



Tips to Successful Rewriting

5 Pages of Excerpts from

The Rewritten Word Web Course

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Mix & Match, or sign up for the entire course

Organization:

There are many aspects to a well organized piece beyond making and following an outline. Usually after the first write, I find I have left out some obvious element. For instance, after writing my draft for this chapter, I realized, with all my advice, I failed to give the hard-core how-tos of rewriting. A definite “Duh!” but more common than you think.

Go over your piece as if you don’t know anything about the topic. What have you learned by reading it? Do you still have questions? Did it answer the question you promised? Be sure your piece is complete.

Once it’s complete, read through your piece again as if you’ve never seen it before. If you’re like me, you may find it reads choppy, jerky and, excuse the four-letter word, but it’s a B-O-R-E. Poor organization always makes for boring reading.

One of the best pieces of organizational advice I’ve found is that you can usually start your piece about 1/3 of the way into it. Many editors tell me they routinely cut the first one – three paragraphs of an article without even reading them and it nearly always improves the work.

Rambling:

Do you say irrelevant things? Invariable I do. In the process of rewriting this chapter I cut quite a bit about raising the quality of literature, a subject dear to my heart. That is a critical subject, but mine is rewriting.

Clarity:

Clarity is Vital to Reader Comprehension. Sometimes we inadvertently make unclear or vague statements. Read through each sentence as if you didn't already know what you meant to say. You'll be amazed at what you find.

Clarity also means to arrange the words in each sentence to create the most logical flow that also packs the most punch. Organize your sentences to captivate.

Always think of your reader. How does it sound to him? How does it flow for her? Can they understand it in one quick reading? Does one concise thought compel them quickly and smoothly to the next? If reader comprehension is sluggish in one sentence, they usually won't bother to read the next.

Verbosity:

Though you have a great article idea and/or are an experienced writer, words still need to be polished. After the glow of inspiration usually comes this reality; the piece is verbose, a cardinal writing sin.

Checking my own work for wordiness, I cut probably half my words. Does that mean I'm a poor writer? Could be, but perhaps, instead, it shows I care about what lands on an editor's desk with my name attached. I care even more about my readers.

Every word cut gives the reader better understanding. If they have to re-read even one sentence to understand it, you've lost them. Your ideas can't flow unimpeded if your words don't. Unblock the flow of words by shortening them.

Here is a sentence as it was originally written for this article:

That is a vital subject to writers, but I am writing a book about rewriting, and though I did tie in the need for excellent quality writing, my main recourse must be the specific area of perfecting our work: rewriting.

The same sentence after the knife:

That is a critical subject, but mine is rewriting.

I cut the sentence from forty words to nine without losing any meaning. Most of the words were a repeat. If you lean towards verbosity, as I do, this phase of the rewriting craft is imperative.

Passive / Past Tense vs. Active/Present

There are tomes written about the weakness of passive voice. This principle underscores every written word, particularly every rewritten word. Though passive voice is unavoidable, each time you switch to active improves your writing.

Run your grammar checker to see how many passive phrases it flags. Not a foolproof method by any means, and not one to rely on. Only you can find and make the judgments, but this will flag some examples to watch for, and alert you to how often you write in passive voice.

When you use passive words they force you to construct a weak, inactive sentence. (*Like the passive sentence I just wrote using the words “when” “you” “they.”*)

The first words of a sentence can make or break it. Change my passive sentence above to begin with the word “Use” which is active (rather than “When you use”), and you force a construction something like this: “Use these words to construct a weak, inactive sentence.” That’s the active voice. Of course, passive words, must be used occasionally, but unless absolutely necessary eliminate them.

One word is always better than two. Compare: *as I slowly moved* to *I inched*. Instead of using two words (slowly moved), one a passive adjective, use one active descriptive verb, such as *inched*.

The first person/present tense, rather than 3rd person/past tense, also dulls your writing. No matter how we fight it, first person narratives are verbose, choppy and unnatural-sounding to the reading *ear*. Unless you are another Truman Capote.

There are many drawbacks, but one of the most common is how many times first person/present tense uses the word *I*. The word *I* reminds the reader they are not really there; you are.

Another drawback of first person is it forces an even more passive voice than we are usually tempted toward. I’ve yet to read a manuscript where first person narrative/present tense is done smoothly, actively and unobtrusively.

Cut words ending with *ly* as much as possible so your adverbs will add punch when you must use them. They are a great tool, but when overused promote a jerky flow, as in this published sentence from my novel *Chase the Wind*, coauthored with Deborah Lawrence, *Thomas Nelson*, 1983.

He patted her hand and smiled sympathetically, but to Gomer his lips curved grotesquely and his lowered voice sounded more like a hiss than a whisper.

The adverb *sympathetically* is, in this case, unnecessary since patting a hand is a universal sympathetic gesture. The adverb *grotesquely* is also unnecessary since a lowered voice sounding more like a hiss than a whisper is the picture of grotesque. Besides being unnecessary, notice how the adverbs chop the flow compared to this:

He patted her hand and smiled, but to Gomer his lowered voice sounded more like a hiss than a whisper.

Words ending with *ing* also stir choppy literary waters when overused, as in this sentence.

I'd been researching and outlining my second novel for a year.

The following seems a small, but evident improvement in the active voice. But not so small when multiplied hundreds of times throughout an article, eliminating hundreds of unnecessary words.

I'd researched and outlined my second novel for a year.

Don't leave readers adrift. Don't make them work for comprehension. Writing in the active voice naturally propels sentences and thoughts forward. Launch readers into your word flow, and guide them with a concise rudder.

Write the Right Words

Circle all words or phrases that aren't to the point. The thesaurus is invaluable here. I use it to find words saying precisely what I mean, and in some cases I can substitute one perfect word for five weak ones. Mark Twain said that *The difference between the almost right word & the right word is the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.*

As helpful as the thesaurus is, it is abused by those who try to emulate archaic writers who use exotic words. Have you ever read a sentence like this?

Humanity is conceived here exclusively in terms of ritual function – man is made in order to offer sacrifices to the gods – and so the highly differentiated realms of history and moral action are not intimated in the account of man's creation.

Wouldn't it make more sense like this?

According to this account of man's creation, our only function is to sacrifice to the gods. The many facets of our purpose, such as our varied history and morality, are not even hinted at.

My edit may not sound as intellectual, but you understood it. Use a thesaurus to make your meaning clear, not to amaze with your intelligence.

Titles are a great exercise in finding the perfect word. You can't waste a syllable. I put much thought into titling my fine art photography. The importance of perfectly worded titles can get lost in our keyword-conscious virtual world. My fine art title above would never serve this purpose. Literary art has given way to search engine optimization. This is actually the title of an article at [ArticlesBase](#) (no byline available). *Desktop Pen Stand, Pen Holder, Folding Pen Stand, Card Holder, Office Desk Set, Ball Pen Stands, Wooden Pen Stand.*

‘Nuff said.

A Few Facts on Fiction

We've covered many things to consider when rewriting, but fiction has some unique aspects. Mostly you want to use simple, short, flowing words to pull the reader along. But at times, like when you set a mood, each word must propel them; waste one and break the spell. Everything we've covered also applies to fiction, and then some.

Some solutions to goofy dialogue:

People don't give soliloquies in the midst of angry outbursts. Continue to hack away at your fiction dialogue. At first write, half the things a character says may be unnecessary; only included so the reader will know what is going on. Solution: clarify the plot, not lengthen the dialogue.

If the dialogue still seems like a soliloquy, check if you need to strengthen characterizations in preceding chapters. Then the reader would be aware of the background between characters without a stream of unrealistic dialogue between them to explain it.

If you haven't gone over each of your words until you are utterly sick of them, you haven't sufficiently scrutinized your work. It's much less painful to complete the rewriting process now, than suffer continual editorial rejection, or worse, make reading your work a chore when it should be a pleasure.

I hope you've enjoyed these excerpts

from my course, *The Rewritten Word*.

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