Everything In Its Right Place: Fiction Continuity

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Write Edit Index conference

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Welcome

Whodunnit?

An ad created for London Transport

Contains 21 deliberate continuity errors

Watch: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubNF9QNEQLA

Whydunnit?

Pay attention!

It's easy to miss continuity errors.

Our eyes and brains can only handle so much detail at once.

The good news

You can get better at continuity through:

- training

- management strategies

- constant vigilance.

- What is continuity?

- Who's responsible?

- Two types of continuity in novels

- Continuity toolkit

  - Style sheet

  - Continuity tracker

- Best-practice editorial approach

- Questions

OBJECTIVES

What *is* continuity?

The **maintenance** of **continuous action** and **self-consistent detail.**

"continuity." *The Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Current English*, 2009
http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/continuity.aspx

Who's responsible for continuity?

It's a big job...

Who's responsible for continuity in TV and film?

- Script writer
- Script editor
- Script producer
- Script supervisor
- Camera operators
- Director
- Editor
- Showrunner

- Various other departments:
  - Wardrobe
  - Hair
  - Makeup
  - Special effects
  - Art department
- Etc.

Who's responsible for continuity in **novels**?
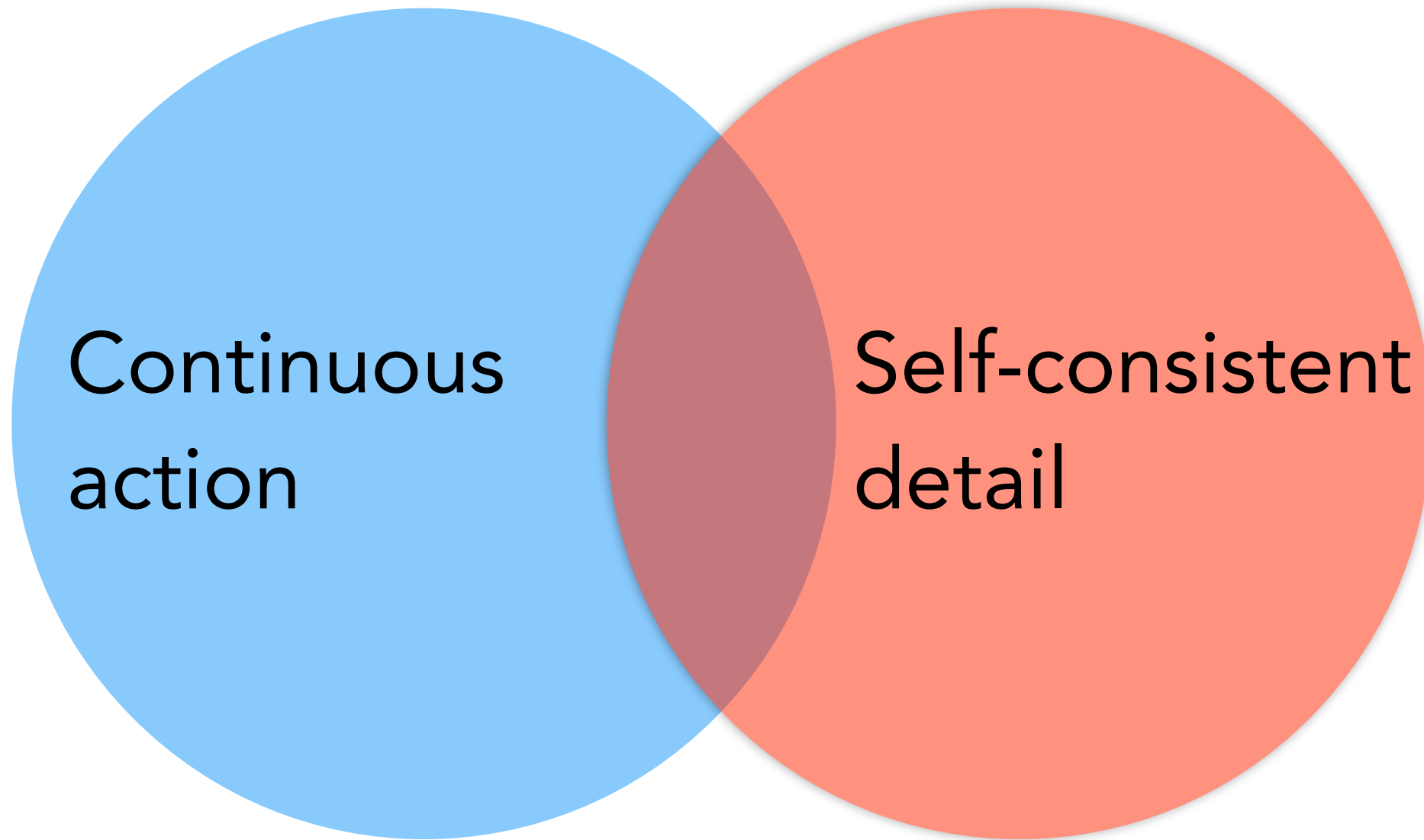
- **AUTHOR**

- Editor

- Proofreader.

Continuity is …

… one of the ways that editorial professionals **add value** to the publishing process.

Continuity in the wild

(What to look for in your next project)

flickr/Zabara Alexander

Two types of continuity

Continuous action

Self-consistent detail

These two types applied to novels...

Continuity type 1: Continuous action

- Plot

- Timeline

- Blocking

Plot and timeline

- **Is the plot possible**?

- Are there any **holes**?

- Have any dead characters come back to life* when they weren't meant to?**

- Are there internal **inconsistencies** in the **timeline**?

*Surprisingly common!
**Assuming it's not a zombie novel.
Obey the rules of the fictional world.

Absolute & relative time

Absolute time: '11 am on Saturday, 2 July 2016'

Relative time: 'two weeks later'

- Relative time has more wiggle room.

- If it could go either way, I tend to give the author the benefit of the doubt.

Implied time

References to:

- seasons

- weather

- the position of the sun

- phases of the moon

- etc.

Problem:
time-scale integration

- Most novels use all three time scales simultaneously.

- We need to be able to reconcile them.

- How?

  - Spoiler: continuity tracker sheet.

Blocking

The **positioning and movement of characters** in a scene.

flickr/Rafal Klisowski

Common blocking pitfalls

- **Describing an action repeatedly**, e.g. characters entering a room twice without leaving it.

- **Losing track of characters**: how they are positioned in relation to each other,* how they are sitting/standing, where they are looking, etc.

- **Props disappearing and reappearing**, e.g. coffee cups.

Very common in sex scenes!

Continuity type 2: self-consistent detail

- **Place** setting; geography

- **Time** setting; period detail

- Characterisation

- **Character details**

- etc.

Continuity toolkit

What's in your toolkit?

- Style sheet
- Continuity tracker
- Other personal/project-specific solutions
- Professional judgment
- Constant vigilance.

How much detail do you need to track?

- Use your best judgment

- Trial and error!

- Balance competing needs:

  - Comprehensiveness versus budget/deadline.

Watch for red flags!

Continuity red flags

Pay particular attention to numbers:

- Dates

- Times, timezones

- Ages

- Distances

- Dated days of the week, if year is specified.

Watch for:

- Hair and eye colour; height

- Clothing

- Weather/ seasons

- Crops and flowering plants

- Pregnancy progress

Spot check anything that:

- Is important to the story, if you know nothing about the topic.

- 'Smells' funny.

Clothing continuity

The heroine, a **nurse**, had just finished her shift at the hospital. The hero described her **'clopping' down the corridor**.

- She normally wore rubber-soled flat shoes at work.

- From the sound, readers would infer the heroine was wearing hard shoes with a heel.

- The heroine hadn't explicitly changed clothes.

I suggested the author either (1) change the sound, or (2) briefly mention she'd changed clothes.

The style sheet

You're likely to include character and place names, so why not also track things like these?

- General appearance

- Major relationships

- Personality quirks

- Significant changes (e.g. injuries)

- Relative distances and directions

- etc.

Two style sheet methods

Inline method

versus

Breakout method

Inline method

G

G force(s)

G-Man

Gaddis, Harley 'Igor' – Chief Petty Officer, wears gold wedding band, six foot four, husband Sammy (Samuel), aka Igor the giant – beard, biggest of the SEALs on the chopper originally in Book 1, shaved head, a head taller than Dave. Shaves beard in Book 2.

Gargui, Sectum

gas station

Gerber Mark II fighting knife

Breakout method

Separate style sheet sections for:

Word list/usage	Vehicles
Characters	Weapons
Places	etc.

Managing continuity via the style sheet

PRO

- No need to create and update yet another document

- Searchable

- **Indispensible for series**, especially when there's a lengthy gap between volumes or a change of editorial personnel.

CON

- Can lead to very lengthy style sheets

- Without consistency of approach, can become difficult to find the information you need

- **Not great for timeline tracking.**

The continuity tracker

Records how much time has passed at specific points in a story, and other continuity red flags as desired.

- Much better than a style sheet for keeping track of timelines.

- **Can reconcile absolute, relative and implied time scales.**

- Mine is for personal use only – so it can be as sketchy or messy as I want.

- Particularly good for proofreads, where you might only get to do one pass.

Continuity tracker Road to Hope   Page _1_

Date/day	Time passed	Page	Notes
DI		1	Ellie + Flynn's wedding
			Stunning hot
			Ellie _forgiven_ 'what had happened 10 yrs ago' _at leaving Fab after_
			⟨J p345 call outside⟩
		4	L loved Flynn since she was 12 + recently from _Sudan_
			Ellie arrived in Yr 11
			J 15 – 15 y o when arrived
			Lucy 17 = J 25
			Ellie + F going out since Lucy's age (ie 17)
		5	JH = 'a few months ago'
			Hilda Quatermaine collapses in church
		6	late Nov
			drizzly little sweltering rather
		11	Hannah 'leaving tomorrow' for 2 mnths travel
			L planning to resign Monday (prob sub now!)
		12	Hannah 40-something long plait brown hair
			Tom brown eyes
			faded jeans

What's on my template?

Date/day	I identify the **start of the main action** and call it **D1**, or day 1. As I work through the book I match each absolute, relative and implied time marker to **D2**, **D3**, **D4**, etc., as best I can, building a **unified picture of the timeline**. Absolute time references also go here.
Time passed	Relative and implied time markers go here.
Page	Unique locator within the book. (Could be a para or chapter ref for ebook-only titles.)
Notes	Any other relevant information.

Continuity tracker: download my PDF template

sarahjhfletcher.com/continuity-tracker

Continuity & editorial best practice

Two bad approaches... and a better one

Bad approach 1: go hard

Obsess about getting every single detail of continuity 'accurate', at the expense of plot, characterisation, theme, pacing, style, etc.

Annoy the author with incessant queries about tiny details that have little to no bearing on the story.

Bad approach 2: go home

Completely **ignore** continuity. It's too hard.

A better approach: go softly

Balance continuity with other editorial considerations.

Use your best judgment to walk the line between 'accuracy' and **what the audience is likely to perceive as 'correct'**.
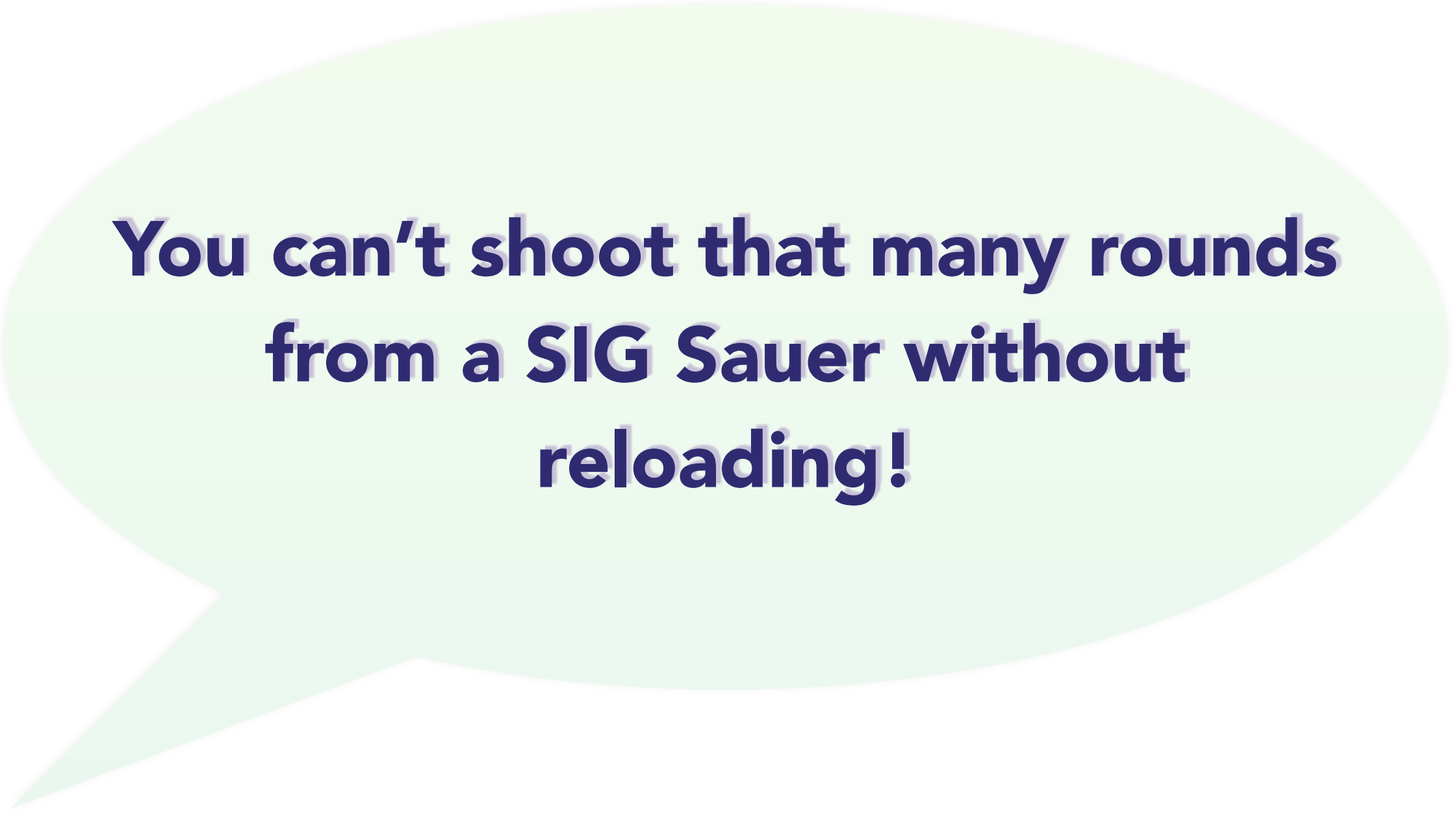
Difficult truths of working on continuity

- What is 'accurate' won't necessarily read as such to everyone.

- What the author considers 'accurate' may be less definitive than they claim.

- Different genres may have different continuity standards.

- Certain readers will have unusual amounts of knowledge – either more or less – and this affects how plausible they will find events.

- You will never, ever, ever make the continuity in a work of fiction unassailable.

Who are your readers?

Should you edit with the 'reasonable reader' in mind?

How to deal: editorial practice

QUERY, QUERY, QUERY.

- Don't make continuity changes without the author's input.

- Remember: even minor tweaks may have knock-on effects.

  - Particularly timeline and plot tweaks.

How to deal: editorial practice 2

- Use your **best professional judgment**.

- Think of readers.

- Keep an open mind.

- Don't let continuity overwhelm other editorial considerations.

How to deal: author relationships

- Don't get smug.

- Don't punish authors for continuity mistakes.

- Suggest solutions where appropriate, but maintain editorial boundaries.

- Remember: **the author is ultimately responsible**.

Thanks

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- All the photographers credited – thanks for licensing your works under Creative Commons.

Questions?

Thanks for coming!

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