

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

Purchase

Buy

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 Cilizza 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.

[redacted] Court, Rockville, MD
\$51,900,000

Open House Sunday, December 17th 1 - 4
Call me at 301-[redacted] 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!

The death of copy editing?

Yesterday, Bill Walsh, a copy editor for the *Washington Post* and author of three books on language, died. He was far too young—only 55—and a victim of cancer. He was liked and respected by his colleagues, copy editors everywhere, and by people who appreciate clean, readable copy (myself included). His [obituary in the Post](#) is a worthwhile read.

A couple of years ago, I had the good fortune to attend a copy editing workshop that Mr. Walsh was leading. He talked about his pet peeves (“armed gunmen” for example) and talked extensively about comma and hyphen use, among other topics. After the session, somebody asked him why there were so many copy errors in the *Washington Post*. He lamented that the sheer quantity of copy (all that digital stuff) made it impossible to keep up. And of course, his department had suffered cuts.

More and more, news outlets have fewer copy editors or even none at all. Writers/reporters are expected to edit their own

work, which, as anybody who has written anything, is damn near impossible to do successfully.

Copy editing is not proofreading. Proofreading is about making sure that words are spelled correctly and/or are in the right place. Copy editing is far more than that. Copy editing is about making sure that the work makes sense and that it is accurate. It strives to improve readability and accessibility.

Bill Walsh was a celebrity copy editor (he had a following!). His insight and wit are irreplaceable. I hope that his main skill—copy editing—does not die along with him. He certainly transmitted his knowledge through his books and his workshops. But he couldn't stop the powers that be from making cuts to copy editing staff.

Without copy editors, readers are shortchanged with text that can be mistake-ridden and inaccurate. Copy editors are valuable and perform necessary work inside news organizations and indeed, any organization that puts out "content."

Rest in peace, Bill Walsh. You and your skills will be sorely missed.

P.S. I don't have a copy editor, so any mistakes (and I am sure there are a few) are mine and mine alone.

How to show you really don't care

"Your sport is reserved."

That was the headline in an email I got from a marketing agency confirming my attendance at an event it was hosting.

Obviously, it should have read “your spot is reserved.” Is this an egregious mistake? Not really, but it is careless. It shows nobody bothered to proofread this email. And remember, this is coming from a marketing agency, which presumably creates accurate copy for its clients.

More careless yet was a letter I received from my HOA’s management company regarding board elections. The letter stated that the elections would be held on February 7. The accompanying ballot said the elections would take place on February 28. Every homeowner was welcomed to attend (if only we knew which the correct date was).

Mistakes are everywhere

I’ve been noticing these types of mistakes more and more. Yesterday, a tweet from a leading women’s organization talked about principals instead of principles. Another letter from my HOA referenced the wrong community.

I am sure you’ve noticed it too because it has become rampant. I am not sure what’s causing this but I believe it has to do with the expectations of instant communication and the ongoing rush we are experiencing. We’ve seen news organizations that rush to be first instead of taking the time to ensure accuracy.

Avoiding mistakes takes a bit of effort

It takes time to proofread documents. It takes time to ensure all information (dates, times, locations) is accurate. It involves an extra step and perhaps another person.

And not making the effort communicates lack of care

Remember, not taking the appropriate steps to make sure your communications are clear and accurate shows that you don’t

care about your reader.

What do you do to make sure your communications materials are accurate? Do you follow a checklist? Enlist a proofreader? Please let me know in the comments.

The Washington Post needs copy editors

It seems a daily occurrence at the Washington Post: a headline typo here, and a factual error there. Sometimes, I have had to read a sentence several times to even start understanding it. This is because the Washington Post has few (if any) copy editors. I suspect reporters are being asked to edit their own work, which is never a good idea, especially with quick turnarounds. You can edit your own work, if you can look at it with “fresh eyes” after a day or so. In the fast-paced, 24/7 news cycle, there is little time to look at writing with fresh eyes.

I could not believe the mistake I found in an article in today’s Post. It’s about the Chesapeake Crab & Beer Festival, which took place on Saturday at National Harbor in Maryland. The story appeared in the Post’s Local Living section and had the headline “All smiles on a crab-filled festival day in Inner Harbor.”

The Inner Harbor is in Baltimore and the event took place at National Harbor. Then, in the body of the article, the writer says the event took place in Baltimore, except it didn’t. See for yourself here:

[Washington Post article](#)

Copy editors don't just catch grammatical mistakes and typos, they check for accuracy too. Clearly, this article was not checked at all. A cursory search (and plain common sense) would have told anyone reading this article that the event took place at National Harbor and not in Baltimore.

Shame on the Washington Post! These mistakes make the newspaper look sloppy and careless, and makes me question the accuracy of all reporting.

It's a 2for1 blog post

There's been two blog post ideas floating around in my head, so I thought I would combine them since they are both short.

Details please!

A few weeks ago, I saw a query from a woman to a group we're both in. She was asking about "affordable" meeting space that would allow her to charge for admission. Predictably, the questions starting rolling in: How many people would she be hosting? Would she be serving food? And from me, what did she consider affordable?

Her question was fundamentally flawed because she did not provide enough detail.

Imagine if before asking a vague question, this woman had taken a few minutes to think about what is necessary in booking a meeting space (you know, those pesky details):

- Number of attendees/space needs

- Location
- Budget
- Amount of time needed
- Schedule (date and time)
- Ability to charge attendance
- Catering (needed or not)

She would have saved time (hers and ours): getting better suggestions and fielding fewer questions.

Next time you are looking to get information about anything, take a few minutes to think about the details that may be relevant. Make it easy for others to provide you with the information you need.

It's all about him!

Saw this on Twitter:



Although it's become acceptable to use the plural for gender neutrality (I still prefer his/her because plural is plural), if you know the gender (male in this case) it is perfectly OK to use a gendered pronoun (his not their). It's worrisome that people are so intent on being gender neutral (which is good) that they forget that gendered pronouns can be used appropriately.

That's all folks. Catch you soon and let me know if you have any documents that need some copy editing.

Some weekend reading

I share so many articles every day on Twitter, and of those I save my favorites to Pocket (my favorite tool for saving articles). Starting today, I will do a weekly or biweekly round-up of great articles for weekend reading.

Here are three articles on writing and editing:

[7 Self-Editing Tips for Reporters Without Copy Editors](#)

[Study Shows the Value of Copy Editing](#)

[11 easy ways to write more clearly](#)

Here's a couple about websites and social media:

[5 Things You Can Learn From a Poorly Designed Website](#)

[Is Social Media Actually Helping Your Company's Bottom Line?](#)

Happy reading and have a great weekend!