THE CONTINUITY DETECTIVE

Keeping people, places and pocket contents consistent

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CASE NOTES

Monday: Nessa leaves the only key inside the locked observatory. Tuesday: Nessa opens the observatory with the key in her pocket. Wednesday: The author hopes nobody will notice.

Somebody probably will.

Continuity is the consistency of details and events across a work. Readers do not need an inventory of every pocket. They do need confidence that objects, knowledge, time and consequences behave according to the book's established reality.

A useful continuity check follows evidence rather than memory. The author who remembers three different versions of Tuesday is particularly well placed to confuse them.

OPEN A SMALL CASE FILE

Create a reference document alongside the manuscript. A notebook or ordinary text file works; a spreadsheet is optional. Record what the current draft actually establishes, with chapter or scene references so you can check the evidence later.

Organize it into a few practical categories:

- People: names, ages, relationships, physical details and recurring habits.
- Places: layout, distances, entrances and important features.
- Time: dates, elapsed time, ages at past events and event order.
- Objects: who possesses them, where they go and what condition they are in.
- Knowledge: who learns what, when, and from whom.

A fiction copyeditor may record some of these details in a style sheet. Your working continuity notes can be more extensive. Avoid recording hundreds of facts that never affect the book; maintain the information you need to keep reliable.

TRACK CHANGE AS WELL AS FACT

"Nessa has a blue coat" is a fact. "Nessa leaves the blue coat on the ferry in Scene 14" is a change of state. Both matter when she reaches into its pocket in Scene 18.

For consequential objects, follow a simple chain: acquired, carried, transferred, lost, recovered or destroyed. If the object changes hands off the page, decide whether readers need to see or hear about it.

Resolve the observatory key by choosing an explanation that fits the story. Nessa might retrieve it through a window, obtain a spare or use a different entrance. If access is meant to be difficult, casually inventing a spare may undermine the obstacle. Repair the cause, not just the sentence that exposes it.

Treat injuries and other physical conditions similarly. Record what limitations the draft establishes and whether later actions respect them. If realism depends on specialist medical knowledge, research the specific circumstances rather than guessing at a convenient recovery time.

PUT EVENTS ON A CLOCK

Start with relative time: Monday morning, that evening, two days later. Add exact dates only where needed. Check references such as "last night" after moving scenes; these little phrases have strong opinions about sequence.

For a nonlinear narrative, track two orders: when events occur in the story world, and when the reader encounters them. A flashback may be placed correctly in the book while giving a character information they could not yet possess.

Include travel, sleep and waiting when they affect plausibility. If the plot requires a particular ferry crossing or journey time in a real setting, verify the relevant route and period. A fictional village may have its own timetable, but that timetable still needs to work consistently.

You do not need to account for every minute. Focus on intervals that determine whether something is possible.

WALK THROUGH THE ROOMS

Sketch important locations, even badly. Mark doors, windows, stairs and places people can see or hear from. Artistic talent is unnecessary. A rectangle labelled "shed" can prevent a surprising number of architectural emergencies.

Then follow a complicated scene through the sketch. Can the witness see the gate? Can someone leave without passing the guard? If a character discovers a hidden staircase, have you accidentally sent another character down it earlier?

A changed description is not always an error. A different viewpoint may perceive the same room differently. Distinguish subjective impressions from physical contradictions.

INVESTIGATE KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge errors can be less visible than disappearing coats. Nessa knows the observatory has a cellar because she inspected it. Her colleague does not, unless she tells him or he learns another way.

For a mystery or a story with multiple viewpoints, keep a short record of major revelations. Include what readers know separately from what characters know. This helps preserve suspense without making anyone conveniently forget a fact at the crucial moment.

An unreliable narrator can report inconsistent information intentionally. The revision question is whether the inconsistency serves a planned effect and becomes meaningful, rather than whether all statements agree mechanically.

CLOSE THE LOOP AFTER REPAIRS

When you correct a detail, search for related references. Changing a character's age can affect schooling, anniversaries and memories. Renaming the observatory may leave its old abbreviation in dialogue.

Search finds occurrences; it does not understand them. Inspect each result before replacing text, and update the reference document after deciding what is true. Otherwise your continuity file becomes a record of a book you no longer have.

A careful beta reader may flag contradictions. A copyeditor may check consistency within the contracted scope, while extensive research or a complex timeline audit may need a separate agreement. With limited funds, checking one category at a time yourself is still useful work.

Finish with a short list of unresolved contradictions and the passages affected. Resolve those before declaring the check complete, then read each repair in context. Keep the updated reference file with the revised manuscript so the next pass begins from the same set of facts.

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