

# THE SECRETS OF SELF-EDITING

Polish your prose with these six simple strategies for self-editing

# Hotsheets

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## 1. KEEP IT CLEAN

The basics may be obvious but they bear repeating: spelling and grammar count.

- **Scan for the squiggles:** Electronic tools in programs such as Word are helpful but not foolproof; still, most programs highlight misspelled words or potential grammatical errors.
- **Read your piece aloud:** You'll be more likely to spot errors (and awkwardness) when you have to speak each word out loud.
- **Leave it for 24 hours:** Fresh eyes are more likely to spot mistakes.
- **Call in a buddy:** Someone else's eyes—especially someone else's sharp eyes—are often better than your own.
- **Double-check the names:** Always take the time to double-check the names of people, places, corporations and pets. No one wants their pooch Lady misidentified as Laddy.

## 2. GET ACTIVE

Check your verbs. Are they crisp, clear and muscular? One tip: If you find yourself tempted to load in adverbs, it's likely your verb choices are weak.

## 3. QUOTE SPARINGLY

Direct quotes are best used to convey personality, emotion or unique point of view. They should NEVER be used to transmit basic information that you, as a writer, can more artfully convey in a paraphrased sentence or two. Long sections of direct quote are often a sign of lazy writing.

## 4. ENGAGE IN SOME WORDPLAY

Review your piece and look for opportunities to inject smart wordplay—alliteration, double entendres, rhythm or rhyme where appropriate. Also look for unintended word repetitions, clichés and accidental double entendres. And while using trendy terms or slang might seem like fun, do so with caution: it can date your piece—and it can date you if you get it wrong.

## 5. MIND THE GAPS

It's hard to see the gaps in the logic and structure of your own piece when you've just finished writing it. If at all possible, take a breather before reviewing your piece. A couple of days is best, but at the very least, leave your desk and clear your head before doing a final read. Some writers find that printing a hard copy and reading it in a different setting—away from where they've written it—can help them see their copy with fresh eyes. Others find reading it on another device—your phone perhaps?—can help them spot problems they miss on their computer screen.



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## 6. CHECK THE STRUCTURE

- **Is your lede compelling and does it set up your story well?** Do your opening lines grab the reader’s attention—and do they accurately reflect the story that follows?
- **Is your theme clear?** What’s your story about? Can you sum it up in a Tweet? Capture it in 6 words? Pitch it in a 20-second elevator ride? While not every story needs a “This story is about x” statement of theme, as the writer you need to know what that theme is—and if it’s not crisply stated in an obvious theme statement it should still come through clearly enough that the reader knows in the first few paragraphs what they’re reading about.
- **Does your structure accentuate or hinder your story?** There are as many ways to write a story as there are writers to write it. Still, as you check the overall structure of your story, ask yourself if the structure you’ve chosen is fighting or amplifying your story’s point. A story about a race car driver might be best served with a series of sections that suggest laps around a speedway. A piece about a comedian might be structured with sub-heads that “tell” a joke.
- **Are your transitions strong?** A weak transition is an exit ramp: If your reader doesn’t understand the connection from one section to the next, you risk losing them. Review your transitions to ensure you keep your readers on the road to the next section.
- **Do you end well?** Beware the weak ending. Is there an opportunity to tie your ending back to your opening? To answer the question implicit in your theme? Or better still, to suggest an even larger question or broader implication that your exploration of this story has led to? Your final section, paragraph and line all deserve close attention to ensure that your story echoes in your reader’s mind long after they’ve finished reading.

### BONUS TIP

You likely know your writing weak spots better than any editor. Do you tend to over-quote? Are you too fond of puns? Customize your story checklist based on your habits and weaknesses.



### Resources:

- A Writer’s Coach: The Complete Guide to Writing Strategies That Work** by Jack Hart (Anchor Books, 2007)
- Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer** by Roy Peter Clark (Little, Brown and Company, 2006)
- The Mindful Writer: Noble Truths of the Writing Life** by Dinty W. Moore (Wisdom Publications, 2012)



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