Harvard College Writing Center

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 cliches.** 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 cliches altogether is *easier said than done.*Sometimes a cliche 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 cliche, 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, ..."

**Copyright 1999, Kim Cooper, for the Writing Center at Harvard University**

https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/editing-essay-part-two