

How to Edit Your Own Writing

By Caroline McMillan

Like most newspaper reporters, I got into the biz because a) I love writing and b) I'm pretty good at it. But it's a sobering profession. You file your masterpiece, only to find your editor thinks it's two dozen "tinks" shy of publishable. Repeat this scenario a couple hundred times, and you'll find you've grown some thick skin. You've also gotten pretty darn good at self-editing. So, I'm here to impart some wisdom on the art of quickly perfecting your own work—how to hone, trim, and morph clumsy words and phrases into a clear, concise message that will wow your audience.

It could be a company memo, a PowerPoint presentation, an email, or a report—but no matter the medium, these quick editing skills will always come in handy. Some other bonuses of good self-editing skills: People are less likely to misunderstand you, and bosses and peers will pay more attention to the meat of your message.

So here we go. Let's say you're working on a personal assessment for your [annual performance review](#). You've written the first draft, but you want to make sure it's in perfect condition before you submit it. Here's your game plan:

Print Out Your Work

Always do this. Always. It's a pain, but when you're talking performance reviews, that 20-yard hassle of a walk to the printer could mean the difference between a 4% or a 5% raise.

Here's why: As any writer or editor will tell you, critiquing someone else's work is much easier than deconstructing your own, because outside eyes bring a fresh perspective. To approach your own work critically, you need to simulate this "outsider" perspective by viewing it in a form other than the one you wrote it in.

If you typed it, print it out. Give it a quick read-through, then wield your red pen and start slashing. (Ruthlessly. More on that below.) If you hand-wrote the first draft of your evaluation, type it up, print it, and analyze. That's right—either way, you should still be heading over to the printer.

Take a Break

If you're on deadline and this step isn't a luxury, proceed to No. 3. But if you do have a few minutes to spare, putting a literal distance between you and your work creates an emotional distance as well. When you come back to it with fresh eyes, you're more likely to spot awkward wording, unnecessary phrasing, and plain ol' mistakes. So take a stroll, go to the bathroom, chat with a co-worker. If you can let it simmer overnight, that's best of all. Then you can be more ruthless with your edits.

Read it Out Loud

The best writing **sounds smooth**—almost like you're speaking, without getting colloquial. So actually listening to your written syntax is one of the best ways you can catch areas with jangling phrasing. Read your work out loud and change anything that doesn't make sense or that you stumble over. And don't be afraid to use contractions—that's how us non-robots talk, isn't it? (Imagine that last sentence without contractions. Now you see what I mean.)

Pretend You're the Intended Audience

Now that you've read and re-read your document, it's time for some editing role play. Keeping with the performance review example, read the document again, this time **as if you're the boss**. Is it so verbose that you're getting bored by page two? Or does it flow easily and leave you with a "Wow, she deserves a raise!" impression? What stands out to you most? Jot down your thoughts, make changes, and move on to the last step.

Be Ruthless

The final step is to edit your work down. Yes, chop some of those words, sentences, and paragraphs. Like crazy. But this will help make sure that the true meat of your piece is what shines.

If you need a little help with this, here are some tips:

Keep paragraphs short: Three to four sentences is more than enough to get to the point quickly and succinctly.

Reduce each sentence to its essential parts: A well-defined subject, strong verb, and object.

Avoid the overuse of subordinate clauses: Quick little grammar refresher: A subordinate clause (also known as a dependent clause) has a subject and verb but can't stand alone as a sentence. So let's take this sentence that might appear in your personal assessment:

"When staff fatigue was high during the fourth quarter because of lower earnings than projected, I led an initiative to improve morale."

Let's rework it a bit, make it more straightforward.

"I led an initiative to tackle staff fatigue and improve morale in the wake of disappointing fourth-quarter earnings."

Nix adverbs and adjectives as often as possible: On your printout, mark through every adjective and adverb you see, and then add back the ones that you think are absolutely necessary. When in doubt, find a verb that says it better.

Infuse opinionated language with authority: During my freshman year of college, I got a B on a kick-ass paper. Upset, I asked my professor to explain his (obviously flawed) grading system. He said I was downgraded because I repeatedly used phrases like "seems to be" and "it appears." When you make a point, he said, throw yourself behind it. Don't give the impression that you're not sure you fully [support your own argument](#).

That advice stuck with me, and you should pay attention to it, too, especially when your career is in play. Don't weaken your argument with wishy-washy sentences that start with "I believe," "In my opinion," and "You may disagree, but..." You'll see the difference it makes.

Self-editing is a tough skill to develop, but it's one that can only help your career. It ensures your writing puts your best foot forward, even when your charming self isn't there to do the talking.

[5 Steps for Editing Your Own Writing](#) | The Daily Muse

Caroline McMillan is a Charlotte, N.C. native and a reporter at The Charlotte Observer, where she writes about small business and entrepreneurship. She graduated from the journalism school at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and spent her last two years of college as the editor in chief of Rival Magazine, a joint publication between Duke University and UNC. She loves Tar Heel basketball, french-press coffee, making to-do lists, and buying more books than her shelves can hold.