

Milo Sanders

## Portfolio of Editing

When conceptually editing, I always return the completed manuscript with a document that outlines general issues with the story and how I recommend the author solve the problems.

Though many authors make similar mistakes with regard to plot, themes, structure, dialogue, etc., each author's note is written specifically for them to address their own work. The following pages are examples of such notes; I've included three notes to three different authors.

Mark,

Thanks for trusting me to edit your novel. I've enjoyed working through the text and seeing your characters brought to life. As a person whose family is also considering moving farther from home soon, I related to Maureen's struggles at the beginning of the story, and I'm sure many of your readers will be able to as well.

Every story starts with a story question, or conflict. What does your character want that they can't have? By the end of your story, the question should be answered, the conflict resolved, the desire achieved. The points in the middle should bring up smaller problems that address the question and keep the plot flowing from initial problem to final resolution.

You've probably seen this before, but I've added a picture of the classic story arc for your reference below. It's necessary to keep these smaller crises in mind as you write, each adding to the main problem, culminating in the large climax scene where the main characters either achieve or fail in their greater goals. [original note included graphic of the classic story arc.]

In the first two or three chapters you've done a great job setting up two major conflicts that your two main characters need to work through to find their happy endings.

1. Maureen is unhappy that they have moved from their family homestead and believes she will never feel at home in their new place. Things she struggles with are a new house, not knowing who she can count on to help with Emily, and a new job.
2. Chelsea has been raised only by her grandmother, and while her grandmother is loving and supportive and has given her a great life, Chelsea feels like something is missing. And if she loses Gram, who will she have left? She longs for a more traditional family unit like her grandmother experienced growing up, parents and siblings, and a place where everyone comes together to work the family business and support each other.

The answer to both these problems comes in the form of each other: Maureen feels more at home with the plants they buy at Chelsea's greenhouse, as she finds a trusted caregiver who becomes like another daughter, and with Chelsea comes a place to work doing something she enjoys, rather than tedious paperwork at a law firm. Chelsea, conversely, finds a traditional family unit in the Huntingtons, with a mom and a dad and a sister who join in the family business and can restore it to its former glory while also helping her grandmother recover from her stroke. I think that's a beautiful way to resolve the problems.

But. This resolution can't be fully realized until the end of the story.

Conflict is what drives a story. Real life is not perfect, and your readers are not going to relate to characters who have no flaws and no problems. Yes, everything can work out in the end, but all humans have doubts, all humans have issues, and it's the getting through the hard times that make the happy endings even more sweet.

You've got potential conflicts set up within your story, but each time you make everything smoothed over by the next paragraph. Maureen's work is closing down a building? She can work

from home instead! Gram had a stroke? She can come home in two days and only needs a wheelchair for a short amount of time! The greenhouse takes a lot of work? The Huntingtons know how to run a greenhouse! Convenient answers rarely form in real life, and your characters need to struggle to find the answers too. These small problems need to become larger obstacles for your characters to overcome and through them learn something about themselves. In each series of crisis, focus on how it relates to 1) Maureen not feeling at home in a new place, and/or 2) Chelsea missing a traditional family unit.

For example, Gram's stroke and stay in the hospital makes Chelsea feel even more alone. Gram doesn't get better soon, and Chelsea wishes she had a larger family unit to help take care of her. Don't let the Huntingtons fix her problems before Chelsea even realizes she has them. Chelsea needs to feel alone, helpless, before she can appreciate what the Huntingtons can offer her.

As for Maureen, her work having to lay off employees almost as soon as she begins could make her question why she even wanted to rejoin the work force in the first place. Can she truly have it all, being a working mother (a struggle many mothers relate to)? If her boss can't afford the lease of the building, can he afford to pay her? If she has to take a pay cut to continue working, can she afford Chelsea as a babysitter? If she works from home, where will she find the room to work (a problem many readers have been facing during the coronavirus outbreak)?

Currently you have Maureen considering Chelsea as her older daughter by halfway through the book. This is one of your main story arcs and needs to find conflicts before it can be resolved near the end. For example, perhaps Maureen wants to love Chelsea, but she finds herself envious that Emily prefers Chelsea's company to her own. Or perhaps she is unhappy with the choices Chelsea makes when Chelsea is babysitting. Maureen laughed off the incident when they went to the cottage, but this could be a major problem for her. Maureen trusted Emily into Chelsea's care and then they just went running off into a stranger's house? What if Emily had fallen while they were running away? Perhaps Emily has an allergic reaction to a food Chelsea gave her, and Maureen feels like a bad parent and guilty she forgot to warn Chelsea about allergens?

Rather than making Emily a perfect child, make a child your readers can relate to, one who is reacting to a lot of changes in her life. And in some ways, her reactions can additionally create obstacles for Chelsea and Maureen. Emily says she loves the new plants, but instead she finds joy in destroying them. Emily doesn't have friends here, so she tries to capture the rabbits and force them to play tea party with her. Emily isn't used to her mother working full time. There is no way this can't be affecting her. How can Emily react negatively to Chelsea's new role in her life? And if Maureen chooses to work from home, Emily will most certainly be trying to stay with her in her work space as much as possible. How will that play out and keep Maureen from her goal of feeling at home in this place?

In addition, you never resolved the issue with if the Huntingtons were going to be partners in the greenhouse business and what that would mean for Maureen and Bob's other jobs. They agreed to help work with Chelsea and Gram, and then the story took a completely different turn. But this business proposition cannot be entered into lightly and it makes for a lot of potential conflict for both story arcs. In real life there are lots of complications that come with becoming part of a business, and this conflict can really add to Maureen's feelings of whether or not moving was the

right choice for them and if this will make Chelsea feel like part of a family unit. Maureen and Bob both need to consider if she will continue working at the law firm, if he can afford to split his time and money between a struggling greenhouse and his own carpentry business, and what happens with Emily while they are working, and what is best for her? If they want to restore the greenhouses to their former glory, how are they going to come up with the capital to start this project? What if Gram's ideas don't match up to Maureen's? Perhaps Gram wants to focus on offering landscaping architecture and shrubbery, but Maureen wants to focus on restoring the Christmas tree farm. If they don't have money or space for both, how will they choose? Being able to fix the sprinklers is only one minor inconvenience to overcome.

If you'll take a look at your story through this lens of conflict and resolution, you'll notice that nowhere in this story does John, the owner of the cottage, create conflict nor resolve either of the story's conflicts. John is a superfluous addition to the end of the story that I highly recommend deleting altogether. The need for a love interest should be established at the beginning of story, the interest himself introduced early on, and their relationship have conflicts that keep the plot going throughout, not pushed in at the end of the story. If anything, you have set up in Chelsea a need to live in a place of her own. Her conflict is that if she moved, then no one would be able to care for Gram and in turn, care for the greenhouses. Once Gram reunites with Mary and finds business partners in the Huntingtons, this problem is solved, and Chelsea is free to live alone in the cottage. But nowhere do you set up a need for Chelsea to be married, so making a wedding as the climax of the book makes no sense. You mentioned potentially making this a series, so John or any other potential love interests can be added and focused on in later books. Again, relationships require a full story arc, not to be thrown in at the end.

Instead your last ten thousand words should focus on the ultimate climax of all the issues Maureen and Chelsea have come across in the previous chapters and how they can be resolved. Instead of a wedding, a great happy ending could be the grand reopening of the other greenhouses. However, I'm happy to help you flesh out other ideas if you have them.

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Evan,

Congratulations on writing an excellent fantasy novel. I enjoyed editing your manuscript and getting to know the world you crafted. You have excellent characters and character development. Your plot and world building were solid and revealed at a perfect pace. You had a great balance of point of view between Lehksi and Emily, and a great contrast between the two women and how they approached the overarching problem. Pretty much all the editing suggestions I have are smaller, specific sentence issues, and I have dealt with all of those within the text. Below I've also detailed some grammatical issues you had a habit of making, some of which I noted in the text, and others I just corrected without note.

My only problem on the conceptual end is the ending. I'm assuming you concluded where you did because you have an entire second book's worth of content forthcoming. However, it feels like you have cut off the book before the big ending. You have treated the fight scenes against Zaro and his ultimate death as the big conflict at the end, and the resolution being Emily, Marty, and Lehksi's declaration of their next steps as the denouement, but that's not how you've actually written it.

See, you established at the beginning of the story that the conflict for Emily is rescuing her father, and the conflict for Lehksi is helping Marcus save the trees and stop the shade. Both of these conflicts will be resolved, either for good or for ill, with the fall of the last Tyr tree. Therefore, what happens at the last Tyr tree should be the true ultimate conflict. Zaro's death was definitely a big obstacle that needed to be overcome, but it was just one on the path to Emily and Lehksi's true callings. The story ends almost abruptly with them both setting out to reach the last Tyr tree, but without the resolution that the reader will find there. My brain tells me there should be around five to ten thousand more words in your novel to finish this conflict and bring our heroines to their resolution.

I'm suspecting that many bad things will happen after they reach the final Tyr tree, even worse than what we have previously seen in your story. The repercussions of whether Emily destroys the last tree or if Marcus kills Emily or whatever you have happen there happens—those are the events that should be placed in a second novel, because it will set up a whole new set of goals for the characters, whether it be finding Emily's dad and figuring out what he has been doing all this time, or chasing the shade further, or stopping the saint from releasing some other hellhound on the earth. But until we know what those things are that will happen, we can't know what we're waiting for in the second story.

I strongly recommend changing that epilogue to a conventional chapter and then continuing another two or three chapters to finish your current arc. If you're worried about length, your story is already 127k. A few more thousand words isn't going to really change anything.

If the events that lead up to the final Tyr tree "battle" will truly take more than 5-10k, and there is more going on here than I realize, then forgot what I said and you can save them for another story. However, that means that you've set up *To the North* with the incorrect conflicts for your main characters. Instead, you need to reframe your story in a way that the conflicts will be "resolved" with the death of Zaro. Do you want to focus instead on Lehksi rejecting her role of steward after Zaro dies? Perhaps Emily knew of Zaro before she reached her father's house and was already seeking him out and what he knew of her father at the beginning of the story. Let me know if you want to talk more about this and how to resolve this issue.

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Joseph,

Thanks for trusting me again to work through your stories of Malik and *Pathfinder* crew. I've noticed you did a good job on being more concise and keeping your story filled with action. I know you were mainly worried about the end, but I also have a few questions about the plot that I'd like to detail below.

Your main plot is that the mantas are taking over the galaxy and Malik is the only one who can stop them. You've done a great job of showing the *how* this plays out, but I didn't get a fully fleshed out explanation as to *why* on either of these things. Why are the mantas so determined to take over humans and replicate themselves across the worlds? Why does Malik know that it is his responsibility to stop them?

Let's talk about this second question first. You touch briefly on Malik and the Fates having a premonition, and that fighting the mantas might stop this vision from coming true. However, this

was only vaguely stated at the beginning, and the mantes' involvement in a dark future wasn't explained until page ninety-five, which is over halfway through the manuscript. I was left wondering what I had missed and what everyone was worried about for thousands of words. Hinting at the conflict but then not following up in short order doesn't let the readers know what they should be worried about or rooting for; the readers are confused while waiting for an explanation and can't empathize with the main character's conflict.

As for the previous question of the mantes' motivation, it's never explained at all to my knowledge. Throughout the course of their eradication it is revealed that they are intelligent and capable of manipulation and planning ahead. They're also shown to have vindictive tendencies when they use Kroes to go after Malik and punish him by killing his friends. Because of this, it's hard to believe that their scheme is as simple as an instinctual need to procreate and form hives like basic insects. Their plans are put into effect before, or at least in conjunction with, Malik's premonition spurring him to act against them, which also implies that they are not simply reacting to Malik's actions but proacting based on something in him they feel the need to destroy. But what is the motive for their goals? Every villain should be shown with an underlying motive, and these mantes showed themselves to be villainous, not just "bad bugs." A look into their motivations through Kroes could be a solution to this.

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