

Editing Yourself

*You can improve the likelihood that **The School Administrator** will accept your article by using these guidelines to edit it yourself. The tips may seem picky and insignificant, but you may be surprised at how they tighten and strengthen your writing.*

Organize your article. Make it flow logically and effortlessly. Make your points in sequence as if you were telling them to a friend or trying to convince a colleague. Remember your audience and strive to anticipate the reader's questions.

Use plain English. Make your meaning clear to every reader. Be specific when you can. Avoid generalities or unsubstantiated assertions.

Write concisely. Keep sentences lean and short. A simple declarative sentence is a thing of beauty. When in doubt, leave it out.

Cut clutter. Omit unnecessary phrases such as:

<i>in order to</i>	<i>say to</i>
<i>in the area of instruction</i>	<i>say in instruction</i>
<i>make decisions about</i>	<i>say decide about</i>
<i>on an annual basis</i>	<i>say yearly</i>
<i>at that point in time</i>	<i>say then</i>
<i>subsequent to</i>	<i>say after</i>
<i>a large majority</i>	<i>say most -- unless a vote was taken</i>
<i>please do not hesitate to call</i>	<i>say please call</i>
<i>in the process of updating</i>	<i>say updating</i>

Do not look for *answers and solutions* to *problems and difficulties*. One of each synonym will convey your thought.

Do not show the skeleton of your article. Do not say "I am going to outline ..." Just *outline* it. Do not say, "Finally, ..." The reader will know when the article has ended. Instead of writing "It is interesting to note that ..." -- *make it interesting*. Never say, "I want to take this opportunity to thank ..." Grab that opportunity and simply thank!

Avoid sentences that begin with "It is ..." or "There are." *It* and *there* have no antecedents. These words are dead wood, a dull start for what can become a vibrant sentence if you use active voice and a vivid verb. Do not begin sentences with *And* or *But*.

If everybody in business and government learned to write and edit well, thus produced strong copy that was direct and forceful, we could wipe out the national debt because paperwork would be cut by one-third

Jefferson Bates



Brevity is a by-product of vigor.

Strunk and White

Words, like eyeglasses, blur everything they do not make clear.

Joseph Joubert

Avoid stilted construction. Use *before* instead of *prior to*. Do not use jargon, educationese or cliches.

Be obscure clearly.
E. B. White

Use active voice. Active voice is strong, direct and lively. It tells who did what. Passive voice is longer and "fuzzifies." Passive voice avoids specifics. When Nixon, referring to Watergate, said "Mistakes were made," we did not learn a lot.

Use vivid verbs. Dull sentences rely on forms of *to be*: *is*, *are*, *were*, *will be*, etc. Vivid verbs such as *construct*, *pursue*, *elevate*, *undermine* and *motivate* build strong sentences and convey exciting visual images.

Use concrete language that conjures up images. Readers understand and remember situations they can visualize. Use examples to help the reader understand your point.

If a sentence can possibly be misunderstood, it will be.
A law of Murphy

Do not smother verbs by turning them into nouns. *Development* is a bastardized noun derived from the verb *develop*. Use *to help develop* instead of the ten-syllable phrase *to assist in the development of* Do not turn working verbs into dull nouns, as in *transmit/transmittal*, *concede/concession*, *neglect/negligence*.

Rely on nouns and verbs, not adjectives or adverbs. Omit *very*, *quite*, *meaningful* and *thankfully*. Use nouns and verbs that relate to the senses of seeing, hearing and touching.



Do not turn nouns and adjectives into verbs, as in *to optimize*, *to interface*, *to maximize* and *to target*. *Author* and *impact* are nouns, not verbs.

Watch out for participial phrases. The phrase must refer to the grammatical subject. A modifier that is not placed next to the word or phrase that it modifies may bring unexpected results, as in these cited by Strunk and White:

As a mother of five, with another on the way, my ironing board is always up.

Being in a dilapidated condition, I was able to buy the house at a very reasonable price.

Watch for ambiguous meanings, especially pronoun references. Ensure that singular pronouns match their singular nouns. Say "The board ended its meeting," not "The board ended *their* meeting."

Do not use the word *hopefully*. It means "with hope."

Use plain words, not those with many syllables. Use *about* instead of *approximately*, and *use*, not *utilize*.

James Boren, in **When in Doubt, Mumble**, defines "fuzzify" as "the presentation of a matter in terms that permit adjustive interpretation. Particularly useful when the fuzzifier does not know what he or she is talking about, or when the fuzzifier wants to enunciate a nonposition in the form of a position. Also known as waffling."

Avoid redundant words and phrases. Only the Department of Redundancy Department uses phrases such as *necessary prerequisites, absolutely essential, past experience, final outcome, future plans, new initiatives, serious crisis, untimely death* and *enclosed herewith*.



Adhere to grammatical rules. Make noun and verb tenses agree. *None* and *nobody* are singular pronouns: *None* of the students *has* gone. *Data* takes a plural verb: *Data show* that ...

Do not split infinitives. Authorities advise against splitting infinitives but they permit it if the result is greater clarity.

Use words correctly. *Anxious* and *eager* are not synonyms. You might be *anxious* about a test but should be *eager* to improve your writing skills.

Learn the difference between *that* and *which*, *who* and *whom*, *fewer* and *less*.

That defines or restricts, *which* introduces a commenting clause. Most writers need to go on a "which" hunt and substitute *that*.

Substitute *he* or *who* for *him* and *whom* to see which you should use.

Fewer indicates number and refers to things you can count. *Less* indicates amount and refers to things in bulk. Say *fewer apples*, *less sugar*.

Learn when to use *whether* or *if*, *proven* or *proved*, *further* or *farther*, *than* or *from*, *like* or *as*.

Do not use *and/or* or *he/she* (try *they*).

Be creative in your imagery and in your writing, but not in spelling or punctuation. Proofread your article and use your computer's spell checker.

Ask a colleague or an English teacher to check your writing for accuracy and content. Articles filled with typos or other obvious errors are rarely accepted for publication.

Imagery from the masters:

These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country.

Thomas Paine

... blood, sweat, and tears.

Winston Churchill

I have a dream I have been to the mountain, and I have seen the other side.

Martin Luther King

Dorothy Mulligan, formerly of The School Administrator staff, extracted these tips from the sources listed on the next page.

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Resources for your desk:

To improve your writing, buy and study these references that are available in paperback editions:

The Elements of Style, by Strunk and White

Edit Yourself: A manual for everyone who works with words,
by Bruce Ross-Larson

Writing with Precision: How to write so that you cannot possibly be misunderstood, by Jefferson D. Bates

The Careful Writer: A modern guide to English usage,
by Theodore M. Bernstein

Available in hardcover:

On Writing Well, by William Zinsser



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