THE WORDS DESK

Sample Edit

The first 1,000 words of a novel chapter, edited
The Ashen Crown — Chapter Four

PREPARED BY

The Words Desk · Pretty Good Publishing

WHAT THIS SHOWS

The second half of our $25 sample — every change visible, every reason stated

THE OTHER HALF

A one-page critique of your first 10 pages — the two together are the $25 sample, credited in full toward a critique or an edit

DATE

November 2026

Demonstration document — the passage below was written in-house, with its faults left in on purpose, so you can watch a copyedit happen before you trust us with a single page of your own.

SAMPLE

How to read this sample

Our $25 sample has two halves: a **one-page critique of your first 10 pages** (the companion sample shows that format) and a **sample edit of your first 1,000 words** — this document. Below you will find the passage **as submitted**, then the same passage with every change shown — ~~red strikethrough~~ is a cut, blue underline is an insertion or replacement — then the **clean edited passage**, and finally the reasons for the main changes. That is exactly how a paid edit arrives: your words, our changes visible, nothing silently rewritten. The $25 is credited in full toward a full critique ($249/$349) or any editing job.

The passage as submitted

Sera worked by candlelight in the room above the shop, copying the reef line for the third time because her hand kept shaking. The chart was unrolled by her across the whole table and held down at the corners with a chipped mug, a brass compass, a stone, and the flat black case, which was black as pitch. She could hear the harbor bell over their, tolling the hour, and she could smell the rain coming through the shutters again.

The candle guttered, she didn't look up. She copies the reef line twice more. The ink from yesterday was still wet in her memory, each and every stroke of it, and the past memories of her training rose up in her mind whether she wanted them or not.

There was a knock at the stair door, three soft knocks, then two.

"Who is it," she called.

"It's me. Thomas," a voice said nervously. "Let me in, Sera, please, it's important."

She set down the pen. Tomas the ferryman stood in the doorway with water running off of his cloak, carrying the lantern, the stairs creaked under him as he came up.

"You're dripping on my floor," she said.

"Okay," he said. "Sorry. Okay. But listen — "

"The harbour master has doubled the watch," Thomas said. "And that's not the worst of it, not by a long shot. They've got a list, Sera. A list of names. Anyone in this city who ever held a Guild compass, they want them all brought in for questioning, and your name — " He shrugged his shoulders. "Your name is on it. It's written right there at the very top of it, in red ink."

Sera was angry. She stood up very quickly and her chair went over backwards with a clatter that seemed very loud in the small room.

"How do you know?" she demanded loudly. "Who showed you this list? Where did you even see it?"

"My cousin works in the harbour office," Tomas said, "he copies the orders for the captain, and he saw it with his own two eyes, and he came straight to me because he knows — he knows what you can do, Sera. Everybody on the wharf knows, no matter how careful you've been."

For a long moment she just stood there, breathing hard, and she felt the whole small room tilt around her, the chart, the candle, the rain on the shutters, the bell, and she thought about the ten years she had spent hiding what she was, hiding it from the soldiers, hiding it from the palace,

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hiding it even from herself sometimes, and how all of that hiding had been for nothing in the end if a clerk with a candle could write her name at the top of a list in red ink.

"Tell me everything," she said. "Slowly. From the beginning."

So he told her, all of it, in a rush, the words tumbling over each other: how the soldiers had come down to the harbour at dusk with torches, how they had sealed the customs house and the chart-sellers' row, how the captain had stood up on a crate in the fish market and read the King's order out loud to the crowd, and how nobody in the crowd had said a single word, nobody at all, they had all just stood there in the rain and listened to the names of the things that were now forbidden: unlicensed charts, coastline surveys, Guild compasses, tide tables, sounding books, and any map of the old coastline drawn before the Sundering.

"And there's a reward," Thomas said. "Twenty crowns for anyone who turns in a reader. Twenty crowns, Sera. There's men on the wharf who would turn in their own mothers for twenty crowns, and that's a fact."

She could feel the room getting smaller around her. She thought about the floorboard under her bed, and what was underneath it: her mother's Guild compass, wrapped in oilcloth, and a tide book with her own handwriting in the margins going back ten years, each and every page of it a hanging offense all by itself. If the soldiers searched the shop and found the floorboard, it would not just be her name on the list. It would be Mira's name too, and Odo's name too, because the law said a house that sheltered a reader was a reader's house, and the punishment for that was the same punishment.

"I have to get the compass out of the house," she said. "Tonight. Before they come. If they find me, that's one thing, but I won't have them taking Mira for the crime of being my sister, I won't."

"When?" she said.

"They start at dawn," Thomas whispered loudly. "They'll come street by street. The map shop is on the third street, Sera. You've got maybe an hour after first light, maybe not even that."

She nodded her head slowly. Then she rolled the chart with hands that only shook a little, now, and slid it into the flat black case, and blew out the lantern, and in the dark she heard Tomas breathing and the rain, and her own heart, going like a drum.

"The floorboard," she said in the dark. "Help me."

Together they pried it up with the bread knife, her mother's compass and the tide book coming up out of the dust in their oilcloth wrapping, smelling of camphor and old paper. Sera wrapped them inside the chart, tight, the way you wrap a child you are sneaking past a guard, and Tomas took the bundle under his cloak without being asked, and that, more than anything he had said all night, is what she would remember about him later. Outside, somewhere down the hill, a dog began to bark and then thought better of it, and it seemed to her that the whole city was holding its breath along with her own.

"Then we go by water," she said. "Get your boat ready, Tomas. And Tomas — thank you."

The same passage, with the edit shown

Sera worked by candlelight in the room above the shop, copying the reef line for the third time because her hand kept shaking. The chart ~~was unrolled by her across~~ lay unrolled across the whole table ~~and~~ held down at the corners with a chipped mug, a brass compass, a stone, and the flat black case~~, which was black as pitch~~. ~~She could hear the harbor bell over their, tolling the hour, and she could smell the rain coming through the shutters again.~~ Beyond the shutters, the harbor bell tolled the hour, and the smell of rain came through in gusts.

The candle guttered~~,~~; she didn't look up. She cop~~ies~~ied the reef line twice more. The ink ~~from yesterday~~ was still wet in her memory, ~~each and~~ every stroke of it, and ~~the past memories of~~ her training rose up in her mind whether she wanted ~~them~~it or not.

~~There was~~A knock ~~at~~came at the stair door~~,~~ — three soft knocks, then two.

"Who is it~~,~~?" she called.

"It's me. ~~Thomas," a voice said nervously. "~~Tomas." His voice shook. "Let me in, Sera, please~~, it's~~. It's important."

She set down the pen. Tomas the ferryman stood in the doorway ~~with~~, water running off ~~of~~ his cloak~~, carrying the lantern, the stairs creaked under him as he came up~~. The stairs creaked under him as he set the lantern down inside the door.

"You're dripping on my floor," she said.

"~~Okay," he said. "Sorry. Okay. But~~All right. Sorry." He pushed the door shut behind him. "But listen — "

"The harbo~~u~~rmaster has doubled the watch," T~~h~~omas said. "And that's not the worst of it, not by a long shot. They~~'ve got~~ have a list, Sera. A list of names. Anyone in this city who ever held a Guild compass~~, they~~ — they want them all brought in for questioning~~,~~. And your name — " He shrugged ~~his shoulders~~. "Your name is on it. ~~It's written~~Written right ~~there~~ at the very top ~~of it~~, in red ink."

~~Sera was angry. She stood up very quickly and her chair~~ Sera shoved her chair back so fast it went over ~~backwards~~ with a clatter that seemed ~~very loud in~~to fill the small room.

"How do you know?" she demanded ~~loudly~~. "Who showed you this list? Where did you even see it?"

"My cousin works in the harbo~~u~~r office," Tomas said~~, "he~~. "He copies the orders for the captain~~, and he~~. He saw it with his own ~~two~~ eyes, and he came straight to me because he knows — he knows what you can do, Sera. Everybody on the wharf knows, no matter how careful you've been."

For a long moment she ~~just~~ stood there, breathing hard, and ~~she felt the whole small~~the room ~~tilt~~seemed to tilt around her~~,~~: the chart, the candle, the rain on the shutters, the bell~~, and she thought about the ten~~. Ten years ~~she had spent~~ hiding what she was~~, hiding it~~ — from the soldiers, ~~hiding it~~ from the palace, ~~hiding it even from herself sometimes, and how~~sometimes even from herself — and all of ~~that hiding had been for~~it for nothing ~~in the end~~ if a clerk with a candle could write her name at the top of a list in red ink.

"Tell me everything," she said. "Slowly. From the beginning."

So he told her, all of it, in a rush~~, the words tumbling over each other~~: how the soldiers had come down to the harbo~~u~~r at dusk with torches~~,~~; how they had sealed the customs house and the chart-sellers' row~~,~~; how the captain had stood ~~up~~ on a crate in the fish market and read the King's order ~~out loud~~aloud to ~~the crowd, and how nobody in the crowd had said a single word, nobody at all, they had all just stood there~~a crowd that said nothing at all, just stood in the rain and listened to ~~the names of the things that were now forbidden:~~the list of forbidden things — unlicensed charts, coastline surveys, Guild compasses, tide tables, sounding books, and any map of the old coastline drawn before the Sundering.

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"I have to get the compass out of the house," she said. "Tonight~~. Before~~, before they come. If they find me, that's one thing~~, but~~. But I won't have them taking Mira for the crime of being my sister~~, I won't~~. I won't."

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"They start at dawn," ~~Thomas~~Tomas whispered ~~loudly~~. "They'll come street by street. The map shop is on the third street, Sera. You~~'ve got~~ have maybe an hour after first light~~, maybe~~. Maybe not even that."

She nodded ~~her head~~ slowly. Then she rolled the chart with hands that ~~only shook a little, now,~~shook only a little now, and slid it into the flat black case, and blew out the ~~lantern~~candle. ~~and in the dark she heard~~In the dark she could hear Tomas breathing and the rain, and her own heart~~,~~ going like a drum.

"The floorboard," she said in the dark. "Help me."

Together they pried it up with the bread knife~~, her~~. Her mother's compass and the tide book ~~coming~~came up out of the dust in their oilcloth wrapping, smelling of camphor and old paper. Sera wrapped them inside the chart, tight~~,~~ — the way you wrap a child you are sneaking past a guard~~,~~ — and Tomas took the bundle under his cloak without being asked~~, and that~~. That, more than anything he had said all night, is what she would remember about him later. ~~Outside, somewhere down the hill, a dog began to bark and then thought better of it, and it seemed to her that the whole city was holding its breath along with her own.~~Outside, somewhere down the hill, a dog began to bark and then thought better of it, and the whole city seemed to hold its breath along with her.

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The passage after the copyedit (clean)

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Why the changes were made (the main ones)

1. **Passive + repetition — “The chart was unrolled by her…” / “…black as pitch”**

Passive construction with the actor named is the worst of both worlds; let objects simply be where they are. And the case is described as black twice in four words — “black as pitch” also fights the candlelit mood. The case stays an unexplained, slightly ominous object (it pays off at the end, when she uses it).

2. **Tense slip — “She copies… the ink from yesterday”**

The passage slips into present tense for two sentences — almost certainly a leftover from an earlier draft's style. Standardized to past. If the author *wants* present-tense interludes, that's a deliberate pattern and we'd keep and sharpen it instead.

3. **Filter words — “She could hear the harbor bell over their”**

Two fixes in one line: *their/there*, and the filter “she could hear,” which puts glass between the reader and the sound. In close third person, if it's on the page, she's perceiving it — say the thing itself.

4. **Comma splice — “The candle guttered, she didn't look up”**

Joined with a semicolon, which keeps the breathless pace the author wanted; a period would also have worked.

5. **Redundant pairs — “each and every stroke,” “past memories”**

“Past memories” is a tautology; memories are definitionally past. “Each and every” becomes “every.”

6. **Name drift — “Thomas” for “Tomas” (four places)**

The ferryman is Tomas everywhere else, including this passage's own later lines. Name drift is exactly what the per-book style sheet (started with every sample, maintained through every full edit) exists to catch — in a series, it catches the drift across books.

7. **Said-bookism + adverb — “a voice said nervously” / “whispered loudly”**

The information (he's frightened) matters, so we kept it and showed it: “His voice shook.” “Whispered loudly” is an oxymoron; it becomes simply “whispered.”

8. **Misplaced modifier + continuity — “Carrying the lantern, the stairs creaked…”**

As written, the stairs are carrying the lantern. Restructured — and it fixes the continuity slip at the scene's end: the room's light is a candle, so she blows out the candle, not the lantern.

9. **Anachronism, flagged not forced — “Okay”**

In a secondary-world fantasy, “Okay” (a 19th-century Americanism) snags many readers; changed to “All right,” with a beat added. This is flagged as an *authorial choice*, not an error: some fantasy voices use modern idiom deliberately. Our job is to make it a decision instead of an accident.

10. **Spelling consistency — “harbour” “harbor,” “harbormaster” closed up**

The manuscript otherwise uses American spellings. Consistency beats preference; the style sheet records the choice so Book 2 matches Book 1.

11. **Telling, where showing already exists — "Sera was angry"**

The emotion was named, then described anyway ("her chair went over"). The action alone is angrier. Where a draft both tells *and* shows, we keep the show.

12. **Body-part redundancy — "nodded her head," "shrugged his shoulders"**

Heads and shoulders are the default equipment for both verbs. Cut.

13. **The long "hiding" sentence — tightened, not cut**

The catalogue (chart, candle, rain, bell) is the emotional peak of the scene and its rhythm does real work; we kept the repetition ("hiding… from the soldiers, from the palace") and gave it punctuation that lets it land, removing the filter "she felt."

14. **What we did NOT change**

The three-knocks-then-two signal, "going like a drum," "Everybody on the wharf knows," the red ink. Voice is the author's; an editor who sands off the voice has failed at the job. In a real edit every change is tracked — nothing is ever silently rewritten.

Style sheet started for this book (comes with the sample, maintained through every full edit)

Tomas (not Thomas) · harbor (US spellings) · Inquisition capitalized as an office · "reef line" two words · candle = the room's light source in Ch. 4 · the flat black case — do not describe its contents early.

A full copyedit runs 1.4¢/word; developmental editing 1.8¢/word; proofreading 1.0¢/word — quoted in writing after the sample, with this style sheet maintained across the whole book, and across the series.

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