

Becoming a Better Editor: Why Rewriting & Editing Are Not The Same

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Good writing emerges from rewriting: trimming, shaping and polishing your draft to make it something you are happy with. But revising is not the same as editing; it is only part of the editing process.

When you revise your draft, you are in the role of the writer. You are immersed in your material and are thinking from a writer's perspective: What details do I need to best communicate this point? How should I describe this to provide a clear picture for the reader? Can I tighten this sentence without changing the meaning? Have I made my point convincingly?

When you shift to editor mode, you make fewer changes to the text, because most of the changes should occur in the revising phase. As an editor, ask questions from the perspective of a reader who doesn't have the writer's insight: What does that mean? How is that related to the previous point? Will that make sense to a reader who is unfamiliar with the topic? Will that get by the legal department?

Find a writing buddy.

Strengthen your writing skills by finding a partner who will read your drafts and give you candid feedback about what isn't clear, what is missing, what you should add or remove, and what grammar mistakes need to be fixed.

It should be someone whose opinion you trust and someone you have confidence in. A writing buddy is someone you can talk to when you are struggling to start an assignment or when you are wrestling with a difficult topic.

Don't hit "send" without having your buddy read it first. It can be particularly helpful to ask someone who is unfamiliar with the topic.

Read your copy three times.

Editing isn't one quick reading to check for grammar and punctuation errors and other glaring flaws. To effectively edit, read it three times, because you look for different things each time. The first time, sit back and look only for big issues: Does the body of the message support the opening paragraph, or do I start out saying one thing and veer off track? Is any information

missing or positioned in the wrong place? The second time, check for clarity, flabby sentences, unified paragraphs and smooth flow.

Understand the parts of the editing process.

People often use editing and proofreading interchangeably, but proofreading is the third step in the editing process. It's the line-by-line search for grammar and editorial-style errors. Many people start editing and immediately look for grammar and punctuation errors, but there are more important issues to deal with in the first two readings.

If information is obviously missing or disorganized, or if sentences are not clearly related to previous thoughts, then you won't notice those problems if you are focused on whether a word is incorrectly used or whether the sentence needs a comma.

Editorial style refers to the use of a stylebook. Most companies follow the AP Stylebook, which covers spelling, capitalization, number usage and many other issues.

Allow time for revising.

When the deadline is 5 p.m., many writers plan their time so that they finish it at 4:58 p.m., drop it on the boss' desk and go home. Then they grumble the next day because the final version bears little resemblance to what they submitted. There are two issues here:

1. Don't be lazy and expect an editor to clean up your copy. That's not her job.
2. Allow time before the deadline to talk with your editor about necessary changes so that you can do the rewriting and can benefit from learning by doing.

Leave a positive impression.

Readers, particularly in management, have a difficult time cutting you slack for high-school mistakes that simply shouldn't be there. Like table manners and social skills (or the lack of), sloppy writing leaves an impression. The reader is wondering, are you that careless about other aspects of your job?

You're a writer. Take pride in the craft.

Ken O'Quinn is a writing coach who teaches workshops in corporations throughout the world. After a journalism career with the Associated Press and newspapers, he started *Writing With Clarity* and now works with such clients as Facebook, GE, Chevron, KPMG, Motorola, Dow Chemical, Cisco, and EMC. He has helped thousands of staff and managers, including professional communicators, sharpen their writing skills.