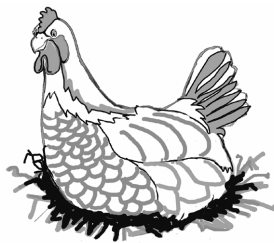


Constructive Editing: a Writer's Guide



Jenny Argante

**Constructive Editing:
A Writer's Guide
by
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∞ Constructive Editing ∞

What is Editing?

What exactly does it mean, to 'edit' something?

A general-purpose definition for a writer is to prepare something for publication or presentation. That 'something' is the written text, or manuscript.

At its most basic, editing is revision. You might begin by checking the technical elements: spelling, punctuation and grammar. Nowadays this can be done by any word-processing program, though there are definite pros and cons to most. A program has to be all things to every user whereas, in your own writing, you want to emphasise or develop an individual style.

Proofreading

Sometimes people say editing when what they mean is proofreading. Usually authors are expected, and prefer, to proof their own 'galleys'. A galley is a print-out of the book as prepared for publication. Proof-reading is mainly checking for 'typos' - typographical (or print-setting) errors. Things like a word omitted or mis-spelt; a misplaced apostrophe; capital letters wrongly put on or left off.

Don't fret too much about proof-reading, as it's a skill easily mastered. Any good book on writing for money will usually include a chapter on 'The mechanics of writing' (cf. p.104 IN *Writing for Magazines*, op. cit.) Invest in a reference book such as Gowers' *Plain Words* or Strunk & White's famous *Elements of Style*.

Good English

If you're really uncertain as to what constitutes good English, sign up for a course at your local college. You will learn the fundamentals of language. Most importantly, you'll learn how much you already know.

Most people who want to write do have a flair for it, an instinctive understanding that language is for giving shape to our thoughts, emotions and observations. To our imagination.

Doing a formal course of instruction plugs a few gaps and confirms your own powers of expression.

Good Sense in Writing

Because grammar and punctuation are used in written language, we forget they are based on the verbal patterns of speech. Think of a comma, a semi-colon; a full stop. They are indicators of a pause - each merely a different length of time.

With grammar, reading your words aloud will usually indicate 'something wrong' in your writing. If you falter or run out of breath before the sentence ends, there's your problem. Fixing it can be surprisingly simple. Try changing the order in which you present your information. Or rewrite one long sentence as two shorter sentences.

Word Counting & Readability

As well as doing a spell and grammar check, your word processor can count the number of words in a document. This is useful when you're writing to editorial guidelines or for a competition. Some programs include a readability indicator, the 'Fog Index'. This is a formula that tells you when your text is getting unreadable. Too many polysyllabic words, for instance, or too many long sentences. (A copy of the *Fog Index* is included for your interest.)

Reading Aloud

Reading aloud is the key. The ear informs the brain.

Some writers read their work to others in a writing group, and this can be helpful. The rule here is for constructive criticism only.

You can also read your work to an interested friend or family member – but sometimes how much they like you will interfere with a critical appraisal of your writing.

Reading aloud by yourself is fine for an immediate response. You can also record what you've written, put it away, and come back and listen to it later. That's when you'll pick up on things you want to correct.

Editing as a Profession

'Editing' is also a profession, identifiably separate from writing, though one person may combine both roles. To be the editor of a newspaper or magazine is to be the person who not only defines the practice, but also the policy on which it is based. S/he decides what kind of publication it will be, and for which readership. The number of pages, for example, and frequency. Will it include a letters page, fiction, a lifestyles section, or health and well-being?

Policy and practice is what makes *The New Zealand Listener* one kind of publication and *Hello!* another.

Inclusions & Exclusions

The editor will use policy not only to determine what to include but also what to exclude. What's in, and what's out.

This is of great importance. Firstly, to the writer, because if something is 'out', there is no sale if you put it in. Secondly, to the editor, because what's 'in' must match up to a predefined context.

If you're the editor of a short story magazine, you don't want to be inundated with verse. If you've stipulated 2500 words maximum, you won't read anything longer. And if your magazine is a Christian, family-orientated monthly, you don't want to unwrap red-hot erotica.

Or not in your official role as editor.

Content & Format

You may not think of yourself as an editor, but when you're revising or rewriting a manuscript, that's exactly what you are and editing is what you are doing. As editor you will concern yourself with both content and format.

'Content' is the matter of your text - what it's about, e.g. growing mushrooms. 'Format' is the manner in which it is presented, e.g. a magazine article. Both content and format will influence your editing decisions.

Some writers choose to write to a 'formula'. This is OK, but if you've opted to be Mills & Boon when you start writing, it's harder on to make the transition later to avant-garde playwright. You would certainly have to edit stringently all new writing.

Most professional writers write to format, as it makes life easier for them. When you know whom it is for, it's easier to decide what to write and how to write it. If you've decided on a format, you can sit down and concentrate on that one kind of writing.

This is good practice for beginners, too. If you want to write for radio, read how to do it, listen to how others have done it, then sit down and do it yourself. Radio New Zealand produces a regularly updated guide on how to write for radio. Any radio station or programme editor should be able to send you a tip-sheet, or writer's guide, on request.

(Don't forget to be polite when you ask for writers' guidelines, and if you're contacting an editor or publisher by post, include an S.S.A.E.)

Content is yours alone. Format is determined by the market. Editors want writers to produce content that suits their readership in a format compatible with editorial policy and practice.

So plan and prepare. This helps the editorial process by giving you less to do.

Editorial Process

'Editorial process' is a fancy term for what writers usually call drafting, revision or rewriting. Or, as Farrukh Dhondy has told us: "The only true writer is a re-writer."

Should you call yourself a writer if you're not ready to take your first rough draft and work on it over and over until it is up to 'publishable standard'?

This doesn't mean it will inevitably get published. Good work is rejected daily. It does mean it won't be turned down for all the wrong reasons.

The writer as re-writer is active during all stages of the work in progress: when markets are checked out; when content and format is determined; when word-length is decided upon, and when an appropriate style is chosen. During all stages from first draft to finished manuscript.

A Writer's Notebook

Some people think that editing begins before you've written a word, with a writer's notebook. Jotting down ideas on the wing teaches you the value of the fleeting moment, and the first principle of editing, which is choice. Betty likes to flick through her notebook and see what's there that she can build into a first draft, and then edit. Here's her last entry: "I like a wall that's built to last and a fence that knows its place."

Something like that might have inspired Frost's poem on how 'good fences make good neighbours'. Betty used it to write an article for a psychology magazine on how we need to learn our own boundaries and teach others to respect them.

The First Draft

So often a first draft is based on ideas and notes like this, but where ideas come from and how to build notes into finished text is not part of this discussion. If you read frequently, and with discernment, and if you keep up with contemporary news, debates, opinion, inventions and innovations, fact, fancy and fantasy, you will never lack for ideas.

A frequent preference for creating ideas is to use a technique called brainstorming or clustering - what journalists call CIPP ("Create Images around People and Places") or CIS (Create Ideas around Subjects).

Journalists like to boast that can come up with 1000 words in 48 hours – or less! - on any subject they're assigned to cover whether they know anything about it or not.

'Real' writers are often more precious. They demand a visit from the Muse; await Inspiration. Real writers often go hungry.

Revision

'To inspire' originally meant to breathe, or to breathe life into. To breathe life into your first draft it needs a second and a third working over, minimal.

Sometimes a sonnet, 14 lines in all, has taken the poet twenty drafts to get exactly right. Changing a single word or deleting a comma can bring about significant change. Editing is itself an art. Revision encourages inspiration.

Both editing and revision are learned processes, like writing itself. The more you write, the easier it gets, and the better you become at editing and revising to suit your market and your individual style.

You will recover, uncover, and discover. And finally you will know the keen pleasure of honing your text to editorial specifications - your own, or another's - and to its own particular form.

From Writer to Editor

Editing of this quality is easiest when you adopt a basic rule - to set aside your work after preliminary drafts are done and let it cool off. Writing is a white-hot activity. Editing is ice-cold - an act of control, of imposition. Detachment and discernment.

Coleridge spoke of form in writing as 'organic'. By this he meant that a piece of writing was complete when it had assumed its proper shape - a form that appears natural and inevitable, where to change one word would be to damage its perfection.

Such a form would seem as if it had evolved, or flowed into a predefined mould, as distinct as a robin from a blackbird, or as clover from a rose.

Yet the form of your writing is determined by your skill as editor as much as by your writing style. It is dependent on writer's ability to move from the passion of creating - the writer as originator - to the discipline of shaping and modifying your text to its own best form.

Why Editing Works

Here are some other analogies to bear in mind. In writing, as in other endeavours, more is less. A glass of champagne is never filled to the brim, and that space is deliberate. It is where the bouquet can be savoured. Think of a house of cards. When built it must be as if one card added, one card taken away, will bring it tumbling down.

When you edit, check that you have left space for your reader, and that there is nothing left to add, or to take away.

This is 'constructive editing', the kind that separates the amateur from the professional writer, that deserves to be rewarded by sale after sale after sale.

And even without sales it is the process by which we recognise and applaud the committed writer. The ability to edit and revise your work is the single most pertinent distinguishing feature of a writer who can be relied upon to bring work up to 'a publishable standard'. And if this is not your ambition, why are you writing at all?

The Strength of Editing

Isaac Bashevis Singer once declared that, "A writer's best friend is the waste-paper basket".

In these days of word-processing wizardry we could revise that, and say 'A writer has two good friends: the delete key and the cut-and-paste facility'.

Editing has now become faster and quicker than ever. So no excuses, please, for work that is less than your best.

Your two guiding principles are always clarity and flow. Is the meaning of what you say discoverable by your reader, and does it express what you want to share with style? Do your sentences read well on the page, and within each paragraph? Then you are done.

One Writer's Story

Yesterday Margaret wrote two 'fillers', brief pieces that had to be less than 150 words. This was hard for her, as she tends to be verbose and voluble. (She has been attending a haiku workshop to learn the power of brevity.)

The first ended up as 142 words after seven drafts. There is one final editorial check she must make. Is AC-DC commonly understood as a slang expression for a person who swings both ways, a bisexual? If not, her piece won't work.

The other piece has got stuck at 160 words. The major editorial change Margaret made on the last rewrite (five so far) was from first person to third person. Not, 'I said', but 'Margaret said'.

What Margaret has been doing is personal, constructive editing.

This is the essential lesson all writers must learn.

Learning to be an Editor

Learning to proofread is no problem - a guide is included in every edition of the *Writers and Artists Year Book*.

And letting someone else edit our work is usually productive, sometimes chastening, occasionally illuminating. Think of Ezra Pound's dynamic influence on T.S. Eliot's great poem 'The Waste Land'.

Eliot was writing in a form so innovative that even he was struggling to define it. He needed Pound's external, objective eye.

Similarly, we need and can use the input of others. We can learn from them as mentors, as readers and as reviewers. We can profit from their insights as the basis of our own judicious and discerning re-writes.

Yet knowing always that we can ask the right questions and use the proper checklists to ensure that we ourselves are the best editors of all: well-versed in our craft of writer and re-writer, creative, and constructive.

When you have finished you know that there is no surplus word or obscure meaning in your text. And that the general rule to work by is that what doesn't positively ADD to your writing will actually SUBTRACT from it in terms of content and style.

Let's finish with a well-known example of the power of editing:

Remember the waterfront shack with the sign FRESH FISH
SOLD HERE. Of course it's fresh, we're on the ocean. Of
course it's for sale, we're not giving it away. Of course it's
here, otherwise the sign would be someplace else. The
final sign: FISH.

Peggy Noonan



Checklist 1 ~ Editing for Content



By the third draft you should have enough material properly set out to read through for a final edit. You can do this by reading through and answering the following questions as you go:

- Is there any important information I left out? *Check.*
- Is the information I've included correct? *Check.*
- Have I chosen the best quotes & examples? *Check.*
- Have I organised my material in the best order for sense and readability? *Check.*
- Is there good flow between paragraphs & between new ideas (transition)? *Check.*
- Have I used words properly & are they the best for the job? *Check.*
- Is my language concise, expressive & appropriate? *Check.*
- Can I improve my style in any way? *Check.*
- Is there anything I've left unsaid that needs to be stated? *Check*



☞ Checklist 2 ~ The Final Edit ☞

This is your final chance to get it as good as it can be. Some of this editing is stylistic. Most is factual, grammatical and 'targeted' – i.e. you're editing with a particular editor or readership in mind.

- ✓ Check you've used the most beguiling intro you can think of. Don't bury it in paragraph 7.
- ✓ Check that you've come at your article or story from the most interesting or unusual angle.
- ✓ Check your punctuation. Make sure you've used commas, full stops, apostrophes, dashes and quote marks correctly.
- ✓ Check all words that should have capital letters, do. Check that all words that should not have capital letters, don't.
- ✓ Check the spelling of any proper names including street and place names. Check for consistency, especially of abbreviations and acronyms.
- ✓ Check all your spelling and grammar. Use your computer spellcheck, but don't rely on it absolutely - it is operating by machine logic and you are writing for humans.
- ✓ Check for style. If it's your own material, make sure you've got internal consistency of tone and expression. If it's for a specific publisher or editor, use the house style.
- ✓ Check for text in the passive voice and wherever possible rewrite it in the active voice.
- ✓ Check that your sentences are only as long as they need to be for maximum clarity.
- ✓ Check that you've eliminated all jargon, or explained what you must retain. Cut out clichés and tautology and repetition.

- ✓ Check that your paragraphs are only as long as they need to be for better flow. 3-4 sentences are usually O.K.
- ✓ Check that all quotations and comments are properly attributed to the speaker.
- ✓ Check that you've not defamed anyone or breached another writer's copyright.
- ✓ Check that you've not exceeded the maximum length required. If your article is well written, you should be able to cut from the end. A story needs more careful excision.

When you've checked all that you can check, read it through once more - first for sense, then for spelling and grammar. While you were rewriting you might have made another mistake.

Now print out a good copy on clean white paper and send it off.

Good luck.



The Fog Index

The Fog Index is one of several methods devised to measure the readability of written texts. Readability is affected by:

- Average length of sentences (in words, not syllables.)
- The percentage of simple words.
- The percentage of verbs expressing forceful action.
- The proportion of familiar words.
- The proportion of abstract words.
- The percentage of personal references.
- The proportion of long and complex words.

The Fog Index is based on a count of the number of words of three or more syllables in a 100-word sample as well as the average sentence length. This checks readability.

To determine the reading difficulty of a passage:

1. Select samples of 100 words each.
2. Calculate average no. of words in sentences.
(Count no. of words in all and divide by no. of complete sentences in sample.)
3. Now count no. of words of three or more syllables, excl. proper nouns, compounds such as book-keeper and words ending in -es or ed.
4. Add average no. of words per sentence and no. Of words of three syllables or more.
5. Multiply by 0.4

This formula tells you the Fog Index graded as follows:

INDEX	READING LEVEL
less than 10	easy reading
11-12	top 20% of 12-year olds
13	top 20% of 16-year olds
14-16	1st-year university students
17	university graduate

You can apply the Fog Index to check if your text matches the readership it is intended.

For example: A memorandum to workers which contained an ultimatum about productivity was found to have an index of 17. Difficult to read and hardly likely to achieve the co-operation management wanted.

In fact the only management-to-worker communication that fell below an index of 13 was the memo wishing them all a happy Christmas. This company is known for its poor industrial relations. Ineffective communication could be a major cause.

Some recent American research discovered that:

only 4% of readers understand a 27-word sentence
but 75% of readers understand a 17-word sentence
and 95% cent of readers understand an 8-word sentence

If we are not writing for readers, then for whom? Make yourself understood: it is the first duty of the good writer.

