



## Chapter Ten | Less is more

A few years ago, when I was new to Seattle, I attended a lot of networking events as I tried to find my place there. I attended a picnic sponsored by a local editors association, and as we crunched our carrot sticks and gulped our deviled eggs, the conversation turned to semicolons and the misuse of parentheses. Later, a heated discussion ensued over the use of “that” and “which.” I admit I’ve enjoyed feeling smug a time or two when I knew the difference between compose and comprise or further and farther, but honestly, that’s all so small-minded. Sure, it’s important to know grammar, but good writing is about more substantive stuff:

the excitement your lead generates, the rhythm you've created with just the right words, the pacing of your story, and your presentation of the facts.

I know plenty of people who think editing is boring and difficult. But look at it this way: You've finished the hard part—the dreadful first draft—and now you can start the creative part. Editing is your chance to add interesting examples, turn a phrase or two, and cut the flab. This is the stage where you can really excel.

In case you're still thinking that you shouldn't *need* to edit, consider E. B. White. He's best known for his children's books *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*, but he also wrote essays for the *The New Yorker*. The first time I read them, I was convinced he just jotted them down while sitting on the front porch of his farmhouse in Maine. Here's the truth: It took him 20 to 25 edits to get that warm, conversational tone—and even then he didn't think they were good enough. These essays are some of the best writing I've ever read. So, when I'm struggling with a piece, I remind myself that if E. B. White had to edit 25 times, there's no shame in my having to do that too.



## **GOOD WRITING IS REALLY GOOD EDITING**

Right about now, if you were sitting in one of my seminars, you'd see several people raising their hands, brows furrowed. They're complaining that this much editing will take too long. Not true. Instead of spending 30 minutes in one fell swoop, try 10 minutes at three different times. This saves time because our brains are sharper in shorter sprints. After a break, it will help you spot more things to improve. (I'm not sure why, maybe our brains get bored, too, with the longer sessions.) Three short sessions won't take any more of your time, but the results are guaranteed to be sharper.

And besides, if extra editing gets you better results, isn't that worth it?

One of the most important steps in the writing process is knowing when to welcome back your OE (ornery editor). We've talked about not letting him come in too soon, like the neighbor who rings your doorbell on Friday for the party you're throwing on Saturday. Not a bad person, just in the right place at the wrong time. But come Saturday, your OE can be your best friend. Like those times you're feeling self-satisfied and he disagrees. Listen to him *now* because he's almost always right in this situation.

### **@ Short cuts to success**

My students and clients often ask me what they're supposed to look for when they edit. Their OE is making

them uncomfortable, they know they need to do something, but what? Obviously, start by cutting words and catching typos, but editing is so much more than that. It's about transforming choppy copy with funky flow into something smooth and compelling. When I'm editing, I look for six key qualities: conversational, clear, concise, creative, constructive, and complete.

### **1. Conversational (engaging)**

If you want people to read your documents, make them open and friendly. Too often our writing is full of corporatespeak. Forget sounding august, the way I did back in the day. Nothing short of poor grammar makes a writer sound less professional than a studied aloofness. Relax. Tell a good story. No one wants to be lectured. And like any good conversation, don't write a monologue—get your readers involved. Pretend you're having a conversation with your target-audience members. Ask them questions, listen to their answers. In other words, have a conversation.

### **Before**

*The purpose of this letter is to inform you that the communications endeavor we planned to originate in the month of March unfortunately will be postponed until later inasmuch as the necessary components have been delayed until further notice. We will keep you apprised of the pending date.*

## After

*We regret that the communications program planned for March has been postponed. You will receive an announcement when we re-launch the program.*

## 2. Clear (avoid jargon)

Cut the mumbo-jumbo when you can. Sometimes jargon works. If your audience is comprised solely of your peers, it's okay to use the language of your trade. Also, today certain acronyms have become the norm—FBI, PPO, and ASAP. Most terms, though, should be introduced the first time with the spelled-out version followed by the acronym in parentheses: Association for Creative Business Writing (AFCBW) or American Society of Journalists and Authors (ASJA). From then on, you may use only the acronym. Other pointers to keep in mind as you edit:

- Ⓜ Avoid archaic language—incumbent on, betwixt, behoove, derring-do.
- Ⓜ Skip exaggeration or too-strong descriptions:  
(No) This is a disaster. (Yes) We have a problem.
- Ⓜ Cut out public-relations language:  
(No) The committee debated the issue and eventually determined that the employees needed to be hydrated.  
(Yes) The committee approved the water cooler.
- Ⓜ Lose the legalese. Unless you're a lawyer, avoid: pursuant to, be advised that, herein, heretofore, etc. And even if you have Esq. after your name, you don't have license to write convoluted communications.

**Before**

*The basic fundamentals of the AMA course are herewith enclosed. Important essentials of such a campaign—from the beginning to the final ending—are included, with particular spotlight on the hidden pitfalls that can be generated over an extended period of time.*

**After**

*The fundamentals of the American Marketing Association (AMA) course are enclosed. This course features the essential steps in a marketing campaign—from start to finish—with emphasis on the pitfalls of a long campaign.*

**3. Concise (edit and edit again)**

Cutting out words, hard as they were to conjure in the first place, is one of the best ways you can improve your writing. Too often, we've used three words when one would do. Think of all those extra words as the love handles of writing and get in shape.

For example, change, “When I heard someone behind me, my heart began to beat faster and I began to walk very fast” to “When I heard someone behind me, my heart raced and I began to run.” See how these cuts and corrections quicken the pace and add intrigue?

Next, get rid of most of your adjectives and adverbs. It's an easy trap to fall into—stringing together several adjectives to make sure you got the point across when one strong word would do it best. Cut out flabby descriptions

and weak (or virtually synonymous) adjectives. Of course, concise does not mean brief. Keep every word necessary for the readers' understanding.

### **Before**

*It is very important that communication with all individuals involved in this process be frequent and continuous.*

### **After**

*Communicate often with everyone involved.*

*or*

*Keep everyone informed throughout the process.*

More concise tips:

- ④ Redundant words make your writing sloppy: past history, unwanted trespassers, postpone until later, completely destroyed, hidden pitfalls, month of April.
- ④ Cut out “very” whenever possible. Believe it or not, your copy is usually stronger without it.
- ④ Avoid using long words when short ones will do. When you try to impress with your extensive vocabulary, it usually backfires.
- ④ Similarly, don't use *utilize* for *use*, *institute* for *adopt*, or *on a regular basis* for *routinely*.
- ④ Avoid run-on sentences. Use a period or a semi-colon to divide thoughts; or use a conjunction (or, and, but, if, because, as) after each one to tie like thoughts together. (But don't join unlike thoughts—simply put a period at the end of each sentence.)

**Before:**

*“But, it still works!”*

*This is a very common remark from those who have the responsibility of maintaining a company’s reliance on computer technology. With a primary focus on maintaining profitability while keeping costs down many times the reliance upon computer hardware and software technology is overlooked. The common thinking is, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!” It is amazing how many companies take this approach, while not realizing that their once dependable infrastructure of technology is on the verge of a catastrophic meltdown!*

**After**

*“But, it still works!”*

*We often hear this remark from people who maintain their company’s computer technology. They’re working hard, keeping an eye on profitability—so sometimes they overlook the importance of upgrading computer hardware and software technology.*

*In other words, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”*

*We’re writing to show you how important—and economical—it is to keep your once-dependable infrastructure from a catastrophic melt-down.*

#### 4. Creative (attention-getting)

This step is my favorite. Creative business writing can include all kinds of techniques, some borrowed from fiction writing, to keep readers engaged.

☞ Boring introductory clauses using “there” and “it” plus “to-be” verbs are often just lazy writing. Look out for these as you edit, and make them more active.

(Boring) There are many ways to organize a document.

(Interesting) Start documents with a story, a quote, or a question.

(Boring) It is so cold in the office.

(Interesting) I’m freezing!

☞ Direct quotes and dialogue add veracity and verve. Depending on the document, you may not be able to share your opinion, but you can let others speak freely. This works especially well in internal documents where you can quote the CEO or VP of Sales in order to give your proposal or memo added oomph from upstairs.

☞ Foreshadowing and flashbacks add intrigue to reports and proposals. Create drama and tension by telling the story in a certain order, withholding information until key points. For example, when you’re introducing a new policy, start with what will happen if the policy *isn’t* adopted. “Next year, five key accounts could be in the hands of ABC. We can start today to make sure that doesn’t happen, but only if we...”

- 📌 Stories draw in your readers. (Chapter Nine)
- 📌 Six Extras for Excitement (Chapter Eight) all add spice to your writing.

## **Before**

*Dear Alex, (head of a PR firm)*

*Would you like your employees to get better results from their writing? I offer one-on-one coaching to help your employees develop a clear, creative style and brush up on their writing skills. It often takes only a few sessions to show them how to make a big difference...*

## **After**

*Dear Alex,*

*You probably know someone like Carole. After 15 years in commercial real estate, she's putting her expertise to work in a fresh way—as a senior account executive for a leading PR agency. Her extensive knowledge is helping the agency attract and retain key accounts.*

*Trouble is, she doesn't write well. She brings plenty of professional expertise but little writing know-how.*

### ***Coaching for excellence***

*Does your agency have a Carole or two? I offer one-on-one coaching to help them develop*

Less is more

*a clear, creative style and brush up on their writing skills. It often takes only a few sessions to show them how to make a big difference...*

## **5. Constructive**

Be clear on your purpose and your audience. Make sure your tone offers encouragement whenever possible and avoids negative words. Even a reprimand can have a constructive tone. Organize it so the bad news is sandwiched between positive comments (Chapter One, Bad News Burrito).

### **Before**

*John:*

*The last report you sent in wasn't on time or accurate. At Acme Sales, our expectations are high. We expect staff to respond to deadlines responsibly and accurately. I don't have time to correct your work. It goes without saying that we expect better next time.*

### **After**

*Dear John:*

*Over the past year, I've watched you grow into an excellent salesman. Maybe that's why I was disappointed with your last report. It was late, and I found several inaccuracies.*

*We have high standards at Acme Sales. I want*

*to go over this report with you so that you know what I expect. You've got a lot of potential, and I know you can get this right.*

*Let me know your schedule this week so we can get together.*

## **6. Complete**

Did you say everything you need to say? Here again, a little time away from the document helps. Step back, then check and double-check to make sure you say it all. Now proofread once more for punctuation and grammar mistakes.

The following e-mail memo lacks key components such as a compelling lead and closing (including contact information)—not to mention how offensive it is. How could he have addressed this sensitive topic more thoughtfully?

### **Before**

***Subject line: Breast Cancer Awareness Month***

*In light of Breast Cancer Awareness Month, First Met has developed a financial seminar to bring women together. It will be a fun evening of learning and sharing of financial knowledge and experience with other women while making new friends. First Met will make a financial donation to breast cancer research for each attendee. So, please bring your friends. We'll have wine, cheese, and hors d'oeuvres. Please*

Less is more

*RSVP to [tinasmith@finsvvc.com](mailto:tinasmith@finsvvc.com) at your earliest convenience as space is limited. Please mention that I invited you!! -Jeremy*

## **After**

***Subject line: Financial seminar to benefit breast cancer research***

*Hello everyone,*

*In support of Breast Cancer Awareness Month, First Met is offering a financial seminar for women. We will make a financial donation to breast cancer research for each attendee, so please bring your friends.*

### ***Food for thought***

*We've planned a fun evening of sharing financial knowledge and experiences. We'll also have a good selection of wine, cheese, and hors d'oeuvres.*

### ***RSVP***

*Please RSVP to [tinasmith@finsvvc.com](mailto:tinasmith@finsvvc.com) at your earliest convenience—and please mention I invited you. This lively evening not only features financial information—it represents an important step toward your financial security and peace of mind.*

*Thanks, and I look forward to seeing you again,  
Jeremy Johnson, Financial Planner  
First Met, 222.899.0999*

**@ Lose your darlings**

It's hard to edit our *bon mots* because we think they're so clever. Sometimes they are. Often they're not. I see a lot of darlings in promotional copy. We want to say something fresh, not the same old way, but we get carried away and end up with confusing babble. Consider this one:

*Imagine, then, relaxing on our beautiful ship in Comstock Bay. Nothing but the sounds of the seagulls and the water slapping the shore. Then step inside to enjoy a romantic dinner and dance to your favorite music. A smiling face serving your favorite drink.*

If a smiling face served me a drink, I'd run screaming. Courteous staff with smiling faces, okay, but I've never seen (and I hope I never do) a smiling face serving anything.

To make matters worse, we often fall in love with what we've written. We convince ourselves that it's poetic or worse, brilliant. But we've just created a monster (a.k.a., our darlings).

*Our ship is an oasis in time allowing you to relax, refresh, and recharge your soul. This romantic trip is just around the corner. One that can lift the spirits and refreshen the mind.*

Hmmm, corners at sea? I don't think so. And I guess if we refresh in the first sentence, naturally we would refreshen in the third one, though Daniel Webster doesn't agree.

## Less is more

Let your darlings go. If you feel yourself digging in your heels to keep something cute, it probably needs to go. (Your OE is nudging you to hit “delete.” This is the perfect time to listen to him.) When you let your copy rest and allow time for clear-headed review, you’ll usually find they’re not so darling after all.

### **📍 Find a friend**

Finally, find an editing buddy so you can review each other’s work. For important projects, it’s too iffy to review your own work—your brain skips over or fills in blanks because it already knows what you’re trying to say.

