

Editorial Assessment

Working title: “ [REDACTED] ”
Author: [REDACTED]
Description of manuscript: [REDACTED]
Date: [REDACTED]

You have a strong and compelling concept for a thriller manuscript. To fulfill its potential and make it a more marketable manuscript, I recommend you work on the following issues. I hope these suggestions will improve and strengthen your writing and help you create a stronger, tighter story line.

A. Story development and structure.

1. While your story is both interesting and timely, you struggle to give it a clear focus. I suggest writing an outline to help you clarify the basic structure and arc of the story, highlight the major plot points, and develop your characters as they relate to the plot. Answering the following six questions will help you focus the concept and each character’s role in it.
 - a. *Who is the primary protagonist?* You have several characters who appear to be central to the action: [REDACTED], [REDACTED] (alias [REDACTED]), and [REDACTED]. I discuss your characters and their development in more detail below.
 - b. *Who is the primary antagonist?* Again, you have a couple of possibilities: [REDACTED] (alias [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]), and [REDACTED].
 - c. *What is the primary conflict?* You address several broad themes, ranging from [REDACTED] to international conflict to political bureaucracies. In a thriller, readers

expect one primary concern or conflict that drives both the characters and the action to a dramatic climax between the protagonist and the antagonist. Focusing your plot more tightly on one concept— [REDACTED] —will help keep the action from dragging or getting sidetracked into discussions of political intrigue and international disputes.

- d. *How does the main character overcome the antagonist and resolve the conflict?* Without a clear protagonist–antagonist relationship and a strong primary conflict, the story doesn't compel the reader to keep reading. Eventually [REDACTED] does provide information to the United States that results in the [REDACTED], but his role in that event—in fact, in most of his actions—is relatively passive. Your story will be stronger, the action more compelling, and readers more satisfied if you make [REDACTED] the active force in bringing about the resolution of the mission.
 - e. *What growth does the protagonist achieve/what lesson does the protagonist learn?* Because you have so many characters and your narrative moves in so many different directions, your story arc lacks a clear and coherent construction. [REDACTED] does get closure by helping to [REDACTED], but he is not active in that resolution. At the cemetery in the last chapter, you also show him facing his inability to resolve concerns about the [REDACTED] [REDACTED], which means he at least somewhat recognizes his flaws, but it's unclear how he has changed or made a difference in his own or others' life. For example, I wanted to know how the experience affected [REDACTED], how he felt about what had happened, and whether he and his wife reaffirmed their commitment to each other. You could show the wife with [REDACTED] at [REDACTED] and describe how his time in [REDACTED] brought them closer together, which would indicate positive growth.
 - f. *Why does the reader care what happens to the characters?* What makes book, especially thriller, characters most interesting—and thus keeps readers' attention—is readers' ability to relate to them. When characters have recognizable flaws or weaknesses and work to overcome those, readers connect with them by seeing their own potential to learn and grow in similar ways. Most of your characters don't develop personally or gain much insight into their shortcomings. [REDACTED] is the most likeable and relatable character, but he doesn't grow much beyond beginning to accept his limitations as a [REDACTED].
2. In several places your timing is out of sequence. Don't count on readers paying close attention to the chapter headers with the month and location; in a good page-turner thriller, readers will be more focused on how the previous chapter left them hanging and what is about to happen next.

- a. Your instinct to open the manuscript with a dramatic event like the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] is a good one. But the [REDACTED] described in chapter 2 chronologically occurs before the [REDACTED] in chapter 1 and, most notably, explains why and how [REDACTED] is able to [REDACTED], so placing the [REDACTED] before the [REDACTED] is confusing. You might condense the [REDACTED] description and make it a brief prologue that sets the stage for everything that happens later.
 - b. More importantly, you need to establish your protagonist much earlier in the story with a dramatic event that sets the stage for everything that comes after it. If your protagonist is [REDACTED], you could introduce him in chapter 1 by having him experience some act of [REDACTED] that forces him to face the [REDACTED]. Then follow with a short chapter about [REDACTED] at the [REDACTED], and then the [REDACTED]. Or you could have the death of [REDACTED] as a prologue, which would both introduce him as your primary character and simultaneously establish [REDACTED] as the main plot point. The critical points are 1) to establish your protagonist and 2) identify their need to overcome some conflict or crisis that 3) drives them to make some choice or change that 4) resolves the conflict while following a logical sequence of events.
 - c. Chapters 8, 10, and 31 also jump back in time for no apparent reason. I recommend keeping all the action chronological (unless you have a specific and compelling reason to include a flashback, which I don't think the story has).
3. You have a tendency to tell readers what has happened, rather than showing them what is happening to your characters through bold, descriptive action and animated dialogue. Long narrative blocks of "he said this and then this, and she said something else, and something else happened" don't give readers any sense of immediacy and inclusion in the action. You want to involve them by making them see what is happening as it happens, as told directly through your characters' words and actions.
 4. You also tend to get distracted from your main action with long narrative sections that provide extensive background on your characters (often including minor ones), detailed information on [REDACTED] functioning or history, and other descriptions that are irrelevant to the plot. Each character and every single scene in your story should do something to propel the action forward, compelling readers to turn the page and read another chapter. Any scene, character, or description that doesn't serve that purpose should be cut from the narrative.

B. Characters and their development.

1. You have 30 distinct named characters who shape the plot and action, plus a variety of lesser unnamed characters. Such a multitude of characters can dilute the story.

- a. Readers won't be able to tell which characters are important and which are not. For example, you provide extensive background on and insight into [REDACTED] in chapter 1, then he is never seen again.
 - b. With so many names and so much background on so many of the characters, it's difficult to keep track of who is who, what their bearing is on the plot, and how they respond to and influence the action. Secondary and minor characters like [REDACTED], [REDACTED], [REDACTED], or [REDACTED] can be important to the plot, but you don't need to spend a lot of words on them. They don't need a great deal of background story or physical details; they just need to fulfill a specific function that keeps the story moving.
2. You need to clarify who the most important person in the story is and build the plot and action around that person. The protagonist at first appears to be [REDACTED], but he disappears after chapter 10, not even 50 pages in, except for one more brief mention in chapter 18. The next major character who appears is [REDACTED], but he serves primarily as a nexus for the other characters rather than someone who actively drives the plot forward. The primary protagonist seems to be [REDACTED], who does not appear until chapter 28, halfway through the manuscript.
 3. Your primary characters—[REDACTED], [REDACTED], [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]—could all use more development. Character growth is less about extensive background detail than about how each person changes and grows in response to your plot development. Part of what makes characters interesting is letting them learn from their mistakes, which allows readers to relate to and sympathize with them.
 4. Another point is that although you should know as much as possible about the characters who drive your story—who they are, what they look like, what they think and feel, what their motivations are—readers don't need to know every one of those details. Some details are unnecessary to the plot, and some can be useful for plot twists or distractions that keep readers guessing and thus engaged with the story.
 5. Some of your characters also are often absent from the action for long stretches at a time. The character list below identifies each chapter where a character appears. Long gaps make it more difficult to develop characters fully because during the intervening pages readers may forget who they are. If, for example, your action revolves around three main people—[REDACTED], [REDACTED], and [REDACTED]—a good tactic is to follow each one for only one or two chapters at a time and to alternate between them in a regular pattern to help readers keep track of how the plot is progressing.
 - ◆ [REDACTED]—ch. 1
 - ◆ [REDACTED]—ch. 2, 3, 8, 10, 18

- ◆ [redacted] (primary antagonist?)—2, 13 14, 15, 17, 36, 37, 40, 41, 47
- ◆ [redacted]—ch. 5, 6, 7 (dies)
- ◆ [redacted]—5 (dies)
- ◆ [redacted] (191) [redacted] (102) aka [redacted] (2) (secondary protagonist)—6, 12, 16, 17, 20, 21, 24, 33, 39, 42, 43, 44, 46,
- ◆ [redacted]—8, 10
- ◆ [redacted]—8
- ◆ [redacted]—8
- ◆ [redacted]—10, 18
- ◆ [redacted]—11
- ◆ [redacted]—11
- ◆ [redacted]—12, 15 (murdered)
- ◆ Unnamed man with scar (later identified as [redacted])—13
- ◆ [redacted]—13 (murdered)
- ◆ [redacted]—14, 27, 48
- ◆ [redacted]—16
- ◆ [redacted]—16
- ◆ [redacted]—18, 42, 46,
- ◆ [redacted]—19
- ◆ [redacted]—19
- ◆ [redacted]—21, 39, 42,
- ◆ [redacted]—21, 22, 25, 42, 46,
- ◆ [redacted]—22, 25
- ◆ [redacted]—22, 25
- ◆ [redacted] (primary protagonist?)—23, 24, 30, 31, 32, 34, 35, 38, 41, 43, 44, 45, 46, 49
- ◆ [redacted]—27, 48

- ◆ Unnamed technician (possibly [redacted]?)—28
- ◆ [redacted] (primary antagonist?)—28, 38, 43, 44, 45, 46, 48,
- ◆ [redacted]—29
- ◆ [redacted]—29
- ◆ [redacted]—37, 40, 47, Unnamed FBI director—43, 44
- ◆ Unnamed test subject/prisoner—45

6. A related point is that your usage of names is inconsistent and thus confusing.

a. You frequently shift between last name and first name in identifying characters.

Particularly when the first name (as in [redacted]) is also often a last name, the shifts can be confusing and make it more difficult to keep track of who is who. Such usage also has the potential to alienate readers if you most often use first names for female characters while using last names for male characters.

b. Other characters have multiple names, and you are inconsistent in how you refer to them.

- ◆ You mention an alias for [redacted] ([redacted]) but the name only appears twice. Unless an alias has some bearing on the plot, it is irrelevant. Instead you could say that he uses other names in his work without specifying what they are and further confusing readers.

- ◆ You have three separate names for [redacted] and refer to him variously in different chapters as [redacted], [redacted], [redacted], [redacted], [redacted], [redacted], and [redacted]. It's fine to establish aliases for characters, but in narrative descriptions you should be consistent in how you identify them to avoid confusion. For example, "[redacted] flipped through his wallet and handed an ID to the inspector with a flourish. 'My name is [redacted];' he said." If you're familiar with the Jason Bourne books and movies, consider how Bourne has multiple passports with a variety of aliases, but he is always called Bourne except when he is specifically indicated as using an alias.

c. You frequently have multiple variations in the spelling of names that further complicate readers' comprehension. You can easily avoid this confusion by creating a character list that will ensure consistency across names. I provide a basic list below in this review to help you smooth out flow.

- ◆ Peter [redacted] (7 instances)/[redacted] (5 instances)
- ◆ Muhammad [redacted] (87)/Mohammad [redacted] (1)
- ◆ [redacted] (31)/[redacted] (1)

- ♦ [REDACTED] (6)/ [REDACTED] (12).

C. Action:

1. You often provide excessively repetitive descriptions of mundane actions, for example your step-by-step-by-step depiction of [REDACTED] procedures for working with the [REDACTED]. Overly detailed explanation of simple activities slows your action practically to a standstill. In a thriller you want to focus on critical actions that will affect the outcome of the story, such as [REDACTED] choices while working in the [REDACTED], rather than routine steps that have no bearing on the plot.
2. You also give overly detailed descriptions, both of physical characteristics and background information, for minor characters that distract the reader from the plot and drag down the action.
3. Your dialogue frequently sounds stilted and unnatural. Listening to how people actually talk in conversation will help you create smoother, more realistic dialogue.
4. In many places you use long narrative sections to describe both actions and conversations that would be more effective if written as dialogue. Dialogue gives you a much better vehicle for including your characters' sensations, emotions, and conflicts, which all help to increase character development as well as reader engagement.
5. Chapter 4, describing the [REDACTED], is too long because it does nothing to advance the plot. I recommend you condense it and include it as part of the next chapter, where you introduce the [REDACTED] brothers.
6. Throughout much of the story, particularly in relation to [REDACTED], your narrative sounds deliberately vague, making your meaning unclear and creating confusion. Does [REDACTED] work for the FBI, or the CIA, or some other shadowy (possibly fictional) government agency? You don't give readers any clear idea of who or what the forces behind the scenes are, making your plot development less believable. Similarly, you often refer to characters as "the [REDACTED]," "the man with the scar," or even simply "the [REDACTED]" without any further description, which leaves readers wondering who they are.
7. [REDACTED] apparent lack of a follow-up plan for [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] indicates weak plot development. No government agency would send an untrained operative into [REDACTED] without having specific and well-defined procedures for following through to complete the assignment.
8. You give few narrative indicators of time passing, such as describing the outside temperature or seasonal changes. Such specifics anchor the story progression to help readers keep track of "real time" and thus strengthen the sense of the story's reality.

D. Language and sentence structure:

1. Some of your metaphors are powerfully descriptive, creating a strong image that will capture readers' interest: "[REDACTED]".
2. The manuscript will need a thorough copy edit to address a variety of grammatical and stylistic issues. You can clean up some of these issues yourself with a careful reading to look for inconsistencies and basic grammatical errors, which will decrease the amount of editorial work required and save you money later.
 - a. Frequent shifts in verb tense from past to present and back again.
 - ◆ "[REDACTED]"
 - ◆ *distinguish* instead of *distinguished*
 - ◆ *present* instead of *presented*
 - b. Inconsistent subject–verb agreement and occasional missing subject or verb.
 - c. Frequent use of incorrect words in context or basic spelling errors on common words. Many of these errors should be easily found through a simple read-through or basic spell-check. A few are noted below as examples.
 - ◆ *his* instead of *he*
 - ◆ *this* instead of *his*
 - ◆ *and* instead of *an*
 - ◆ *busines* instead of *business*
 - ◆ *remined* instead of *reminded*
 - ◆ *solders* instead of *soldiers*
 - ◆ *brining* instead of *bringing*
 - ◆ *as* instead of *was*
 - ◆ *procedure* instead of *proceed*
 - ◆ *fractions* instead of *factions*
 - ◆ *mentioned* versus *motioned*
 - d. Use of non-words words such as *theoric* and *Arabid*.
 - e. Repeated use of "that" in reference to people instead of "who."
 - f. Missing or incorrect punctuation, especially with commas, question marks, and quotation marks on dialogue.
 - g. Inconsistent spelling, missing italics, and inconsistent capitalization of [REDACTED] (47 instances) versus [REDACTED] (9 instances).

3. You frequently use redundant sentence structure and repeat words or phrases, which sounds awkward.

- a. “ [redacted] ”
- b. “ [redacted] ”
- c. “ [redacted] ”

4. The narrative will also need in-depth line editing to address awkward or incoherent sentences.

- a. “ [redacted] ”
- b. “ [redacted] ”
- c. “ [redacted] ...?”

5. The word choice is often weak, using vague terminology rather than specific and descriptive language, for example: “ [redacted] ” versus “ [redacted] ”

a. You have 247 instances of the word “very.” More accurate and descriptive terms will give your writing greater immediacy and power.

- ◆ *quite* interested
- ◆ *tiny* privately owned firm
- ◆ *extremely* time consuming

b. You tend to use passive voice rather than active voice. Passive voice indicates that some action is done by someone or something, while active voice states directly who does the action.

- ◆ “ [redacted] ” (passive) versus “ [redacted] ” (active)
- ◆ “ [redacted] ” (passive) versus “ [redacted] ” (active)

c. You frequently rely on “dummy” subjects such as *there are/were* (230 various uses) and *it is/was*, which clutter up the narrative with unnecessary words and dilute the power of your writing.

- ◆ “ [redacted] ” versus “ [redacted] ”

- ◆ “ [redacted] ” versus “ [redacted] ”
- ◆ “ [redacted] ” versus “ [redacted] ”

E. Problematic wording:

1. You frequently use questionable language that is usually (but not always) irrelevant to the plot, distracts from the action, and may offend some readers.

a. Sweeping generalizations and words that perpetuate racial or ethnic stereotypes.

- ◆ “ [redacted] ”
- ◆ “whipping boy”
- ◆ “ [redacted] looking”
- ◆ “colonials”
- ◆ “the blarney that the Irish seem to be born with”
- ◆ “acquired their freedom so they could murder their fellow countrymen”
- ◆ “all [redacted] look alike”
- ◆ “ [redacted] ”
- ◆ “smells like an [redacted] ”

b. Sexist terminology such as *mankind*.

c. Repeated observations about men’s sexual prowess and conquests, excessive description of women’s physical characteristics, and sweeping generalizations about people’s sexual interests that do nothing to advance the plot or action. Having sex in a thriller is appropriate only insofar as it relates directly to the plot or advances the action—for example, developing a relationship between two main characters. Otherwise, it merely distracts from the story.

- ◆ “... [redacted] ”
- ◆ “... [redacted] ”
- ◆ “ [redacted] ” (As a side note, “the weaker sex” is typically used to describe women, not men, which is in itself a sexist stereotype.)
- ◆ “ [redacted] ”

d. Clichés and vulgar expressions.

- ◆ “doesn’t smell right” (used twice)
 - ◆ “went ape shit”
 - ◆ “missing the boat”
 - ◆ “grab the world by the balls”
 - ◆ “the last thing he wanted to do”
 - ◆ “connect the dots” (used four times)
 - ◆ “feel it in his bones”
- e. Unfamiliar words, particularly scientific terms, that may need definition or clarification.
- ◆ Abaya
 - ◆ Autoclave
 - ◆ three horses of the apocalypse (The Bible mentions *four horsemen* of the apocalypse.)
- f. Missing, misplaced, or vague antecedents, especially with pronouns such *he*, *they*, and *it*, that create confusion in your narrative because their meaning is not immediately clear to readers.
2. On a few occasions you use *Islam* as an adjective to modify a noun. *Islam* is the name of the religion and is a noun. The adjective form is *Islamic*.
3. In a few places you make statements that sound unrealistic or unlikely, such as describing an [REDACTED] golf course and exaggerating the size of the [REDACTED] office in [REDACTED]. In reading through the manuscript, I did some basic fact checking that made me question such statements.
4. In several places you insert your external perspective on social, medical, and cultural issues, offering commentary on something that the character would not know about or providing information that is unnecessary and thus disrupts the flow and drive of the action. Your characters and their actions should indicate what information is important without you explicitly telling the reader how or why you think it’s relevant or essential. Whenever possible, you should provide this kind of information through your characters.
- a. “[REDACTED]”
- b. “[REDACTED]”
- c. “[REDACTED]”

Some of the best advice I can offer is to read as much as you possibly can in your genre, looking to determine what makes you want to keep reading those books. Tom Clancy and Dan Brown are two hugely successful thriller writers, and simply going to a bookstore or library and browsing the thriller section will give you a plethora of books to choose from. One resource book I also highly recommend is *Writing a Killer Thriller: An Editor's Guide to Writing Compelling Fiction* by Jodie Renner. It offers excellent detailed guidelines for writing thriller manuscripts and specific steps to tighten your story and keep readers turning the pages.

I hope you find my comments and recommendations helpful. Please feel free to call or email me if you have any questions, and I wish you all the best with your book.

Ginny Ruths
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