

## **IPEd article – manuscript assessment**

Call it ignorance or arrogance: it's tempting for new editors to want to put their 'stamp' on the work they edit. This newbie's first instinct for a manuscript assessment was to be a fix-it-all (and, by extension, a know-it-all). Faced with the draft of a 45,000-word novella, I had my scalpel primed for all manner of surgeries – amputations, transplants, reconstructions – no matter how invasive or cosmetic.

But my experience taught me the necessary humilities and contingencies of the editing process. In crafting my structural report, I discovered how editing comprises a series of radically revised expectations. I began with a full list of suggestions, culled that list to only the most important points (also known as 'choosing your battles'), further narrowing them to what I thought was achievable within our schedule.

Fleshing out my suggestions forced me to ask myself, at every stage: what was I really asking of the author? How could I be specific – not only asking to 'add more nuance to this character' or 'rework the sequence of actions', but also identifying which character, and which actions – without being overly prescriptive? How could I be helpful without explaining too much?

Rereading these points, I remained conscious of not imposing objective standards of narrative or style. I found myself obsessing over the need to maintain a 'central narrative arc' in the story, before realising the novella's beauty lay in the moments where it was perhaps digressive, or shifted jarringly in tone or pace, or in its few subplots. I reoriented my compass and began to follow the internal logic of the work; I was editing on the author's terms, not mine. I was only a visitor to the world she'd painstakingly built from the ground up.

I learnt that you can never be too diplomatic. Therein lies the power of the compliment sandwich: to place these queries and comments within a solid framework of praise. Again, I found that being specific about what worked well, and why – moments, passages, characters, aspects of style – helped me to gesture towards an understanding of the author's purpose.

Communicating this purpose was central to the structural edit. At every stage of the process, I asked myself what exactly I was asking the author to do, and how much was manageable. Being honest with myself about the amount of rewriting, cutting, or adding of new material in my suggestions meant I could more honestly frame my requests to the author.

I prepared to send the structural report. Remembering that the author wasn't obliged to agree with all (or any) of my suggestions, I reassured myself that, at the very least, they could provide a new lens to filter her understanding of her novella, or a new way to deconstruct and reassemble it in a way that worked for her.

Reminding myself how lucky I was to be in a position to ask anything of an author, and how tenuous and humble my role as editor was, I attached the report to an email and clicked send.