

Editing Guide

Matt Tillotson • Version 1.1 • September 2026

A living craft document for developing Matt's writing without sanding away his voice. Revise it when the writing outgrows it.

1. What the writing is trying to do

- The reader should encounter an observation, story, or question and leave seeing it differently.
- Favor discovery over advice.
- Favor specificity over abstraction.
- Favor genuine feeling over manufactured profundity.

The goal is writing with surprise, energy, humor, heart, and something at stake.

The writing should be true to Matt's feelings, experiences, and beliefs. That humanity distinguishes it from manufactured AI prose.

2. Voice

- Plain-spoken, conversational, Midwestern.
- Newspaper-column sensibility rather than literary-essay preciousness.
- Short sentences mixed with longer conversational ones.
- Dry humor and unexpected comparisons.
- Concrete details that make the scene visible.
- Comfortable being earnest, but suspicious of sentimentality.
- Protect oddball phrases that sound like Matt.
- Do not "upgrade" simple language into writerly language.

3. The discovery process

A draft often begins with a noticing. Keep digging until the observation reveals a larger idea, tension, or question.

- What's interesting about this—and what's interesting about that?
- What if this means something different than it appears to mean?
- What is the discovery underneath the discovery?
- What does Matt actually care about here?

Useful progression: Notice → What's interesting? → What if? → Discovery → Larger implication.

4. Reader energy

- You can't bore the reader.
- Every paragraph should create curiosity, recognition, surprise, humor, emotion, imagery, or forward movement.
- Identify sentences that merely transport the reader to better sentences.
- Do not automatically cut a slow section; first ask whether it can become more interesting.
- Look for intellectual suspense: Why is he telling me this? Where is this going?

5. Beginnings

- Start in the middle.
- Look several paragraphs into the draft for the actual beginning.
- Prefer concrete situations, provocative observations, questions, strange details, tension, or contradiction over throat-clearing.
- Ask: Could paragraph four be paragraph one?
- The opening should create forward pressure without needing thriller-style suspense.

6. Endings

- Do not summarize what the reader just read.
- Do not staple a lesson onto an observation.
- Look for resonance, reversal, an image, a larger implication, or an unanswered question.
- The ending should ideally make the beginning mean something slightly different.
- Trust the reader enough to leave some air around the final thought.

7. Compression

- Assume the reader understands more than the writer thinks.
- Look especially for explanation following an image, example, or sentence that already made the point.
- Test deleting entire paragraphs, not merely tightening sentences.
- Preserve texture. Shorter is not automatically better.
- Keep a cut when the piece loses nothing without it, even if the cut itself is good writing.

8. Humor

- Humor should emerge from observation, specificity, exaggeration, juxtaposition, or phrasing.
- Protect weird comparisons.
- Understatement often works better than explaining the joke.
- The funniest line can still carry argument or emotional weight.
- Jokes should feel off-the-cuff, like Matt speaks. Conversational asides and smartass footnotes are welcome when they work.

9. Creative process

- Treat the writing environment as a source of energy. When a container is working, exploit it. When the energy disappears, change the container before blaming discipline.
- Draft with less dignity. The first draft is allowed to be bad, excessive, strange, or incomplete.
- Take lots of swings. A low-stakes publishing environment can create the conditions for better work.
- Distinguish talking in order to discover from talking in order to feel as though the work has already been created.

10. Final editing card

Before calling a piece finished, run these questions:

Discovery What's interesting about this—and what's interesting about that?

Surprise What if this means something different?

Depth What's the discovery underneath the discovery?

Beginning Where does the real piece begin?

Energy Is anything merely transporting the reader to the next interesting part?

Heart What do I actually care about underneath this?

Trust Have I explained something the reader already understands?

Ending Does the ending deepen the piece rather than summarize it?

11. How this guide should evolve

This is not a rulebook. It is a record of what currently makes the writing better. When a principle starts producing predictable prose, becomes unnecessary, or conflicts with a stronger discovery about the work, revise it.

- Add principles that repeatedly improve actual drafts.
- Remove principles that become training wheels.
- Record recurring weaknesses only when they are genuinely recurring.
- Add examples from published pieces when they reveal the voice better than abstract instruction.
- Revisit the guide periodically rather than adjusting it after every individual draft.

North star

Protect the voice. Find the surprise. Go one layer deeper. Keep the reader moving. Leave something that lingers.