**WOOLPERT**

Workshop Material

# WE 3N THE EDITING WORKOUT: TRIMMING, TONING, TWEAKING, . . . AND SQUEAKING (BY)

STC 51st Annual Conference
Baltimore, Maryland

May 10, 2004

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# TRIMMING, TONING, TWEAKING,
# . . . AND SQUEAKING (BY)

STC 51st Annual Conference
Baltimore, Maryland

May 10, 2004

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# THE EDITING WORKOUT: TRIMMING, TONING, TWEAKING, . . . AND SQUEAKING (BY)

## INTRODUCTION

In the whirlwind of ASP, B-to-B, IIS, and .NET, it's easy to lose sight of the most basic element of professional writing—the fact that it must communicate clearly. All the techno-tools in the world are of limited value if we, as communicators, can't communicate.

If writing for the web has taught us anything, it's the value of brevity. Was anyone really surprised to find that no one wants to read 40-word sentences (let alone 400-word paragraphs) on the web?

There is much more to editing than we can cover today. However, this light-hearted look at editing will give you some fixes guaranteed to make writing better. If you are a writer, you'll probably tune in to foggy readability. If you are an editor and are asked for a quick fix—the techniques we'll cover should help you.

Before we go on, here's our take on what is grammatically wrong and what is stylistically unacceptable.

- Grammatical problems include sentence fragments, subject-verb disagreements, misplaced modifiers of all types, misplaced pronouns, incorrect joining of dependent clauses, ambiguities, wrong punctuation, and many more offenses. These must never slip through the net.

- Stylistically unacceptable language—particularly in technical writing—includes passive verbs, nominalizations, long sentences, nonparallel construction, and other crimes.

Both these categories contribute to readability problems in paper and online documents. There is no guarantee that simple grammatical correctness will lead to clear communication.

In this workshop, we've bypassed some of the misdemeanors—subject-verb agreement, punctuation errors—and focused on the more heinous and pervasive crimes.

## WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED "EDITING"?

There are many definitions for editing. Here's a good one from Carolyn Rude's book, *Technical Editing:*

> Editing the text means making it complete, accurate, comprehensible, and usable as well as correct.

Of course, many books contain other definitions. Here's another viewpoint: Years ago, Rebecca had a

> Editing is **reducing** bulk—while **increasing** usability.

tailoring class. On day one, the instructor said that the students probably all thought tailoring had to do with sewing and with putting things together. But in that instructor's opinion, tailoring was really all about just one thing—reducing bulk. We've adapted that definition for today's discussion:

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# OBJECTIVES AND PLAN

Today we will review and build the following skills:

- Chopping extra words and simplifying language
- Shortening long sentences
- Making sure all parts of sentences are in the right place
- Using strong words and identifying the strongest parts of sentences
- Finding and replacing biased and negative words
- Checking for macro- and micro-level sense
- Editing on the run when time is short

| Format | Description | Talk | Work |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Table 1. Workshop plan** | | | |
| Discussion | **Introduction** | 5 | |
| Activity | *Passages gone wrong* | | 10 |
| **Part 1: Trimming** | | | |
| Discussion | **Verbosity and inflation**<br>• Cut extra words—removing the fluff<br>• Eliminate spoken word patterns—bad habits that come from speech<br>• Simplify language—taking vocabulary down a notch | 5 | |
| Activity | *Slicing and dicing* | | 11 |
| Discussion | **Sentence chopping**<br>• Find the underlying problem—why sentences are long<br>• Use the right tools—solving the problems<br>• Eliminate prepositional phrases—streamlining | 5 | |
| Activity | *Trimming the fat* | | 12 |
| **Part 2: Toning** | | | |
| Discussion | **Strong words, hot spots, and landmines**<br>• Choose strong words—strong verbs<br>• Pack a punch—the point in the best place<br>• Disarm landmine words—biased, judgmental, and negative terms | 5 | |
| Activity | *Where's the beef* | | 12 |
| **Part 3: Tweaking** | | | |
| Discussion | **Stepping stones and the translation test**<br>• Edit for total communication—the translation test | 5 | |
| Discussion | **Checklist: The 10 steps to editing stardom** | 10 | |
| **Part 4: . . . And Squeaking (By)** | | | |
| Discussion | **Checklist: The 12-step program to editing on the run** | 10 | |
| **Total time 90 minutes** | | **45** | **45** |

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# ACTIVITY: PASSAGES GONE WRONG

**Instructions:** Read these passages and then identify their crimes in Table 3.

**Offender A** Throw the horse over the fence some hay.

**Offender B** A round of public meetings could help waylay their fears.

**Offender C** We mailed the child sex education curriculum publication deadline reminder.

**Offender D** We'll get together to lay out a plan for penetration of the local government client.

**Offender E** I'll hold the nail in position and, when I nod my head, you hit it with the hammer.

**Offender F**

**Offender G** Researchers from the University of Maryland found markedly higher rates of separation and divorce among couples with children who work different shifts.
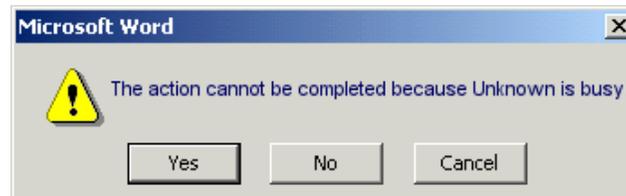
> *—Chicago Sun-Times*

**Offender H** In addition, research on writing, reading, drama and its impact upon learning in different disciplines including history, science as well as English studies which has pioneered new approaches to research complex socio-cognitive processes.

> *—Ohio State University website for the School of Teaching and Learning,* www.coe.ohio-state.edu

**Offender I** Just as we expect water to flow from the tap every time it is turned on, and the engine of a car to burst into life each time the ignition key is tweaked, a similar expectation exists during our leisure hours that, no matter what we do to escape the rat race and recharge the batteries, if things go wrong and we find ourselves detached, marooned, lost, injured or immobilized, sooner or later help will arrive— providing the basic precaution of letting someone know where you are going has been taken.

> *—The first sentence of an article on "New abrasion test for ropes," from* The Australian Standard *journal*

**Offender J** It is the recommendation at this time to analysis the business processes and the use of technology in order to better understand the server requirements at the agency. The first fundamental factor imbibing the agency and providing long-term risk is that the majority of the records, and hence the workflow of the agency, is not electronic. This records exist as paper document, stored locally within the agency. Even those small Access databases are Excel spreadsheets that are implemented are typically implemented within a department. This creates several problems within the organization.

> *—The first paragraph of recommendations to a government office on the use of technology*

**Offender K** It is definitely time to nip it in the butt.

| Table 2. The offenders and the cavalcade of crimes | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | Crime | Description |
| | | | | | | | | | | | Verbosity | Unnecessary words and redundancy |
| | | | | | | | | | | | Vocabulary bloat | Unnecessarily complex or obscure vocabulary |
| | | | | | | | | | | | Sentence bloat | Overly long sentences, often with multiple main points |
| | | | | | | | | | | | Paragraph bloat | Overly long paragraphs, often with multiple (or no) topic sentences |
| | | | | | | | | | | | Duds | Overused phrases, clichés, and metaphors |
| | | | | | | | | | | | Passivity | Passive voice when active would be better |
| | | | | | | | | | | | Parallel perils | Parallelism faults in headings, phrases, lists, and sentences |
| | | | | | | | | | | | Hidden verbs | Weak verbs that conceal the action in nouns |
| | | | | | | | | | | | Noun stacks | Piles of nouns that confuse meaning |
| | | | | | | | | | | | Misplaced modifiers | Misplaced and squinting constructions, usually with modifiers |
| | | | | | | | | | | | Orphans | Pronouns without correct antecedents |
| | | | | | | | | | | | Landmines | Biased, judgmental, insensitive, or unnecessarily negative words |
| | | | | | | | | | | | Syntax sins | Improper word choices |
| | | | | | | | | | | | Switcheroo | Jarring changes in person, number, or tense |
| | | | | | | | | | | | Typos | A catchall for spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors |
| | | | | | | | | | | | Nonsense | Passages no one can unravel, probably because of some or all or the crimes listed above |
| | | | | | | | | | | | Roast | Unflattering and unintentional humor, at the writer's expense |

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## Suggested answers: Passages gone wrong

| A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | Crime | Description |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | ✔ | ✔ | ✔ | | Verbosity | Unnecessary words and redundancy |
| | | | | | | | ✔ | ✔ | | | Vocabulary bloat | Unnecessarily complex or obscure vocabulary |
| | | | | | | | ✔ | ✔ | | | Sentence bloat | Overly long sentences, often with multiple main points |
| | | | | | | | | ✔ | ✔ | | Paragraph bloat | Overly long paragraphs, often with multiple (or no) topic sentences |
| | | | | | | | ✔ | | | ✔ | Duds | Overused phrases, clichés, and metaphors |
| | | | | | | | ✔ | | | | Passivity | Passive voice when active would be better |
| | | | | | | ✔ | | | | | Parallel perils | Parallelism faults in headings, phrases, lists, and sentences |
| | | | ✔ | | | | | | | | Hidden verbs | Weak verbs that conceal the action in nouns |
| | | ✔ | | | | | | | | | Noun stacks | Piles of nouns that confuse meaning |
| ✔ | | | | | ✔ | | | | | | Misplaced modifiers | Misplaced and squinting constructions, usually with modifiers |
| | | | ✔ | | | ✔ | | | ✔ | | Orphans | Pronouns without correct antecedents |
| | | | ✔ | | | | ✔ | | | | Landmines | Biased, judgmental, insensitive, or unnecessarily negative words |
| | ✔ | | ✔ | | | | | | ✔ | | Syntax sins | Improper word choices |
| | | | | | | | ✔ | | | | Switcheroo | Jarring changes in person, number, or tense |
| | | | | | | | | | ✔ | | Typos | A catchall for spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors |
| | | | | ✔ | ✔ | ✔ | | | ✔ | | Nonsense | Passages no one can unravel, probably because of some or all or the crimes listed above |
| ✔ | ✔ | | ✔ | ✔ | | ✔ | | ✔ | ✔ | ✔ | Roast | Unflattering and unintentional humor, at the writer's expense |

**Table 3. The offenders and the cavalcade of crimes—suggested answers**

# PART 1: TRIMMING

When we trim, we reduce words. Editing can eliminate unnecessary words—such as those in tautologies and clichés. Or it can reduce words by using better grammatical forms—such as changing from passive to active, which often reduces sentence length by 10 percent.

> What's a **tautology?** In a word—redundancy. Or, as *the American Heritage Dictionary* puts it, "Needless repetition of the same sense in different words.

In this section we look at clichés, unnecessary words, and long sentences. A good editor will trim, trim, trim, and not allow superfluous and simplifiable words into print.

Words must be correct, appropriate, and combined into effective phrases. Word choice must prevent ambiguity and vagueness, and the phrases must avoid wordiness and confusion.

## ELIMINATE FLUFF

### Avoid clichés like the plague

Clichés are sayings that were once appropriate but are now stale. Examples are *quick as a flash*, *from the shoulder*, and *grassroots*. Use of these expressions is not good writing.

Avoid today's cliches:

- *level playing field*
- *moving goal posts*
- *the cutting edge*
- *too much on my plate*
- *a pie-in-the-sky idea*
- *low-hanging fruit*
- ***at this point in time***—particularly annoying

### Don't use no double negatives

Every editor certainly knows about grammatically incorrect double negatives, such as *Don't nobody move* and *There isn't no point.*

However, some instances of two negative elements can be correct, such as *He is never unwilling to help.* But even when they are correct, they can cause readers to stumble. So avoid using a word and a prefix that make a double negative, as in ***not un****usual* and ***never un****available.*

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## Reduce redundancies and repetition

People often write two or more words that mean the same thing. Redundancies are common for two reasons: People use them in speech, and people mistakenly believe that the repetition helps to make a point.

Common word redundancies are listed in Appendix A: Redundancy and Bloat. Here are some of the most heinous. You can often eliminate the *italicized* words.

- *advance* planning
- *ATM* machine
- close *proximity*
- *during* the course of

- end *result*
- past *experience*
- *p.m.* in the evening
- whether *or not*

Appendix A suggests economical replacements for other wordy phrases.

## Don't "gild the lily"

Another type of redundancy (more like "gilding the lily") often happens with these words:

- *absolutely*
- *completely*
- *quite*

- *really*
- *totally*
- *very*

"Substitute 'damn' every time you're inclined to write 'very'; your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be."
*—Mark Twain*

## Cure vocabulary bloat

Check out this sentence. It's suffering from vocabularious bloatus.

*Numerous instantiations of terminology that move stealthily into prose can be supplanted by more unpretentious—and frequently more succinct—verbiage that imparts significance with augmented alacrity.* (26 words, 59 syllables, Flesch Reading Ease 0, Flesch-Kinkaid Grade Level 12.0)

Watch for vocabulary bloat danger signs. Many overblown words end with suffixes like *–age, –ate, –ation, –ize, –ology,* and *–ous.*

Here it is again, in plain English:

*Many words that creep into writing can be replaced by simpler, often shorter words that communicate better.* (17 words, 28 syllables, Flesch Reading Ease 50.2, Flesch-Kinkaid Grade Level 10.4)

- **Flesch Reading Ease score:** Rates text on a 100-point scale; the higher the score, the easier it is to understand the document. For most standard documents, aim for a score of approximately 60 to 70.

- **Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score:** Rates text on a U.S. grade-school level. For example, a score of 8.0 means that an eighth grader can understand the document. For most standard documents, aim for a score of approximately 7.0 to 8.0.

    *—Microsoft Word Help*

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And here are just a few examples of *italicized* words that you may be able to simplify:

- *concomitant* ➜ related, associated
- *(are) desirous* ➜ want, choose, are interested in
- *echelons* ➜ levels
- *eschew* ➜ avoid
- *expansive* ➜ large
- *facilitate* ➜ ease, help
- *foundation* ➜ basis, source
- *maximize* ➜ increase, make the best use of
- *methodology* ➜ method
- *multifarious* ➜ diverse, mixed
- *nebulous* ➜ vague, hazy

- *numerous* ➜ many
- *optimum* ➜ best
- *perspicacity* ➜ wisdom
- *possess* ➜ have
- *propinquity* ➜ nearness
- *provide* ➜ give
- *proximity* ➜ near, close to, adjacent to
- *pursuant (to)* ➜ by, following, according to
- *signage* ➜ signs
- *terminology* ➜ words
- *utilize* ➜ use

Appendix A lists some other bloat words to avoid.

## WATCH FOR SPOKEN POLLUTION IN TEXT

When speaking, we use a lot of unnecessary words that can sneak into our writing. And we may be used to using certain words or word patterns in our general writing lives and take them with us—rather like baggage—when we become technical writers.

There are many examples of spoken "pollution" in text. Perhaps the most common is the confusion between homonyms, like *led–lead, do–due, to–too–two, your–you're, their–there–they're,* and *its–it's*.

> What are **homonyms?** They're words with the same sound but different meanings.

Here are a few other polluters that you can often **leave out.**

### Where there's a "will"

*Will* still appears in procedural documents, although many writers chucked it years ago.

- **Unnecessary "will":** *If you press the red button, the rocket will take off.*
- **Better:** *If you press the red button, the rocket takes off.*
- **Even better:** *To launch the rocket, press the red button.*
- **Or:** *Press the red button to launch the rocket.*

The better of the last two is open to debate.

*Will* is often found with *happen* and followed by *to.* You can often cut the *will.*

- **Unnecessary "will":** *What will happen to the trumpet if it is not cleaned regularly?*
- **Better:** *What happens to the trumpet if it is not cleaned regularly?*

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## The human bondage of "of"

Here are the two most common cases of *of*-itis:

- **Unnecessary "of":** *all of the*
- **Better:** *all the*

- **Unnecessary "of the":** *many of the*
- **Better:** *many*

*Of* is an annoying little preposition that can often be removed by streamlining a prepositional phrase into an adjective:

- **Prepositional phrase:** *method of collection*
- **Better:** *collection method*

*Of* can also be associated with other words in redundant expressions such as *both of them are installed.*

A downright error in the use of *of* also results from spoken language.

- **Incorrect "of":** *He should of received the report by now.*
- **Correct:** *He should have received the report by now.*

Be careful when streamlining prepositional phrases. If you use that technique too often, you can end up with hideous noun stacks: *We mailed the child sex education curriculum publication deadline reminder.*

## "That's" all, folks!

*That* can frequently be cut out.

- **Unnecessary "that":** *You do an audience analysis so that you identify what the reader wants.*
- **Better:** *You do an audience analysis so you identify what the reader wants.*
- **Even better:** *You do an audience analysis to identify what the reader wants.*

## "To" be or not "to" be

In many cases, the *to* part of a verb pair—called an infinitive—can be cut out.

- **Unnecessary "to":** *A good manual helps you to communicate with the reader.*
- **Better:** *A good manual helps you communicate with the reader.*

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# ACTIVITY: SLICING AND DICING

**Instructions:** Rewrite these sentences to slice and dice. Look for these elements:

A. Clichés
B. Double negatives
C. Redundancies
D. Gilded lilies
E. Vocabulary bloat
F. Spoken pollution (homonyms as well as *will, of, that,* and *to*)

1. Many of the presentations and briefings of often utilized maps of some type or graphics of some nature to more effectively communicate the subject matter at hand. (28 words, Reading Ease 38.4, Grade Level 12.0)

   _____

   _____

2. Past experience has shown that all of the computer-based software programs that money can buy in the world will not ever prove to be worth its weight in gold if the end users of them do not possess the knowledge to adequately utilize these tools in the performance of their jobs. (52 words, Reading Ease 38.9, Grade Level 12.0)

   _____

   _____

3. Each of the county departments at the county expressed their interest in the existing database. But the database is itself expansive, and understanding their relationships is not always intuitive. However, the database is maintained through a combination of efforts of the departments of the county. It is the official database from which reports are generated from for the Department of Transportation. (63 words, Reading Ease 37.4, Grade Level 11.8)

   _____

   _____

   _____

4. First and foremost, as with any reasonable request for additional equipment whether technical or not, is the resultant utilization of such concomitant equipage and the resultant increase in productivity such a tool will provide. If any portion or part within the project area needs additional coverage or requires a greater scrutiny, then the crew can address that with alacrity while there still on the site environs and not after they are back at home base. (76 words, Reading Ease 22.1, Grade Level 12.0)

   _____

   _____

   _____

## Suggested answers: Slicing and dicing

1. Presentations often used maps and other graphics to communicate the subject matter. (from 28 to 13 words, 54% reduction, Reading Ease 72.5, Grade Level 8.7)

2. All the software money can buy won't help if people don't know how to use it for their jobs. (from 52 to 20 words, 62% reduction, Reading Ease 89.5, Grade Level 5.4)

   Software helps people do their jobs only if they know how to use it. (from 48 to 14 words, 73% reduction, Reading Ease 89.8, Grade Level 4.1)

3. County departments are interested in the database, even though it is large and complex. They work together to maintain it, and they use it to create Department of Transportation reports. (from 63 to 30 words, 53% reduction, Reading Ease 53.4, Grade Level 8.3)

4. How will we use the new equipment? How will it increase productivity? With this equipment, the crew will finish a whole project area in a single trip, even if more coverage or a closer investigation is needed. (from 76 to 37 words, 53% reduction, Reading Ease 59.4, Grade Level 8.0)

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- **Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score:** Rates text on a U.S. grade-school level. For example, a score of 8.0 means that an eighth grader can understand the document. For most standard documents, aim for a score of approximately 7.0 to 8.0.

  *—Microsoft Word Help*

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## SHORTEN SENTENCES

### Dig before you cut

In other words, before you shorten sentences, figure out **why** they're too long.

There are many reasons and combinations of reasons for long sentences. If a person continually writes long sentences, you may find a consistent set of problems.

The longer the sentence, the more likely it is to contain grammatical errors such as misplaced modifiers, subject-verb disagreements, and punctuation problems.

Here are some common reasons for long sentences:

- Too many independent clauses
- Too many dependent clauses
- Too many phrases
- Too many modifiers

The best way to tackle a long sentence is to find the main point of the sentence—a good sentence can have only one main point. If there are several main points, the sentence can probably be split into several shorter sentences. To do that, look for independent clauses—pieces that stand on their own.

This short workshop can't go into all the causes of sentence bloat, so we'll give you an overview of the sentence chopping tools and then tackle just the prepositional phrases.

### Use the right tools

**Table 4. Sentence choppers**

| Solution | Method |
| --- | --- |
| Separate sentences into the different ideas they contain | Look for ideas that don't flow, pieces that belong to sentences above or below, and pieces that should be on their own. |
| Make sure each sentence contains one idea | If it doesn't really say anything, you may not need the sentence at all! |
| Turn independent clauses into separate sentences | Look for *, and* (comma + small word), as well as *; however* (semicolon + big word), or *;* the lone semicolon. |
| Turn modifying phrases into adjectives or adverbs | Work on those prepositional phrases. Try turning *The plans of the company…* into *The company plans…* |
| Put conditional statements in separate sentences | Many phrases that impose conditions should be separate sentences. Watch for phrases beginning with *if.* |
| Use chronological (or other logical) order | When you sort out the order of activity in a sentence, superfluous words or phrases may become obvious. This is most important in procedure writing. |
| Insist on parallelism | Look for lack of parallelism in series. A sentence that isn't in parallel structure may really be hiding clauses that could—or should—be separate sentences. For example, this could easily be separated into sentences (or even bullets—see the next item in this table): *Let me know how you will attend the meeting—whether in person, remotely by NetMeeting, teleconferencing from the Resource Center, if someone else will attend for you, or not at all.* |

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| Table 4. Sentence choppers | |
|---|---|
| **Solution** | **Method** |
| Use bulleted lists if there are more than three pieces of data in a sentence | Turn this:<br>*To develop a good writing style, you must choose words well, be careful with placement and development of words and phrases, write sentences that are not too long, and take care with the tone of the writing.*<br>Into this:<br>*These techniques contribute to the development of a good writing style*<br>• *Word choice*<br>• *Word and phrase development*<br>• *Word and phrase placement*<br>• *Sentence length*<br>• *Writing tone* |

# Deflate prepositional phrases

Prepositional phrases are some of the most troublesome types of modifiers. Too many prepositional phrases make the sentence long and choppy. Look at this overinflated sentence.

> *The need **in the company for** great increases **in the area of** new system design means we must address the addition **of** analysts and programmers **to the** division **of** information technology.*

That sentence has too many *__prepositions__* and too many *prepositional phrases*.

In the following rewrite, the small units have been integrated into two large units. In other words, the prepositional phrases are integrated into a **main independent clause** and a *dependent clause.* This is called subordination.

> *Because the company is greatly increasing its system design work*, **it must hire additional analysts and programmers in the information technology division**.

Here are the common prepositions:

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *about* | *at* | *by* | *into* | *since* |
| *above* | *because of* | *concerning* | *like* | *through* |
| *across* | *before* | *despite* | *near* | *throughout* |
| *after* | *behind* | *down* | *of* | *till* |
| *against* | *below* | *due to* | *off* | *to* |
| *along* | *beneath* | *during* | *on* | *toward* |
| *among* | *beside* | *except* | *onto* | *until* |
| *apart from* | *besides* | *for* | *over* | *with* |
| *around* | *between* | *from* | *out* | *without* |
| *as for* | *beyond* | *in* | *outside* | |
| *as to* | *but (*meaning *except)* | *inside* | *past* | |
| *as regards* | | *instead of* | *regarding* | |

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# ACTIVITY: TRIMMING THE FAT

**Instructions:** Rewrite these sentences to trim the fat. Look for these elements:

A. Phrases that relate to earlier or later sentences and should be separated
B. Meaningless sentences that don't contain any main idea
C. Independent clauses that should be separate sentences (*comma + and, semicolon + therefore,* lone *semicolon*)
D. Prepositional phrases that should be adjectives or adverbs
E. Conditional statements that should be in separate sentences
F. Lack of chronological (or other logical) order
G. Lack of parallelism
H. Series that should be turned into bulleted lists

1. The document is being distributed by the PEO to the Chief Executives of all the County public sector agencies to assist them in understanding the role of ITABs in industry training planning, and to encourage agencies to assess their training needs and draw them to the attention of the County ITAB for inclusion in the ITAB's 2001/2002 industry training plan. (61 words, Reading Ease 0.0, Grade Level 12.0)

2. The Stage A solution will be based on the BillA interface with necessary changes and enhancements and will provide CDE with the information regarding accounts which are now billed in XYZ and during Stage A all legacy systems' feeds will continue to supply data to CDE without any changes. (50 words, Reading Ease 20.7, Grade Level 12.0)

3. The Documentation Team Leader has been told by the Project Manager to prepare a report on the recent computer problems that have resulted in considerable downtime for the documentation team and have led to the deadline for the Ajax project being missed. (43 words, Reading Ease 23.2, Grade Level 12.0)

4. Before you install XYZ version 3.1, you have to determine whether you are upgrading from version 3.0 or if it a new installation, i.e. either you are installing XYZ for the first time or you are installing version 3.1 on a new personal computer. (45 words, Reading Ease 21.8, Grade Level 12.0)

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5. The screen is broken into three parts the first being the text box displaying the word not found, the second is the list of suggested words you can use to replace your original word and the last part contains the action buttons. (43 words, Reading Ease 49.3, Grade Level 12.0)

   _____

   _____


6. The software/database design specification process consists of two primary parts: the software design specification and the database design specification; these specifications describe the software design and database design. These specifications are developed by the project team members. (38 words, Reading Ease 13.6, Grade Level 12.0)

   _____

   _____

## Suggested answers: Trimming the fat

1. In the county, all chief executives from public-sector agencies will receive a document from the PEO about the role of ITABs in industry planning. The agencies can then determine their training needs and pass them to the county ITAB for inclusion in the 2001/2002 industry training plan. (from 61 to 48 words, 21% reduction, Reading Ease 34.4, Grade Level 12.0)

2. The Stage A solution is based on the enhanced BillA interface. That interface will give CDE information about accounts now billed in XYZ. During Stage A, all legacy system feeds will supply data to CDE without any changes. (from 50 to 38 words, 24% reduction, Reading Ease 60.3, Grade Level 7.9)

3. The project manager told the team leader to report on the computer problems that caused the documentation team to miss the Ajax project deadline. (from 43 to 24 words, 44% reduction, Reading Ease 45.0, Grade Level 12.0)

4. Before you install XYZ version 3.1, find out whether you are upgrading from version 3.0 or installing a new program. (from 45 to 20 words, 56% reduction, Reading Ease 42.7, Grade Level 12.0)

5. The screen has three parts:
   - The text box displaying the word not found
   - A list of suggested replacement words
   - The action buttons (from 43 to 22 words, 49% reduction, Reading Ease 62.7, Grade Level 5.2)

6. The project team writes two specifications: software design and database design. (from 38 to 11 words, 71% reduction, Reading Ease 38.4, Grade Level 11.2)

---

- **Flesch Reading Ease score:** Rates text on a 100-point scale; the higher the score, the easier it is to understand the document. For most standard documents, aim for a score of approximately 60 to 70.

- **Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score:** Rates text on a U.S. grade-school level. For example, a score of 8.0 means that an eighth grader can understand the document. For most standard documents, aim for a score of approximately 7.0 to 8.0.

  *—Microsoft Word Help*

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# PART 2: TONING

## STRENGTHEN WEAK VERBS

### Watch for nouns that change themselves into verbs

The word *diarize* represents an action (verb) that has evolved from the noun *diary*.

Some of these word evolutions can form horrific jargon, such as these examples:

- *Let's back-burner this one until later.*

Other examples are as follows:

- *to courier*
- *to conform*
- *to beverage*
- *to Christmasize*
- *to message*
- *to action*
- *to verbize*
- *to agenda, to agendize*

Many such words (like *to fax*) are now part of our language, but let's try to prevent words like *Christmasize* from becoming acceptable.

### Watch for weak verbs

Weak verbs are those that can mean many things. Often, weak verbs are found in sentences with other vague words such as abstract nouns.

Here is a list of weak verbs, with the major offenders in **bold:**

- *to accomplish*
- *to aim*
- *to appear*
- *to associate*
- ***to be***
- *to carry out*
- *to come*
- ***to do***
- *to exist*
- *to feel*
- *to get*
- *to give*
- ***to have***
- *to hold*
- ***to make***
- *to suggest*
- *to take*
- ***to use***

Look at these examples of weak—or at least vague—verbs:

- *The technician **got it out** using . . .*   *pulled it out*
  *extracted it*
  *unlocked it*
  *unscrewed it*
- *The crew **got** some spare parts.*   *bought*
  *found*
  *borrowed*
  *stole*

## Find the hidden action

In sentences with weak verbs, the action—which should be the verb—is often trapped inside a noun. That is called **nominalization.** Nominalization is commonly associated with the weak verbs listed above. Prime offenders are again *to be, to do, to have, to make,* and *to use.*

Here's an example:

> *We did a **comparison** of the two answering machines.* (9 words)
>
> **Noun hiding action**
>
> *We **compared** the two answering machines.* (6 words)
>
> **Strong verb**

Common verb-*noun* transformations are as follows:

- approve ➜ *approval*
- decide ➜ *decision*
- involve ➜ *involvement*
- legalize ➜ *legalization*
- occur ➜ *occurrence*
- perform ➜ *performance*
- prioritize ➜ *prioritization*
- provide ➜ *provision*
- reduce ➜ *reduction*

> Watch for nominalization danger signs. Many action-hiding nouns end with suffixes like *–al, –ance, –ation, –ence, –ion,* and *–ment.*

# STAY ACTIVE

Verbs have two voices—active and passive. Active verbs are direct and strong. Passive verbs are indirect and weak. Technical writing must be direct and clear, so it must use active verbs.

A passive verb has two pieces: an auxiliary verb + the past participle of the main verb.

The auxiliary verb is always part of the verb to be (is, am, are, was, were, be, being, been). The past participle often ends in -ed or -en. The passive is therefore a two- or three-word verb:

- is written
- are captured
- was decided
- is being helped

Many irregular verbs have past participles that don't end in -ed or -en, but are still part of a passive, such as in these examples:

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- has been rung
- is begun
- is being taught
- was thought

Compare these two sentences:

- **Active:** The programmer wrote the manual.

  The subject (the programmer) acts on (wrote) the object (the manual). Active voice is strong, clear, and forward moving.

- **Passive:** The manual was written by the programmer.

  The subject (the manual) is acted upon (was written) by the object (the programmer). Passive voice is weak, is backward moving, and takes more words.

## Don't pass on all passives

But passive voice isn't useless. Passive verbs are effective in these situations:

- The person performing the action is unimportant or unknown:

  - The mail was delivered at 8:30 this morning.
  - The manual was written about 10 years ago.

- The focus is on the receiver of the action:

  - The instructions in the manual are designed for beginning users. (The focus is on "beginning users.")

- The aim is to avoid an issue or avoid assigning responsibility. This is fairly common in business/government writing, but it's usually not appropriate in technical writing.

  - It has been suggested that . . .
  - The decision was made to . . .

## Push passive to active

There are four ways to change a **passive verb** to an **active verb:**

- Put the **subject** back into the sentence.

  - **Original:** It **was decided** to put the manuals online.
  - **Edited:** The **company decided** to put the manuals online.

- Turn the **infinitive** (to + verb) after the **passive verb** into the **main verb.**

  - **Original:** Control Q **is used to stop** the program.
  - **Edited:** Control Q **stops** the program.

- Convert a **noun** that hides an action into an **active verb.**

  - **Original:** Senior writers were used for the document **revision.**
  - **Edited:** Senior writers **revised** the document.

- Reverse the original **subject** and **object,** so that the edited subject is the doer of the **active verb.**

  - **Original:** The **specifications** were reviewed by the **team leader.**
  - **Edited:** The **team leader reviewed** the **specifications.**

# ACTIVITY: KEEPING SENTENCES ACTIVE

**Instructions:** The following sentences are all passive. First list the passive verb, and then rewrite the sentences in the active voice.

1.  Reports are being presented by several companies.

    Passive verb _____

    _____

    _____

2.  The new flextime system will be implemented to assist in the reorganization.

    Passive verb _____

    _____

    _____

3.  The Program X Quick Guide was created by the new writer.

    Passive verb _____

    _____

    _____

4.  The proposal has been considered and it has been decided to reject it.

    Passive verb _____

    _____

    _____

5.  It is time the productivity award was presented to the GUI team.

    Passive verb _____

    _____

    _____

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## Suggested answers: Keeping sentences active

1. Reports are being presented by several companies.

   Passive verb: **are being presented**

   Several companies are presenting reports.

2. The new flextime system will be implemented to assist in the reorganization.

   Passive verb: **will be implemented**

   We (they) will implement the new flextime system to assist in the reorganization. But note that passive may be appropriate in this case.

3. The Program X Quick Guide was created by the new writer.

   Passive verb: **was created**

   The new writer created the Program X Quick Guide.

4. The proposal has been considered and it has been decided to reject it.

   Passive verb: **has been considered, has been decided**

   We (they, the committee, the director) considered the proposal and decided to reject it. But note that passive may be appropriate in this case.

5. It is time the productivity award was presented to the GUI team.

   Passive verb: **was presented**

   It is (was) time for the GUI team to win the productivity award. But note that passive may be appropriate in this case.

# ACTIVITY: UNTANGLING PASSIVE PROCEDURES

**Instructions:** Turn this rat's-nest of passive voice material to sparkling clear active voice procedures. If you find any gaps in the process, fill them in as well as you can. You may have to put on your thinking cap to remember back to floppy disks and software that you must install manually.

Assume that the user is quite new to computers but knows basic mouse and Windows operations. Also assume that the user might not know how to load a disk or CD but will know how to run and use Windows Explorer.

1. The process is begun with the startup disk that was included in the blue envelope marked "Startup."

2. The disk medium should never be touched, including the recording material under the metal slider.

3. The startup disk is inserted in drive A (if the received medium is a 3.5-inch floppy) or in the CD drive (if the received medium is a CD), which is configured as drive E, and the door is closed with the green label facing up.

4. Install is typed and Enter is pressed in the Windows 95 Start Run box.

5. The project files BxxPyy are loaded onto the hard drive after a few minutes, where xx is referenced to the book number and yy is referenced to the page number.

6. The new directory is called Sheets.

7. The 63 files should be verified to be on the hard drive after Installation complete is displayed on the screen and after Clear is clicked.

8. Windows Explorer should be used. If any problems or questions are encountered, the system administrator should be informed.

## Suggested answers: Untangling passive procedures

**Original text**

1. The process is begun with the startup disk that was included in the blue envelope marked "Startup."
2. The disk medium should never be touched, including the recording material under the metal slider.
3. The startup disk is inserted in drive A (if the received medium is a 3.5-inch floppy) or in the CD drive (if the received medium is a CD), which is configured as drive E, and the door is closed with the green label facing up.
4. Install is typed and Enter is pressed in the Windows 95 Start Run box.
5. The project files BxxPyy are loaded onto the hard drive after a few minutes, where xx is referenced to the book number and yy is referenced to the page number.
6. The new directory is called Sheets.
7. The 63 files should be verified to be on the hard drive after Installation complete is displayed on the screen and after Clear is clicked.
8. Windows Explorer should be used. If any problems or questions are encountered, the system administrator should be informed.

1. Find the blue envelope marked Startup. It contains the startup disk.

   **Caution:**   If you received a 3.5-inch floppy disk, never touch the recording medium under the metal slider. If you received a CD, handle it as little as possible and only by the very edge.

2. Remove the startup disk from the envelope.

3. Use one of these steps:

   - If you received a floppy disk, hold it with the green label facing up and insert it into drive A.

   **Or**

   - If you received a CD, hold it with the green label facing up and insert it into the CD drive. Close the drive.

4. Click Start and then Run on the Windows 95 taskbar.

5. Use one of these steps:

   - For a floppy disk, make sure the box says A:\install and click OK.

   **Or**

   - For a CD, make sure the box says E:\install and click OK.

6. Wait while the installation proceeds. The process automatically creates a directory called Sheets on your hard drive and loads the project files. When the process is done, Installation complete displays on the screen.

7. Click Clear.

8. Use Windows Explorer to make sure the Sheets directory on your hard drive contains 63 project files.

   **Note:** The project file names use the pattern BxxPyy where
            xx is the book number
            yy is the page number

If you have any problems or questions, contact the system administrator at _____.

## PACK A PUNCH

In everything you write, there are two natural places for emphasizing your words: the beginning and the ending. And of the two places, the ending is probably the stronger. This applies to chapters, paragraphs, and sentences.

> If you have something important to say, don't bury it in the middle where it could get missed. Or if you have something controversial to say, you might soften it by putting it in the middle.

Here are some examples:

- **Mute "several people" and emphasize "recession":** *We're laying off several people because of the recession.*
- **Emphasize "several people":** *Because of the recession, we're laying off several people.*

## DISARM LANDMINE WORDS

Writers must be sensitive to language that is directly—or indirectly—discriminatory or inflammatory. Discriminatory language is typically in three categories:

- Gender
- Physical or mental abilities or disabilities
- Race, nationality, culture, age, religion, region, and other factors

While the examples and guidelines are far too lengthy for this short workshop, here are some simple suggestions for replacing the *landmine* words:
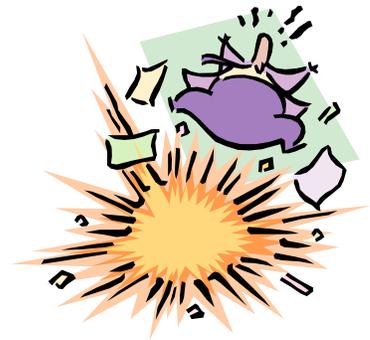
- *afflicted person* ➜ person
- *American* ➜ when the meaning is "North American" or even limited to just the United States
- *black person* ➜ African American or other regional designation—not all black people are from Africa, and not all Africans are black
- *(the) blind, (the) vision-impaired* ➜ people who are blind, people who are vision-impaired
- *boy* ➜ when the meaning is "man"
- *Chicano, Chicana* ➜ Mexican-American
- *Dear Sir:* ➜ To Whom It May Concern:
- *(the) elderly* ➜ senior citizens
- *English* ➜ British, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, or other designation—not all people from the British Isles are English
- *female construction worker* ➜ construction worker (the gender reference is usually unnecessary)
- *fireman* ➜ firefighter
- *girl* ➜ when the meaning is "woman"
- *Indian* ➜ when the meaning is "American Indian"
- *handicapped parking* ➜ accessible parking
- *male nurse* ➜ nurse (the gender reference is usually unnecessary)
- *manhours* ➜ hours, work hours, staff hours
- *manpower* ➜ personnel, staff, work force
- *mentally retarded child* ➜ child with mental retardation
- *people confined to wheelchairs* ➜ people who use wheelchairs

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- *two-man crew* ➜ two-person crew
- *waitress* ➜ server
- *white men* ➜ Europeans or other regional designation—not all white people are from Europe, and not all white people are men
- *workman* ➜ worker

## EXTINGUISH INFLAMMATORY LANGUAGE

Inflammatory language includes words that sound overly negative or judgmental. In some circumstances, "disaster," "fatal," or "negligent" could be exactly the right word. But in many cases, it isn't. So, depending on the context and the message you want to send, watch for these kinds of *inflammatory* words:

- *absurd*
- *afraid*
- *bad*
- *blame*
- *broken down* (meaning *divided*)
- *catastrophe*
- *covert*
- *damage*
- *dead*
- *deplorable*
- *desperate*
- *destroy*
- *disaster*
- *dumb*

- *fatal*
- *failure*
- *fiasco*
- *fault*
- *flagrant*
- *hopeless*
- *horrible*
- *ignorant*
- *impossible*
- *incompetent*
- *inferior*
- *irresponsible*
- *liable*
- *meaningless*

- *mishap*
- *negligent*
- *pointless*
- *ridiculous*
- *rude*
- *ruin*
- *secret*
- *shameful*
- *stupid*
- *substandard*
- *useless*
- *waste*
- *worried*
- *worthless*

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## ACTIVITY: WHERE'S THE BEEF?

**Instructions:** Note the weak verb and the action-hiding noun in each sentence. Then rewrite the sentence to fix that situation—and other problems you might see.
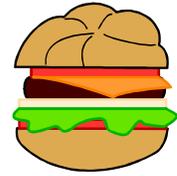
1.  The committee is giving consideration to the proposal.

    Weak verb_____        Action-hiding noun _____

    _____

    _____

2.  The assessment of the success of the new training program was made by the CEO.

    Weak verb_____        Action-hiding noun _____

    _____

    _____

3.  Please make your application on this form.

    Weak verb_____        Action-hiding noun _____

    _____

    _____

4.  If you make time to do an edit of the document it will be much better.

    Weak verb_____        Action-hiding noun _____

    _____

    _____

5.  The new office manager did an audit of the accounts.

    Weak verb_____        Action-hiding noun _____

    _____

    _____

This one—with a lovely misplaced modifier—is here for your enjoyment.

6.  Only one in three city workers currently have access to a computer, and many of them are dumb terminals.

    _____

## Suggested answers: Where's the beef?

1. Weak verb: **is giving**                Action-hiding noun: **consideration**

   The committee is considering the proposal.

2. Weak verb: **was made**             Action-hiding noun: **assessment (of the success)**

   The CEO assessed the new training program.

3. Weak verb: **make**                 Action-hiding noun: **application**

   Please apply on this form.

4. Weak verb: **to do**                 Action-hiding noun: **edit**

   This document will be better if you edit it.

5. Weak verb: **did**                   Action-hiding noun: **audit**

   The new office manager audited the accounts.

6. Only one-third of the city workers have computer access, and many of those computers are just terminals.

# PART 3: TWEAKING

Tweaking pertains to many techniques we use to adjust meaning, style, appearance, and more. Of course, many techniques can be included in this category. But we're going to focus on just one, the translation test, which covers a lot of the bases.

The translation test is an interesting technique that integrates concepts of correctness, effective communication, and even elements of layout and presentation.

And, as this discussion should show, the translation test works even when no language translation will be taking place.

## USE THE TRANSLATION TEST

Before we get to the translation test itself, let's take a moment to consider the editing process.

The writer and reader start out separated by a wide gulf of confusion. The potential connection between them is the written word. So think of each sentence as a bridge or—better yet—as a set of stepping stones.

As the reader crosses the gulf on these stones, he or she carries a "backpack" of previous knowledge as well as knowledge of the context and even cues from the presentation on the page.

When stepping off solid ground onto the first stone, the reader typically tests the "stone" by unconsciously asking questions like this:

- Do I know this word?
- Can it mean more than one thing?
- What is its probable purpose in the sentence?

Then the reader advances to the second "stone"—more questions:

- Do I know this word?
- Can it mean more than one thing?
- What is its probable purpose in the sentence?
- What is its relationship to the previous word?
- How does this word make me feel?
- What do I expect to read next?

Each time the reader tries out a new stone, he or she unconsciously goes through all those questions.

So what happens if the "stone" happens to be an orphaned pronoun (one without an antecedent), an awkward phrase, a subject-verb disagreement, or an instance of confusing syntax? In essence, the reader might end up wobbling on a stone that leads nowhere. To continue reading, he or she must then backtrack far enough in the sentence to pick up the thread again. That's bad.

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If the sentence is convoluted enough, the reader may end up stepping off a stone into the gulf of confusion. That's even worse.

Then what is an editor's role in this process?

As the editor, you are responsible for anticipating and answering all those questions that the reader asks unconsciously (and more, of course). And you must ask them about **every single word.** So you must cover all the points listed in the box at the right about every word in the sentence. Many of the questions also relate to elements like graphics, icons, and tables.

Obviously, then, an effective editor must be able to do two things:

- Know and apply the appropriate rules of grammar, syntax, punctuation, style, and so on.
- Determine whether the intended message gets through, because even "correct" things may fail to communicate.

- Is this the word I **expected** to read?
- What does it **mean**?
- Will it be clear to the intended **audience**?
- What **part of speech** is it (pronoun, noun, verb, modifier, and so on)?
  - If it's a pronoun, what is its antecedent?
  - If it's a noun, is it a subject or an object?
  - If it's a verb, what is its subject?
  - If it's a modifier, what does it modify?
  - Does it agree in tense, gender, number, and tone with previous elements?
- What is its **relationship** to the text I've already read?
- Is it **necessary** to the sentence?
- Does it carry any **baggage** of negativity, discrimination, and so on?
- Does the **presentation** on the page help me understand the sentence so far?
- Does the sentence make **sense** so far?
- What word do I **expect** to read next?

That second point—the intended message getting through—hints at a basic way for editors to approach the whole editing process. That approach is characterized by Rebecca's basic principle of editing, as shown in the box below.

> ## Approach every document you edit as if it must be translated to another language.

Here's how the test works: You examine every sentence, every phrase, every word, every punctuation mark, and every graphic to make sure that it tells the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

The translation test is useful, even when the document will never go into another language. Why? If you know anything about other languages, you know that translation is never just the process of substituting one word for another. Instead, it is really a rewriting process where word order, parts of speech, idioms, tenses, agreement, sentence length, and many other things can change.

If you think about it, readers translate everything they read. They translate the words and symbols into meaningful ideas. Just like language translators, readers also don't end up mentally substituting one word for every word you write. Instead, they translate your words into abstract chunks of concepts and ideas.

So if you write a sentence that could cause a language translator to stumble, any reader might do the same thing.

Table 5 lists the major problems that translators encounter. These are, of course, in addition to all the basic problems of subject-verb agreement, syntax, spelling, and so on.
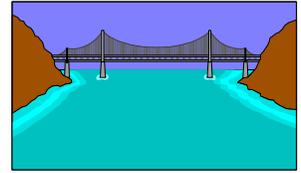
| Table 5. Translation traps | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Title** | **Bad example** | **Discussion about disconnects and derailments** |
| **Modifier strings, noun strings, distributed modifiers** | *The selection includes tasty international and frozen Cajun soups, red chowder, and dip.* | Is everything tasty? Is everything international? Is everything frozen? Is everything Cajun? Is the dip red? |
| | *This action requires a high-speed modem and hard drive.* | Must just the modem be high-speed? What about the hard drive? |
| | *Please list your name, age, sex, and housing preferences.* | Just what does "preferences" apply to? |
| | *We reviewed the test project command module reaction control system engine oxidizer vapor inhalation damage recovery results.* | Enough said. |
| **Ambiguous antecedents** | *I'll hold the nail in position and, when I nod my head, you hit it with the hammer.* | Sounds painful! |
| | *Various methods exist for setting up sewer models, depending on their use.* | Hmm. Are we talking about the use of "methods" or "models" here? |
| **Misplaced modifiers and squinting constructions** | *I agreed the next day to help him.* | Which occurred on the next day—the agreement or the help? |
| | *I put the chair in the building, which I had just purchased.* | What was recently purchased—the chair or the building? |
| | *The note says she means to leave the country in the middle of the paragraph.* | Is she really leaving in the middle of the paragraph? Can't she at least wait until the end of the page? |
| | *Small pools used for children that are portable when empty are exempt from these provisions.* | Aren't all children portable, whether empty or full? |
| **Elliptical (telegraphic) English and dangling modifiers** | *The clerk said last week he arrived.* | What took place last week—the saying or the arriving? |
| | *When answering the prompt, the software requires all caps.* | Is the software really answering the prompt? |
| **Invisible plurals** | *Find the CD carton and load the contents.* | Does the carton contain one CD or many CDs? |
| | *We will provide application development services.* | Just how many applications are we agreeing to develop here? |
| **Words with multiple or unclear meanings** | *Before initialization, the system must be configured.* | What actually initializes—is it hardware, software, some of each? |
| | *The report generation will take place.* | Does the report generate by itself? Does a person have to generate it? |
| | *We implemented a new employee recognition system.* | Is this a security system or a morale-boosting program? Does it apply only to new employees, or is it the system that's new? |
| | *With these liaisons, the airlines can now feed passengers to each other.* | Gives a whole new meaning to economy class, doesn't it? |

**Table 5. Translation traps**

| Title | Bad example | Discussion about disconnects and derailments |
|---|---|---|
| **Meaningless phrases and nominalization** | *The goal is to facilitate the accommodation of the creation of an innovative development initiative.* | I'm out of breath! Good thing that sentence doesn't really expect any action. |
| | *The goal is to effect the characterization and classification in preparation for the integration and utilization of the software enhancement utilization.* | This one may even be beyond editing. |
| **Punctuation pitfalls** | *I've been in that place only once before, today, it was dark as a tomb.* | Is that "once before today" or "today it was dark"? |
| | *We'll submit a draft for the client to review, and check against the original source documents.* | Hmm. Will the client just review, or will the client review and check? |
| | *The clerk said, last week, he arrived.* | Even with the addition of commas, this sentence is still ambiguous. |

# ACTIVITY: USING THE TRANSLATION TEST

**Instructions:** Find the translation traps in the following text. For each passage, use the space provided to list the translation problems and suggest solutions. Here's a review of the typical problems:

A. Modifier strings, noun strings, and distributed modifiers
B. Ambiguous antecedents
C. Misplaced modifiers and squinting constructions
D. Elliptical (telegraphic) English and dangling modifiers

E. Invisible plurals
F. Words with multiple or unclear meanings
G. Meaningless phrases and nominalization
H. Punctuation pitfalls

1. The committee membership might be available on Tuesday.

   _____

   _____

2. You must send the database, CD-ROM, and software specifications to us.

   _____

   _____

3. The system allows accelerated application development.

   _____

   _____

4. This action will conform the program to certain type preferences for maintaining order and past corporate values.

   _____

   _____

5. The class will discuss how to determine hazards from reading a label.

   _____

   _____

6. A building permit application can be obtained from the county receptionist with instructions attached.

   _____

   _____

7. Only one in three city workers currently have access to a computer, and many of them are dumb terminals.

_____

_____

8. Although currently sorted and delivered on a regular basis, the staff of the director could be notified that they have mail through an electronic mail system.

_____

_____

9. The vehicle exhaust system exhausts vehicle exhaust directly to the outdoors.

_____

_____

10. This insignificant allocation of organizational capitalization need not cause consternation.

_____

_____

# Suggested answers: Using the translation test

A. Modifier strings, noun strings, and distributed modifiers
B. Ambiguous antecedents
C. Misplaced modifiers and squinting constructions
D. Elliptical (telegraphic) English and dangling modifiers
E. Invisible plurals
F. Words with multiple or unclear meanings
G. Meaningless phrases and nominalization
H. Punctuation pitfalls

1. The committee membership might be available on Tuesday.

   **E, G        Three versions, depending on meaning:**

   The members of the committee might be available on Tuesday.
   A list of the committee members might be available on Tuesday.
   The committee might be available on Tuesday.

2. You must send the database, CD-ROM, and software specifications to us.

   **A, E        Four versions, depending on meaning (others may be possible):**

   You must send the database, the CD-ROM, and the specifications for the software to us.
   You must send us the specifications for the database, CD-ROM, and software.
   You must send us the specifications for the databases, CD-ROMs, and software.
   Send us the following specifications: database, CD-ROM, and software.

3. The system allows accelerated application development.

   **A, E, F        Three versions, depending on meaning (others are possible—author query needed):**

   The system allows accelerated development of applications.
   The system allows development of accelerated applications.
   The system accelerates the development of applications.

4. This action will conform the program to certain type preferences for maintaining order and past corporate values.

   **A, F, G        Two versions, depending on meaning (others are possible—author query needed):**

   This action causes the program to conform to certain preferences for maintaining order. It also causes the program to follow past corporate values.
   This action forces the program to conform to certain preferences for typefaces. These preferences maintain order and match past corporate values.

5. The class will discuss how to determine hazards from reading a label.

   **C        One version:**

   The class will discuss how to read a label and identify product hazards.

6.  A building permit application can be obtained from the county receptionist with instructions attached.

    **C, E, F     Three versions (the third is—admittedly—a long shot, but it makes the point):**

    An application for a building permit can be obtained from the county receptionist. Instructions are attached to the form.

    A building permit application, with instructions attached, may be obtained from the county receptionist.

    An application that builds permits is available from the county receptionist. Instructions are included with the application.

7.  Only one in three city workers currently have access to a computer, and many of them are dumb terminals.

    **B     One version:**

    Only one in three city workers has computer access, and many of those computers are just terminals.

8.  Although currently sorted and delivered on a regular basis, the staff of the director could be notified that they have mail through an electronic mail system.

    **D     One version:**

    Although mail is sorted and delivered regularly, the director's staff could be notified by email when they have mail.

9.  The vehicle exhaust system exhausts vehicle exhaust directly to the outdoors.

    **A     One version:**

    The vehicle's exhaust system blows the exhaust outdoors.

10. This insignificant allocation of organizational capitalization need not cause consternation.

    **A, G     Three versions, depending on meaning (others are possible—author query needed):**

    This allocation of organizational capital is insignificant.

    The organization's allocation of capitalization is insignificant.

    Don't worry about this distribution of the company's funds.

# CHECKLIST: THE 10 STEPS TO EDITING STARDOM

1. **Write a short description of the audience and their expectations from this document.**

   _____

   _____

2. **Keep paragraphs tight.**

   - Are the paragraphs short enough (10 lines or less, or whatever your standard is)?

   - Does each paragraph contain a topic sentence?

   - Do the other sentences in the paragraph support the topic sentence?

   - Have you used one-sentence paragraphs sparingly?

3. **Keep sentences short and focused.**

   - Are the sentences short enough (20 words or less, or whatever your standard is)?

   - Does each sentence contain only one main idea?

   - Have you eliminated unnecessary modifiers?

   - Have you eliminated unnecessary prepositional phrases—being careful to avoid noun stacks?

4. **Use the right voice.**

   - Have you used active voice properly . . .

     - For all procedures?

     - For all other sentences where it's important to know who does what to whom?

   - Have you used passive voice properly . . .

     - For sentences where you want to protect the doer (avoid assigning blame)?

     - For sentences where the doer of the action doesn't matter?

5. **Stay parallel.**

   - Are all headings parallel?

   - Are all lists and series parallel?

   - Are all procedures parallel?
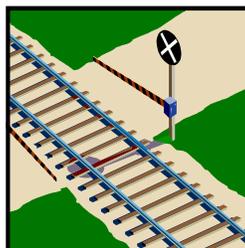
6. **Avoid weak verbs and nominalizations.**

- Have you eliminated weak verbs (to be, to do, and to have)?

- Have you used verbs that carry the action of the sentence ("analyze" instead of "do an analysis")?

- Have you pruned nominalizations (often ending in –al, –ance, –ation, –ence, –ion, and –ment)?
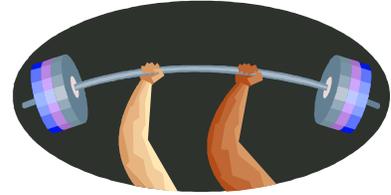
7. **Keep modifiers connected.**

- Is each modifier close to the word modified?

- Have you eliminated danglers that cause unintentional humor ("software for beginners with built-in editing tools")?
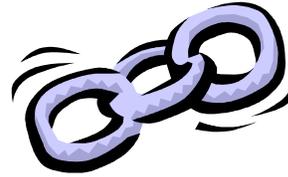
8. **Cut the fat.**

- Have you eliminated bloat words (often ending in –age, –ate, –ation, –ize, –ology, and –ous)?

- Have you eliminated fluff?

9. **Get it right!**

- Did you check spelling, including commonly mistyped words that create new words (pubic for public, manger for manager, and so on)?

- Did you check grammar and punctuation?

- Did you check pertinent facts—quantities, dates, and names?

- Did you check cross references?

10. **Reread the audience description you wrote in step 1. Then reread the whole document with that audience in mind.**

- Does it convey what the audience needs to know?

- Does it use the appropriate form (procedures, tutorial, alphabetic reference, comparison-contrast, or whatever)?

- Does it avoid landmine content (words or graphics that might confuse or offend)?

- Does it avoid unnecessary content?

- Does it create the intended impression or motivate the intended action?

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# PART 4: . . . AND SQUEAKING (BY)

So far, we've talked about trimming, toning, and tweaking. All those activities are excellent, but they take time.

What if you don't have the time for a full editing job? What if you have only enough time for **squeaking by?** Then which things should you spend your time on?

The checklist on the next page gives you some ideas for editing on the run. It starts with several steps that comprise the bare minimum of what you should check. Then, if you have time, there are some additional steps to carry out.

As the checklist says, plan your time so that you spend two-thirds on the editing work and leave one-third for fixing any errors you find.

# CHECKLIST: THE 12-STEP PROGRAM FOR EDITING ON THE RUN

**Instructions:** Use this checklist when you have too much material and too little time for a full-scale edit. This is adapted from "Emergency Proofreading: The Bare Minimum" in *Error-Free Writing* by Robin A. Cormier. In planning your time, allow two-thirds for editing and one-third for repairing any errors you find. As the very last process, rerun the table of contents (index, etc.), print the document, check each revision against the marked copy, and be sure that the pages you discard are the **marked** ones.

## The bare minimum

1. **Use the software tools you have.**

   - If you have a spell checker, is everything spelled correctly? Use a tablet to record errors as the spell checker runs. For each one, jot down the error and the page number (or unique nearby text you can search for).

   - If you have a grammar checker, is the grammar correct?

   - If you know that this document was adapted from another one, use find and replace to ensure that any important elements (names, clients, products, etc.) have been found and updated.

2. **Check the pagination.**

   - Are all the page numbers sequential?

   - Do the page numbers follow the right pattern (such as 1-1 for section 1, A-1 for appendix A, or sequential throughout)?

   - If the document will be double-sided, are blanks inserted so that all odd-numbered pages start on the right-hand side?

3. **Check the cover and title page.**

   - Is everything letter-perfect—document title, company name, and author names?

   - Is the date correct?

4. **Look for glaring errors.**

   - Are all figures and tables present?

   - Is the printing complete and even throughout (no dark or light spots, no black streaks, etc.)?

   - Are there any gaps on pages (bad page breaks) or obviously missing text or graphics?

5. **Start over and check the format.**

   - Are all the heads and subheads the correct size and typeface?

   - Are the spacing and indentation consistent?

   - Are the running heads and footers correct?

   - Are the margins correct and consistent?

**6. Check the table of contents.**

- Are all chapters/sections and subsections included?

- Does the wording match the text?

- Are the page numbers correct?

**7. Scan the chapter/section numbers and other sequential lists.**

- Are the chapters/sections in order?

- Are they sequential?

- Are subsections appropriately and sequentially numbered?

- Are lists appropriately and sequentially numbered?

**8. Check tables and figures.**

- Are tables sequentially numbered?

- Are figures sequentially numbered?

- Have figure captions stayed with their figures?

## A few more steps if time permits

**9. Check what the reader will look at first.**

- Is the preface, executive summary, or other introduction complete and correct?

- Is the conclusion or final summary section complete and correct?

- Is any other mission-critical section (such as a page with prices, controversial recommendations, or action items) complete and correct?

**10. Read the page breaks.**

- Does the last line on each page flow onto the first line of the following page?

**11. Check the large type.**

- Are the heads correct?

- Are the subheads correct?

**12. Check the firsts.**

- In each section, is the first sentence letter-perfect?

- In each section, is the first paragraph letter-perfect?

# APPENDIX A: REDUNDANCY AND BLOAT

## ELIMINATE THE EXTRA WORDS IN ITALICS

- *absolute* perfection
- *absolutely* essential
- AC *current*
- *actual* fact
- *adequate* enough
- *advance* forward
- *advance* planning
- a.m. *in the morning*
- ascend *up*
- ATM *machine*
- attached *hereto*
- *available* supply
- *basic* fundamentals
- blend *in/together*
- blue/red *in color*
- *both* alike
- brief *in duration*
- by *return* mail
- *circle* around
- *close* proximity
- collect *together*
- combine *together*
- *consequent* results
- cooperate *together*
- cost *the sum of*
- DC *current*
- depreciate *in value*
- descend *down*
- *desirable* benefit
- disappear *from sight*
- divide *up*
- drink *up/down*
- during *the course of*
- eat *up*
- each *and every*
- enclosed *herein*
- endorse *on the back*
- *end* result/product
- end *up*
- *end* user
- enter *into*
- equal+ly *as*
- *exact* duplicate
- faced *up to*

- few *in number*
- *final* completion
- *final* result
- *first* began
- *first* initiated
- followed *after*
- following *after*
- follow *up*
- for *a period of*
- *free* gift
- *future* prospect
- *general* consensus
- *general* rule
- *goals and* objectives
- goals *and objectives*
- *grateful* thanks
- hoist *up*
- *hot* water heater
- if *and when*
- *if and* when
- including *but not limited to*
- *in the form of* a square
- in my opinion *I think*
- *in my opinion* I think
- *invited* guest
- join *up/together*
- *joint* partnership
- *just* recently
- large *in size*
- larger *sized*
- *last* remaining
- level *off*
- link *together*
- *maximum* capacity
- *more* preferable
- may *possibly*
- merge *together*
- MIS *system*
- mix *together*
- *month of* May
- *mutual* cooperation
- *necessary* requisite
- never *at any time*
- *new* innovation

- open *up*
- *other* alternative
- *passing* phase
- *past* experience
- *past* history
- plan *ahead*
- p.m. *in the evening*
- present *time*
- proof *positive*
- protrude *out*
- recall *back*
- reduce *down*
- renew *again*
- repay *back*
- repeat *again*
- restore *back*
- *resultant* effect
- resume *again*
- return *back*
- revert *back*
- round *in shape*
- *serious* trouble
- sink *down*
- small *in size*
- sole *and exclusive*
- state *the fact that*
- *still* remain
- *subsequent* effect
- sufficient *enough*
- *sum* total
- *thin* veneer
- *total* effect
- *totally* full
- *true* facts
- *truly* unique
- *ultimate* end
- unite *together*
- *very* unique
- *viable* alternative*/*solution
- visible *to the eye*
- whether *or not*
- whole *and entire*
- write *up*

## WATCH FOR REDUNDANCY WITH THESE WORDS

- absolutely
- completely
- quite
- really
- totally
- very

## REPLACE THE WORDY PHRASES WITH THE WORDS AFTER THE ARROWS

- a majority of ➜ most
- along the lines of ➜ like
- an example of this is the fact that ➜ for example
- a number of ➜ several
- arrive at a conclusion ➜ conclude
- assuming that ➜ if
- at the rate of ➜ at
- at the same time as ➜ while
- became aware of ➜ realize, sense
- be cognizant of ➜ know
- be devoid of ➜ lack
- bring to a conclusion ➜ conclude
- by means of ➜ by
- by use of ➜ by
- come to a conclusion ➜ conclude
- conduct an investigation ➜ investigate
- due to the fact that ➜ because
- during the time that ➜ while
- during the course of ➜ during, while
- exhibit a tendency ➜ tend
- every effort will be made ➜ we will try
- following a similar procedure ➜ like
- for a period of ➜ for
- for the purpose of ➜ for
- for the reason that ➜ since, because
- has the capacity to ➜ can
- has the potential to ➜ can
- have a preference for ➜ prefer
- have negative effects on ➜ harm
- in all probability ➜ probably
- in an area where ➜ where
- in an effort to ➜ to
- in as much as ➜ because
- in close proximity to ➜ near, close to
- in the event that ➜ when
- in the near future ➜ soon
- indicative of the fact that ➜ indicates that
- in order to ➜ to
- in accordance with ➜ by, under
- in the event that ➜ if
- in the region/proximity of ➜ near
- in the neighborhood of ➜ near
- in the same manner/way ➜ similarly, like
- in terms of ➜ in, for
- is able to ➜ can
- is found to be ➜ is
- in the direction ➜ towards
- in the vicinity of ➜ near, about
- in regard to ➜ about
- in such a manner as to ➜ to
- it is often the case that ➜ therefore
- in the course of ➜ during
- in the present circumstances ➜ now
- in the very near future ➜ soon
- in view of the fact that ➜ therefore
- involves the use of ➜ involves, employs
- it will be necessary to ➜ we must, I must
- lend support to ➜ support
- make shorter ➜ shorten
- more specifically ➜ for instance, for example
- most of the time ➜ usually
- on account of ➜ because
- on the grounds that ➜ since, because
- past history ➜ history
- previous experience ➜ experience
- prior to ➜ before
- provided that ➜ if
- serve as a substitute for ➜ replace
- short supply ➜ scarce
- take into consideration ➜ consider
- the only difference being that ➜ except that
- that is to say ➜ in other words
- to be sure ➜ of course
- whether or not ➜ if
- with regard to ➜ about
- with the aid of ➜ with
- with the result that ➜ so that
- with the exception of ➜ except

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# REPLACE THE BLOAT WORDS WITH THE WORDS AFTER THE ARROWS

- accordingly ➜ so
- actually ➜ (delete)
- accordance ➜ agree
- accountability ➜ responsibility
- acquaint ➜ inform, tell
- acquire ➜ get, buy
- advantageous ➜ helpful
- advise ➜ tell
- aforementioned ➜ previous, last, these
- alacrity ➜ eagerness, speed
- alleviate ➜ lessen, ease
- apparent ➜ clear, obvious
- applicable ➜ apply
- approximately ➜ about
- assistance ➜ help
- attributable ➜ due
- cognizant ➜ aware
- commence ➜ begin
- concomitant ➜ related
- consequently ➜ so
- considerable ➜ many, great
- constitutes ➜ is
- correspondence ➜ letter
- delineate ➜ draw, describe
- deleterious ➜ harmful
- desire ➜ want
- desist ➜ stop
- demonstrate ➜ show, prove
- disseminate ➜ send out, scatter
- echelons ➜ levels
- elucidate ➜ explain
- emoluments ➜ pay, money, fee
- employ ➜ use
- eschew ➜ avoid
- eventuate ➜ happen
- expansive ➜ large
- expedite ➜ hasten
- expenditure ➜ expense, cost, payment
- facilitate ➜ ease, help
- foregoing ➜ this, these
- furthermore ➜ also, but, however
- germane ➜ relevant
- hence ➜ so
- hiatus ➜ gap, interval
- immediately ➜ at once
- impair ➜ weaken, hurt
- indebtedness ➜ obligation, liability, debt
- indicate ➜ show
- interrogate ➜ question
- initiate ➜ begin
- institute ➜ begin
- illustrate ➜ show
- lethal ➜ deadly, fatal
- likewise ➜ and, also
- locality ➜ place
- memorandum ➜ memo
- methodology ➜ method
- moreover ➜ now, however
- misapprehension ➜ wrong idea, mistake
- multitudinous ➜ many
- myself ➜ I, me
- nebulous ➜ vague, hazy
- necessitate ➜ may have to
- notify ➜ tell
- numerous ➜ many
- obviate ➜ prevent, do away with
- obtain ➜ get
- optimal ➜ best
- palpable ➜ clear, obvious
- per annum ➜ a year
- per diem ➜ a day
- perform ➜ do
- persons ➜ people
- possess ➜ have, own, use
- preceding ➜ last, before
- presently ➜ soon
- previously ➜ before
- primarily ➜ mainly
- principally ➜ mainly
- prioritize ➜ rank
- propinquity ➜ nearness
- prospect ➜ outlook
- provide ➜ give
- purchase ➜ buy
- purport ➜ claim, imply
- rapid ➜ fast
- recapitulate ➜ sum up, restate, recap
- reimburse ➜ pay back, repay
- require ➜ need
- remuneration ➜ pay
- rescind ➜ call off
- subsequently ➜ later
- suffice ➜ do, be enough
- sufficient ➜ enough
- superior ➜ better
- supplementary ➜ extra, more
- technique ➜ way
- terminate ➜ end
- terminology ➜ words, terms
- transmit ➜ send, carry
- transpire ➜ happen
- utilize ➜ use
- ultimate ➜ final, last
- uncommon ➜ rare
- undersigned ➜ I, me
- verify ➜ prove
- vicissitude ➜ change
- visualize ➜ see

# REPLACE THE POSSIBLE LANDMINE WORDS WITH THE WORDS AFTER THE ARROWS (AND KEEP A LIST OF YOUR OWN)

- anal ➜ annual
- asp ➜ ask
- ass ➜ ask
- asses ➜ assess
- beast ➜ best
- bitch ➜ batch
- butt ➜ but
- farce ➜ face, force
- fat ➜ far
- horizonal ➜ horizontal
- intercostal ➜ intercoastal
- landslide ➜ landside

- laster ➜ later
- loin ➜ coin
- manger ➜ manager
- marital ➜ martial
- miliary ➜ military
- navel ➜ naval
- pone ➜ phone
- potion ➜ portion
- preform ➜ perform
- pubic ➜ public
- quarry ➜ query

- snot ➜ *-s* not, such as is not
- steak ➜ stake
- surrey ➜ survey
- taster ➜ tester
- turkey ➜ turnkey
- widow ➜ window
- waster ➜ water
- where ➜ were
- whore ➜ where
- witch ➜ which

Woolpert
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# APPENDIX B: 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 scribblings 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.

## 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."

## 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."

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

## 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. Simply check a good college handbook on English usage (such as *Harbrace College Handbook, Chicago Manual of Style,* or *Gregg Reference Manual*), and then try to follow the rules.

## 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.

## 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.

## 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 a 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."

—*From **Guest Column** on* http://www.novalearn.com/wol/Peterson12a.htm

# APPENDIX C: BIOGRAPHIES

**Rebecca Edgerton,** a Woolpert LLP associate, manages the firm's Data, Design & Documentation Group and manages web-based GIS software products. A senior STC member and long-time STC presenter, Rebecca has had technical documentation accomplishments over the last 20 years that include database and software user manuals, training materials, implementation plans, and policy and procedure manuals. With more than two decades' experience in technical writing, Rebecca has won international, national, and local awards for the *Woolpert Desk Reference* as well as for a variety of hardware and software user manuals, procedure guides, and technical implementation plans.

**Jill Nicholson** is an experienced technical and business communicator who lectured on science and technical communication skills for many years at the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia. Since leaving the university in 1995, Jill has presented business and technical communication courses to government departments and the private sector in Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the US, and she has provided technical writing and documentation services for many clients. Jill still presents courses for several universities. She also organizes the JoAnn Hackos Seminars when they are presented in Australia. Jill is a senior member of STC, has served as president of the Australian Society for Technical Communication (NWS) Inc., and was the inaugural President of the STC Australia Chapter.