

# WIELDING YOUR BLUE PENCIL

by Dennis L. Peterson

The essence of successful writing is the ability to edit oneself. Only dreamers would think that their initial, unedited scribbles are ready for publication. They gripe about the unreasonable and undiscerning editors who continually reject their submissions. On the other hand, writers who have learned to edit what they've written are the ones who are likely to get published.

By following seven steps in editing yourself, you're not likely to be heavily edited by editors and *are* likely to get your work published.

**1. Swallow your pride.** William Zinsser, a famous proponent of self-editing, wrote, "You have to have the toughness to separate your work from yourself, to look at your piece objectively and make it as good as you can."

Few writers can admit that their writings are imperfect at best and can be improved. Writers tend to guard jealously their literary creations; that attitude almost guarantees failure.

Every word is fair game for the editor's blue pencil. The wastebasket is our best friend, and the blue pencil runs a close second. Most successful writers will agree that "half of life is the act of revision."

**2. Cut the fat.** Cutting the fat means that no word or phrase can remain in your manuscript unless it has a justifiable purpose, carries its own weight, or supports another word or idea. It also means saying the most in the fewest possible words and saying it as simply as possible.

I learned this important lesson early in my free-lance career when an editor returned one of my submissions and stated that he was willing to publish it—if I would cut it in half! My initial reaction was, "But I've already cut it to bare bones. Any further cuts will kill the thing!" But my desperate financial situation and my desire to be published in that particular magazine prompted me to comply. So I cut and pasted the manuscript, occasionally rewriting entire sections and inserting transitions where necessary, until I had it down to the desired length. It was accepted and published and gained a modicum of acclaim for its humbled author.

A weakness of many writers is to attempt to sound more authoritative than they are or to impress readers by using long words. The best writers, however, take complex ideas and state them simply. The wise writer will heed the advice of the sage who said, “Never try to impress people with the profundity of your thought by the obscurity of your language. Whatever has been thoroughly thought through can be stated simply.”

**3. Choose the best word.** Closely associated with cutting the fat is the art of choosing the right words to deliver your thoughts effectively. Choosing the precise word, especially selecting the right verb (which is often the most important word in the sentence), is vital. More confusion and misunderstanding result from improperly used words than for any other reason. And when your words are wrong, your ideas are misunderstood, the intended message is garbled, and communication ceases.

Finding just the right word can at times be difficult and involves more than a cursory glance through *Roget's Thesaurus*. It requires careful thought and often some trial and error until the right word “clicks.” As Mark Twain said, “The difference between the right word and the nearly right word is the difference between the lightning and the lightning bug.”

In word choice, the following rules of thumb apply:

- a) A short word generally is preferable to a long word.
- b) A concrete term is clearer than an abstract idea.
- c) A specific word is better than a broad generality.
- d) Common words are more understandable than jargon.
- e) Clichés should almost always be avoided.

**4. Check your grammar and usage.** Using a word incorrectly or making a mistake in grammatical construction is the mark of a careless writer. Readers are often confused by the lack of agreement between a pronoun and its antecedent or between a subject and its verb. Dangling participles, misplaced modifiers, and dozens of other grammar and usage problems not only can cause reader confusion but also can turn an editor against your manuscript.

One way to avoid such problems is to develop an ear for correct usage, but that takes time and experience. There is no substitute for a sound knowledge of grammar. This does not require a college degree in English. Simply check a good

college handbook on English usage (e.g., *Harbrace College Handbook*, *Chicago Manual of Style*, or *Gregg Reference Manual*), and then try to follow the rules.

**5. Vary your sentences.** Don't use the same sentence structure and length. If you tend to write short, simple sentences, avoid Dick-and-Jane-reader choppiness by occasionally joining two simple sentences to create a compound sentence; link two related simple sentences with a semicolon; or use a few complex sentences.

**6. Use active voice.** Good writing requires action. There is nothing wrong with using the passive voice from time to time, but sentences using the active voice are shorter, livelier, more direct, and more effective. For example, although the meaning is clear when one writes "The ball *was hit* by John" (passive voice), action is injected into the piece when one writes "John *hit* the ball" (active voice). Substituting a more descriptive verb, such as *clobbered*, adds even more action.

**7. Cool it!** Trying to edit a piece while it's still "hot" is never a good idea. After working on a piece for several hours (or perhaps days), during which you have revised and reread it several times, your mind begins to accept what you have written as perfect—even when it isn't. Favorite words and pet phrases become so fixed in your mind that you are less likely to see and correct problems. Set your manuscript aside to cool, and on rereading it, you'll discover that many of the awkward phrases or wrong words will jump right out at you, suggesting fresh alternatives.

The same approach works for catching spelling and usage errors in your writing. Reading the piece after it is "cold" will enable you to see not only misspelled words but also correctly spelled but improperly used words that even computer spell checkers could not identify.

One of the challenges of writing is that writers can learn something new about self-editing every time they sit down with pen and paper or word processor. That's why they must be willing to cut, edit, and revise.

There's always room for improvement. As Art Linkletter wrote, "When you are in the world of communication, you can never be perfect. But you can always be better."