

10 VITAL SELF-EDITING TIPS

Write **to** Done



Author: **Mary Jaksch**

Polishing what you write can make all the difference.

Take diamonds. In the raw, only experts can spot them.

But once they are cut and polished, they sparkle and shine.

This is what good editing can do to your writing.

But there is a problem.

Having to go back over your writing can be a painful and frustrating process. Especially if those early drafts don't look anything like the picture you had in your head.

You can be tempted to ignore this process and either push “publish” or “send” and hope for the best.

Not a good idea.

How often have you re-read a post or piece of writing a few days later, and found obvious spelling errors or problems with flow?

The old cliché “practice makes perfect” applies to the editing process. Many best-selling authors note that the art of writing is really the art of re-writing!

The good news is that self-editing is a skill that can be developed.

There are some crucial editing strategies and techniques that you can easily learn and apply to your own writing so that you can polish those drafts, eliminate the fluff and leave them clean, clear and sparkling.

Sound good?

Let's get to it.



1

Get Some Distance From Your Writing

In many cases, the reason you find it hard to go back over your work is that it makes you feel bad. It may be that you don't feel satisfied with your work and worry about how it will be received.

You may also be just plain bored of it!

Whatever the negative emotion, a way to face it is to imagine that you are sitting down to edit someone else's work. That can help give you the distance to see your writing from a fresh perspective.

And take comfort from the fact that many successful authors hate their first drafts too!

“For me and most of the other writers I know, writing is not rapturous. In fact, the only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really shitty first drafts”.

Anne Lamott

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Give It a Rest



Another way to get distance from your writing is to leave at least 24 hours from the time you finish until the time you start your serious editing attempts.

Your brain knows your work and so will fill in the gaps where missing words are, or will autocorrect spelling errors without you even realizing it!

When you come back after a break, you will be able to see your writing without the additional “help” from your brain.

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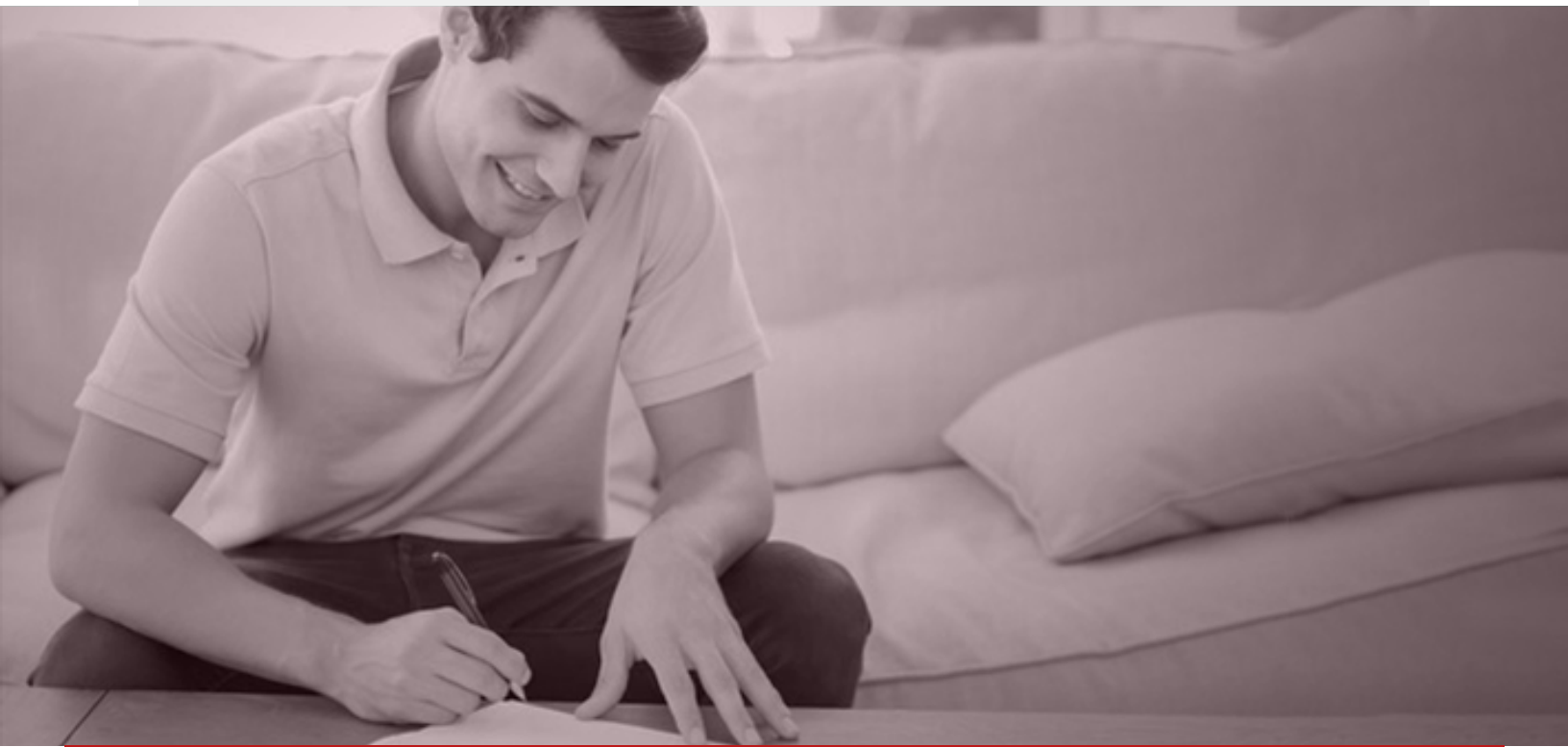
Change the Format

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This is an old editor's trick for catching bad phrasing, double or missing words. Print it out, read it on Kindle, magnify the screen or change the font and font size.

Read your writing slowly out loud.

A nice trick is to have Adobe Reader read it to you. The dull computerized voice will quickly help you pick up the errors your brain omits!

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Change Locations While Editing

Self-editing can be a boring process and you may find your attention start to wander.

When you find your attention drifting, Cal Newport, a prolific writer and college professor recommends that you try moving physical locations.

He tried this experiment when working on a particularly challenging piece of work.

He found himself moving every half an hour, and each time the move brought about renewed energy for the task.

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Eliminate Distractions

Catching those small, pesky errors requires that you pay close attention to your work.

If you are attempting to multi-task, by juggling between email, Facebook, and Twitter, they are going to find their way into your final piece.

Set yourself small and manageable distraction-free time chunks and focus solely on editing.



Remember Who You Are Writing For



Knowing your audience and holding an image of one reader in mind while you edit will help you write in a way which is appropriate.

This will affect your choice of words and tone. If you are writing a blog post you will tend to be conversational and use contractions – isn't instead of is not.

You'll speak in the first person and avoid the passive tense.

If you're writing an academic piece, you'll make different choices. Editing with one reader in mind will ensure consistency.

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Start With the Big Picture

Start with the big picture – the core message and overall structure- and check for clarity, consistency and flow.



Ask yourself how well the different parts contribute to the central message or narrative.

You may find yourself making big structural changes at the point, even eliminating big chunks of writing, which is why doing a line by line edit at this stage isn't a good idea.

And be sure to be able to answer the question "what's the point?"

Cut Out the Fluff

Readers have short attention spans these days, and even if you are writing a novel, a short tolerance for long rambling sentences (I'm not commenting on whether this is a good thing, it just is a trend).

Look for times where you repeat yourself, state the obvious, or add extra information that doesn't need to be there.

Be brutal!

As blogger Henneke Duistermaat advises “religiously tighten your text, then tighten it more”.



Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling (GPS)

Now you can start drilling down and focus on line-by-line grammar, punctuation and spelling.

Again, your grammatical choice will depend largely on your audience.

Pay particular attention to your habit words.

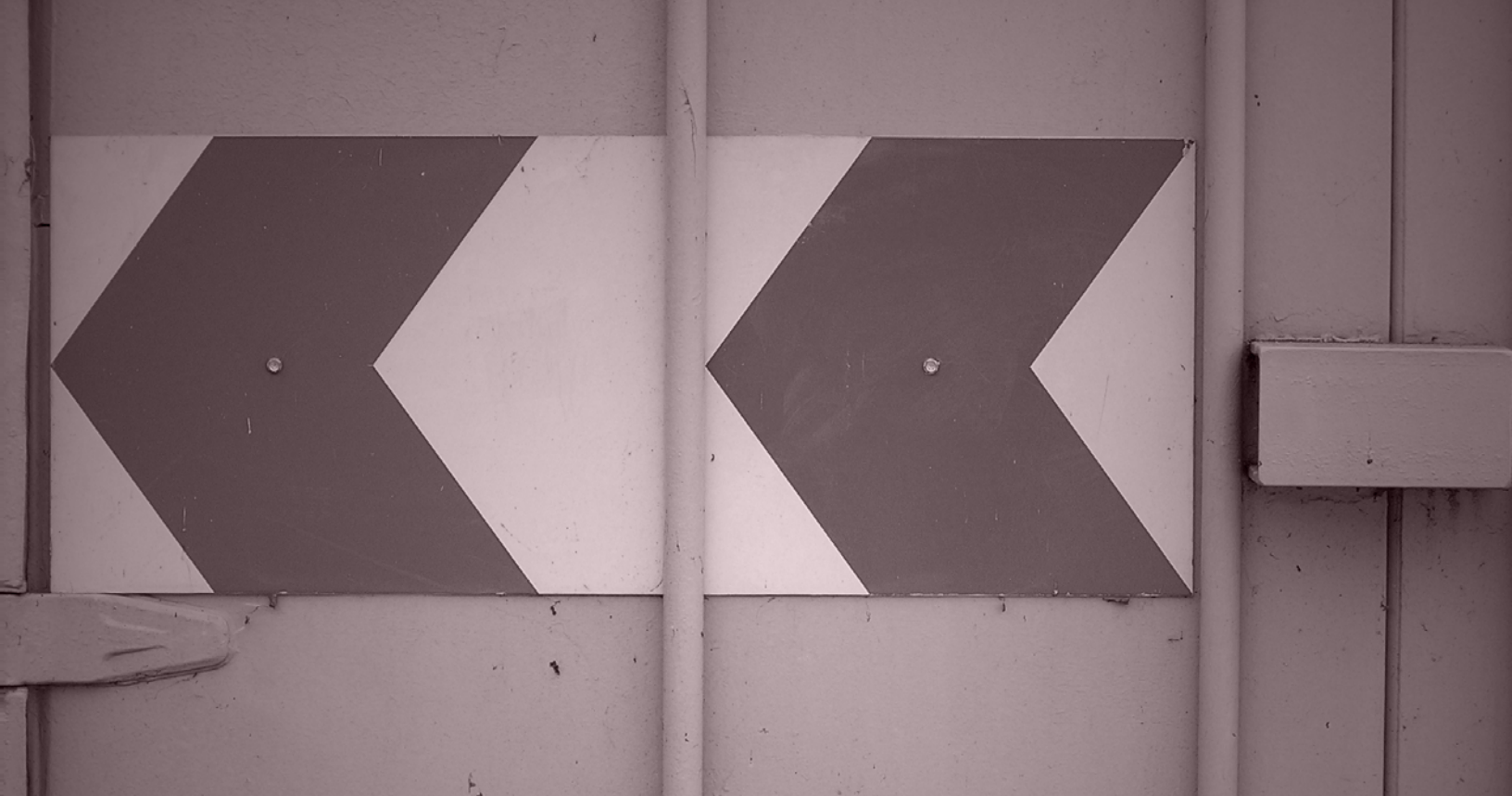
Many of us have words that we like to use regularly that find their way into every few sentences. Some of the most common habit words are “so”, “just”, “actually”, “literally”, and “very”.

Keep a list of your common offenders and then search and see if you can replace them without altering your intended meaning.

Have a thesaurus handy to help you generate interesting sensory and emotional words.

And don't always believe the spell check suggestions!

Read Your Work Backwards



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The final tip, is to read over your work, starting from the end. This helps to combat a common pattern where we pay good attention at the beginning, but our attention wanes as we get further into the piece.

This way, you can be sure that your conclusion is as tight and polished as your introduction.
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By now your writing should be clear, clean and sparkling!

Editing your work is a time-consuming process, but it is well worth the effort.

Following these tips will help you become a better writer, help you avoid the embarrassment of making obvious mistakes, and ensure your work is more convincing and credible.

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