Harvard College Writing Center

Editing the Essay, Part One

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 jargony.**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.

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