



# THE STOPLIGHT STRATEGY

**W**hen you know the issues that exist in your manuscript, you need to decide how to approach them – and not all problems are created equal. You want to focus on the things that matter most to your story before you focus on the things that are more surface-level. It makes no sense to worry about dialogue, for example, if you have a fundamental issue with your main character's motivation. That would be like frosting the cake before it's fully baked. The Stoplight Strategy helps you determine which problems to focus on and in what order.

What you want to do is to organize the problems according to how easy they are to fix. By identifying a problem by how easy it is to solve, you accomplish several things:

- You keep your mind open to and focused on the big ideas that run throughout the narrative rather than on the small issues. Just seeing the yellow and red columns on the templates will help you accomplish this.
- You can organize your editing energy once you are back at the computer. If you have 10 minutes, you can choose to do three green-light fixes or one yellow-light fix. If you need to do a red-light fix, you might want to set aside a few hours or even a whole day.
- You can assess all the red-light issues in a holistic way, across all the chapters, rather than focusing only on one chapter at a time. This is the key way to solve a novel that is sagging in the middle or not paying off in the end.

This strategy is designed to prevent you from slipping into paying too much attention to the easy, green-light issues. You need to force yourself to think about the yellow- and red-light issues. These are the issues that tend to ruin stories – not the green-light issues. Green-light issues are the things any good proofreader or copy editor can fix.

## Green-Light Issues

Green-light issues are easy to fix, and are almost always confined to one page or scene. If it will take you less than 10 minutes to fix, it's probably a green-light issue.

Examples of green-light issues include:

- A date you need to look up for historical accuracy.
- A location you need to Google to get a better grasp of it.
- A concept you need to describe more deeply because you might know what it means but your reader may not.
- Something small you need to ask someone you know to clarify.

- Moving a paragraph to another location for better flow.
- Cleaning up a bit of dialogue to give the reader new insight into character motivation and relationships.
- Cleaning up a bit of dialogue to make it sound natural.
- Cleaning up a bit of dialogue so the reader can see the character's verbal and physical reaction.
- Axing something small you know needs to go – a scene where nothing changes.
- Writing a new ending to a scene so that it sets up the next scene.

You can mark green-light issues right on the page with a Post-it Flag or circle it with a green highlighter. If it is not obvious what the green-light issue is all about, write yourself a quick note in the margin or use a Post-it Note. There will probably be a LOT of green-light issues, so you don't want to spend too much time describing them; when you go back to the computer to execute the change, it is usually pretty clear.

**Remember: Absolutely DO NOT make the actual correction of the green-light issue right now, even with pencil on the page.** That will slow you down and force you to be thinking about commas and verb agreements rather than story. When you are finished categorizing the problems and you take the pages back to the computer, it's easy to fix green-light issues. You don't have to think or debate too long about green-light issues – you just make them.

**Remember: Resist the urge to correct grammar. Don't fall into the trap of making micro edits. Our concern is all about the story right now.**

On your Stoplight Strategy template under the green heading, note approximately how many green-light issues are in the chapter. Just guesstimate the number so you have a sense when you sit down to enter the changes on the computer. In one of the student examples below, you can see that the writer noted 12 green-light issues.

## Yellow-Light Issues

Yellow-light issues are more involved than green-light issues, but they are not big, bad, or scary like red-light issues might be. It may take you 30-60 minutes to solve a yellow-light issue and it often involves digging deeper into a scene, or jumping both forward and back in the manuscript. If you notice something that's not working and you think, "OK, that's not great, but I know how to fix it," it's probably a yellow-light issue.

Examples of yellow-light issues include:

- Hammering out a complex part of your world that isn't yet locked into place.
- Showing a scene – letting it appear on the page and unfold in real time rather than telling the reader what happened.
- Ironing out the passage of time if there are leaps that aren't logical:

- This includes flashbacks, which are leaps back in time when a character uses something from the past to make sense of the present and then returns to story present.
- This includes making sure the reader can follow the passage of time at the start and end of each scene.
- Making sure the reader can see the characters' reaction as they make sense of everything that's happening in a scene.
- Solving POV inconsistencies on a scene-by-scene level:
  - In third-person close and first person, the narrator can only go into the main character's head.
  - In third-person omniscient, the narrator can go into any character's head – but don't head-hop within a paragraph or even a scene. Stick to being in one person's head at a time. Head-hopping makes the reader work too hard.
- A logic problem that plays forward or backward in the story – you must check a few other locations in the manuscript to make sure events are properly aligned.
- A change in character motivation or understanding that needs to be made more visible in an earlier or later chapter and play forward or backward in the story.
- Making sure that any scene that is falling flat has actual consequences in the story:
  - Something must be at stake in every single scene for the main character. They must be forced to choose, to act, to decide.
  - One scene should lead to the next in a clear cause-and-effect trajectory.

You can mark yellow-light issues with a Post-it Flag or a yellow highlighter. There won't be as many yellow-light issues as green-light ones, and using a Post-it Flag sets them apart. If an issue carries across several pages, you can use the highlighter to encircle the entire chunk of text and a flag to note where the issue begins. If it is not obvious what the yellow-light issue is all about, write yourself a note in the margin or on a Post-it Note.

Be aware of recurring patterns in yellow-light issues. If you keep seeing the same problem again and again, it might be an indication that you have a red-light issue. If, for example, you keep making a note about the logic of a certain character's motivation, perhaps that character has not yet been fully fleshed out in a way that serves the story.

## Red-Light Issues

Red-light issues are the big challenges in your manuscript that probably scare you to death. They are going to take not only time, but probably courage. They are the things you might see that make you think, "Uh oh." They are the things you were perhaps afraid to admit while you were writing but have to admit now.

Red-light issues are usually systemic and they usually mean setting aside a chunk of several hours or half a day to figure out how to fix the problem.

Most rough drafts are going to have a few red-light issues. Some are going to have quite a number of them. Don't despair if your red-light list feels long. You will just chip away at them, one at a time.

Examples of red-light issues include:

- Starting or ending the story in a completely different place so that the story question established at the start pays off at the end. This may mean a complete reframing of the story's point or message.
- Moving a chapter from one position in the lineup to another in order to improve logic, pacing, or flow.
- Changing something fundamental about a character's backstory or motivation that has to be pulled through the whole story
  - If you would like to learn more about this tactic, Jennie Nash wrote about the concept of the "golden thread" in this blog post: [A Game-Changing Revision Tactic: The Golden Thread](#).
  - You can search for every instance of a character's appearance as a way of tracking that story and seeing how it builds and progresses. It's a simple but powerful way to "watch" something unfold over the course of the manuscript without being distracted by everything else around it.
- Realizing that a secondary character or a whole subplot is adding nothing to the story and needs to either have a clear consequence to the main storyline or get cut.
- Realizing something in your world doesn't hold and having to reframe an entire concept.

You can mark red-light issues with a Post-it Flag or a bright pink highlighter. If it is not obvious what the red-light issue is all about, write yourself a note in the margin or on a Post-it Note.

### **What If a Red-Light Issue Calls Your Whole Story Into Question?**

We're not going to pretend it doesn't happen, because it does happen. You might realize that there is a fatal logic flaw to what you have written, or that the entire way you have told it – your structure or your POV is wrong. Do you have the energy and motivation to lean into the rewrite and make it work? Great! If not, you may decide that you need to put your book in a folder and let it sit for six months or a year. Or you may decide to put it in a folder forever, and chalk it up to a learning experience.

This is not the worst thing that can happen.

Seriously.

Writing is a craft and you are trying to master it. There are going to be failures along the way. Many writers cite the moment when they threw something out as the moment when they felt like a real writer.

*You might never fail on the scale I did, but some failure in life is inevitable. It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all – in which case, you fail by default.*

—JK Rowling

When we talked before about being brave? This is what we meant.

### Take Action

1. Print out the Stoplight Strategy template of your choice (on the next two pages) on 5x8 index cards or bright-colored paper.
2. Read through your pages, searching out the places where you see weaknesses.
3. Identify those weaknesses and label them as either green-, yellow-, or red-light issues.
4. Indicate on your worksheet the specific elements that need to be changed.

### Take Action

Once you have completed the Stoplight Strategy worksheet, go back to the computer and start executing the fixes.

Note that a yellow- or red-light issue in an early chapter may very well impact other chapters, including chapters in the middle and end of your book.

**PRO TIP:** You can also use a Two-Tier Outline to help you capture any changes that need to be made in your manuscript. If, for example, you take out a scene in the first chapter, and it will impact scenes throughout the manuscript, you can note those on your Two-Tier Outline (e.g., "pull through change from Ch. 1").

Chapter: \_\_\_\_\_

- Is everything I know on the page? (Show, don't tell)
- Is it logical? (Time, space, emotion)
- Can we *feel* the stake and the meaning?
- Does it drive to the next thing?

**GREEN**

**YELLOW**

**RED**

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Chapter: \_\_\_\_\_

- Is everything I know on the page? (Show, don't tell)
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