

Summary Report on MiPA General Meeting—October 11, 2022

26 Participating on Zoom

Fiction Editing: Plot, Character Arcs, and Worldbuilding



[Kristin Noland](#) is a freelance editor, specializing in developmental and line editing of speculative fiction with a bachelor's degree in English and literature from Southern New Hampshire University. In her career, she has edited over fifty books, including an Amazon best seller. She works directly with authors to make their manuscripts shine, and with hybrid and traditional publishers in various rolls.

Kristin discusses how to perform a developmental edit on fiction manuscripts, concentrating on the major through-lines—plot, character arcs, and worldbuilding—what to look for when assessing these big-picture elements, and how to address them in an editorial evaluation.

Pre-meeting discussion:

We discussed MiPA's upcoming participation in the [Heartland Fall Forum](#) in St. Louis (Oct. 13-14) and the [Twin Cities Book Festival](#) at the Minnesota state fairgrounds (Oct. 15, dress warmly). MiPA has prepared a catalog called *Indie Publishing* with our book award winners and other books, that we will be distributing at these festivals and then later to MiPA members. We also have an exciting [lunchtime meeting](#) coming up on Oct. 20 where Carol Topp will cover *Business Tips and Taxes for Writers and Publishers*. Next month, at our regular meeting, Rachel Anderson will talk about building an author platform. In December we will have an open celebration meeting where the MiPA board will field questions.

Big Picture Items:

- Point of View (POV) and Tone—Who and how
- Message—What the author is trying to convey
- Characters—Realistic
- Character Arcs—Growth and change
- Plot—Structure
- Pacing—Pace of the story and scenes
- Cliffhangers and Chapter Hooks—Makes you want to turn the page
- Worldbuilding—Setting

In general, while working with an author, the editor's suggestions should be "reader-focused and author-kind."

Character Arcs (bad to good, bad to worse):

- Wound—often a deep inner wound (childhood wounds are best)
- Wants—goals to achieve
- Needs—lessons to be learned

For example, in *Pride and Prejudice* both Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy are prideful and believe they are right. They both have a positive arc and ultimately are married. They both accept the reasoning of the other.

In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Theon Greyjoy has a complex arc, going from being a selfish immature teen, to a ruthless young man, to a tortured captive, and then a supporting hero.



The wants of the characters should be clear but they are foiled by their flaws. Only when they get their needs met should they heal, understand their flaw, and grow. An editor should help make these key character items more clear and prominent.

Plot:

- *Beginning*. Hook the reader. Prologue, snapshot, or action are options. Get to know the main character. Add emotions to create a bond between the reader and that character. Plant a question in readers minds. Hint that something important will happen. Search for the best beginning from the book.

For a *prologue*, include some backstory (but not too much). Something exciting!

The *snapshot* approach is a brief look at life before it changes. Hint that something will happen or have it actually happen.

Starting with *action* is often best. Drop the reader directly into the story. Include dialogue and start with an inciting incident. It will bring up many questions.

- *Inciting Incident*. This should be a life-changing event—shaken to the core. The characters should make decisions and take actions they haven't needed before. Make sure the event is drastic enough.
- *Learning Curve*. Lots of ups and downs, fun times, and problems. Make the problems as hard as possible so the character learns. They should try and fail multiple times—keep it exciting. Don't let them learn too fast.

- *Middle*. In the middle something tricky should come up—something new that is not easy to get through. Make it hard for the main character.

The earlier subplots should be tied up and new subplots or adventures can be introduced.

One can even introduce new characters, but not too many

- *Climax*. Everything has built up to this and everything culminates in this epic scene. Most readers want the main character to win at this point. The main character should battle the antagonist by him or herself, even if there has been a supporting team. And it should involve a difficult decision. For example, in *A Few Good Men* the Tom Kruse character needs to win the case even though it will destroy his career. End with an epic scene. It could be a great, exciting, long battle. The character can hit rock bottom and use everything they have learned. Win or lose, it must match the main message of the book.
- *Resolution*. This is where all the loose ends should be tied up. If it is a book series, there might be an unanswered question or an overarching problem. The resolution can also be in the form of an epilogue—how things look a time after the climax action.

For a romance, readers expect a happy ending in all cases. Mysteries should be solved.

If the book is envisioned as part of a series, an overarching problem may remain. This can be for science fiction, fantasy, or in mysteries. For example, if a big crime family still remains, the problem might not be over.

Epilogues should be only one third the length of a regular chapter. They can also hint at an unsolved problem.

- *Worldbuilding*. Accuracy, consistency, believability, and rule breaking are all important. An editor should check for all of these. Reality can be broken in fantasy and other novels, but they have to be consistent. Consistency is crucial for believability. If the protagonist or antagonist can break some reality rules, don't surprise the reader by having some normal person pull out the same trick.

To go deeper, Kristin has developed paid courses for both editors and authors with immediate lifetime access, subtitled audio and video, which allows you to learn at your own pace. They cover the topics not covered in tonight's talk.

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Questions and Answers:

Q1. As an editor, how do you deal with authors who are in love with their work and refuse to make changes?

A1. You definitely want to have a long discussion with the author before you take on a job. In a 30-60 minute session we discuss what kind of editing they want, who needs to make the changes, and maybe do a sample edit.

Q2. Do you ever have an author who wants to sit down before writing too much and discuss the big items like story structure with you?

A2. Kirstin writes a letter with changes suggested. A ghost writer, alpha editor, or book coach might be better options. She can suggest someone. Most editors want the manuscript to be finished.

Q3. Does every character need an arc?

A3. The protagonist usually does. A few main ones should have an arc.

Q4. How do you strike the balance between suggesting changes and just doing it?

A4. I usually suggest changes. Sometimes an author might ask you to make the changes—that is the only time I might. Line editing is more detailed and I may put in changes, without moving things around.

Q5. How do you find the right editor for the genre you are in?

A5. Go to EFA ([Editorial Freelancers Association](#)) they have a listing, and you input the genre type. Ask them for a sample edit.

Q6. Do you edit for other book elements while doing a developmental edit? How could you resist fixing spelling or grammar problems?

A6. You can make some suggestions. During a line edit you do those things.

Q7. Please talk about the bad character arc—going from bad to worse.

A7. It can be that the action of the protagonists forces the bad guy to get worse.

Q8. How do you know if there are too many subplots?

A8. If you get confused, that is a sign. I am working on a book with seven points of view. The subplots have to tie in. One can suggest ending some subplots.

Q9. How do you get the reader to bond with the characters?

A9. What is missing? Is there no emotion being shown? They have to have a believable reaction to things.

Q10. Are authors sometime resistant to suggestions? How do you deal with that?

A10. It is their book. Sometimes you have to just accept it. You may not want to work with that person again.

Q11. On books like historical fiction, does it have to be accurate?

A11. Yes. I will check some things but not deep historical facts. The author has to do that.

Q12. How about writing a new legend or myth?

A12. If it is connected in some way to a well-known myth you have to be more careful. But if it is entirely new you have more freedom.

Q13. How do you deal with POV shifts?

A13. There should be no POV shifts within an actual scene. But if the scene changes, you can head-hop. You can't assume a character knows something only another person knows. In the omniscient mode, you cannot have any internal thoughts. Omniscient is different from head-hopping.

Q14. Can a prologue have a different POV?

A14. Sometimes. The prologue could be about the main character at an earlier time. You have to consider the whole book.

Q15. How do you keep track of all the items in a book? Do you map it all somehow?

A15. I try to keep it all in my head and I do remember most of it.

Q16. Do you only work on one book at a time?

A16. I am doing that now. I plan to schedule two with a little overlap. Three would be too many.

Q17. What do you think about real-time editing on Google? Scott liked the experience.

A17. I wouldn't like that because the author is always changing things.

Q18. What is your favorite novel and why?

A18. I love *Gone Girl*. I like what she says about relationships. She uses interesting words. Her messages are really good.

Q19. How many rounds are needed?

A19. Sometime only one or two. But it may be three for some authors.