



## Help With: Editing

Good writers do not see writing as a single activity, but as three related processes: planning, writing, and editing. Editing is often overlooked when impatient writers rush the file to the printer, but can make the difference between a good paper and an excellent one. Here are four editing techniques which will give your writing that special edge.

### Removing Excess Words

One mark of a good writer is economy—the ability to say more in fewer words. In a concise sentence every word of a sentence contributes to its meaning. Words and phrases that do not add anything to a sentence simply pad out the text and should be removed in editing. Here are some common sources of weakness:

- Unnecessary category words: green *in color*, the *field of* medical science, *the game of* chess

Readers know that green is a color and that chess is a game. Category words add to the meaning of a sentence only when they are surprising or abstract, as in *the game of love* or *a wet, green smell*.

- Doubled synonyms: *each and every*, the last *and final*, *one and only*, return *again*.
- Empty phrases: *is quoted as saying*, *can be defined as*, *is considered to be*

Empty phrases use three or four words to do the work of one. Instead of *is quoted as saying*, write *says*; instead of *is considered to be*, write *is considered* or *is*.

- Needless qualification: *In my opinion*, *I believe*, *more or less*, *generally*
- Intensifiers: *really*, *very*, *extremely*, *incredibly*, *literally*, *rather*

Instead of adding an intensifier to a word: *extremely happy*, *incredibly sad*, replace it with a stronger word, saving space and time: *thrilled*, *crushed*.

Here is a typical sentence inflated to four times its useful size by wasteful writing:

☒ *In my opinion, as it were, the best papers, more often than not, are usually those in which the author uses a style that may be described by most readers as being very clear and extremely concise without any redundancies in language use.*

You could convey the same information in ten words:

☒ *The best papers use a clear, concise style without redundancies.*

Often editing turns up phrasings which turn out to be redundant or obvious:

☒ *I believe that it may be assumed that children should not carry loaded guns because it is extremely dangerous.*

We already know it's what *you* believe. Your name is on the paper.

## Using Verbal Sentences

Noun statements such as “X is Y” (The rain is cool) often don’t seem to *do* anything. They can have a stagnant tone as opposed to verbal statements: The cool rain feels refreshing.

Noun statements also tend to waste space.

☒ The problem is complex and this is caused by politicians who are apathetic.

By removing the ‘*is*’s from this sentence it will be shorter and more punching:

☑ The problem’s complexity results from apathetic politicians.

Some uses of ‘*is*’ (Grass is green) are inevitable. Don’t write a ridiculous sentence such as ☒ “Grass colors itself in a green tint.” The point is to write shorter, clearer sentences. Here are some sentences with unnecessary ‘*is*’ verbs. Can you produce alternative sentences where possible?

1. Hamlet is angry with Gertrude after he is visited by the ghost of his father.
2. It is increasingly the case that newspapers are increasingly pressured to cut costs. This is because the internet is replacing newspapers as a source of news.
3. Lewis Carrol is one of the best-known authors of the Victorian period, but he was also a renowned mathematics professor.

## Upgrading Your Diction

One strategy for developing a more professional tone is to scan your text, replacing dull or vague words with more colorful or precise ones. Remember not to overdo it. The point is to be interesting and exact, not to show off your thesaurus.

A useful example is eliminating *good* from your writing, a boring and nondescript word which cries out for upgrading:

☒ The problem of people building cities too big with no control is bad.

☑ The problem of uncontrolled expansion of cities exacerbates urban sprawl.

☒ The invention of e-mail has been a good thing for trying to communicate in writing.

☑ The invention of e-mail has greatly eased written communication.

☒ Friedman proposes a good way to fix the problem of globalization that is too fast.

☑ Friedman proposes an effective means of dealing with over-rapid globalization.

## Taking a Break



The fourth means of improving your writing is to not write and edit in one sitting. Rest your brain and return to your text with a fresh mind. As you reexamine your paper as a reader and not a writer you will see omissions, errors, and opportunities for improvement you would otherwise miss.