How Do You Know When It's Finished?
A Self-editing Checklist for Authors
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The Über-question

☐   Is it on the page?

This is the holy grail of effective story—that the author's vision and intentions are evident to readers. For each question below, refer **directly to the manuscript itself**—not your notes, memory, or mental image of the story—and ask yourself, How do readers know? Specifically where and how can they glean it on the page?

Assess the Big Picture

☐   **Is your overall story question clearly established early in, and does it propel the entire story?**

What main uncertainty or unresolved issue are we reading to find out?

Examples:
Why did Izzy light the fire (*Little Fires Everywhere*)?
Who died and who did it (*Big Little Lies*)?
What is the hidden secret (*Da Vinci Code*)?
Where is Bernadette (*Where'd You Go, Bernadette*)?

☐   **Do readers know who your main character(s) are?**

Readers don't care what's happening unless we care who it's happening to.

- o Do we see characters both broadly and granularly—logline description as well as foundational character traits? The fabric of who your protagonist(s) are, foundationally, intrinsically, and who they are in the world: who and what shaped them, and who and what influences them still; their preferences, ideology, temperament, foibles, vulnerabilities, personality, way of communicating; who they care about and who cares for them?
- o Do they reveal themselves through their actions, reactions, interactions, words, behavior, mannerisms, etc., concretely and specifically on the page?
- o Do readers understand them vividly and viscerally? Do we experience the key parts of their journey directly, not in expositional "tell"? Are we directly in their experience and perspective?
- o Are the characters consistent? If not, do we see why?

☐ **Is what your protagonist wants—internally and externally—clear, vivid, and strong throughout the story?**

What your character wants should be intrinsically tied to who she is—how did all the above considerations create the person driven by the thing she is driven by? Do we see how that pressing goal is an intrinsic part of driving her through the story throughout?

- o What is the thing she wants more than anything (external goal)? This may change as the story unfolds.
- o What longing makes her want that thing (internal motivation)?
- o Are overall character goals evident and strong, and do they drive the story?
- o Do we see the character's immediate goal in every single scene? And does that goal serve the overall goal?

☐ **Do we understand exactly and specifically what your protag stands to gain or lose—and why it matters?**

Characters must want something desperately, and there must be consequences—meaningful ones—if they don't achieve that goal. Don't think in terms of adding more exciting *stuff*. Think in terms of adding more *meaning*.

- o Do you show both internal and external stakes?
- o Do the stakes rise across the story, becoming ever more urgent to the climax, which presents the highest stakes yet?
- o Are stakes urgent and immediate?
- o Could you add more meaning and impact to each scene's premise/situation?
- o Do those stakes clearly motivate your character throughout her journey, driving her actions, reactions, behavior—her plans, hopes, state of mind, emotions, fears, etc.?
- o By the end do we see her gain or avoid that thing—and how it impacts her?

☐ **Is there something standing in her way at every step toward her goal?**

If it's smooth sailing for your protagonist, readers may fail to invest in her journey. Story is dependent upon ups and downs, setbacks and triumphs along the path toward your character's final destination. Flat lines are narrative dead space.

- o Are bad/undesirable things happening to your protag(s) throughout the story?
- o Do we clearly see what's in your protagonist(s)' way?
    - ▪ Externally *and* internally
    - ▪ Can be a person, thing, situation, inner conflict or demon, etc.
    - ▪ Can be more than one opposing force
- o If she overcomes one obstacle, does a new one present itself? Is each setback even more challenging than the last?

☐ **Is there any easier or better way out of each challenge, obstacle, or mess?**

The answer must be no—human nature pushes us toward the path of least resistance; if there's a less onerous way forward your character would take it.

  o Have you left her no other option but the hardest path at every turn?

☐ **Does each setback and triumph move her along her arc?**

It's not enough that these story events propel the plot—they should also propel the character along her arc, meaning the path of growth or change she undergoes in the course of the story.

  o Do we see how your protags are reacting to and processing events, how they are affected by them along the way?
  o How does each story development affect that arc? Does it challenge her beliefs, broaden her understanding, influence her choices, strengthen or weaken her resolve, shift or change her goal?
  o Does your main character(s) end somewhere different from where he began? Is his "point B" different from his "point A" (in other words, do we see change and growth)?
  o Is that change brought about directly as a result of the story events? Point A + Plot = Point B.

☐ **Does her pursuit of her goal directly drive the story and her arc?**

Does your protag(s) have agency? Is she the main force propelling the action of the plot—not necessarily the events that happen, but is her response to them the thing that pushes the story forward? If not your character may seem passive—a witness, bystander, or victim rather than the engine of the story.

  o Does she overcome each obstacle or challenge, attain every step forward through some direct action or inaction on her part?
  o Is the protagonist the driving force of the story's action and forward momentum, rather than outside forces or characters?

☐ **Is every scene essential to the protagonist(s)' journey?**

Action is not plot, and plot is not story; if your character is not moving toward a clear goal, the journey to which affects and changes her in some key way, then you may have a series of interesting events, but no cohesive, satisfying *story*.

  o Does every single scene move the story forward by developing character, furthering the plot, or raising stakes in some way—or ideally some combination of all three?
  o Does each scene move your protagonist toward the next step on a clear path toward or in service to her ultimate goal?

☐ **Is every main (or point-of-view) character essential to the protag(s)' journey?**

  o Does each character play some key role in affecting your character's actions or reactions in the events of the plot or pushing her along her arc, or both?
  o Could you combine any characters more effectively for impact, resonance, or story cohesion, especially those who fulfill similar story functions?

☐ **Does every single main plot event follow from the previous and push the story and character forward to the next?**

This evaluates story arc, cohesion, and momentum. Try my favorite *South Park* hack: Is each scene connected with either the word "but" or "therefore"? If the connecting words are "and then," you may have an episodic story without consistent forward momentum.

- o Does every story development help move your character along his or her arc? (If not, it may be superfluous.)
- o Check for common brakes on forward momentum:

  - Info dumps
  - Background dumps
  - Flashbacks
  - Too much description
  - Too much thought/inner dialogue
  - Too much unbroken dialogue
  - Too much stage direction
  - Extraneous verbiage
  - Detours (inessential plot developments, minor characters, etc.)

☐ **Does the plot hold together seamlessly and cohesively throughout the story to the end?**

- o Are there plot holes?
- o Extraneous story events unrelated to the main story arc?
- o Loose ends?
- o Unanswered questions?
- o Anything unresolved?
- o Any unmotivated actions?
- o Is each development plausible, realistic? Believable?
- o Do you rely on the "cheat" of a *deus ex machina*, an unjustified or unpaved-in "act of God" that comes out of nowhere to resolve the plot?
- o Do we have enough "connective tissue" between scenes to orient readers and allow the story to seamlessly flow? Or is there too much, stalling momentum and bogging the story down?
- o Does it all tie together cohesively? Are all story questions, plot threads, and character arcs resolved by the end? Is it satisfying?

☐ **Does the protagonist change?**

- o Does the story take the reader on a clear journey—meaning are the main characters changed somehow by the end of the story? Is she different at her point B than at point A?
- o Is that change a direct result of her journey—the challenges and victories she experienced along the way as a direct result of her own actions (or inaction)?
- o Does each main character have an arc of his own, in addition to the overall story arc?

The Microelements of Story

☐ **Is there some question or uncertainty in every single scene?**

Suspense keeps readers on the hook, turning pages to find out answers or resolution. Maintain the big overarching suspense questions throughout—will Katniss survive the Hunger Games?—but make sure you've seeded in microsuspense elements in each scene as well: Will she be chosen as a tribute; what will she do once Prim has; will Haymitch actually train them; can Katniss hone her skills enough to stay alive against more experienced tributes; will she get a good weapon in the first moments of the games, etc.

- o Does every single scene create some question in readers' minds: an uncertainty, an unresolved question, a dangling hook?
- o Do you avoid resolving that question/uncertainty as long as possible to create anticipation?
- o As soon as you resolve one question, do you introduce another?
- o Have you woven in enough puzzle pieces and clues to allow readers to try to piece them together, but without being cryptic or coy, leaving readers feeling manipulated, or avoiding unpaved-in developments (*deus ex machina*)?

☐ **Do you have opposing forces keeping your protagonist from what they want throughout the story?**

Tension is a main motor of story—incorporating some element of obstacle, friction, resistance, or conflict in every scene keeping your protagonist from what she wants helps keep readers invested and drives them through the story.

- o Do you have some element of opposition, friction, or antagonistic forces in every single scene? I.e.:
  - ▪ a problem, challenge, or impediment (person or thing)
  - ▪ a looming deadline (ticking clock)
  - ▪ a danger
  - ▪ a disagreement, friction
  - ▪ a thwarted desire or goal
  - ▪ an unmet or upended expectation
  - ▪ a lack of response
  - ▪ a false front or lie
  - ▪ an inability to react/respond (restrained, constrained, trapped, etc.)
  - ▪ a mood or atmosphere
- o Have you layered in different types of tension: internal and external, subtle and overt, direct and indirect?

☐ **Do you incorporate suspense and tension elements at the beginning and end of every single scene or chapter end?**

Think of story as a series of Tarzan vines—Tarzan needs enough momentum from the previous vine to reach the next, which had better get swinging or he's going to miss getting a handhold on the vine after that. Suspense and tension propel the reader through the story and drive momentum forward; grab readers from the very beginning of every scene, and don't give them the chance to let go at scene and chapter breaks.

☐ **Have you grounded the reader from the beginning of every chapter and scene?**

Readers need their feet planted early in each scene so they can orient to and invest in what's happening.

- o Do you establish the setting, the characters' states, and the action from early in every chapter and section?

☐ **Is the story vivid and visceral where it needs to be?**

- o Do you "show" rather than tell key developments in the plot and character's arc—turning-point moments, for instance, realization moments, high-stakes developments, essential plot points?
- o Do we see who your characters are through their actions, reactions, interactions, words, behaviors, demeanors, etc., rather than just through exposition or description?
- o Does each scene feel immediate—are readers directly and viscerally involved and affected?
- o Are the characters open to readers? Do readers see enough on the page to understand their reactions, share their thoughts, feelings, what they make of what they're experiencing? Do they live vicariously through the characters, directly and viscerally, with insight into their motivations, reactions, emotions?
- o Do readers "see" the story? Do the characters and events feel tangible and real?

☐ **Do you keep momentum/pace clipping?**

- o Do you consistently propel the story and keep action moving by using expedient "tell" where it serves the story more powerfully than "show," like character movements from one place to another, passage of time, minor or inessential developments or backstory?
- o Does the pace of each scene match its "mood" or intent (e.g., slower-paced for more internal scenes, or heavier ones; faster for action scenes, humor, etc.)?
- o Do we have enough "connective tissue" between scenes to orient readers and allow the story to seamlessly flow? Or is there too much, stalling momentum and bogging the story down?

☐ **Is each character's and the narrative point of view (if different) consistent, clear, and strong?**

- o Have you used POV consistently throughout, without slipping, uncertain, or weak POV?
- o Have you used your chosen POV most effectively for the story—e.g., creating immediate, direct, strong characterization in first-person or deep third, or using the panoramic perspective omniscient third offers you?
- o In multiple POV stories do you orient readers to which character's POV each scene is in from early in the scene?
- o Does the point of view you've chosen deepen the story, give it perspective and voice?

The Mechanics of Prose

The final polish: Is your prose *lean* and is it *elegant*?

☐ **Is it lean?**

- o Is the prose streamlined, efficient, and economical in most clearly and vividly conveying your intentions?
- o Do you have echoed words or pet phrases that appear multiple times, potentially calling readers' attention to the prose rather than keeping them within the fictive dream of the story?
- o Have you overused dialogue tags or performed extraneous verbal gymnastics with them? (You know who you are, gaspers, exclaimers, and yelpers of dialogue.)

Check for:

- ▪ Redundancy (establishing the same things multiple times, either in verbiage or in story action/dynamics)
- ▪ Useless/extraneous verbiage ("nodded ~~her head~~")
- ▪ Spoonfeeding (offering too much narration, description, or explanation to readers)
- ▪ Unnecessary modifiers (e.g., multiple or redundant descriptors, extra words spelling out what's already implied or inherent, as in "complete destruction," etc.)
- ▪ Echoed words/pet words and phrases
- ▪ Overuse or overly embellished use of dialogue tags
- ▪ Verbal gymnastics (passive voice, clunky phrasings, etc.)
- ▪ Telegraphing (telling then showing the same thing)

☐ **Is it elegant?**

- o Is the prose original, memorable, distinctive?
- o Does it clearly and specifically convey your intention?
- o Check that you haven't defaulted to cliches or tired phrasings rather than found fresh, original ones, or written in passive voice where active would be stronger.
- o Have you chosen the most precise word(s) to evoke the shade of nuance or meaning you intend?
- o Does the prose have visual and visceral impact?
- o Does its rhythm and meter reflect the mood of the scene, of the story, of the POV character?
- o Does it have distinct, original voice?

Check for:

- ▪ Cliches and tired phrasings
- ▪ Lazy writing
- ▪ Passive voice
- ▪ Word choice: nuance and shades of meaning; pinpoint accuracy of intention
- ▪ Visual/visceral impact
- ▪ Rhythm and meter reflecting the mood of story and scene

This isn't an exhaustive checklist—the infinite nuances of story and style are part of why it can be hard to know when to let go of a manuscript and release it into the world. But checking that these key story elements are clear and vivid on the page—whether you write fiction or nonfiction—can ensure that your story's most important elements are rock-solid, and give you the confidence to test its wings.

All areas of this checklist are covered in greater detail in my book *Intuitive Editing: A Creative and Practice Guide for Revising Your Writing,* as well as my blog, Editing QuickTips videos, and online Working Writer courses; find more resources at www.foxprinteditorial.com.