

## Editing the Essay, Part One

Courtesy of the Harvard Writing Center

Anyone who has gone through the ecstasies and agonies of writing an essay knows the satisfaction (and sometimes the sadness) of finishing. Once you've done all the work of figuring out what you want to say, arriving at an arguable and interesting thesis, analyzing your evidence, organizing your ideas, and contending with counter-arguments, you may feel that you've got nothing left to do but run spell-check, print it out and await your professor's response. But what spell-check can't discern is what real readers might think or feel when they read your essay: where they might become confused, or annoyed, or bored, or distracted. Anticipating those responses is the job of an editor—the job you take on as you edit your own work.

As you proceed, remember that sometimes what may seem like a small problem can mask (be a symptom of) a larger one. A poorly-worded phrase—one that seems, say, unclear or vague—may just need some tweaking to fix; but it *may* indicate that your thinking hasn't developed fully yet, that you're not quite sure what you want to say. Your language may be vague or confusing because the idea itself is. So learning, as Yeats says, to "cast a cold eye" on your prose isn't just a matter of arranging the finishing touches on your essay. It's about making your essay better from the inside (clarifying and deepening your ideas and insights) and from the outside (expressing those ideas in powerful, lucid, graceful prose). These five guidelines can help.

**1. Read your essay aloud.** When we labor over sentences, we can sometimes lose sight of the larger picture, of how all the sentences sound when they're read quickly one after the other, as your readers will read them. When you read aloud, your ear will pick up some of the problems your eye might miss.

As you read your essay, remember the "The Princess and the Pea," the story of a princess so sensitive she was bothered by a single pea buried beneath the pile of mattresses she lay upon. As an editor, you want to be like the princess—highly alert to anything that seems slightly odd or "off" in your prose. So if something strikes you as problematic, don't gloss over it. Investigate to uncover the nature of the problem. Chances are, if something bothers you a little, it will bother your readers a lot.

**2. Make sure all of your words are doing important work in making your argument.** Are all of your words and phrases necessary? Or are they just taking up space? Are your sentences tight and sharp, or are they loose and dull? Don't say in three sentences what you can say in one, and don't use 14 words where five will do. You want every word in your sentence to add as much meaning and inflection as possible. When you see phrases like "My own personal opinion," ask yourself what "own personal" adds. Isn't that what "my" means?

Even small, apparently unimportant words like "says" are worth your attention. Instead of "says," could you use a word like argues, acknowledges, contends, believes, reveals, suggests, or claims? Words like these not only make your sentences more lively and interesting, they provide useful information: if you tell your readers that someone "acknowledges" something, that deepens their understanding of how or why he or she said that thing; "said" merely reports.

**3. Keep in mind the concept of *le mot juste*.** Always try to find the perfect words, the most precise and specific language, to say what you mean. Without using concrete, clear language, you can't convey to your readers exactly what you think about a subject; you can only speak in generalities, and everyone has already heard those: "The evils of society are a drain on our resources." Sentences like this could mean so many things that they end up meaning nothing at all to your readers—or meaning something very different from what you intended. Be specific: What evils? Which societies? What resources? Your readers are reading your words to see what *you* think, what *you* have to say.

If you're having trouble putting your finger on just the right word, consult a thesaurus, but only to remind yourself of your options. Never choose words whose connotations or usual contexts you don't really understand. Using language you're unfamiliar with can lead to more imprecision—and that can lead your reader to question your authority.

**4. Beware of inappropriately elevated language—words and phrases that are stilted, pompous, or jargon.** Sometimes, in an effort to sound more reliable or authoritative, or more sophisticated, we puff up our prose with this sort of language. Usually we only end up sounding like we're trying to sound smart—which is a sure sign to our readers that we're not. If you find yourself inserting words or phrases because you think they'll sound impressive, reconsider. If your ideas are good, you don't need to strain for impressive language; if they're not, that language won't help anyway.

Inappropriately elevated language can result from nouns being used as verbs. Most parts of speech function better—more elegantly—when they play the roles they were meant to play; nouns work well as nouns and verbs as verbs. Read the following sentences aloud, and listen to how pompous they sound.

*He exited the room. It is important that proponents and opponents of this bill dialogue about its contents before voting on it.*

Exits and dialogues work better as nouns and there are plenty of ways of expressing those ideas without turning nouns into verbs.

*He left the room. People should debate the pros and cons of this bill before voting.*

Every now and then, though, this is a rule worth breaking, as in "He muscled his way to the front of the line." "Muscled" gives us a lot of information that might otherwise take several words or even sentences to express. And because it's not awkward to read, but lively and descriptive, readers won't mind the temporary shift in roles as "muscle" becomes a verb.

**5. Be tough on your most dazzling sentences.** As you revise, you may find that sentences you needed in earlier drafts no longer belong—and these may be the sentences you're most fond of. We're all guilty of trying to sneak in our favorite sentences where they don't belong, because we can't bear to cut them. But great writers are ruthless and will throw out brilliant lines if they're no longer relevant or necessary. They know that readers will be less struck by the brilliance than by the inappropriateness of those sentences and they let them go.

## Editing the Essay, Part Two

When you read writing you like, ask yourself: How did the writer do that? How did the writer make me see this image, feel this feeling? Try to figure out how the writer achieves those effects, and then try some of those moves on your own. Don't feel guilty about this; all great writers are great readers. In finding a new way to say something, we're always building on what came before, adding our voices to an ongoing conversation. Here are more ways to help you add yours.

**1. Try to avoid repetitive sentence structure.** Try to vary the rhythm in your sentences. Try to avoid starting all your sentences the same way. Try to write sentences of differing lengths. (The structure and the length of the preceding sentences make this choppy and dull to read, and readers get so distracted by the monotony of the *sound*, that they lose focus on the *sense* of what you're saying.)

**2. A word to the wise: watch out for clichés.** Phrases that we hear all the time have lost their impact and vividness, and you want your readers to feel that they're hearing a fresh voice when they read your essay. Of course, avoiding clichés altogether is *easier said than done*. Sometimes a cliché is just what you need to make a point, and trying to avoid them at all costs can make your prose seem strained and unnatural. You don't want your prose to be so demanding that your readers *can't see the forest for the trees*. So get in the habit of questioning phrases that come to you especially easily to determine whether they might be stale, whether there might be more powerful ways of expressing your idea. When you use a cliché, do it intentionally, and don't do it too often. *This is just the tip of the iceberg* on this subject, but let's not *push the envelope*.

**3. Be sparing in your use of rhetorical or stylistic flourishes—cutesy touches like alliteration, double entendres, or extended metaphors.** A well-placed sentence fragment or a sentence beginning with "And" or "But" or "Or" can

emphasize a point well. But too much of this sort of thing and you'll sound shrill. Or dull. It's okay to wink at your reader every now and then, if that's appropriate to your essay's tone, but try to avoid spending so much time winking that you never seem to have your eyes open. (See, that's a little cutesy, but at least it's not an example of #4.)

**4. Beware of mixed metaphors.** While metaphors can help make abstract ideas more vivid and concrete for your readers, piling them one on top of the other can be confusing. Consider: "The fabric of society vibrates to the fluctuations of the stock market." There are too many metaphors here competing for your readers' attention. Does it really make sense, anyway, to say that fabric vibrates? It's usually better to pick one image and stick with it. So if you want to use a metaphor like "fabric of society," choose language that's appropriate for talking about fabric: "The fabric of society is more delicate than it sometimes seems."

**5. Don't use "crutches" to support weak, imprecise language.** Phrases like "It is almost impossible to extricate..." or "The writer's almost magical ability to transform..." use "almost" as a crutch. Either it's "impossible" or it's not, "magical" or not. If it *is* impossible, or if you're claiming it's so, be bold and say it! Take responsibility for your claim by being direct about it; don't hide behind an "almost." If it's *not* impossible, be clear about what it *is*. Tough? Very difficult?

**6. Don't call something a fact that isn't one, even if it may be true.** "The fact that Shakespeare is a great writer ..." That's not a fact, even though most people agree that he's pretty good. "The fact that water freezes at 32 degrees Fahrenheit ..." That's a fact. Similarly, don't call something unprecedented if you just mean to say it's rare or surprising. Unprecedented means something specific and literal. (Of course, all words have literal meanings, but not all of them need to be used equally literally. Many can be bent, and stretched, and played around with. But be careful when you're using words, like "fact," whose very natures require attention to accuracy.)

**7. "But"—only use it if you really mean it; that is, if you're introducing a counter-argument or contradiction.** Otherwise, your readers will wonder what you're "but-ing" against. You lose credibility if you seem to be trying to create high drama or conflict or suggesting counter-argument where there really isn't any. Needless to say, this also goes for "however." (And why is "Needless to say" necessary? If it really is needless to say what you're saying, why are you saying it?)

**8. Try not to overuse forms of the verb "to be."** Replace some of those "are"s and "were"s with words that add more energy to your sentences. Instead of saying "Jones's theory is a direct contradiction of Smith's" say "Jones's theory contradicts Smith's." Instead of "This historian is outspoken about revisionist theories," try "This historian speaks out against ...."

**9. Avoid sexist language.** A sure way to lose your readers is to make them feel that you're not speaking to them, that your essay hasn't been written with them in mind. Using sexist language, even if you don't mean to offend, is certain to alienate people. Wherever you use phrases like "Throughout history, man has ..." figure out how to make it gender-neutral, or how to include women in your world-view. Here, for instance, you could say: "humans" or "we" or "people" or "men and women."

When you refer to someone who has no specific gender ("The last line confuses the reader ..."), how should you follow that up? If you say "he," referring to "the reader," you're excluding the possibility that the reader is female. There's no perfect solution to this problem, as our language is still evolving to accommodate issues like these, but there are things you can do. Occasionally, you can use "he or she." Don't repeat that too many times, though. It gets irritating quickly. You can switch from "he" to "she" a few times throughout your essay, but don't do it within one specific example, or your reader will become confused. Whenever possible, use plurals to avoid the problem: "Readers may be confused when they get to the last line" is a neat way of side-stepping the issue. And don't let your attempts to avoid sexist language lead you into ungrammatical phrasing: "One should always edit their essay." You need to be mindful of sexist language *and* the elegance of your prose, not one or the other.

**10. Make sure you're not over-quoting.** Try to quote only the most essential, illustrative, or vividly-phrased material. Too much quoting obscures your own thinking, while highlighting that of your source. It suggests to your reader that you're leaning heavily on your source because you don't have much to say for yourself, or that you couldn't be bothered, or didn't take the time, to summarize. Remember that your readers are trying to figure out what *you* think. If they only wanted to hear your sources' positions, they'd go read *them*. Remember, too, that unless you're reasonably sure your sources are known to most readers (Plato or Joan of Arc or Freud, for example), you need to introduce them in some way. Even a brief mention of a source's field or area of expertise can help orient your reader: "as philosopher Robert Nozick says, ..."