Ten Tips for Effective Editing

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Introduction

Great writing probably requires genius. Good writing, though, which in this age of imprecision is rare enough to pass for great, merely requires the ability to edit. I no longer even attempt to teach writing, since my students have been taught it for so many years with such dubious results. Instead, I encourage them to pick up a copy of Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, still the best and shortest book about writing, and any respectable handbook of grammar. Thus equipped, they can engage in grammatical calisthenics that flex what needs flexing and burn off linguistic fat. Then I point out that writing well is largely the result of a long-term commitment to living with the written word--to carving out a space in life for actual reading, then becoming comfortable with a variety of good writers, from Sophocles and Jane Austen to the essayists in *Harpers* and *Forbes*.

Meanwhile, nobody beyond the fourth grade needs to be taught to write. Once a person grasps the idea of a sentence, writing things down flows naturally from the necessity to communicate (notes to classmates, birthday invitations, graffiti). A person's abilities may remain crude for a lifetime, but that person still knows how to write. As the demands become more sophisticated (papers, correspondence, proposals), most people, especially those who go through high school and college, manage to cover large quantities of paper with ink. These men and women all know how to write.

What they generally don't know well enough is how to edit: how to transform impressions into effective communications. The following ten tips thus constitute an appendix (or homage) to Strunk and White. Together with a short-term grammar review and a long-term diet of good books, these admonitions should help most people develop habits that will allow them to pass for good writers.

I Use the Active Voice

This advice is so obvious and so frequently repeated in writing texts that it seems silly to give it here. Yet from twenty-five years of teaching writing I must say that for most writers the simple expedient of changing verbs from passive to active voice is the quickest route to improvement. For example, one of my graduate students in management once wrote:

This study has been conducted in response to your directive of

15 February. This study was initiated because of the poor sales performance of our product over the past two fiscal quarters.

Here the writer used two passive voice constructions: "has been conducted" and "was initiated." Grammatically there is nothing wrong with doing this, and the pattern probably asserted itself unconsciously, as the writer attempted to achieve an air of professionalism.

If we were to change the passive voice to active, the passage might look like this:

In response to your directive of 15 February, we have conducted a study to determine the reasons for our product's poor performance over the last two quarters.

Here "has been conducted" has become "we have conducted," and "was initiated," which was redundant anyway, is gone. Thus when we went from passive to active, we pruned excess words, eliminated some repetition, and indicated who was responsible for action.

In addition to sounding pompous, the passive voice hides agency (obscures the blame for some administrative crime), as in "it was determined that health benefits would be cut by 50%." Yet in spite of these defects, it would be foolish to argue that we should eradicate all passives from the English language, because sometimes it doesn't matter who the agent is, as in "women are now considered equal to men, politically and intellectually." The point here is that a writer should think twice before using the passive voice. Most of the time it leads to sin, while the active voice leads to the direct, energetic, prose which constitutes a writer's salvation.

II Ration prepositions.

Prepositions are the carbohydrates of English prose. We couldn't manage without them (of English prose, without them). A sentence overloaded with prepositional phrases, though, is like a meal of pasta, potatoes, and rice. To entertain my students I sometimes embark [on an endless sentence] [with a series] [of prepositional phrases] [in increments] [of syllables] [within which] the meaning stalls [in frustration] [without hope] [of emerging] [from limbo] [without violence} . . . . This unfinished monologue creeps like an inch worm, happy to be cut off after any prepositional phrase, but willing to stretch out indefinitely, or until someone screams. The attraction of prepositions is that they are so all-purpose and bland that they are often the first words to come to mind. The problem is that when they are overused they anesthetize the reader.

If we return to the revised passage above, we see some prepositional phrases that survived the first edit:

[In response] [to your directive] [of 15 February], we have conducted a study to

determine the reasons [for our product's poor performance] [over the last two quarters].

Although this sentence is grammatically correct, the prepositional phrases pile up monotonously. We might revise it further:

[On February 15th] you asked us to determine why our product has performed so poorly [over the last two quarters]. According to the study we have just completed, . . .

This revision reduces the number of prepositional phrases. In the process it adds two active voice verbs (asked, has performed), one of which (has performed) is reclaimed from the noun performance (see Tip V below). More importantly, we now have a focused introduction to the central idea of the memo (not stated here).

Prepositions, then, innocuous enough individually, or even in small numbers, tempt us to rely too much on one pattern. They also pander to a writer's tendency to ramble. Because they accumulate so gradually, they are rarely respected enough as culprits.

III Avoid trailing modifiers.

My endless sentence above peters out in prepositions instead of ending with punch. This is a bad idea, according to Strunk and White, who point out that the ends of sentences, paragraphs, and essays are always prominent (32-33). Thus they create opportunities for emphasis, as in the following sentence from the conclusion of *The Elements of Style*:

The young writer should learn to spot . . . words that at first glance seem freighted with delicious meaning but that soon burst in air, leaving nothing but the memory of bright sound (83-84).

Strunk and White could have ended this sentence with "nothing but the memory of sound ringing brightly, without substance or any redeeming qualities whatsoever." They knew better, because modifying phrases which labor the obvious are always inferior to a concise noun or verb.

IV Avoid "to be."

I am we are

you are you are

he/she/it is they are

" To be" is the imperialist verb. It tyrannizes over the next two sentences in this paragraph. *As long as "to be"* ***is*** *around, no other verb* ***is*** *really necessary. If "invade"* ***is*** *in the sentence, for example, "to be"* ***is*** *quickly there to tell us that there* ***was*** *an invasion.* Thus "invade" becomes a noun, and "to be" shops for another verb to displace. "To be" is especially attractive because it is so easy to use, requiring the writer to master only one verb. Since it converts all other verbs into nouns, it also invites writers to pile up prepositions. After all, prepositions give "to be" the green light to transform competitors into nouns, since they can be disposed of in prepositional phrases. "The Normans conquered the English" becomes "The English were the defeated army in the Norman Conquest."

Hardly a sentence goes by without "to be" making an appearance, if not directly (is, were), then indirectly, as a helping verb (is growing), or in disguise as "seems," "appears," or "becomes." Consider this sentence:

The purpose of this study was to confirm or discredit the rumor that our product is becoming out-of-style.

Here "to be" shows up directly (was), indirectly as a helper (is becoming), and in disguise (becoming). We could revise the sentence:

We designed this study to confirm or discredit the rumor that our product lacks style.

This revision replaces "to be" with active verbs (designed, lacks). It also saves words.

Like prepositions, "to be" is indispensable yet dangerous, precisely because we can’t resist overusing it.

V Liberate verbs from the bondage of nominalization.

If active verbs promote good writing, it is never too late to join the quest to liberate them not just from the passive voice, or "to be," but from the nouns that imprison them:

The implementation of this study was initiated as a result of our discovery of the poor sales performance of our running shoes.

Here, "implement," "discover," and "perform" are held hostage while "was" imperializes this sentence, abetted by a preposition (of) and the passive voice (initiated). We can liberate them:

When we discovered that shoe sales were lagging, we decided to study why.

In this revision only "discover" survives, but it leads to two other active verbs (lagging, decided) once we edit in favor of verbs rather than nouns.

As writing becomes more specialized it becomes more difficult to liberate verbs from their imprisoning nouns. From the world of academia (matriculation, nominalizaton, subjectification) to science (experimentation, calibration), to law (documentation, legalization), to business (prioritization, implementation), these nouns proliferate like fruit flies. For a writer, the difficulty lies not in the mechanics of converting nouns to verbs (confiscation to confiscate, implementation to implement), but in the stubbornness of jargonmongers, all of whom consider their own specialized vocabularies to be vital "terms of art." In some cases, as in law, the writer has no choice but to use the exact statutory terms; "reasonable suspicion" must not be confused with "probable cause," and in an appellate brief either term might be repeated fifty times for the sake of precision.

We are awed by the knights and high priests of the judicial system, who wield these words to imprison, to liberate, or to move mountains of wealth. Thus we find it difficult to defend writing sentences that people will want to read, or that a variety of people with different backgrounds might need to read, or that unforseen future minds might want to consult. Yet if the writer is bold enough to engage in this battle against tedium and obscurity, keeping an eye on nouns will help, because so many of them are verbs just waiting to be set free.

VI Avoid repeating vocabulary and grammatical structures.

This tip arises naturally out of the first five, especially those dealing with jargon, the passive voice, prepositions, and "to be." Nothing (besides incoherence) alienates a reader quicker than repetition. Look again at the first example above:

This study has been conducted in response to your directive of 15 February. This study was initiated because of the poor sales performance of our product over the past two fiscal quarters.

Both sentences begin with the same subject (This study), both use passive voice verbs (has been conducted, was initiated), and both peter out in prepositions (in, to, of, over). By the second revision we edited out these repetitive words and structures. This process left us free to use grammar to emphasize logic.

VII Use subordination to clarify logical connections.

When it comes time to edit, we are all like Adam in Eden: choice is everything, and by our choices we define ourselves. We are free to revise any given sentence a number of ways, some better than others, and there is no one best revision that we can call

perfect. Within this context rich in moral ambiguities, how should we proceed? For guidance we turn again to Strunk and White, who give this wise advice: craft sentences that "best represent the real relations of the thought" (26). Thus, among the many legitimate choices open to an editor, we need to select the words that best express the logical connections between ideas. Because we are all a little lazy, however, we tend to build sentences merely by stacking up independent clauses, with "and" and "but" as convenient mortar:

Sales fell short, and we abandoned the project.

Sales fell short, but we completed the project.

Here we can "show the real relations of thought" by using grammar to emphasize cause and effect:

Once sales fell short, we abandoned the project.

Despite poor sales, we completed the project.

Two equally poised independent clauses joined by "and" or "but" give way to one independent clause describing the action taken, preceded by a subordinate clause giving the reason for the action, or emphasizing that there were reasons for the decision. Thus grammar reinforces meaning.

Of course there are times when "and" and "but" are perfectly appropriate, because two things are in some sense equal:

State-run labs will accredit wood stoves, and the EPA will certify the labs.

The point here is that by using syntax to clarify logical relationships writers turn the game of grammar from "how to avoid mistakes" to "how to help the reader understand."

VIII Exploit parallel constructions.

The attentive reader might think that this tip contradicts Tip VI, which cautions against repetition. There is a difference, though, between accidental repetition, the product of inexperience or laziness, and intentional repetition, the product of craft. When President Kennedy said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country," he was exploiting the power of parallel construction.

Martin Luther King, Jr., demonstrated a similar ability in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail:"

An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself. This is *difference* made legal. By the same token, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow and that it is willing to follow itself. This is *sameness* made legal.

Notice how the verbal and structural repetitions (unjust law/just law, law is a code, majority compels, does not make binding/is willing to follow, difference made legal/sameness made legal) make a relatively sophisticated network of ideas about justice easier to follow. This is the great virtue of parallel structure: it allows a writer to indicate relationships clearly and economically, thus saving words and helping the reader digest complex ideas. The more complex the information, the more useful parallel structures become.

On a more mundane level, parallel constructions are especially useful in introductions:

Before the negotiators could formulate a rule, they needed to establish a standard of emissions, specify a deadline for compliance, and create a procedure for wood stove testing.

Here the parallel verbs (establish, specify, create) introduce and organize the discussion to follow. Parallel structures also help technical writers make data more palatable:

Oregon's standard of 4 grams/hour for catalytic stoves and 9 grams/hour for non-catalytic stoves seemed like a good compromise.

These structures also clarify conclusions:

This agreement favors the EPA, because it reduces emission levels nationwide, takes immediate effect, and saves the taxpayers money.

Of course, early efforts to master parallel structure may prove incomplete:

Heated mattress pads are popular because they can be turned on to heat up a bed, turned off at bedtime, and keep the bed warm throughout the night.

Here the structure breaks down when two passive voice verbs (turned on, turned off) are followed by an active verb (keep), breaking the established pattern. Since the last (and problematic) phrase really belongs to "turned off," we can edit the sentence:

Heated mattress pads are popular because they can be turned on to heat up the bed and off at bed time, without losing much heat during the night.

Like any tool, parallel structure can be misused or overused. In general, though, it is the editor's friend.

IX Place modifiers next to the words they modify.

Another piece of obvious advice, though easier to give than to follow. Strunk and White offer an example we should all memorize, because *only* is the most slippery word in the English language. Perhaps one time in ten it starts out in the right place:

He only found two mistakes.

He found only two mistakes (30).

The literal meaning of the first statement is hard to pin down. Is it that he found two mistakes, but he made others, or that he only found two mistakes, but he found and corrected others? The second version of the statement is clearer because the editor moved *only* to a position next to the word it modifies.

Every rough draft, no matter how skilled the writer, contains misplaced modifiers, with results that are often ludicrous. "All the members were not present" needs to be revised to "not all the members were present" (Strunk and White 30), unless the secretary is reporting on a meeting that no one, including the secretary, attended. Although it is extremely easy to misplace modifying words or phrases, it is also relatively easy to retrieve them, once a writer becomes vigilant. Anyone who takes time to do this will find a rich pay-off in precision.

X Throw out any sentence that does not flow logically from the previous one, lead logically to the next one, or sound right.

Here the skeptical reader might accuse me of trying to weasel out of my promise to stop at ten tips. This is not the case. I end with logic, because it is the key to good writing, and with the ear, because whatever logic misses the ear may catch. If one sentence does not lead logically to the next, no amount of "therefores" or "howevers" can patch them together. Perhaps the greatest single benefit of the word processor is that it makes it so easy for us to move words, sentences, or paragraphs, so that logic, the DNA of analysis, can unfold as effectively as possible. Sometimes I think that writing involves less creating than listening to what was just created, so that the finished product becomes merely the inevitable outcome of the first thought.

In this process, we need to listen for more than logic, because sometimes our minds fail to explain errors that our ears can detect. Or, to put it differently, it is less important to name the problem than to find a solution. Thus the final test belongs to the ear. If after all corrective surgery a sentence sounds bad when read out loud, get rid of it and write a

new one.

Conclusion

Writing is like any skill. It improves with practice--in this case, with writing, revision, and exposure to good models. The ten tips listed here should help develop strategies that will eventually become habits. Thus equipped, ordinary human beings should be able to nurture editing abilities until what once seemed like a wasteland of choppy, imprecise, enervated locutions becomes, if not a garden of delight, at least a well-tended park. Given the litter that blights the contemporary landscape, this modest achievement might pass for genius.