craft.

What line editing is … and isn't

Line editing (sometimes called stylistic editing or substantive editing) considers what the scene is *trying* to do and then makes stylistic improvements to ensure the language actually achieves that.

This type of editing involves examining the dialogue and narrative, and considering the degree to which sentence-level choices:

- deepen the reader's immersion
- sharpen the impact of the storytelling
- control what readers know, feel, suspect and fear
- heighten tension and sustain suspense
- build momentum so that readers want to keep turning the page.

Line editing needs to respect the author because it's their story and they've made deliberate choices about how that story is shaped and what they want the reader to experience overall.

That respect needs to be balanced with ensuring that the prose demonstrates trust in the reader and their ability to join the dots. After all, they're the audience and the ones who'll decide whether to keep turning the page because the experience created by the author earns their continued engagement.

So what is line editing not? It's not rewriting large passages, restructuring chapters, developing characterization or deciding which narrative presentation style (e.g. first or third person) or which viewpoint choice (e.g. limited, objective or omniscient) the story will use. Those are structural (or developmental) decisions that are best made before line editing takes place.

Nor is line editing a technical copyedit or a polishing proofread, though the lines often blur because spelling, punctuation and grammar affect, for example, rhythm, mood, pressure, pacing and therefore the overall reader experience.

Ultimately, line editing focuses on the text that's already there, and reviews it word by word, line by line, paragraph by paragraph, scene by scene to ensure that sense and sensibility prevail.

How line editing works

Perhaps you're an author line editing your own novel, or maybe you're a professional sentence-level editor working on a writer's behalf. Either way, the guidance in this book will work for you; the considerations don't change because you come to line work with a different job title.

Understanding author choices

If you're a professional editor, make sure that you understand any deliberate choices the author's made that will affect the decisions you make, and track preferences in a style sheet. Where the intention remains unclear, query rather than assume.

A line editor needs to distinguish between a misfire and a deliberate effect. For example, the author might have chosen to:

- build a character voice influenced by another language, including its syntax, article use or idiom
- use a regional dialect, sociolect or code-switching
- use non-standard grammar or spelling to establish a character's age, community or social background
- write deliberately sparse, blunt or emotionally detached prose
- use unconventional punctuation, capitalization or paragraphing
- switch viewpoint characters across chapters or sections so that readers can access multiple perspectives
- create dialogue that's grammatically non-standard because that's how the character communicates
- use particular names, pronouns or forms of reference to reflect identity, relationships or viewpoint
- use culturally specific references, forms of address or speech patterns.

Understanding the intention doesn't mean leaving every deliberate choice untouched. The effect might still be inconsistent, distracting or unclear. The line editor's task is to preserve the author's purpose while considering whether the prose achieves it for readers.

Adding material

If you're line editing your own work, there'll be times when you decide to add material. The question a line editor working *on behalf of* an author often asks is: Am I stepping over the line if I do this?

My view is that a line editor shouldn't just tell their client that a problem needs fixing. They should be able to offer a solution for the author to consider – a local rewrite that demonstrates how to solve a sentence- or passage-level problem.

Changes that require new decisions about plot, characterization, motive or other developmental matters need to be queried.

Understanding six essential concepts

I recommend you read Part One of this book before you delve into any of the other chapters. It explores six concepts that I think anyone doing sentence-level editing needs to understand in order to assess prose. Those are:

- **viewpoint:** which character's perspective the narrative is filtered through
- **psychic distance:** how deep inside the viewpoint character's head the reader feels they are
- **showing and telling:** how the reader interprets the scene through concrete details or is told how to interpret it through explanation
- **atmosphere and mood:** the emotional climate that the reader experiences
- **decluttering:** how to compress overwritten prose in a way that preserves the author's intention and enables the reader to stay oriented
- **momentum:** the sense of moving forward regardless of how fast or slow the pace is.

I could perhaps have shifted other chapters into this section as well, but you have to stop somewhere! After some toing and froing, I decided that these are the concepts that most often support my own line editing practice, and that I most often turn to, whether I'm considering the effectiveness of suspense, a passage of dialogue, the pacing of a scene or a sentence's rhythm.

The way this book's organized

Each chapter in this book starts with an outline of what the topic is, and what it isn't. The goal here is to define the topic and what distinguishes it from adjacent matters. For example, momentum and pacing are sometimes discussed informally as if they're the same thing, but in the world of storytelling, they're distinct.

That's followed by an examination of how the topic in question works. There's always a principles-based framework in play here – one that gives you a structured way of thinking about it. Examples include the six-link momentum chain, the suspense trifecta and the five levers of showing and telling.

Each part of that framework has a core line-editing question assigned to it. The fact that it's a question rather than a statement is deliberate. Line editing is a subjective and stylistic art, so the answers for the story you're editing will be particular to that piece of work.

Next comes a similarly structured approach to the actual line editing of that chapter's topic – guidance on how to tackle it, where to focus your attention, and what the impact could be for the reader's experience.

After that, there's a before-and-after example of line editing in action – usually two lengthier pieces of prose through which I aim to show how line editing can make a difference by applying the principles explored earlier in the chapter.

Whether you're editing your own work or someone else's, chances are that there'll be times when you look at those 'after' examples and think: *I wouldn't have approached it quite like that*, or *I'd have taken a lighter touch there*, or *I'd have tried X or Y instead.* That's absolutely fine – it's that subjectivity in play once more. I've aimed to illustrate how it *could* be done, not how it *must* be done.

Finally, there's a glossary of terms mentioned throughout the chapters, with short definitions that explain the context in which I use them in this book.

One more thing to mention: I'm a Brit, so you'll tend to see me using British English word choices, spelling and punctuation. If you're not from where I'm from, don't worry. In this book, it's the principles that matter, not the conventions.

Key learning points

- A compelling plot outlined on the back cover might persuade readers to buy a crime, mystery or thriller novel, but it's the writing that persuades them to keep reading.
- Sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, scene by scene, line editing seeks to shape the reader's experience of pace, suspense, voice and emotional impact, while ensuring that the author's original purpose is intact.

6.
Momentum: Reducing drag

Momentum matters in crime, mystery and thriller fiction because readers need to feel that the investigation, danger or uncertainty is always developing, even when the action slows.

Chapter purpose and outcomes

What you'll learn

You'll learn about what momentum is, how it's created by pressure, pursuit, resistance, change, consequence and carry-over, and how problems with entry, beats, attention and exit can weaken momentum.

After reading this chapter …

You'll understand how to review a scene's momentum, check cause and effect, and line edit to reduce drag.

What momentum is … and isn't

Momentum is the reader's sense of the scene moving in a forward direction – and, critically, that there's cause and effect in play, that what's happening now affects what will happen next.

It's not the same as pace. Pace is how quickly or slowly readers experience the narrative. A slow interrogation, surveillance sequence or forensic examination can have as much momentum as a chase scene if every exchange or discovery creates a sense of cause-and-effect motion.

It's also not the same as tension either. Tension is apprehension or uncertainty about what might happen. A scene can be tense but lack momentum if the danger or uncertainty produces no forward movement.

Why scenes come first

Review momentum at scene level rather than chapter level. Why? Because scenes contain the machinery that generates momentum: pressure triggers pursuit, resistance makes it more complicated, and the resulting change creates consequences that propel the reader forward.

Chapters, however, are more flexible containers. A chapter might have several scenes, while a chapter break might occur partway through a scene, for example at a suspense point. The scene is therefore the more appropriate unit for analysing cause-and-effect movement.

How momentum works: The six-link momentum chain

My starting point for this framework was novelist Cara Lopez Lee's five-question method for analysing scenes: What the character wants, the obstacle they face, the resulting conflict, what changes and what they want now. I've adapted and expanded that sequence here to help you understand how momentum is created. Knowing that will help you analyse whether momentum is working or is obscured.

There are six links in the chain.

Link 1: Pressure

Pressure is the existing problem, question, threat or need that makes this scene necessary *now*.

For example, a detective arrives at work, makes coffee, chats to a colleague and checks their email. Only then do they learn that a witness has disappeared. The disappearance is the pressure point. Readers need to learn that quickly rather than having to wade through mundane detail to reach it.

The core line-editing question is: Can readers identify quickly why the scene matters now?

Link 2: Pursuit

Pursuit is what the viewpoint character is trying to obtain, prevent, discover, conceal or decide.

For example, the witness's disappearance could place both the witness and the case in jeopardy. Readers will expect the detective to attempt to locate them or discover what's happened, rather than turning their attention to a routine forensic report that could wait.

The core line-editing question is: Is the viewpoint character's immediate aim clear?

Link 3: Resistance

Resistance is what makes the pursuit difficult or uncertain.

For example, the detective calls the missing witness's wife, hoping to discover what's happened. But the wife is frightened, evasive, unsure of the facts or under instructions not to speak. Any of those obstacles make the outcome less certain and increase the pressure.

The core line-editing question is: Can readers detect what's blocking, delaying or complicating that aim?

Link 4: Change

Change is what becomes different during the scene.

For example, the witness's wife is distressed and struggles to explain what's happened. However, the detective is finally able to calm her and she reveals that her husband withdrew £5,000 on the morning of his disappearance. The detective now has new information, rather than the scene remaining static.

The core line-editing question is: Is it clear what's become different during the scene?

Link 5: Consequence

Consequence is what that change costs, threatens, reveals or forces.

For example, based on the new information, the detective suspects that the missing witness was being threatened in some way and orders a forensic analysis of the family's bank-account transfers and a trace of the witness's phone.

The core line-editing question is: Does the prose show what that change reveals, costs, threatens or forces?

Link 6: Carry-over

The carry-over is the new pressure point that will travel into the next or a later scene and give the reader a reason to care.

For example, the phone trace reveals that the last-known location is the home of the man the witness was due to testify against.

The core line-editing question is: Is the new pressure point clear enough to pull readers onwards?

Line editing momentum

Line editing focuses on checking that there's cause and effect and that drag isn't obscuring the momentum.

It shouldn't involve a complete rewrite of the scene. The links in the chain should be there even if they're buried. If they're absent, that's a structural issue that needs to be addressed by content creation rather than line-editing camouflage.

Checking cause and effect

A commonly used way to check whether the six links form a chain of cause and effect is to look at whether the scene could be summarized using 'because', 'but' and 'so'.

Here's a summary of the scenario used above:

- **Because** the witness has disappeared (pressure), the detective calls his wife (pursuit).
- **But** she's frightened and struggles to communicate (resistance). She eventually reveals that the witness withdrew a large sum of money (change).
- **So** the detective suspects that someone has threatened the witness and orders a forensic analysis and a phone trace (consequences).
- **Then** when the detective traces the witness's phone, its last-known location is the home of the man he was due to testify against (carry-over pressure).

If your summary relies heavily on 'then', the scene might contain a sequence of events without enough causal connection to generate narrative momentum. Make sure that each development creates conditions for the next.

Checking for drag

Review the scene's entry point, beats, where the reader's attention is being directed, and the exit, and check that those things aren't slowing down the momentum unnecessarily.

Entry drag

Review the start of the scene and look at what's on the page before the scene's pressure link occurs. Watch out in particular for:

- travel and arrival mechanics
- expository description of the surroundings that isn't related to the character's experience of the environment
- a recap of information that readers already know
- interruptive backstory explaining why the character cares
- greetings, settling in and routine business.

Think about whether the reader would still understand the scene if this information was removed. If it does need to be there for the purpose of orienting a reader, could it be condensed or worked into other links in the scene appropriately?

Beat drag

Look at each emotion, action, inaction, description and dialogue beat, paying particular attention to whether:

- several beats are expressing the same emotion
- there are questions and answers that restate already-known information
- physical gestures have been inserted between every line of dialogue
- thoughts explain what the dialogue already conveys
- there are repeated extended indications of silence
- dialogue repeats the same refusals, threats or accusations and doesn't result in any kind of change.

Those beats should amplify the prose in each section of the momentum chain, not overshadow it.

Attention drag

Check how much of the page is given over to each detail, and therefore how much attention it's demanding from the reader.

- Is the viewpoint character noticing things that you wouldn't expect them to, but only because it's convenient for the story rather than appropriate to their knowledge, experience and emotional situation?
- Is an insignificant action being stage directed moment by moment in micro-detail?
- Does the narrative switch from the present moment to an extended recollection that risks distracting the reader?
- Does the amount of emotional or expositional detail suit the atmosphere and mood the reader is supposed to experience?

It's not necessarily that any of this information should be ditched, but rather that some might need to be expanded, reduced, or shifted up or down the scene.

Exit drag

Review the scene's exit to make sure that it lands on the carry-over rather than the operational task that follows from it. That carry-over is the new pressure, question, threat or action that will have consequences in what follows. Watch out for:

- explanations of the significance of a revelation
- descriptions of characters settling
- character reflections after a suspense point
- summaries of what's happened or what will happen next
- an important but comparatively mundane task.

If you find any of the above at the end of a scene, identify the emotional or dramatic beat with the most impact – for example a revelation, threat, decision. That pressure point is what will provide a stronger exit and propel the reader forwards.

Line editing in action

Here are two before-and-after examples illustrating a line-editing approach to momentum. In both, a witness has disappeared. His wife, Jenny, has called the viewpoint-character detective, told him that her husband, Martin, is missing and asked him to come to the house.

Example: Momentum weakened by drag

> After receiving the call from the witness's wife about him going missing, I got in my car, switched on the ignition and pulled out into the rush-hour traffic. The journey took forty minutes instead of fifteen, which was frustrating because Jenny had sounded desperate, but finally I arrived at the witness's house. I parked close to the kerb, climbed out and walked up the driveway. His wife opened the door to me after three knocks and beckoned me in. Her eyes were red and puffy.

‘Hello,’ I said. ‘I got your message to come over. Are you okay?’

She waved the question away. ‘Thank you for coming. Tea?’

I nodded. ‘Please. Milk no sugar.’

She disappeared into the kitchen, then returned with two mugs.

I thanked her and sat down. ‘Tell me what happened, Jenny.’

She burst into tears.

And for the next five minutes, that’s how it went down. She’d try to speak, but her voice would crack and she’d reach for a tissue, wipe her eyes, her nose, her mouth, her brow. It broke my heart but I waited it out, glancing from the faded curtains, to the anaglypta wallpaper, to the chipped mugs and threadbare carpet. It reminded me of my gran’s place back in the seventies. She’d died when I was only seven but I could still remember going there for afternoon tea every Tuesday like it was yesterday.

Finally, Jenny settled and the words came. She trembled as she spoke – about how £5,000 had been removed from their joint bank account.

Not just once. Four times in the past two months.

She trembled again. ‘That’s something Martin would never do without asking me first.’

Twenty grand. Regular withdrawals.

One word came to mind:

Blackmail.

I decided to trace Martin’s phone as soon as I got back to the office. Maybe that would shed more light on his disappearance.

Example: Drag reduced and momentum strengthened

Rush hour. A fifteen-minute journey took forty, but Jenny had sounded desperate and I needed answers.

She beckoned me in, her eyes red and puffy.

‘You okay?’ I asked.

She waved the question away, disappeared into the kitchen, then returned with two steaming mugs.

I thanked her and sat down. ‘Tell me what happened, Jenny.’

She burst into tears.

And for the next five minutes, that’s how it went down. She’d try to speak, but her voice would crack and she’d reach for a tissue. It broke my heart but I waited it out, glancing from the chipped mugs to the threadbare carpet.

Finally, she settled and the words came. She trembled as she spoke – about how £5,000 had been removed from their joint bank account.

Not just once. Four times in the past two months.

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How line editing improves the prose

Entry drag

The revised version compresses the journey into a single sentence and removes the mechanics of driving, parking, walking to the house and waiting at the door. It still explains why the journey took forty minutes, but gets to Jenny and the pressure of the scene much faster.

Beat drag

The greeting, tea order and some of Jenny's repeated crying behaviours have been cut. Her making tea remains because it reveals something about how she copes, but the exchange around it no longer delays the detective's pursuit of answers.

Attention drag

The extended description of the room and the memory of the detective's gran have been removed. The chipped mugs and threadbare carpet remain because they create an implicit contrast with the £20,000 that's disappeared.

Exit drag

The revised passage ends on Blackmail, the detective's disturbing new interpretation of the withdrawals. The practical decision to trace Martin's phone has been removed because it weakens the stronger dramatic exit.

Key learning points

- Momentum ensures that readers can feel a scene's forward movement.
- Check the six links in the chain: pressure, pursuit, resistance, change, consequence and carry-over.
- Use 'because', 'but' and 'so' to test the connections between them.
- If a link is absent, the problem is structural and can't be solved through line-editing camouflage.
- If the links are present but buried, line editing can reveal them by reducing entry, beat, attention and exit drag.

Keep turning the page

If this approach helps you see what is happening in your prose, there is much more to explore in the full book.

Line Editing for Crime, Mystery and Thriller Writers

Explore 39 chapters on sentence-level craft, including viewpoint, suspense, clues, dialogue, rhythm, tension, character presentation and action. Each topic combines a framework, line-editing questions and worked examples.

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