

The Writer's Editorial Eye

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Every so often, a writer needs to disengage from the writing task and become an editor. Changing perspective is not always easy, but it is absolutely necessary to do so, for it is only when the editorial eye is alert that the writer will be able to read the text critically, with full powers of analysis and judgement.

The aim of editing is 'to remove any obstacles between the reader and what the [writer] wants to convey' (Butcher, 1992, p. 2), and the writer when in editing mode is the first reader capable of identifying any obstacles. Fortunately, the writer can then eliminate the difficulties, easing the way for all subsequent readers.

Editing takes place at a number of levels: first, the structure must be checked – if the structure is flawed, the language cannot be made 'right'; second, the expression needs to be reviewed and refined; and third, consistency of presentation must be verified. It is impossible to work on all three levels simultaneously, and it is best to start with structure.

To check the structure, review the headings – write out the descriptive headings in an outline form, with subheads subsidiary to the main headings. If there are no headings, list the topics covered in the paragraphs; indicate those paragraphs that are subsidiary to, or depend on, the previous paragraph. Is the order of the topics, as indicated by the headings, logical? Does the wording of the headings make sense? Review the text under each of the headings. Does the content reflect the heading in every case? If not, should the text or the heading be changed? (With prescriptive headings,

altering the text is the only option.) Are additional – or fewer – section or paragraph breaks required?

Once the structure is sound, work through the text. Examine every sentence, constantly asking: does this sentence (or phrase) convey in as clear and concise a manner as possible *exactly* what it is intended to convey? As well as clarifying or tightening any expression that is muddled or loose, watch for ambiguity; awkward phrases; unintended repetition of words; incorrect use of words or terminology. Make sure tables and figures are used effectively. Write for your audience: be aware of the level of language being used – overly complicated structures and unnecessarily erudite vocabulary may not be understood. Is the tone appropriate? A condescending or sarcastic tone can affront readers.

Concern over presentation can become a pedantic obsession. While details of style are certainly not the most important aspect of writing, attention to consistency does make the reader's job easier. Every journal has its own 'house style' regarding capitalisation, preferred spelling, use of figures for numbers, punctuation, use of footnotes and style of referencing, presentation of tables and figures, etc. Be rigorous and consistent in the application of the house rules. If there is no rule or preference stated, make a logical decision and then be consistent in its use.

Reading the text aloud can be helpful in recognising weaknesses in content, logic and expression. The final read through should be done a couple of days after having set the piece aside as finished and 'perfect'.

References and Further Reading

Dictionaries

The dictionaries noted here were chosen because they use an Australian database. The *Concise Oxford* takes the more conservative approach to language and vocabulary.

The Australian concise Oxford dictionary (2nd ed.). (1992). Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

The Macquarie dictionary (2nd ed.). (1991). Sydney: Macquarie Library.

Usage guides

Usage guides explain, with examples, words and constructions that pose difficulties for writers. Fowler's is the classic; the works by Nick Hudson and Stephen Murray-Smith are witty and informative.

Fowler, H.W. (1968). *A dictionary of modern English usage* (2nd ed. revised by Sir Ernest Gowers). London: Oxford University Press.

Hudson, N. (1993). *Modern Australian usage*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

Murray-Smith, S. (1987, 1990). *Right words: A guide to English usage in Australia*. Melbourne: Viking, Penguin.

Style guides

Style guides deal with many styles issues that arise in written material. The APA guide is used extensively in the social sciences, both overseas and in Australia. The Butcher is a sensible guide, which discusses issues without being overly dogmatic. The AGPS manual was originally prepared for use in the Australia government, but has been widely accepted in publishing and academia. The *Writers' and Editors' Guide* lists tricky words, terms, titles, names, etc. as they should be presented.

American Psychological Association (1994). *Publication manual* (4th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

Butcher, Judith (1992). *Copy-editing: The Cambridge handbook for editors, authors, publishers* (3rd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Purchase, S. (Ed.). (1991). *The Australian writers' and editors' guide*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

Australian Government Publishing Service (1994). *The style manual for authors, editors and printers* (5th ed.). Canberra: Author.

Editing aide-mémoire

- Structure
 - Check heading levels: is order logical? do headings themselves make sense?
 - Check content of text within topics: is it suitable? if not, should heading or text be altered?
 - Are additional breaks required? should there be fewer sections?
- Expression
 - Is the text clear and concise?
 - Watch for:
 - ambiguity
 - awkward phrases
 - incorrect use of terms
 - unintended repetition of words
 - how tables and figures are handled
 - Is the level of language appropriate for the target audience? And the tone?
- Style
 - capitalisation
 - numbers (including measures and percentages)
 - punctuation
 - referencing and references
 - spelling, including use of hyphens
 - tables and figures

Acknowledgement

The position of Editor-in-Residence at La Trobe University (March–August 1996) was financed by a grant from the Literature Board of the Australia Council.