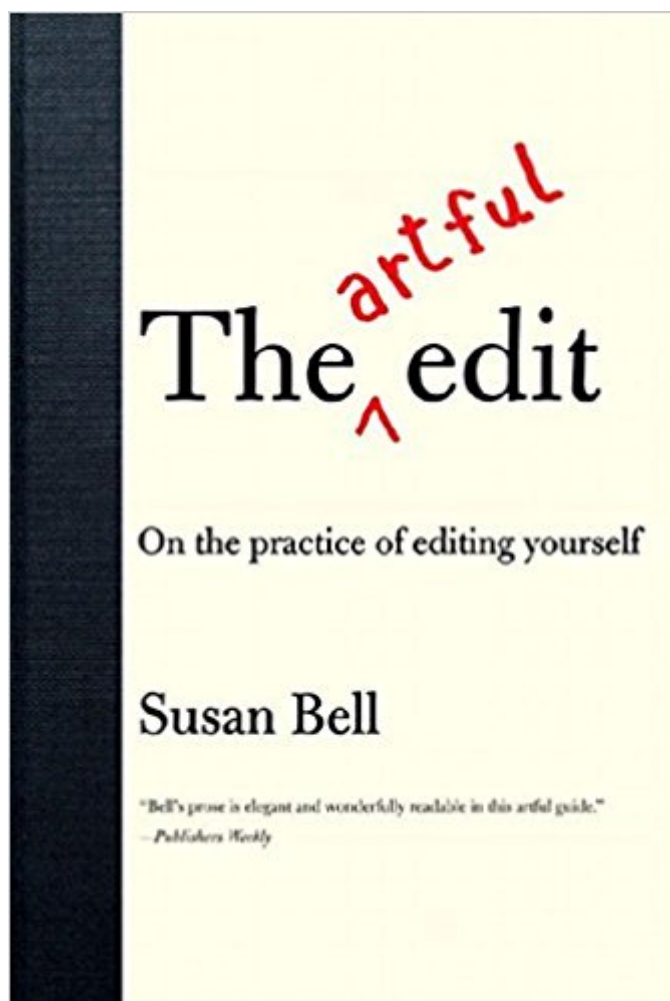


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# The Artful Edit: On The Practice Of Editing Yourself



## Synopsis

"Bell's prose is elegant and wonderfully readable in this artful guide." — Publishers Weekly  
The Artful Edit explores the many-faceted and often misunderstood — or simply overlooked — art of editing. The book brims with examples, quotes, and case studies, including an illuminating discussion of Max Perkins's editorial collaboration with F. Scott Fitzgerald on *The Great Gatsby*. Susan Bell, a veteran book editor, also offers strategic tips and exercises for self-editing and a series of remarkable interviews, taking us into the studios of successful authors such as Michael Ondaatje and Ann Patchett to learn from their various approaches to revision. Much more than a manual, *The Artful Edit* inspires readers to think about both the discipline and the creativity of editing and how it can enhance their work. In the computer age of lightning-quick composition, this book reminds readers that editing is not simply a spell-check. A vigorous investigation into the history and meaning of the edit, this book, like *The Elements of Style*, is a must-have companion for every writer.

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## Customer Reviews

Every writer is an editor if only for choosing one word over another. However, the ability to edit your own work consciously as you go along or after the work is done is another thing altogether and one that leaves many a writer nonplussed. Enter Bell, a long-time professional editor of both fiction and nonfiction (*Dare to Hope: Saving American Democracy*) as well as a teacher of editing at the New School in New York. Bell flat out states that self-editing is not only possible, it's necessary, and it

can be learned. She provides a slew of ingenious methods for viewing your work with fresh eyes (hang the pages on a clothesline, use a different font when printing out). She also supplies exercises on macro-editing (dealing with structure, character, etc.). Neither how-to nor memoir, the book includes a little bit of everything: Bell's own experiences editing writers; a long section on how F. Scott Fitzgerald—*the consummate self-editor*—produced *The Great Gatsby*; lengthy quotes by well-known authors on their self-editing process; and a list of editing symbols. Bell's prose is elegant and wonderfully readable in this artful guide. (Aug.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Susan Bell has edited fiction and nonfiction professionally, including at Random House and *Conjunctions* magazine, for almost twenty years. She lives in New York City and teaches at The New School and Tin House Writers Workshop.

Susan Bell teaches writers what editors do, hoping this will reduce frustration for both. She hopes that "[t]his book will not eliminate the need for an outside editor, but it will minimize it. When writers learn how to better edit themselves, editors will not be out of jobs; rather they will be working with texts at a more advanced stage, and their work will be less an act of excavation than one of refinement." The book's first chapter teaches writers eleven strategies for gaining perspective on what they have written--and grown overly close to. These strategies range from abstract perspective shifting to physical techniques, such as hanging the pages of a chapter on a clothesline to observe the pattern of text across the pages. The second chapter tells authors how to evaluate their writing at the "macro" level, focusing on organization, structure and the sequence and flow of ideas. The third chapter dives to the micro level, helping writers with subtle language choices in sentence-by-sentence writing. We learn to evaluate writing for its repetition, redundancy, clarity, authenticity, continuity, and other well-chosen principles. Bell's fourth chapter presents several extended case studies of writers and their editors working together. The fifth and final chapter traces the development of editing as a profession, from changes medieval scribes introduced as they copied ancient texts to the uneasy, commercially-constrained partnership between modern writers and their time-starved editors. Foremost among the book's strengths are the frequent before-and-after editing examples and the interviews with writers and editors. Numerous excerpts from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Adam Thorpe's *Ulverton* reveal the working relationships between these authors and their editors. Interviews placed between

chapters convey the essence of artistic evaluation and constructive criticism. The interviews with artists and filmmakers teach us much about editing strategies that apply across creative media. Concrete thinkers who equate editing with proofreading and expect lists of commonly misspelled words will be disappointed. The successful reader must understand and apply Susan Bell's lessons at a more abstract level. Susan Bell has much to say about the ongoing struggle between writers and editors for ownership and control. She advises assertiveness and restraint to both. Writers should look courageously at their work, cutting away the excess verbiage that smothers their very best ideas and language--and should defend these hard-won nuggets. Editors must challenge writers to see what does not work, then empower them to rework without undue editorial micromanaging. "The function of an editor is to be a reader," claims Gardner Botsford, as he introduces the last chapter. Susan Bell insists that "...an editor doesn't just read, he reads well, and reading well is a creative, powerful act." Her book attempts to place an editorial presence in the mind of each writer. This book is highly recommended to writers who want to improve their work and their work process. It is beneficial to writers of both fiction and nonfiction.

Susan Bell uses examples from well-known literary works to illustrate the value of editing. This worked well for me. I particularly enjoyed the *Great Gatsby* examples where she used excerpts from earlier drafts of Fitzgerald's book and contrasts them to the final result. The revelations produced were fascinating and enticing. By revealing the nuances of editing from an editor's perspective, a writer begins to understand the process and the purpose of revision and polish. Bell's focus, though, is on the craft of self-editing. She convinces the reader of the power of that. Many authors see writing as a creative experience. They revel in that and leave the editing to someone else, but delivering a mess to an editor means he will be overwhelmed, possibly choked, and the author will be shocked to see his creation so justifiably desecrated. Bell helps the reader see that the craft of editing is a vital and intrinsic part of the process of writing and a key to a polished, readable, enjoyable piece of literature. It is also a key to a writer's reputation as a master of his profession. I've read a multitude of books on writing and this is one of my favorites.

The author of "The Artful Edit," Susan Bell, a veteran editor of fiction and nonfiction books, teaches at New York's New School graduate writing program. She notes: "Many writers hanker to learn about a process that lives at a hushed remove from the 'glamour' of writing: the edit. They want what most creative-writing classrooms are hard-pressed to give, which is detachment from their text in order to see it clearly. . . . Classroom critiques, while helpful, are limited. Too often they don't give

a systematic view of a writer's work, and train him to develop a thick skin more than a sensible one." This accords with my experience in an MFA program. Bell cites editing practices of several established writers such as Tracy Kidder's *The Soul Of A New Machine*, Ann Patchett's *Bel Canto*, and Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. The second and third chapters (nearly half of the book) present a detailed analysis of the editing process of several drafts of F Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby." It's a good choice of novel as most readers are likely to be familiar with it. Moreover, the editing back and forth between Fitzgerald and the publisher's editor, Max Perkins, is well documented in books such as Scott Berg's "Max Perkins: Editor of Genius." The second chapter, fifty pages long, looks at the big picture and culminates with a handy summary "Macro-Edit: Diagnostic Checklist." The list comprises subtitles such as Intention, Character Credibility, Structure Rhythm, Foreshadowing, Theme or Leitmotiv, and Continuity of Tone. These macro-editing guidelines are a major strength of the book. The third chapter, also fifty pages long, examines language details and culminates with "Micro-Edit: Diagnostic Checklist." Here, I would have liked to see some exercises for the reader to do and to compare with suggested solutions as provided in Reni Browne and Dave King's "Self-Editing for Fiction Writers." "Self-Editing for Fiction Writers, Second Edition: How to Edit Yourself Into Print" (The latter lacks exposition of issues in macro-editing.) The final chapter traces the history of editing: "In the last thousand years, editors have roughly gone from servile to celebrated to censorial to collaborative, and finally, to corporate. . . In our era, more than others, writers must buck up and take care of themselves." I highly recommend Susan Bell's "The Artful Edit" for macro-editing and complementing it with Reni Browne & Dave King's "Self-Editing for Fiction Writers" for micro-editing.-- C J Singh

Great ideas

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