Everything In Its Right Place: Fiction Continuity

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Write Edit Index conference
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Welcome
Whodunnit?

An ad created for London Transport
Contains 21 deliberate continuity errors

Watch: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubNF9QNEQLA
Whydunnit?

Pay attention!

It’s easy to miss continuity errors.

Our eyes and brains can only handle so much detail at once.
The good news

You can get better at continuity through:

• training
• management strategies
• constant vigilance.
• What is continuity?
• Who’s responsible?
• Two types of continuity in novels
• Continuity toolkit
  - Style sheet
  - Continuity tracker
• Best-practice editorial approach
• Questions
What is continuity?

The **maintenance of continuous action** and **self-consistent detail**.

"continuity." The Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Current English, 2009
Who’s responsible for continuity?

It’s a big job...
Who’s responsible for continuity in TV and film?

- Script writer
- Script editor
- Script producer
- Script supervisor
- Camera operators
- Director
- Editor
- Showrunner

- Various other departments:
  - Wardrobe
  - Hair
  - Makeup
  - Special effects
  - Art department
- Etc.
Who’s responsible for continuity in novels?

- **AUTHOR**
- Editor
- Proofreader.
Continuity is ...

... one of the ways that editorial professionals **add value** to the publishing process.
Continuity in the wild

(What to look for in your next project)
Two types of continuity

Continuous action

Self-consistent detail
These two types applied to novels...
Continuity type 1:
Continuous action

- Plot
- Timeline
- Blocking
Plot and timeline

- Is the plot possible?
- Are there any holes?
- Have any dead characters come back to life* when they weren’t meant to?**
- Are there internal inconsistencies in the timeline?

*Surprisingly common!
**Assuming it’s not a zombie novel. Obey the rules of the fictional world.
**Absolute & relative time**

**Absolute** time: ‘11 am on Saturday, 2 July 2016’

**Relative** time: ‘two weeks later’

- Relative time has more wiggle room.
- If it could go either way, I tend to give the author the benefit of the doubt.
Implied time

References to:

• seasons
• weather
• the position of the sun
• phases of the moon
• etc.
Problem: time-scale integration

- Most novels use all three time scales simultaneously.
- We need to be able to reconcile them.
- How?
  - Spoiler: continuity tracker sheet.
Blocking

The positioning and movement of characters in a scene.
Common blocking pitfalls

- **Describing an action repeatedly**, e.g. characters entering a room twice without leaving it.
- **Losing track of characters**: how they are positioned in relation to each other,* how they are sitting/standing, where they are looking, etc.
- **Props disappearing and reappearing**, e.g. coffee cups.

*Very common in sex scenes!
Continuity type 2: self-consistent detail

- **Place** setting; geography
- **Time** setting; period detail
- **Characterisation**
- **Character details**
- etc.
Continuity toolkit
What’s in your toolkit?

• Style sheet
• Continuity tracker
• Other personal/project-specific solutions
• Professional judgment
• Constant vigilance.
How much detail do you need to track?

- Use your best judgment
- Trial and error!
- Balance competing needs:
  - Comprehensiveness versus budget/deadline.
Watch for red flags!
Pay particular attention to numbers:

• Dates
• Times, timezones
• Ages
• Distances
• Dated days of the week, if year is specified.

Watch for:

• Hair and eye colour; height
• Clothing
• Weather/seasons
• Crops and flowering plants
• Pregnancy progress

Spot check anything that:

• Is important to the story, if you know nothing about the topic.
• ‘Smells’ funny.
Clothing continuity

The heroine, a nurse, had just finished her shift at the hospital. The hero described her ‘clopping’ down the corridor.

- She normally wore rubber-soled flat shoes at work.
- From the sound, readers would infer the heroine was wearing hard shoes with a heel.
- The heroine hadn’t explicitly changed clothes.

I suggested the author either (1) change the sound, or (2) briefly mention she’d changed clothes.
The style sheet

You’re likely to include character and place names, so why not also track things like these?

- General appearance
- Major relationships
- Personality quirks
- Significant changes (e.g. injuries)
- Relative distances and directions
- etc.
Two style sheet methods

Inline method versus Breakout method
Inline method

G
G force(s)
G-Man
Gaddis, Harley ‘Igor’ – Chief Petty Officer, wears gold wedding band, six foot four, husband Sammy (Samuel), aka Igor the giant – beard, biggest of the SEALs on the chopper originally in Book 1, shaved head, a head taller than Dave. Shaves beard in Book 2.

Gargui, Sectum
gas station
Gerber Mark II fighting knife
Breakout method

Separate style sheet sections for:

- Word list/usage
- Vehicles
- Characters
- Weapons
- Places
- etc.
Managing continuity via the style sheet

**PRO**

- No need to create and update yet another document
- Searchable
- **Indispensable for series,** especially when there’s a lengthy gap between volumes or a change of editorial personnel.

**CON**

- Can lead to very lengthy style sheets
- Without consistency of approach, can become difficult to find the information you need
- **Not great for timeline tracking.**
The continuity tracker

Records how much time has passed at specific points in a story, and other continuity red flags as desired.

- Much better than a style sheet for keeping track of timelines.
- Can reconcile absolute, relative and implied time scales.
- Mine is for personal use only – so it can be as sketchy or messy as I want.
- Particularly good for proofreads, where you might only get to do one pass.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date/day</th>
<th>Time passed</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>04/28</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ellie + Flynn's wedding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Striking lust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fierceness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ellie (what had happened)  17 yrs ago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3/15 - 16 yo when married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lucy 17 = 325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ellie + S going out since Lucy's age (16 yrs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Just a few months ago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hilda Quatermaine collapses in church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6/26 Nov</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Faded face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hospital, leaving tomorrow for 2 months travel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>L planning to resign Monday (not sure why)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hands 40 something long hair brown hair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tom brown eyes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**What’s on my template?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date/day</th>
<th>I identify the <strong>start of the main action</strong> and call it <strong>D1</strong>, or day 1. As I work through the book I match each absolute, relative and implied time marker to <strong>D2</strong>, <strong>D3</strong>, <strong>D4</strong>, etc., as best I can, building a <strong>unified picture of the timeline</strong>.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Absolute time references also go here.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time passed</strong></td>
<td><strong>Relative and implied time markers go here.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Page</strong></td>
<td><strong>Unique locator within the book.</strong> <em>(Could be a para or chapter ref for ebook-only titles.)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Notes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Any other relevant information.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Continuity tracker: download my PDF template

sarahjhfletcher.com/continuity-tracker

Template licensed under Creative Commons BY-NC-SA
Continuity & editorial best practice
Two bad approaches... and a better one
Bad approach 1: go hard

**Obsess** about getting every single detail of continuity ‘accurate’, at the expense of plot, characterisation, theme, pacing, style, etc.

**Annoy the author** with incessant queries about tiny details that have little to no bearing on the story.
Bad approach 2: go home

Completely ignore continuity. It’s too hard.
A better approach: go softly

Balance continuity with other editorial considerations.

Use your best judgment to walk the line between ‘accuracy’ and what the audience is likely to perceive as ‘correct’.
Difficult truths of working on continuity

- What is ‘accurate’ won’t necessarily read as such to everyone.

- What the author considers ‘accurate’ may be less definitive than they claim.

- Different genres may have different continuity standards.

- Certain readers will have unusual amounts of knowledge – either more or less – and this affects how plausible they will find events.

- You will never, ever, ever make the continuity in a work of fiction unassailable.
Nobody could shoot a gun that fast!

Reader with less knowledge
You can’t shoot that many rounds from a SIG Sauer without reloading!
Who are your readers?

Should you edit with the ‘reasonable reader’ in mind?
How to deal: editorial practice

QUERY, QUERY, QUERY.

• Don’t make continuity changes without the author’s input.

• Remember: even minor tweaks may have knock-on effects.
  - Particularly timeline and plot tweaks.
How to deal: editorial practice 2

• Use your **best professional judgment**.

• Think of readers.

• Keep an open mind.

• Don’t let continuity overwhelm other editorial considerations.
How to deal:
author relationships

• Don’t get smug.
• Don’t punish authors for continuity mistakes.
• Suggest solutions where appropriate, but maintain editorial boundaries.
• Remember: the author is ultimately responsible.
Thanks

- Sarah Dollard & Laura Cotton.
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- All the photographers credited – thanks for licensing your works under Creative Commons.
Questions?
Thanks for coming!

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