

Buff it up before you send it out

You've been sending out query letters, and you just got your first request for a partial. Congratulations! After you stop celebrating and before you send those first few chapters, go over them with a fine-toothed comb to make sure that they're as clean and crisp as possible. You might not get a second chance to make a good first impression.

These are pretty basic fixes, but when you need to put your best work in front of an agent or editor, it's important to get the basics right.

- 1. Think tight.** Be aware of repeating yourself. If one sentence gets your point across, don't use two. The same applies to complete paragraphs. As writers, sometimes we tend to get a bit wordy. If you've already said something, repeating it using different words isn't going to get your point across any better; it'll just slow down your story, and you don't want that.
- 2. Strong words.** Be sure to use the word that *best* conveys what you're trying to say. If it takes some sitting and pondering, or reaching for your thesaurus, then do it. I've found myself using several words when one stronger word would do a better job.
- 3. Missing or extra words.** Be aware of missing or extra words. It's usually the little guys (like "a," "and," "the" or "an") that get left out. When you've lived with a work long enough, you know what it's supposed to say, and after you've read it ten gazillion times, your eyes tend to skip over things. The same goes for extra words. When I revise a sentence, sometimes a word that should have been deleted with the rest of the discarded copy gets left behind, leaving me with one heck of a funky-sounding sentence.
- 4. Be clear.** As writers, we assume a lot. When we get involved with our characters and stories, we can fall into the trap of assuming that we've already explained something. But in reality, that explanation is only in our heads—it never made it onto the screen. When you're reading your work for the last time before sending it out, either read it out loud, reading *each* word, or better still, have someone with sharp eyes go over it for you. Something that may have made perfect sense to you may actually need some clarification.
- 5. Spelling and punctuation.** I know this is obvious, but it's so important in making a good impression on an agent or editor. When it comes to spelling and punctuation, get it right. If you're not sure, look it up. A typo or two can be overlooked, any more than that just looks sloppy. And don't depend on Spell Check. A letter once went out to our entire city apologizing for any "inconvenience" that an arts fair may cause in terms of parking. That was all fine and very nice, except they apparently trusted Spell Check, and "inconvenience" became "incontinence." That's a *big* and embarrassing difference.

You've worked hard on your book, so give it the best chance for success. Don't forget the basics.