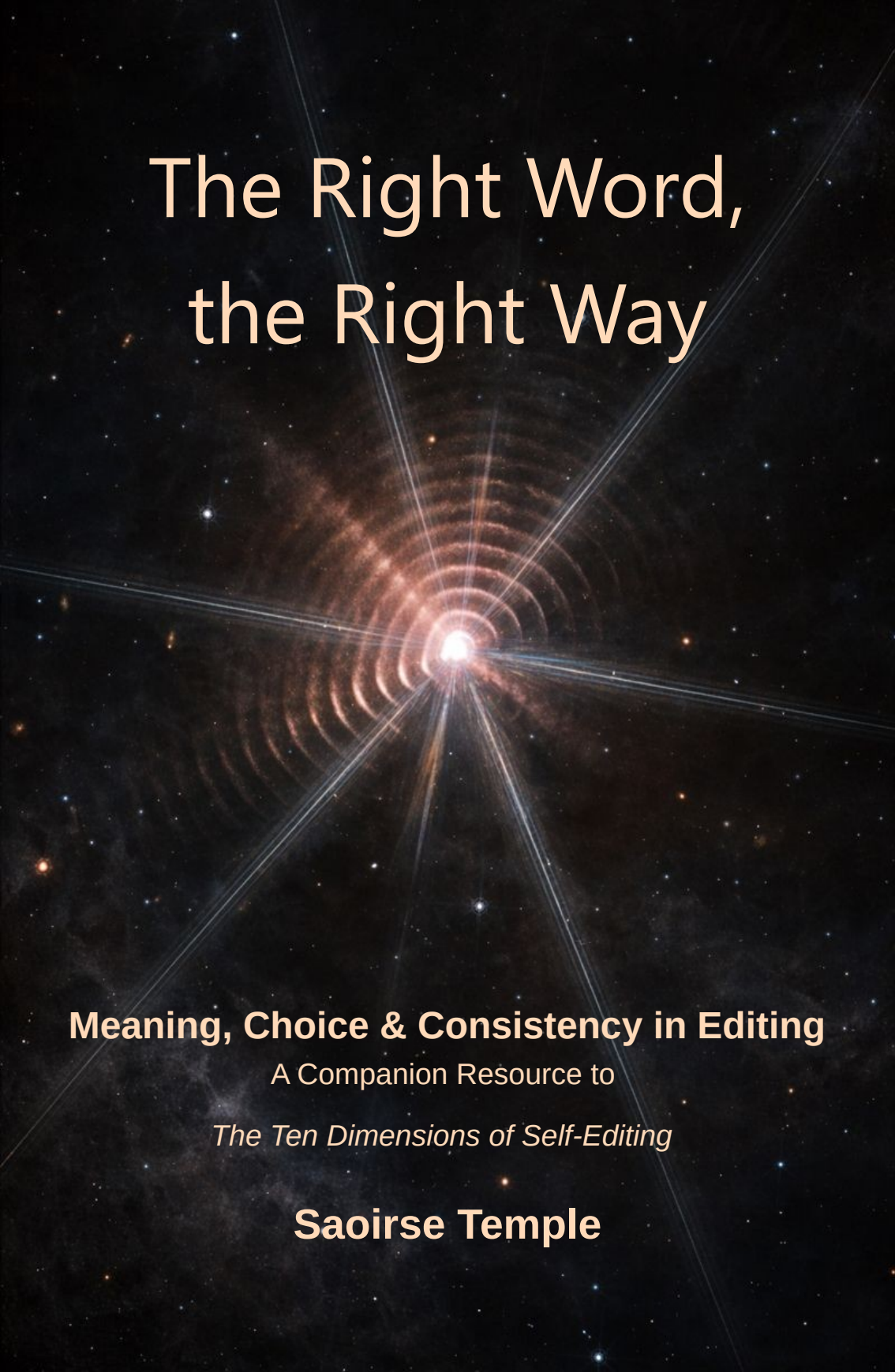

The Right Word, the Right Way

Meaning, Choice & Consistency in Editing

A Companion Resource to

The Ten Dimensions of Self-Editing

Saoirse Temple

For every writer who has ever paused over a word and cared enough to choose it well.

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Introduction

Self-editing is one of the most difficult skills a writer ever learns—not because it's complicated, but because it happens too close to the work.

When you're editing your own writing, familiarity becomes a liability. You already know what you meant. You already hear the sentence the way it sounded in your head when you wrote it. And that makes it surprisingly easy to skim past small but significant problems—especially at the word level, where meaning, tone, and consistency quietly do most of their work. This is where self-editing most often goes wrong.

Writers don't usually struggle because they lack vocabulary or creativity. They struggle because they rely on instinct when instinct needs support. A word feels "off," so it gets replaced. A sentence feels flat, so it gets embellished. A phrasing choice feels inconsistent, so it gets changed—sometimes repeatedly. Without a clear method for making these decisions, editing becomes reactive, exhausting, and oddly destructive to voice.

This guide exists to slow that process down. At its core, self-editing is not about finding better words. It is about making better decisions about the words you already have. And good decisions require more than confidence—they require verification, discernment, and restraint.

That's where Meaning, Choice, and Consistency come in.

These three concepts form a practical lens for self-editing at the word level. They are not abstract ideals or stylistic preferences. They are safeguards—ways of checking your instincts before they quietly lead you astray.

Meaning asks a simple but powerful question: What does this word actually do?

Before you keep a word or replace it, you need to understand its denotation, connotation, usage, and grammatical role. Dictionaries exist for this reason—not to police language, but to clarify it. When self-editors skip this step, they often swap words that sound right but mean something else entirely, subtly shifting tone or intent without realizing it.

Choice asks a different question: Is this the best option for this moment?

Thesauruses are often misunderstood as synonym machines, when in reality they present families of related words—many of which are not interchangeable. Used carelessly, they flatten voice and inflate prose. Used well, they expand precision. Choice is not about variety for its own sake; it's about selecting words deliberately, with attention to tone, register, and emotional weight.

Consistency asks the long-view question: Am I being trustworthy?

Style guides exist to prevent drift—those slow, invisible changes that happen over the course of a manuscript when decisions are made repeatedly but not recorded. Consistency isn't about rigid correctness; it's about creating a stable reading experience. For self-editors, consistency removes decision fatigue and protects immersion, allowing attention to stay where it belongs: on the story.

Together, these three principles transform how editing feels. Instead of second-guessing every change, you learn to pause and verify. Instead of endlessly tinkering, you learn to decide with confidence. Instead of sanding down your voice, you learn to preserve it. This guide is designed to support that process.

Each section focuses on one principle—Meaning, Choice, and Consistency—and the tool that best supports it: the dictionary, the thesaurus, and the style guide. The goal is not to teach you rules to memorize, but habits to adopt. Editors don't use these tools constantly or mechanically; they use them strategically, when judgment needs confirmation.

You don't need to read this guide straight through. You don't need to apply everything at once. Use it as a reference. Return to it when a word gives you pause, when a sentence feels uncertain, or when your edits start circling the same problems without resolution.

If you ever feel stuck, unsure, or tempted to "just pick something and move on," stop and check one thing: meaning, choice, or consistency. One of them is usually asking for your attention.

This resource stands on its own, but it also complements a broader self-editing framework. Wherever you are in your revision process, its purpose is the same: to help you make calm, deliberate decisions about language—so your words say exactly what you mean, the way you intend, consistently, from beginning to end.

That is the right word, used the right way.

Saoirse Temple

Meaning

Most self-editing mistakes begin with a quiet assumption: I know what this word means.

Often, you do.

Sometimes, you almost do.

And occasionally, that confidence is exactly what causes the problem.

When writers talk about word choice, they often focus on sound, rhythm, or emotional impact. Those things matter—but they sit on top of something more fundamental: meaning. If the meaning isn't stable, everything built on it wobbles.

This is why editors reach for dictionaries far more often than writers expect. Not because they doubt intelligence or creativity, but because they know how slippery familiarity can be. Words we use frequently are especially dangerous; they feel safe, even when they've quietly drifted away from what we intend them to do.

In self-editing, meaning is the first checkpoint.

Before you decide whether to keep a word, replace it, or "improve" it, you need to know exactly what it's doing—not what it sounds like it's doing, and not what you meant it to do when you wrote it.

Meaning Is More Than Definition

A dictionary is not a list of substitutions or a spelling oracle. Its real value lies in the layers it reveals beneath a familiar word.

When editors consult a dictionary, they are usually checking one (or more) of the following:

- ✓ Denotation—the word's literal meaning
- ✓ Connotation—the emotional or cultural weight it carries
- ✓ Part of speech—how the word functions grammatically
- ✓ Usage notes—where and how the word is typically used
- ✓ Register—whether the word feels formal, casual, technical, or archaic

A word can be "technically correct" and still wrong for the sentence it inhabits. It can point in roughly the right direction while carrying an unintended tone, implication, or emphasis.

Self-editors often sense this before they can explain it. A sentence feels slightly off. The rhythm stumbles. The emotional temperature shifts. The instinct is to replace the word quickly and move on.

That instinct is understandable—and often premature.

The Danger of Near-Misses

Many word-level problems aren't caused by obviously incorrect choices, but by near-misses: words that are adjacent in meaning but not aligned in effect.

For example, consider the difference between:

Word	Emotional Weight	Implication
Curious	Neutral	Interest
Nosy	Negative	Thoughtful interest
Inquisitive	Positive	Intrusion

Swapping among them without checking meaning doesn't refine a sentence—it changes the reader's perception of character, tone, or intent. When this happens repeatedly across a manuscript, the result isn't dramatic error; it's erosion. Voice thins. Precision blurs. Trust weakens.

This is why editors verify even words they "know."

Checking meaning is not an admission of ignorance. It is a refusal to guess.

What Editors Actually Do With Dictionaries

Editors don't consult dictionaries constantly, and they don't read entries from top to bottom. They dip in strategically, usually when:

- a word feels slightly misaligned
- a sentence carries unintended weight
- a replacement word seems "almost right"
- two similar words are competing for the same spot

The goal isn't to find a better word—it's to confirm whether the current one is doing its job.

Often, the result of checking meaning is reassurance. The original word stays. The sentence improves simply because the editor now knows it's right, rather than hoping.

Sometimes, the check reveals a mismatch. When that happens, the solution becomes clearer and more deliberate—not a scramble through alternatives, but a measured adjustment.

Meaning as a Self-Editing Habit

For self-editors, meaning is the first safeguard against unnecessary change.

Before replacing a word, pause and ask:

- What does this word actually mean?
- What does it imply?
- Is that implication intentional here?

If the answer is yes, stop editing.

If the answer is no, now you have a reason to change it.

This single habit prevents a surprising amount of over-editing. It keeps revisions grounded and purposeful. It also preserves voice, because it reduces the impulse to tinker without cause.

Meaning doesn't demand perfection. It demands attention.

Meaning Comes First

Every editing decision builds on meaning. Without it, choice becomes guesswork and consistency becomes accidental.

In the next chapter, we'll look at Choice—and how editors use thesauruses not to decorate prose, but to refine it. Meaning sets the boundary. Choice operates within it.

But before you move on, remember this: If a word feels uncertain, don't replace it yet. Check what it actually means. Clarity begins there.

Recommended Dictionary Resources

Not all dictionaries serve the same purpose. Editors tend to favour descriptive dictionaries — resources that show how language is actually used, rather than how it is "supposed" to be used.

Reliable options include:

- Merriam-Webster (online)—clear, current, and rich in usage notes
- Oxford English Dictionary / Oxford Learner's Dictionaries—excellent for nuance and international usage
- Cambridge Dictionary—helpful for contemporary tone and learner-friendly explanations

Print dictionaries can be useful and satisfying, but online versions offer faster access to updates, usage notes, and examples—all valuable during self-editing.

How to Choose Which One to Use

The first thing to consider is the type of writing you do. This becomes especially important when selecting a style guide.

For academic or technical writing, APA is usually the appropriate choice. For fiction and most trade nonfiction, The Chicago Manual of Style is widely used. The Editing Canadian English (3rd edition), is excellent for specifically Canadian writing.

If you're unsure where to start, your local library is an excellent resource. Many libraries carry multiple dictionaries, thesauruses, and style guides — sometimes in print, sometimes digitally. Some even offer online access through apps you can use with a library card.

You may also want to consider specialized resources. For example, if you write medical thrillers, a medical dictionary can be invaluable. The same applies to legal, historical, or technical fields.

One good dictionary, one good thesaurus, and one appropriate style guide are usually enough to begin. You don't need everything.

Choice

If *Meaning* is about knowing what a word does, *Choice* is about deciding whether it belongs.

This is where many self-editors get into trouble—not because they don't care about precision, but because they care too much about variation. A word appears twice on a page. A sentence feels familiar. Something seems repetitive. Instinct kicks in—change it.

Enter the thesaurus.

For many writers, the thesaurus feels like a solution machine: a place to find a "better" word, a fresher word, a more interesting word. Used this way, it becomes one of the fastest ways to flatten voice, distort tone, and quietly undo good writing.

Editors use thesauruses differently.

They don't reach for them to decorate prose. They use them to evaluate options—and often, to confirm that the original word was the right choice all along.

A Thesaurus Is a Map, Not a Menu

A thesaurus does not offer interchangeable parts. It offers clusters of related meaning, arranged by association rather than suitability. This is a crucial distinction.

When you look up a word in a thesaurus, you are not being handed replacements. You are being shown a semantic neighbourhood—words that live near one another, but do not always do the same work.

For example, a thesaurus entry for **quiet** might include:

- silent
- calm
- subdued
- muted
- secretive
- shy

All of these words relate to quietness. None of them mean the same thing.

Swapping among them without scrutiny doesn't improve a sentence; it changes its intent.

- A quiet room is not a secretive room.
- A calm character is not a shy one.
- A silent response is not a subdued one.

The thesaurus hasn't failed you here. It has done exactly what it's meant to do: reveal options. The failure happens when choice is mistaken for substitution.

Why Over-Variety Weakens Writing

Many writers are taught—explicitly or implicitly—that repetition is bad. The result is a kind of nervous editing, where words are swapped simply to avoid seeing the same one twice.

Editors know better.

Repetition becomes a problem only when it dulls meaning or rhythm. Changing words without regard for nuance doesn't solve repetition; it replaces clarity with inconsistency.

When self-editors chase variety for its own sake, a few predictable things happen:

- tone drifts
- emotional signals blur
- characters begin to sound less like themselves
- the prose feels "edited," but not sharper

The irony is that strong voice often depends on strategic repetition. The right word, used consistently, creates coherence and confidence. The wrong word, chosen for novelty, creates noise.

What Editors Actually Do With Thesauruses

Editors use thesauruses to compare, not to replace.

They consult them when:

- a word feels close but not quite right
- the tone needs subtle adjustment
- emotional weight feels mismatched
- a sentence is doing too much or too little

Instead of grabbing the first alternative, editors scan the list and ask:

- What's the emotional temperature of this word?
- Does it intensify or soften the moment?
- Does it belong to this character, this narrator, this world?

Often, this process leads right back to the original word—now chosen deliberately, not defensively.

Sometimes, it reveals a better fit. When that happens, the change feels precise, not ornamental.

A Worked Example: Why Synonyms Aren’t Substitutes

Consider this sentence: She looked at him with interest.

A thesaurus entry for **interest** might include:

- curiosity
- fascination
- concern
- attention
- enthusiasm

Now read the sentence with each option:

- She looked at him with curiosity.
- She looked at him with fascination.
- She looked at him with concern.
- She looked at him with attention.
- She looked at him with enthusiasm.

Each sentence tells a different story. Curiosity suggests questions. Fascination suggests attraction or awe. Concern suggests worry. Attention is neutral, almost clinical. Enthusiasm suggests eagerness.

None of these are wrong. But they don’t necessarily match the scene, the character, and the emotional context.

The thesaurus hasn’t given you better words. It has asked you to choose.

Choice as a Self-Editing Discipline

Choice requires restraint.

Before replacing a word, ask:

- Why am I changing this?
- What specifically isn’t working?
- What effect do I want instead?

If you can’t answer those questions, don’t change the word yet. Return to Meaning. Verify what the word actually does. Often, the discomfort isn’t about variety at all—it’s about clarity, rhythm, or context.

Good choices feel quiet. They don’t announce themselves. They simply fit.

Choice Serves Meaning

Choice does not replace meaning; it operates within it.

Once you know what a word does, you can decide whether it is the right word for this moment—and whether changing it would improve or undermine the sentence.

In the next chapter, we’ll turn to Consistency—the principle that ensures your carefully chosen words continue to do their work across an entire manuscript.

But before you move on, remember this:

A thesaurus offers possibilities.

A self-editor’s job is to choose wisely.

Recommended Thesaurus Resources

Editors favour thesauruses that show context and nuance, not just lists.

Useful options include:

- Roget's Thesaurus—especially good for conceptual relationships
- Merriam-Webster Thesaurus (online)—clear groupings with usage notes
- Power Thesaurus—helpful for exploring range, with caution and verification

As always, thesaurus use should be paired with a dictionary check. One without the other invites drift.

Why would anyone invest in a dictionary or a thesaurus when you can just Google a word?

Google gives you answers. Dictionaries and thesauruses help you make decisions.

When you Google a word, you usually get a quick definition or a list of synonyms. That's fine for everyday use. But editing isn't about speed—it's about precision.

A real dictionary shows you layers:

different meanings, parts of speech, connotations, usage notes, and examples. It helps you see not just what a word can mean, but what it's actually doing in your sentence.

And thesauruses? They're even more misunderstood.

Google synonym lists make words look interchangeable. They're not. A proper thesaurus shows you relationships between words—differences in tone, emotional weight, and intent. It doesn't tell you what to swap in. It asks you to choose.

There's also an authority difference.

Google mixes dictionaries, blogs, forums, and AI summaries together. A dictionary or thesaurus is curated, edited, and consistent. That matters when you're making judgment calls.

And here's the thing most people don't expect: using proper tools actually saves time. You check once, decide, and move on—instead of second-guessing and undoing changes later.

So yes, you can Google words.

But if you want to edit with clarity and confidence, dictionaries and thesauruses aren't old-fashioned.

They're how you respect the work—and your own judgment.

Consistency

Consistency rarely announces itself.

When it’s working, no one comments on it. When it’s missing, readers feel unsettled without quite knowing why. Names shift. Hyphenation changes. Time formats wobble. A character’s voice subtly drifts. Nothing is wrong exactly—and yet something doesn’t feel trustworthy.

This is the work of inconsistency.

For self-editors, consistency is often the most frustrating part of revision, not because it’s difficult, but because it feels endless. Decisions made early in a manuscript resurface hundreds of pages later. Small choices multiply. Fatigue sets in.

This is why editors rely on style guides—not to enforce rigidity, but to protect coherence.

Consistency Is About Trust

At its heart, consistency is a promise to the reader.

When a book is consistent, the reader doesn’t have to stop and re-orient themselves. They don’t wonder whether a change was intentional. They don’t lose momentum questioning mechanics instead of absorbing meaning.

Consistency creates a stable surface on which story, argument, or voice can move freely.

For self-editors, this matters because inconsistency erodes confidence—both the reader’s and the writer’s. When the ground keeps shifting, every decision feels provisional, and revision becomes exhausting.

Style guides exist to stop that slide.

What a Style Guide Is (and Isn’t)

A style guide is an external reference.

Editors use style guides to determine how language is generally handled: spelling preferences, capitalization norms, punctuation conventions, number treatment, and formatting standards.

A style guide answers questions like:

- Is this hyphenated?
- Is this capitalized?
- Is this spelled one way or another?
- How are numbers handled in this context?

What a style guide does not do is remember what you decided last time.

That’s not its job.

The Role of the Style Sheet

A style sheet is internal. It belongs to the manuscript.

Once you consult a style guide and make a decision—or choose to depart from it—that decision gets recorded in the style sheet. The style sheet is the place where this manuscript's choices live.

For example:

- You use a style guide to determine whether a compound word is typically hyphenated.
- You decide which version best fits your book.
- You record that decision in the style sheet.
- You then apply it consistently throughout the manuscript.

The style guide informs the choice. The style sheet preserves it.

This distinction is crucial.

Why Inconsistency Creeps In

Most inconsistency isn't caused by carelessness. It's caused by time.

Manuscripts are written over weeks, months, or years. Writers change. Context changes. Tools change. What felt right in Chapter Two no longer feels right in Chapter Twelve.

Without a record, self-editors rely on memory—and memory is unreliable under repetition.

Inconsistency also creeps in when words are swapped reactively. A hyphen disappears here. A spelling shifts there. A term evolves without being anchored. None of these changes are dramatic, but together they create noise.

Style guides turn memory into documentation when decisions are recorded in a style sheet. Once you have decided on a style, add it to your style sheet and it will be there for you at a glance.

What Editors Actually Do With Style Guides

Editors move back and forth between these tools constantly:

- They consult the style guide to verify standard usage.
- They make a deliberate decision for the manuscript.
- They record that decision in the style sheet.
- They refer back to the style sheet to maintain consistency.

This process removes hundreds of micro-decisions from the editing workflow. Instead of rethinking the same issue repeatedly, the editor checks the sheet and moves on.

For self-editors, this is one of the most powerful ways to reduce fatigue.

Consistency as a Self-Editing Habit

Consistency is not about perfection. It's about follow-through.

Before changing a recurring element, ask:

- Have I already made this decision elsewhere?
- Will this change create a new pattern I need to maintain?
- Is this solving a real problem, or creating a new one?

If the change improves clarity, update the style sheet and proceed. If it doesn't, leave it alone.

The goal is not uniformity for its own sake. The goal is a manuscript that behaves predictably, so the reader can relax into it.

Consistency Completes the Work

Meaning ensures your words say what you intend.

Choice ensures they are the right words for the moment.

Consistency ensures they continue to work together across the whole manuscript.

Without consistency, even good decisions unravel. But with it, self-editing becomes calmer, faster, and more reliable—not because there are fewer decisions to make, but because fewer decisions need to be made twice.

This is how editors remove chaos without flattening voice: one deliberate choice, recorded and respected.

Recommended Style Guide Resources

Most editors work with:

One primary published style guide, such as:

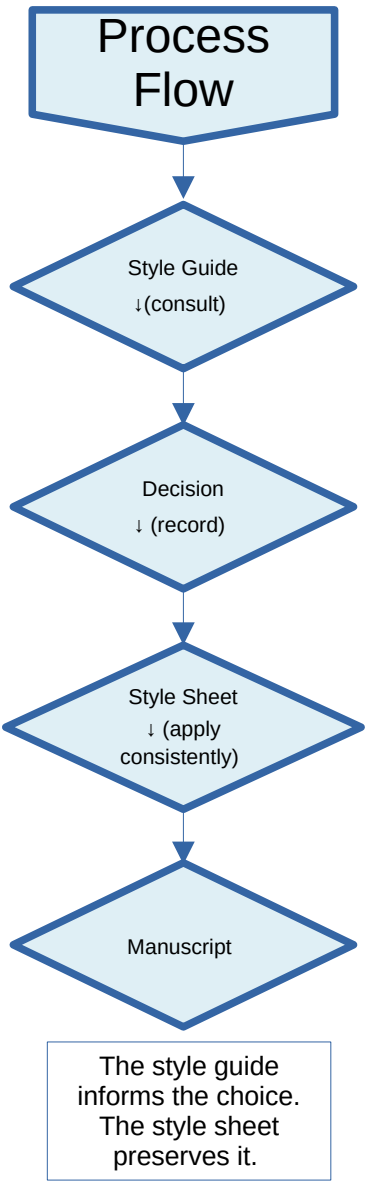
- The Chicago Manual of Style
- New Hart's Rules
- APA Style (for academic or technical work)
- Editing Canadian English 3rd edition

One project-specific style sheet, created for the manuscript itself.

The style guide provides authority.

The style sheet provides continuity.

Used together, they keep the manuscript stable without flattening voice.



Bringing It Together

Self-editing becomes difficult when too many decisions are made at once—or when decisions are made without clarity.

The tools in this guide exist to simplify that process, not complicate it.

Meaning asks you to verify what a word actually does before you change it.

Choice asks you to select words deliberately, rather than reactively.

Consistency asks you to honour those decisions across the manuscript.

Used together, these principles form a practical editing lens. They slow revision down just enough to prevent unnecessary changes, while still allowing refinement to happen with intention.

This is not about perfect language. It's about reliable judgment.

When you feel uncertain during revision, return to the sequence:

- Check meaning first.
- Choose deliberately.
- Record the decision and stay consistent.

You don't need to apply everything at once. You don't need to consult every tool on every page. Editors don't work that way—and neither should you.

Use these tools when a word gives you pause. When instinct hesitates. When a sentence feels close, but not settled.

Clarity rarely arrives through force. It arrives through attention.

And when attention is guided by ***meaning, choice, and consistency***, self-editing becomes less about fixing your work—and more about trusting it.

Now go write!

Thank you so much for sticking with me through *The Right Word, the Right Way*. I truly hope you found this resource helpful and that it gave you a little more clarity and confidence as you return to your work.

Self-editing isn't new. But in the face of how much writing and publishing have changed in recent years, it's become essential for writers to understand the editing process — and to know how to apply it to their own work.

For indie authors especially, self-editing isn't just another step in the publishing journey. It's a form of self-preservation. Being able to produce a well-crafted book builds trust with readers — and trust is what turns readers into loyal ones.

Where publishers once handled many of the behind-the-scenes details, indie authors now do it all: the writing, much of the editing, the designing, the publishing, the marketing. It can be exhausting. But it's also incredibly liberating.

You get to tell your story your way. And that matters.

About the Author

Saoirse Temple is an editor, author, and book coach who helps writers develop clarity, confidence, and discernment in their work. She believes that self-editing is not about following rules, but about learning how to make thoughtful decisions —one word at a time.

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