

Remediating the Runway: How Transfer and Remediation Allowed *Project Runway* Help Me Write a Book

Michael Haley

In this article, Michael Haley considers the processes in which learning the genre conventions of the reality TV show *Project Runway* helped him learn how to edit a literary manuscript. He considers how his antecedent knowledge of literary genres helped him learn about conventions of fashion as presented within the show's weekly challenges. Then, he considers how new knowledge of fashion conventions transferred into knowledge of how to edit a literary manuscript, and he ultimately considers how the various genres merged within the process of genre remediation to result in a publishable book.

Once upon a time, it was my dream to publish not just a novel but a *book*. A *book* that my friends could check out from the library, a *book* that sat on the shelves of Barnes and Noble, a *book* I could not only read but also feel the tight binding of its spine and the exhilarating smell of its ink. After many years and many tries, I finally had an idea for a plot that could potentially form an actual novel. I wrote, wrote, wrote, and wrote—lots of scenes, lots of characters—all in the same book! My book was to be a comedy, a drama, a musical, a wild-as-hell fantasia of thoughts and feelings and ideas that the world had never seen before! Just wait until someone reads it!

This confidence was inspiring, to a degree, until I realized I had a manuscript with lots of words and no story. Or perhaps lots of stories, *too* many stories, but not something cohesive that one would read and call a publishable novel. Now that my “vision” (writers and artists in general like to convince ourselves our works are mystical revelations) was on paper, it became clear that this “vision” had to be tempered into a text that someone else could read, understand, and enjoy. One such tempering process is called **editing**.

Vocabulary Terms Involving Editing? Yes Please!!

Editing is the transformation of one's textual production into an improved text that can be consumed, enjoyed, or otherwise used by other people. This transformation comes in two flavors: grammatical and conceptual. The former is called **copyediting** and consists of both grammatical and mechanical corrections and/or revisions to ensure that the text reads in a consistently "correct" manner that your high school grammar teacher might approve of. However, editing can also entail correcting, balancing, deleting, or otherwise revising much larger concepts than correct grammar. These could include, but are not limited to, things like characters, plot consistency, pacing, and others that will be discussed shortly. This is called **developmental editing**, which is usually conducted by either a professional editor or team of editors who have not written the text themselves. The author doing their own editing on their text is a process referred to as either **draft editing** or **self-editing**. For purposes of this article, our focus here won't lie so much in grammatical types of editing but instead in conceptual, "big-picture" issues of self-editing.

Editing is a process that is fundamental to nearly every textual production that has ever been published. Every book Barnes and Noble sells has been through an editing process, newspaper articles have been edited prior to print, and even this article you're reading right now will have gone through an editing process. This process involves as few as one editor to as many as multiple different editors who are employed by the press/publisher to get the writer's manuscript in a form that the public can read. In the genre of literary fiction, also known as the genre of books you probably had to read for school, the editing process not only involves grammar and mechanical correction, but also consideration of how effectively the author is conveying the story that he/she is attempting to tell. Thus, the editor will look at elements such as character development (do the characters grow in some way?), plot sequencing (does the plot follow a logical sequence?), consistency (do characters behave consistently from scene to scene?), and general likeability (will readers respond favorably to a certain scene or character?) Tracking these elements is the responsibility of the writer, who not only has the task of creating a text that tends to average a few hundred pages in length, but who also has to manage the world of the text, including its characters, conflict, dialogue, internal and external motivations, and plot sequencing. It can be very difficult for any writer to successfully pull off such a feat without the guidance of an editor, who can be in the position to look at the work in question objectively and identify the areas in which the text might need extra help.

I Don't Need No Extra Help! Oh Wait . . .

Extra help is something that all texts and their writers benefit from, and my rough draft of a future novel was no exception. One of the awful things about editing is that the text must often be at a certain level of quality before a potential publisher will deem it worthy enough to hire a professional editor to edit it. This is partially because of constraints on the editor's time and the publisher's checkbook, as well as the sheer volume of manuscripts seeking publication. There simply aren't the resources available to grant every author an opportunity to have their work professionally edited (unless they hire one themselves prior to submitting to a publisher). As editors are only able to handle so many assignments from a publisher, they must be selective of what they invest their time into, and to be selective means that the text must show some type of potential to be worth the time and life the editor puts into it. This "level of quality" is subjective to the reader and dependent upon the genre that a writer is writing in, yet the subjective benchmark nevertheless exists for virtually all textual productions that seek publication.

This means that writers, in addition to being creators of fantastic new worlds, compelling characters, and exciting dramas, also must be their own editors. This is one of those secrets that isn't often mentioned amongst the general public, as a common myth is that the work of writers emerges from their heads more-or-less complete as is, without the need for additional help or guidance. After all, writers are supposed to know all this stuff intuitively, right? Isn't this what separates them from normal people?

Draft, or self-editing, then, is an **occluded genre** (a genre that is not apparent or obvious to see) with its own conventions that most writers discover need to be dealt with for their work to see publication. Although professional editors are trained in such processes, writers themselves are often not. I certainly wasn't. The more I tried to edit the text myself without knowledge of the genre's conventions, the larger and more involved the text grew, as my solution to most of the issues that I deemed apparent in the text was to include *more*. Having other people read the work and comment upon it was only helpful to a degree, as my sensitive ego might have been too insulted by someone who trashed a character that I loved. Or even worse would be the wrong-headed assumption that the gracious reader simply didn't "understand" my work. The thought that I had not communicated my work in a way that the reader could potentially understand, naturally, did not occur to me.

Blah Blah Blah, I Thought This Article Was Supposed to Be About *Project Runway*??

So, in a totally unrelated (but actually super-related, as we'll discover shortly) note, I saw nothing wrong whatsoever with wearing brown and black. Not selectively chosen shades of the two neutrals that play contrastively off each other, mind you, but rather a black belt with brown khakis and cigarette-black loafers was my signature look. Totally rocked it.

My wife thought otherwise and expressed such thinking through eye rolls, awkward silences, and not-so-silent, "Are you *really* going to wear that?" I thought there was nothing wrong with my approach to fashion, unconvinced that my fashion choices communicated any specific messages about me or my sensibilities to anyone else. I was a *writer*, and writers are not supposed to care about how their clothing appears to the rest of the world. Writers are supposed to be preoccupied with other matters, like saving the world from tyranny one poem at a time or something. Fashion is beneath us.

Oh, but little did I know that I was about to discover that what I didn't know about fashion would inform what I didn't know about editing. And what better to inform us of what we don't know than reality TV?

Finally! A Look at the Processes of *Project Runway*

My wife, who is much, *much* more familiar with the conventions of fashion and the fashion industry than I, watched *Project Runway* every week. She told me about the show a few times, and it was often present in the background of our apartment while I would write. Little by little over the course of season four (this was a while ago, folks) the judging segments started to catch my attention. I began to pay more active attention to the whole show, and, eventually, I became hooked.

Project Runway, for those of you who don't watch it, falls into the genre of reality-contest shows. Aspiring fashion designers are presented with a challenge to create a fashionable, runway-ready garment within various styles (an outfit for the red carpet, an avant-garde outfit, something made from unconventional materials, etc.) within the time frame of usually one day. The garments go through numerous processes that involve:

1. Initial inspiration
2. Sketching
3. Selecting and purchasing materials

4. Constructing the outfit with materials
5. Critique of outfit by show mentor Tim Gunn along with his suggestions for improvement
6. Finishing the construction of the garment
7. Enhancing the garment with additional processes, including decisions about what makeup to adorn the models with, what accessories will accompany their outfit, and what type of walk the model will perform to present their outfit on the runway
8. Judging, composed of a model (Heidi Klum), a fashion designer (Michael Kors in earlier seasons, Zac Posen in later seasons), a fashion editor (Nina Garcia of *Elle Magazine*), and a variable guest spot, which could include actors and actresses or other models and fashion designers, all who judge the contestants' outfits and rank them top, bottom, or safe
9. Critiquing the garments, in which the judges tell designers in great detail what they did and did not respond favorably to
10. Deliberation amongst the judges on who should win the challenge and who should lose
11. Congratulating the designer of the winning outfit
12. Eliminating the designer of the losing outfit
13. Next week, next challenge!

The Process of a “Vision”

One thing that *Project Runway* really highlights about one's artistic “vision” is that creating a fashionable garment is not just having a great idea or a flash of inspiration. Rather, constructing an outfit that reflects the designer's vision is a messy process full of problems, compromises, and unforeseen constraints. The designer might have an idea for a gorgeous evening-wear gown, but then choose a fabric that does not “move” (flows well through the air as one walks) on the runway. Or the designer envisions a super-charming jacket to coordinate with pants no one has ever seen before, only to realize that their measurements are off and, as a result, both garments look hideous together. On a weekly basis, *Project Runway* showcases how such problems occur throughout the creative process and that the designers who face such problems are not “bad” designers. Rather, the problems are simply issues that must be overcome if they wish to successfully execute their garments.

These problems present, as Tim Gunn says so frequently, “make it work” moments.

“Making it work” is something I would fail miserably at if trying to sew fabric (my skills amount to reattaching two-hole buttons), but was something I was desperately trying to do in completing the novel I was writing. Like the designers, I found myself overwhelmed with trying to get the novel “to work.” As I would write scenes that I thought were getting me closer to completion, I would realize that characters had developed conflicting motivations. Then I would add more “stuff” to fix the motivation issue but now had pacing issues in the second third of the plot. I would add more “stuff” to balance those issues out, but then the ending suddenly became nonsensical. Like every story I had ever written prior, and even to an extent for the revisions of this very article, my tried-and-true solution was to keep adding more, more, and more and hope that all the additions would magically make the book perfect and complete.

Tim Gunn Comes to the Rescue!

Once I adjusted to the rhythms of the show and began to understand it, I began to pay closer attention to the processes within the designers’ work room, particularly the role of series mentor, Tim Gunn. After the designers have created some draft of their outfit (but not complete), Gunn critiques their work and probes their processes, often asking the designers such questions as, “What story are you trying to tell with this outfit?” or “What is your unique point of view as a designer?” This round of mentoring is not unlike **draft editing** of another’s manuscript by a person who has not created it. Furthermore, these types of questions are also asked by critics and readers of literary fiction, questions such as “What’s this novel trying to say?” or “What’s the writer’s point of view?” As I had a great amount of exposure to the genre of literature, I found I could draw upon my **antecedent knowledge** (my past knowledge) of literature to make sense of the artistic process of the fashion designers by identifying elements that they had in common. Identifying these elements allowed for learning **transfer** (applying antecedent knowledge to a new process/situation to either create new knowledge or learn a new skill) and allowed me to come to the realization that fashion designers were also storytellers working in the genre of fashion. If they were storytellers, too, then perhaps they might know something about the editing of storytelling that I did not.

I don’t know when this first occurred, but, at some point while I was agonizing over a character’s motivation or something, I began to daydream

and imagine Tim Gunn was in the workroom critiquing not a designer's outfit but rather my novel in progress. Even in my imagination, he was a gracious but tough critic, and I imagined him asking me the same types of creative and rhetorical questions he frequently asks the contestants on the show: "Who are you as a designer?" (Who am I as a writer?) "How is this fabric working against your point of view?" (How is this chapter working against my point of view?) "Where is the wow factor in this dress?" (Where is the wow factor in my fiction?)

What Editing for the Runway Taught Me About Editing for the Page

The voices in my head were not limited to Tim Gunn. Soon, I began to also hear Michael Kors's voice in my ear telling me that a scene "was too long," "doesn't fit with your overall vision," or (heavens no!) that he "questions my taste level." Nina Garcia might chime in, too, questioning whether the fiction I wrote was "editorial." As my goal was to get published, the one voice I did *not* want to hear was Heidi Klum telling me, "I'm sorry but you are out. *Auf wiedersehen*" (translation—goodbye, or until we see each other again).

Once this had occurred a couple times, it became routine to imagine their questioning as an integral component of whatever scene/chapter/section of the book I was working on. Yet, to fully address such editorial questions that someone as fashionable as Heidi or Nina might have of my work, it became apparent that I would have to follow Nina's advice and approach my work with an editorial eye. Not having a strong grasp on how to do this, I found that the show was more than willing to provide examples of the editorial process. To learn, I mentally took notes as to *why* a designer would willingly remove design elements from their outfits that they personally loved but that worked against their overall vision, which made me realize I might have to remove a chapter (or two . . . or four . . .) to maintain the vision of my work. Or, if reversing a garment (wearing it backwards or flipping it inside out) was the solution to creating a "Wow!" moment, I, too, might have to change the narrator of a scene or move the entire scene somewhere else in the story to really stun my readers. It was *very seldom* that the solution to the designer's problems was to add more to their work, but, rather, to creatively remove existing elements within their work in order to improve it. In other words, they had to *edit* their visions, and I did, too.

When I watched designers face critique from the judges, I saw that they had to be able to fully articulate the aesthetic choices they made within the production of their work in order to be taken seriously. So, too, would I have to fully articulate my choices, which meant that I had to treat every word I

had written as a conscious choice to write *this* word as opposed to *that* word, and I better have a good reason for doing so. This process occurs frequently with designers who fall so in love with their work that they cannot accurately see the effect that their work has upon other people until the judges critique and look at it. There is no way to avoid this entirely, but learning how to self-edit and approach one's work with an editorial eye dramatically increases the chances that other people (readers, publishers, fashion judges) will be able to specifically respond to what the writer wishes to communicate, as opposed to all the other elements that the writer may personally love yet that detract from that communication.

Watching *Project Runway* essentially allowed me to form a connection between a genre of knowledge that I knew (literary conventions) and a genre of knowledge I did not know (editing) via a genre that I was learning the conventions of (fashion). Here's a weirdly drawn graphic to illustrate:

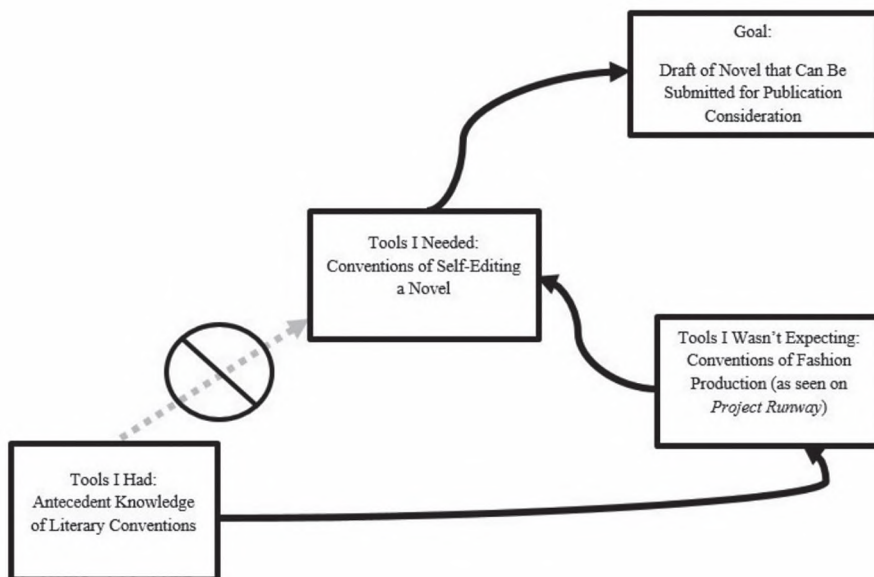


Figure 1: Graphic about antecedent knowledge.

I discovered that all three genres could meaningfully **remediate** (change from one form to another) into the new genre that would become my published book. This remediation was possible because I had mistakenly assumed that having antecedent knowledge about literature would **transfer** to skills in editing a literary text. It did not. However, applying my antecedent knowledge to learn the new genre of fashion production allowed me to see the parallels between literary conventions and production and between

fashion conventions and production, which included principles of editing, and, thus, to transfer this new knowledge to learning the new skill of self-editing a literary novel.

Auf Wiedersehen to the Rough Draft

Eventually, I finished draft two, then draft three, and then too many drafts to count as the novel went through numerous personal revisions before undergoing three formal, professional revisions with different editors prior to publication as a book. No two drafts are completely alike, and no two drafts were more different than draft one and draft two. The second and subsequent drafts are the direct result of the knowledge transfer that occurred while watching *Project Runway*, where the socio-biological genre that is “Michael Haley” came into contact with the knowledge and skills of socio-biological genres that are named Michael Kors, Nina Garcia, Zac Posen, Heidi Klum, Tim Gunn, and numerous fashion designers. Their insights into fashion and the processes in which they created and/or judged fashionable attire might not appear anywhere in my novel, but the novel as a published book simply would not exist without them. Yet, the real question of this article remains: could *Project Runway* designers remediate a black belt wrapped around brown khakis with cigarette-black sneakers into the genre of fashionable clothing people would want to wear? Whether one is a designer manipulating fabric or a writer making up a happy ending for the challenge, some genres are simply beyond remediation.



Michael Haley is a Master's student in English at Illinois State University. A lifelong lover of storytelling in various forms, he primarily studies how intersections of culture, personal identity, and language ideologies are created/destroyed/reborn within age-based genres of literature. Following his experiences publishing the New Adult novel *Lost on the Edge of Forever*, he dreams of the glorious day in which he'll actually have enough free time to write a second book—while watching or streaming *Project Runway*, naturally.