

Do you need a proofreader or a copy editor?

What are you trying to accomplish?

Recently, I saw a query on a listserv looking for a copy editor. The author said she needed a “basic proof” done for spelling, grammar, and for the “missed half sentence in the middle of a paragraph.” In fact, she didn’t need a copy editor—what she needed was a proofreader. Proofreading is a different skill than copy editing. While copy editors can be proofreaders, that is not their main function.



How to get your writing from draft to finished product

When you are creating any type of written work, you should follow these steps:

1. Write a rough draft
2. Review and rewrite
3. Copy edit
4. Incorporate edits
5. Produce final document
6. Proofread
7. Publish

What is copy editing?

Copy editing reviews your work for clarity, consistency, style, and accuracy. This can include everything from fact checking to rearranging copy for flow to flagging duplicate content. Copy editing allows your thoughts to be expressed in the clearest way possible. A thorough copy editing job will shore up your thesis by making sure your main points are clear and supported.

What is proofreading?

Proofreading checks your copy for errors, such as typos, misspellings, and missing punctuation. The best proofreaders will fact check to make sure dates and numbers are accurate, and names are spelled correctly. Proofreading does not rearrange your copy unless it is a spacing issue. More importantly, proofreading is not designed to make your writing clearer but to ensure your copy is error-free.

Keep in mind that using your word processor's spell check is not the same as proofreading. Spell check checks the spelling of a word, not its usage. For example, you could've typed "fair" instead of "fare" in an article about subway prices, and though the word is spelled correctly, it is not used correctly.

So many (preventable) mistakes

Too many folks skip the copy editing and think that they can get by with doing a proofreading. For sure, you should always

proofread, since it prevents your work from being riddled with typos and other embarrassing mistakes. A copy edit would improve the content.

Here's a sampling of errors I've collected over the past few days. Proofreading before publishing would've prevented these:

Using the word **isles** instead of aisles in an article in today's *Washington Post*.

A email subject line that says "Stay on top of the governor's **rack**" (instead of race).

Or an email that tells me to "**Pre oreder** your set today."

Or a survey (from a professional editing association, no less) answer option that says "Professional **Devlopment**"

And so many more. It's as if most organizations have given up on proofreading. Perhaps they don't think it's worth the time, effort, or cost.

Bottom line: If you take your work seriously and want to give it credibility, spend the effort required to get your work both copy edited and proofread before you publish.

Proofing to improve your credibility

It seems not a day goes by without me spotting at least one typo or other error in blog posts, newsletters and other

communications (generally the digital type). I've even seen errors on the chyrons for the local news.



Here's a sampling from the past couple of weeks:

In a sub-headline on a TV news website, it said **baht** instead of bath (and spellcheck didn't pick it up because baht is the currency in Thailand).

On a headline on WETA's Tellyvisions blog, there's mention regarding the new season of a show called **Saniton** (which, in actuality is called Sanditon). (I just checked and this typo has been fixed).

In a newsletter from a restaurant it says a new menu will debut on **Wedensday**.

The call-to-action button on a communications agency's newsletter says, "Read the full case study on our **wesite**."

Those are glaringly obvious typos. There are many other not-

so-glaring mistakes on stuff such as grammar (e.g., using the wrong pronouns or having a dangling modifier) and wrong information (e.g., saying an event is taking place on Tuesday when it is really taking place on Thursday).

It's human to make mistakes. We all do it. But when you make mistakes on professional or official communications, it undermines your credibility. It makes you look unprofessional, and sometimes it makes you look ignorant.

This need for checking your work is summarized beautifully in the The Freelance Creative article "Why Marketing Writers and Editors Need to Master Fact-Checking" when it says:

"The more reliable and high-quality [the content] is for readers, the more it confers trust in and value of the brand behind it," Dimond said. "If a reader can't depend on the basic facts of a blog post, it's a clear message that they can't trust the brand."

In other words, copy that is accurate and error-free helps build your brand. Yet lately, I've noticed more mistakes than ever. It seems nobody is bothering to proofread, let alone fact check or copy edit.

What is causing this?

I think there are three reasons that account for the avalanche of mistakes I've seen lately:

1. Speed

The biggest culprit is most likely speed. People are under pressure to get things done quickly, at the pace of social media. But rushing to get a newsletter out or post an article invariably leads to sloppy or no proofreading.

2. You don't know what you don't know and you don't even know to ask

I got a newsletter a few days ago from a journalist. In it, he writes he made a mistake spelling a subject's name in the previous day's newsletter, something which was pointed out to him by a reader. This says to me that this journalist didn't even do basic fact checking (e.g., Google subject's name to see how it is spelled) nor had a copy editor look at his copy (copy editors routinely check spelling and other facts).

3. Lack of quality control

Too many times people overestimate their abilities and don't take the step to have another person read/proof their work. Sometimes, there simply is no process in place to create a quality check before a communication goes out to the public.

Bottom line

Mistakes hurt your credibility. You can minimize the damage by creating a proofreading/fact checking/copy editing process that you follow before sending or publishing every single piece of public communication.

People should understand

It seems obvious that your readers should understand whatever it is you are writing for them. But it only *seems* that way because too many writers, especially those who write legal documents, don't stop to think whether their readers will get it. I know this because I've attempted to read contracts and other legal documents. Although I understand most of the words, sometimes I can't fathom the meaning.

Do you speak medical jargon? I don't

Same goes for medical stuff. A few years ago, I had an MRI done. I got the report from the radiologist and try as I might, I couldn't make heads or tails of it. In this case, it was the vocabulary. I gave it to the doctor, and I told him that I didn't understand the report. This doctor, as is usual with any insider, gave me a look indicating he thought I must be very slow because it was obvious to him that this report said I had a torn rotator cuff. But it wasn't obvious to me. And it's not because I am slow. It's because the radiologist wrote this using medical jargon that I don't understand.

Plain language required

You'd think the plain language movement were new. It's not. In fact, government agencies are mandated to write in plain English since President Obama signed the Plain Writing Act in 2010. But the directive to make things clearer goes back to the 1970s (read the timeline at plainlanguage.gov).

But there are no such mandates for other industries. Sure, writing in plain language should be common sense and many businesses strive to make their writing clearer and more user friendly but others write (and speak) in industry jargon, making it hard for the average person to understand.

Of all the posts I've shared on LinkedIn, the following from Bloomberg Law really struck a chord:

Use Plain Language in Contract—No One Wants Legalese

It was viewed hundreds of times and shared by many readers, making it my best performing post of all time.

Here's the bottom line: There's a real need for people to understand what you are writing. If you need help, there are some courses available online. You may find the "Oxford Guide to Plain English" by Martin Cutts helpful. Or you could hire

someone like me to copy edit your documents with plain language in mind.

Wishing for better communications in 2021

Count me in as one of the many who are glad that 2020 is over. I am optimistic about the year ahead, in spite of the horrendous and deadly insurrection last week at the U.S. Capitol.

There's a lot to look forward to this year: a new administration, worldwide COVID vaccinations, and the subsequent return to normalcy. Maybe by the end of 2021 we'll be back to attending in-person events!



As a communicator, I thought the biggest lesson of 2020 was the need to adapt and quickly. Events went from in-person to virtual. Many workers were no longer commuting to their offices (I wonder what happened to drive time radio costs!). There was (and continues to be) a lot of stress and anxiety. Those realities impacted marketing efforts. We saw an increase in email marketing, on-line presentations and events, and a general toning down of advertising.

Now that we are in a new year, I have five wishes to make 2021 the year for more effective, high-impact communications.

1. Use email marketing more effectively

At the end of the year I got bombarded with donation pleas from many nonprofits—and I mean several in just one day. On December 31, 2020 it was particularly bad, as I got emails from each and every organization I have supported, and one organization sent me four or five emails! And then there's Overstock.com, which sends at least an email every single day—one day offering me 12% off and the next 15%. The lesson here is: Don't overwhelm your customer or donors. Be strategic and think of your recipient. And then there's the many small groups who are still sending all-image emails. The problem here is that unless the recipient downloads the images, your email appears blank. Follow some guidelines before you send out that next email. Jill Kurtz wrote a great Email Marketing Checklist, which is worth a read.

2. Leverage your website

Your website is your reception desk to the world. If people have questions, chances are they will check your website before they call. It follows your website should have all the information they need. Keep it updated, especially with any COVID protocols you are following. For many, the idea of spending money to update a website in these times may be anathema. However, an outdated website will result in customer

frustration and maybe even lost business.

3. Focus your social media efforts.

This is they year to choose your social media platforms and embrace them. The truth is that you can't effectively manage too many platforms. You won't be able to have meaningful engagement if you have to monitor too many streams. Choose the platforms that *perform* best for you, where you have the most traction and/or where the majority of your audience is. Do you really need to be on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, TikTok, etc? I am not saying that you can't try out a new outlet, but if you do, and it works well, perhaps you replace instead of adding. And if you are using multiple platforms, create content with each platform in mind. The post you use on LinkedIn should not be the same as the one you use on Twitter.

4. Use Zoom or Livestream more effectively.

Check out my post about this. I've spent too much time having to hear people explain how to use Zoom, muting/unmuting, and just plain wasting time reading lengthy presenter bios. People are spending much more time in front of computer screens, and want you to get to the point. I can read the bio myself if you send it in an email or provide a link to it during the presentation.

5. Copy edit and proofread all your marketing materials, including (perhaps especially) social media posts.

The other day, my local police department posted about how a driver ended up with her car on the train tracks because she used the gas pedal instead of the "breaks." And the local weather Twitter feed told me there would be "peaks" of sun. These are very small examples, but when you make these type of mistakes, you are showing a lack of care. So, proof everything before it goes live. And say what you mean clearly and concisely, and if you need help doing so, use a copy editor!

Happy New Year 2021! Let's work on making it better for our communications. If you have a 2021 communications wishes, share them with me in the comments.

Unforced errors (in the copy)

Unforced copy errors are errors (i.e., typos, misspellings, grammatical flubs, etc.) that would have been caught if either you gave yourself enough time to take a second (and third) look at what you were doing; or you had someone else check your copy.

Many people don't notice or even care about copy errors. But if you are like me, errors just jump out at you, no matter where they are—on the TV chyron, on a menu, in the newspaper, in a book.

Errors can reflect poorly on you and your organization. Errors in printed or published copy show that you either didn't care enough or didn't know enough to notice. When you are producing marketing materials or anything that will have a longer shelf life than a social media post, errors will last and you must be careful to eliminate them.

Following are four examples I found in the past ten days:

Program flyer

Error: Headline does not match with body of flyer. Whoever produced this flyer, copied the previous flyer from the January program, put in the description of the February program featuring journalist Ruth Marcus, not Ambassador Susan Rice, and then neglected to update the headline.

Talk of the Hill with Bill Press featuring
Susan Rice, former UN Ambassador
Tuesday, January 18, 7 pm

Award winning journalist Bill Press talks to Ruth Marcus, a deputy editor of the Washington Post editorial page and regular columnist. With a law degree as well as her journalism credentials, Marcus was perfectly situated to write "Supreme Ambition: Brett Kavanaugh and the Conservative Takeover," which The New York Times called "impressively reported, highly insightful and a rollicking good read."

Bill Press is host of the nationally syndicated "Bill Press Show" on talk radio, and his weekly column is distributed by Tribune Media Services. A well-known political commentator, Press began his career on KABC-TV and KCOP-TV, both in Los Angeles. Over the course of his career, he has received numerous awards for his work, including four Emmys and a Golden Mike Award. Press is the author of six books: "Spin This!", "Bush Must Go!", "How The Republicans Stole Christmas", "Trainwreck", "Toxic Talk", "The Obama Hate Machine", and his latest, "From the Left."

Error: A man is not “them.” If you know the gender of the person, there is nothing wrong with using the right pronoun, in this case, “him.” It seems that this story was updated when it became known that the victim was male, but the writer did not bother to read the rest of the sentence.

Montgomery County firefighters are seen on the tracks of Metro after rescuing a woman from under a Metro train. (Courtesy Montgomery County Fire and Rescue)

Share This Gallery:

A man suffered life-threatening, traumatic injuries after a Metro train struck them not far from the Rockville, Maryland, station Tuesday morning.

Metro Transit police said in a tweet that the man had climbed a fence next to the Metro tracks in Montgomery County.

The train struck the man about a quarter of a mile from the Rockville station around 5:40 a.m., according to Montgomery County Fire and Rescue spokesman Pete Piringer.

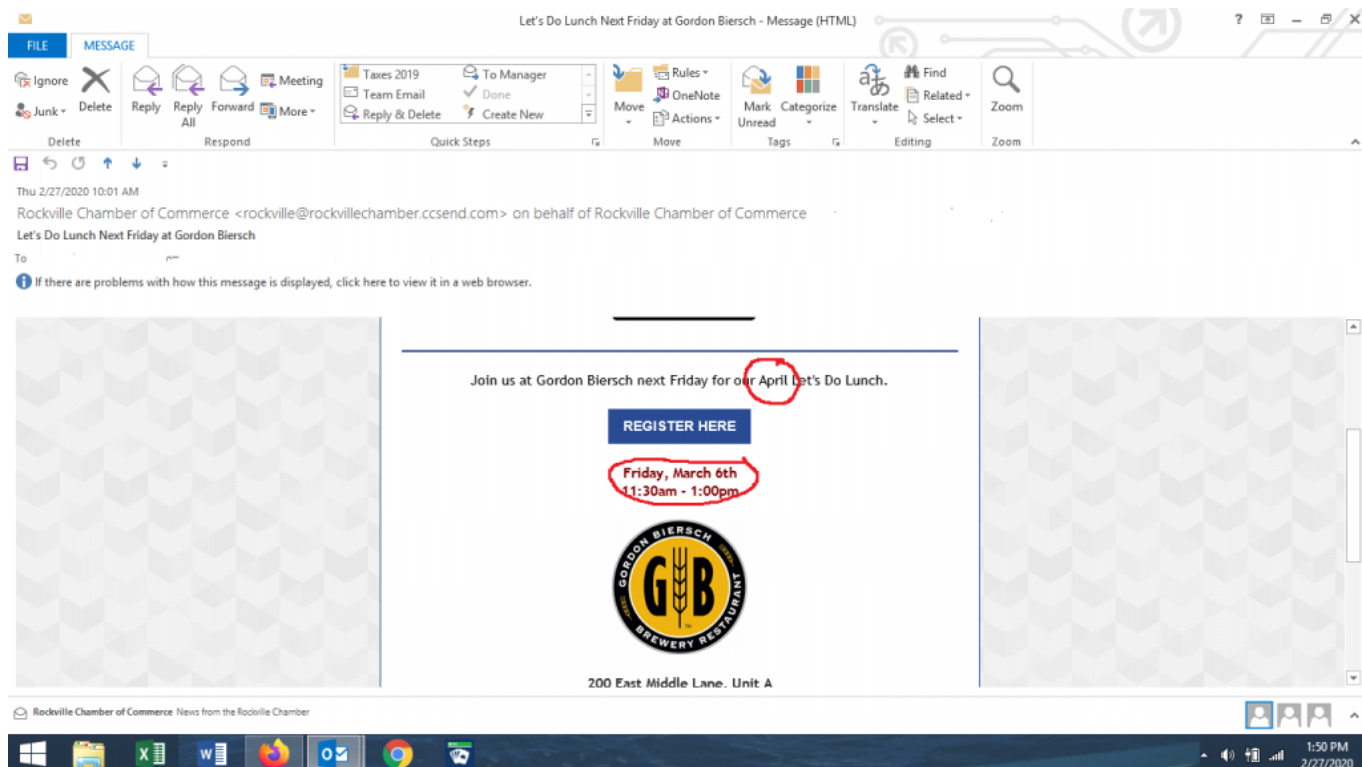
Firefighters rescued the man from under the train as passengers stayed on board.

Backyard Band performs at DC go-go bill signing

Deposit \$25,000 today and EARN

Email invitation

Error: This email is an invitation to a program taking place in March, yet calls it the April program. The organization sent out a corrected email a few minutes later. I would bet speed was the main culprit here. Instead of making this task take less time, the speediness ended up taking more time and effort to correct. Is this a fatal mistake? Not nearly, but it is increasingly common to get emails listing the wrong dates, locations, days of the week, etc.



Words that sound the same don't mean the same...

Error: The owner of this Twitter profile used "principle" instead of "principal." This person wrote the description years ago when first setting up the Twitter account and has never bothered to review it.



Bottom line: All of these errors are small, unforced and most importantly, *avoidable*. Next time you are writing something that will be public-facing, take a breath, slow down, and hit pause before you publish. Always read over what you wrote (I like to read out loud so I can hear the errors) or ask someone else to take a look. If you made a mistake and it has already been publicized, fix it if possible.

3 ways to tighten up your writing

My job as a copy editor is to tighten up other people's writing so that it is more easily readable, clear, consistent and accurate. Often, I come across the same three issues that make writing harder to read and more unclear. These issues include having sentences that are too long and stuffed with extraneous words and phrases; writing in the passive voice; and using unnecessarily big words.



If you want to make your writing sharper, and your meaning clearer, here are three ways to achieve that goal:

1. Use active voice

By eliminating passive sentences, you are immediately tightening up your writing and getting rid of useless words. Your sentences will be more direct and punchy.

Passive:

The actress Jane Doe was awarded an Oscar by the Academy for her performance in *The Movie*.

Active:

The Academy awarded an Oscar to actress Jane Doe for *The Movie*.

Jane Doe won an Oscar for *The Movie*.

2. Get rid of the extras

Using extra words and phrases may have made your college essays reach the magic page number needed, but in marketing

and business writing, these just make your work wordy and/or redundant.

<i>Instead of this</i>	Use this
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<i>As well as</i>	and
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<i>In the afternoon hours</i>	In the afternoon
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<i>The reason why is</i>	Because
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<i>Came at a time when</i>	Came when
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For more examples, check out this list of 50 redundant phrases.

3. Cut out the big words

Using big words when small ones would do makes you look like you are trying too hard, and does nothing to enhance the writing's readability. And p.s., using big words can sound pretentious.

<i>Bigger word</i>	<i>Smaller word</i>
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Utilize	Use
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Physician	Doctor
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Reside	Live
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Purchase	Buy
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Have you come across these in your writing or in work you are editing? Which one is the most common?

If you want to sound smart, don't use big words

So many times, people think that by using big words, they sound smarter. After all, people might need to go get a dictionary to look those words up. Yet, people who do this, often think they know exactly what a word means, when they don't. Take for example Chris Cillizza, a political commentator for CNN. Last night, on the Don Lemon show, Cillizza was discussing some of the latest news regarding Donald Trump and adult film actress Stormy Daniels. Cillizza thought that the salacious details wouldn't matter much to Trump supporters, because, as he put it, "Trump has never been a model of *moral turpitude*." Nobody corrected him even though what he said was actually the exact opposite of what he meant.

Cillizza was back on the air this morning, talking about the same subject, and repeated the phrase he had used last night, that Trump isn't a model of moral turpitude. This time, one of the other panelists questioned the word, but couldn't quite find the correct word to use instead.

What Cillizza meant to say is that Trump is not a model of *moral rectitude*.

Rectitude means righteousness, while turpitude means depravity. They sound similar, and that's what tripped Cillizza up. Sadly, nobody else seems to have understood that Cillizza was contradicting himself by using a big word that he clearly did not know.

Nobody can go back and correct the spoken word. However, you can and should fix written work. You can avoid sounding stupid just by getting someone to copy edit your work, and check that the big words you are using are being used correctly.

P.S. I did tweet Chris Cillizza the correction. I don't know if

he read it, or whether he cared.

Why you need a copy editor (a new series)

A few weeks ago I shared with you a picture of a postcard that advertised a townhouse for sale at more than \$51 million. It was an error that would have been caught by a copy editor but likely not by a proofreader. That's because a proofreader seeks and corrects mistakes such as typos, misspellings, extra words, repeated words, and other errors. A proofreader does not look at the content, and rarely queries the accuracy of amounts. A copy editor, on the other hand, goes beyond checking for mistakes, and also verifies that sentences are clear and accurate (e.g., the correct address, the right day of the week, the correct amount, etc.).

Sadly, there are many examples of printed materials that needed a copy editor, or at the very least, a proofreader, to check them, and did not get either. My goal is to find these examples and share them with you.

Today, I was looking at the back of a Sunsweet Prunes package:



Can you spot the mistake? Here's a hint: it's subject-verb agreement.

A grammatically correct sentence would read:

We believe making good food choices **is** critical to treating your body right and living life to its fullest.

Subject-verb (dis)agreement is a very common mistake. The subject should always match the verb, that is, a singular subject needs a singular verb, and a plural subject needs a plural verb. Lots of people have problems identifying the subject. In this case, the writer is not correctly identifying the subject, *and* is thrown off because he/she sees that a plural word ("choices") goes right before the verb. In this sentence, the plural "choices" is not the subject, rather the singular *phrase* "making good food choices" is the subject.

I am a bit shocked that a large international company would make this type of mistake in its packaging. Perhaps it should hire a copy editor!

What's a comma worth?

I got this postcard last week from a real estate agent who is selling a townhouse near me:

Just Listed. And Inviting You In.

██████████ Court, Rockville, MD
\$51,900,000



Open House Sunday, December 17th 1 - 4

Call me at 301-██████████ for details.

Beautiful Garage Townhouse!

Invite us in. We'll bring results.®

Weicher
Realtor

Seems this lovely townhouse costs more than \$51 million.

Yes, it is an error, but that's what happens when you don't bother to proofread your work. Numbers are especially tricky, and in this case, comma placement (and lack of periods) makes a several *million* dollar mistake.

Would you trust a real estate agent who doesn't bother to check details on a listing before she prints hundreds of postcards and mails them out? Would you want someone like this reviewing your contract for a home? Putting in an offer in your name?

Don't lose millions and your credibility. Take a few minutes to proofread your work. And if you can't, hire someone who can.

Happy holidays to our Caffeinated Ideas readers! We'll be back

with more great content in 2018.

Editing makes everything better!

Over the weekend, I went on walking tour of Georgetown history. In case you don't know it, Georgetown is a historic neighborhood in Washington, D.C. and home to Georgetown University. Georgetown has been around for a long time—it even predates the city of Washington—since it was founded as a port on the Potomac River in 1751. As you can imagine, there's a lot of history there. A lot.

(Check out this photo tour from the Georgetown website)

Lots of stuff has happened in and around here

The tour started on the Georgetown Waterfront, right on the banks of the Potomac River, not far from the Key Bridge. The guide pointed out the Kennedy Center and the Watergate Hotel (both of which are NOT in Georgetown, but are also on the banks of the Potomac). And he started talking about the scandals associated with both those buildings. Then he gave an anecdote about John Quincy Adams and how he nearly drowned in the Potomac River. Then we walked on, and the tour guide told us a story about a family that had traveled to Georgetown on the C&O Canal in a barge, and how a fire broke out and killed three of their young children. He then showed pictures of the graves of these kids, graves which are located in Maryland.

Then, we switched to 1985, and to discussing KGB spy Aldrich Ames and where he met his handlers (in a bar near the Waterfront). And to discussing the buildings along the Waterfront. And the construction of the C&O Canal. And the unsolved murder of a purported lover of John F. Kennedy, whose body was found near the C&O and who had lived in Ben Bradlee's home in Georgetown. And we went to the oldest structure in Georgetown, the Old Stone House. And then to a bank that had been a hospital during the Civil War, and where Louisa May Alcott was a nurse.

(There was much, much more...)

And he kept going

After two and half hours we weren't done. The guide said we had a good 45 minutes left. As interesting as it was, the heat (it was near 90 and very humid) and the hour (it was near 6:00 p.m.) convinced me it was time to go home.

When I got home, I was reflecting on the tour and decided it could have been much improved by some editing. The tour guide suffered from what many writers do—the desire to throw as much information as possible to show the breadth and depth of knowledge. But so much information can become amorphous—lacking in structure—to such an extent that it becomes irrelevant. He also had no overarching theme. There was little to connect the unresolved murder of a woman in the 1960s to the Old Stone House or to how divided Georgetown was during the Civil War. He also had too many asides—as important as the Watergate was to American politics, it does not belong in a Georgetown focused tour.

In writing, editing means deciding what to leave in and what to take out. Editing means tightening up concepts and getting rid of wordiness. Editing means finding focus.

For the Georgetown walking tour, we could start editing by deciding to stick to a time period (Civil War or the 1800s),

or to a specific type of event (murders, spying, politics) or to a specific area (Waterfront, N Street). This would give it a tighter focus and more meaning. And in this case, it would've also have shortened the tour.

Editing does make everything better!