

SELF-EDITING TIPS

Cleaning, Tightening, and Shaping What You've Written

1. Read your paper aloud! It is amazing how many awkward sentences, repetitive word choices, and outright mistakes you can catch this way. Better yet, have someone else read it aloud and listen to your own prose.
2. Go through the paper and circle all the verbs. Look for too many of the following words: *is*, *are*, or *was*. See how many of the verbs you can make stronger, more vivid, and clear. Strong verbs do not need adjectives to prop them up.
3. Find verbal constructions you can compress. Example: "this is an example. . ." can become "this exemplifies. . ." Eliminate the weak filler word "*there*," when you can. "There are many organizations that have cut budgets" can become "Many organizations have cut budgets."
4. Underline all the adverbs and adjectives. Do you need them? Adverbs, especially intensifiers like "very" or "really," can usually be eliminated. It's cleaner and stronger to do without these props.
5. Put a box around all the "-tion" words. Can you change any of them to an "ing" form? This is a more active form and therefore more effective.
6. Find passive sentences and see if you can change them to active. Example: "The essay was written in 1836" can become "Emerson wrote the essay in 1836." Make sure your sentences say who did what to whom!
7. Look for wordy constructions and compress them. Example: "It is this situation that distresses him. . ." can become "this situation distresses him." Or: "A garden of herbs" can become "an herb garden." Think economy!
8. Find all your "whichs" and "thats." You'll be amazed how many you can get rid of by writing a more economical sentence.
9. Look for abstract nouns. Words or phrases such as *aspects*, *elements*, *things*, *mind-set*, etc. are vague. Can you replace these nouns with more concrete selections? Look for generalizations. Are they useful? Would a well-chosen example make your point by itself?
10. Look for unnecessary qualifying phrases: *It would seem that*, *In my opinion*, *It seems apparent*, *I think*. Cut them out!

11. Go through and simply eliminate 7-10 words per page. You can do it!
12. Look at your opening paragraph. What appeal does it make to the reader? Is it provocative? Does it raise a question or does it hit the reader with a flat generalization? Is there anything visually or imaginatively appealing about it?
13. Look at your closing paragraph. Does it do anything new, interesting, surprising? Does it suggest further implications or directions your reasoning might lead, or does it just flatly summarize your main points?
14. Look at the quotations you've used. Are they introduced and commented on, or did you just throw them in? Don't rely on quotations to make your argument for you. Use them as added evidence, but speak for yourself.
15. Skim through the essay by reading only the first sentence of each paragraph. The first sentence should give you a solid idea of what the main point of the paragraph will be.
16. Jot down in the margin what each paragraph does – not what it says.
17. Write a question word (how, what, when, why) next to a paragraph where answering that question might help you further develop your idea.
18. See if you can summarize, in one sentence, the main point of your paper. If you can't, you don't have a firm enough grasp of your main point.
19. Is your language inflated? Does it sound like you? When you hear it, do you recognize yourself?
20. Listen to your sentence rhythms. Do they vary? Do your sentences tend to be needlessly long or consistently short and choppy?
21. Circle all your commas. Does your writing have a lot of them? Peppering a paper with commas may indicate long sentences that need to be broken up. Your idea may need focusing. Unpack long sentences as you would a shopping bag. Unpacking sentences makes them easier to "carry."