

How Do You Learn to Edit Yourself?

By Rachel Toor, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 27, 2010

In the writing process, there is perhaps nothing harder than reading one's own work with a critical eye.

When looking over the prose of others, it's easy to point out mistakes and infelicities of language. You can take someone's writing and make it not only right, but also mellifluous, and then add a comment explaining why you did what you did. You can object to the abuse of semicolons, rail against the ideological problems inherent in the passive voice, and show specific ways to avoid the sickly use of adverbs by replacing them with vigorous nouns and verbs.

You can talk about how the structure of a piece works, tease out the narrative arc, point to flaws in the development of the argument. It's fun to show someone on the page where their writing has taken a wrong turn, according to H.G. Wells: "No passion in the world is equal to the passion to alter someone else's draft."

Good writers agonize over word choice, listen for sounds and rhythms, craft with care the cadences of their sentences. They write wilted clichés and then delete them, replacing them with crisper phrasing. They weed drafts to eradicate noxious modifiers.

But even good writers, once they have a draft, tend to memorize the sentences they like—even if no one else is ever going to like them. The more you pore over your own prose, the more inevitable and unchangeable it can seem, especially as you get tired or a deadline looms.

So how do you learn to edit yourself?

In graduate school you have (theoretically) a dedicated reader—an adviser whose job it is to take your work seriously. It's a gift to find someone who can help you become not only a solid researcher, but also a strong writer. I have known a handful of writing-sensitive scholars whose students regularly produced dissertations that were a pleasure to read.

But most academics are so busy trying to master content—to have ideas, to construct interesting arguments—that thinking about sentences can seem like worrying about blow-drying your hair during a hurricane.

How can I help far-away geologists and physicists, historians and philologists, write better prose? I can't. Not in some abstract, general way. All I can do is urge them to pay attention to well-written works in their own field, to read not just for content, but also for the nuances of style, and to steal the tools and tricks that good writers use. I can beg them to care about their sentences.

If you don't remember the basics—like what a semicolon does—you might want to remind yourself. If you don't know the difference between further and farther, lay and lie, figure it out (or go lie down until you do). If you are prone to comma splices (as I am), be aware of that and make conscientious choices. Those are not trivial issues. If we don't take the form seriously, the content of the message won't get delivered. There's no point in writing if you're not going to be understood.

Where do you go for help? The obvious first step is, of course, to acknowledge that you need help. Then go buy one of the zillions of books on writing well. They all say basically the same things. Find one that speaks to you in a way that you can hear.

Call me fusty and old-fashioned, but I heart Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, now in its 956th edition. My students receive it like a gift and tend to have two reactions: "How come no one ever told me to read this book?" And "OMG, I'm so embarrassed—I'm a terrible writer and make tons of mistakes." As Dorothy Parker said, "If you have any young friends who aspire to become writers, the second-greatest favor you can do them is



Brian Taylor for *The Chronicle*.

to present them with copies of *The Elements of Style*. The first-greatest, of course, is to shoot them now, while they're happy."

A useful companion is Joseph Williams' *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*, published in an excellent series on academic writing by the University of Chicago Press. While I find Williams' cracks about Strunk and White a bit cranky, his aim is to show how to put their rules into action: "Telling me to 'Be clear' is like telling me to 'Hit the ball squarely.' I know that. What I don't know is how to do it." Williams is less delightful but more detailed than Strunk and White, and gives specific examples of how prose goes wrong. You will find in its examples your own sentences, or ones very like them. You'll learn why they are bad and understand how to fix them.

Recently, I asked an economist friend for examples of bad academic prose. He showed me a draft of a paper written by a co-author. It was definitely bad. And then he told me about his favorite book on writing.

Even in the "dismal science," there are dazzling stylists. Deirdre McCloskey's *Economical Writing* is a treat that can benefit academics in all fields. McCloskey took Strunk and White as her model and wrote a terrific little book of her own. She does what all good writers do—delivers her information in a way that makes you want to keep reading. She pleases as she instructs.

The book was originally known as *The Writing of Economics* and was published in 1986, when Deirdre was still Donald McCloskey. It was revised in 1999 and renamed *Economical Writing*, after the author had undergone sex-reassignment surgery. Minutes after finishing the book, I e-mailed McCloskey a gushy letter. During a series of exchanges, I wondered if the revisions were affected by her sex change. She said no, that the book is mostly just her, though in the revisions—and in general—her writing style as a woman is more playful and more personal.

Playful, when it comes to discussing grammar and good writing, is helpful. (For another treat, Google Lewis Thomas's tiny and adorable essay, "Notes on Punctuation.") Academics sometimes forget that and think that to sound smart you have to be dour. You don't. You just have to be clear.

The best writers tend to be able to rattle off the name of their favorite book on writing. I like to give students *On Writing* by Stephen King—yes, *that* Stephen King—because he also loves Strunk and White, because his book is helpful and fun to read, and because it shows that, while King has an astute understanding of the craft of writing, he tends not to follow the guidelines he knows so well.

Many professors say they don't have time to spend on such self-help books. I say you don't have time not to.

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Comments

1. fiona - September 28, 2010 at 04:40 am

I also recommend William Zinsser's *On Writing Well* and Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*. Zinsser is great for tips on avoiding clutter and condensing your prose, and Lamott gives tips and confidence. One of the best tips is from Stephen King's book: never use adverbs. Trouble is, once you get used to reading excellent academic stylists, including Rachel Toor, it gets harder and harder to read the turgid prose that most academics turn out.

2. 11159786 - September 28, 2010 at 08:04 am

As usual, Rachel Toor is on the mark. My own suggestion for improving writing is to find someone who knows how to write well and is willing to be "brutally honest", say your spouse. It seems to work for me!

3. usaret - September 28, 2010 at 08:43 am

Rachel Toor and Fiona both offer excellent and much-needed advice. I am a big fan of Zinsser and Lamott and use portions of their writings in my college composition classes. On academic prose--if only journal editors would follow this advice! The most difficult articles I read, ironically (pace Stephen King), are in PMLA, the journal of the Modern Language Association. We would never let our students write such obfuscatory prose.

4. bumbaugh - September 28, 2010 at 09:10 am

Howard Becker's *Writing for Social Scientists* also offers valuable advice for academic writing (and good writing in general).

5. 11196496 - September 28, 2010 at 09:19 am

As fiona (#1) noted, reading a good author helps. What helps even more is reading many good authors who use a variety of styles. Such reading opens one up to change in one's own style or to a better definition for one's style.

My own writing improved as I edited the essays of colleagues and helped grad students to write longer papers. As 11159786 (#2) notes, brutal honesty helps, but the ability to be brutally honest and to be open to brutal honesty doesn't come naturally. It must be acquired. I offer two examples of situations in which such honesty and openness might be acquired. At one university where I taught and wrote, a group of friendly colleagues from one department regularly met to comment on the substance and style of their articles, book chapters, etc. They did this in a relaxed forum (off campus) with popcorn and beverages to ease the discussion. I have also been part of a team of scholars engaged in a long-term research and writing project (now finished!). Since we all were invested in the project, we felt free to make constructive comments and were open to receiving them. The key in both situations was mutuality and trust.

6. dank48 - September 29, 2010 at 12:16 pm

I was glad to see you recommend the Stephen King book *On Writing*. It's a really fine piece of work. King writes in a genre I'm not particularly fond of, but by God, he always writes well.

Just one item from memory: "I was forty years old and had been making my living as a professional writer for over twenty years before I realized that, if you write (or sing or dance or paint or sculpt or play an instrument), sooner or later somebody is going to try to make you feel lousy about it."

7. cassadia - September 29, 2010 at 04:55 pm

I was surprised and delighted to see your mention of Joseph Williams' *STYLE: TOWARD CLARITY AND GRACE*. "Be clear" is wonderful advice, beyond useless to someone who doesn't have a clue about achieving clarity, let alone grace