

Author, Edit Thyself

By Barbara McNichol

As writers, we can get caught up in an idea or feel particularly attached to a word or phrase. Our writing can suffer as a result. When editing your own manuscript, dare to be brutally honest with yourself. To help you, here's a list of tips and techniques for steering clear of common pitfalls and strengthening your manuscript along the way.

While you're editing, ask these questions:

- Is every word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, section, and chapter **necessary**?
- Is the message **clearly** understood?
- Can your ideas be expressed more **simply**?

Miracles do happen, but you likely won't say **yes** to these questions after your first round of writing. So incorporate the following five "rules of thumb" in your revisions. Doing so will eliminate 90% of the weak writing editors see every day.

Make subjects and verbs agree.

Incorrect: A group of writers were in town. ("group" is singular while "were" is plural)

Correct: A group of writers was in town. ("group" is the subject here, not "writers")

Use parallel construction.

Weak: We've learned to read, write, and we're making sure information is shared.

Stronger: We've learned to read, write, and share information.

Make the subject obvious.

Incorrect: Driving down the highway, the new stadium came into view. (*Who* was driving down the highway...the stadium?)

Correct: We saw the new stadium as we drove down the highway.

Use the active voice.

Passive: It was decided that everyone would take the class.

Active: The principal decided every student would take the class.

Tell the whole story.

Stories, like plays, are told in three acts: Act One—set up the situation. Act Two—develop it. Act Three—resolve it. Similarly, make the end of your story echo its beginning so it will feel complete to the reader.

While You're At It, Check for These, Too

- Don't use "also" and "and" in the same sentence.
- Don't mix "we" and "you" in same paragraph.
- In text, spell out the name of a state or province fully.
- Write for the ear; always read what you've written out loud.
- Eliminate the words "you must" and "you should" as often as possible.
- In text, use "and so on" instead of "etc." (It's okay to use "etc." in a list).
- Use contractions like "can't" and "don't" instead of "cannot" and "do not."
- Writing "ask yourself" and "think to myself" is redundant; use only the verb.
- Here are three four-letter words you just don't need: very, some, much.
- Differentiate between the words "believe" and "feel"; they have different meanings.
- Take the author "I" out of the writing as much as possible – let the ideas stand for themselves.
- Use the words "I think" and "I believe" sparingly – it's assumed what's written is what the author thinks.
- Vary sentence length; I recommend no more than 21 words. Any longer and the meaning is hard to follow.

- Use the verb form of a word rather the noun form – e.g., “Do you struggle?” is better than “Do you have struggles?”
- Present tense is more powerful than future tense. “This book shows you how” is stronger than “this book will show you how.”
- Write with economy of style. It takes more time and effort to write concisely, but the payoff is an easily understood narrative.
- Be precise in the words you select; don’t use “farther” when you mean “further.” Have a handy reference guide of Word Trippers nearby so you’ll use the right word every time.

Remember, no wording is sacred. Self edit with a keen eye and a sharp pencil (or keyboard) to tighten and sharpen your message.

Barbara McNichol, Barbara McNichol Editorial, writes and edits articles, website copy, book proposals, and manuscripts for authors and entrepreneurs. Contact Barbara at Editor@BarbaraMcNichol.com.

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Barbara McNichol Editorial

520-615-7910

887-696-4899 (toll free)

Editor@BarbaraMcNichol.com

www.BarbaraMcNichol.com