

# MASTER COPY EDITING

## Divide and Conquer

When looking for words to cut, don't just do one pass through your manuscript. Plan multiple passes, each for a different category—adverbs, empty words, words you use too often, and so on. In each pass, don't edit, just identify—highlighting is good. Then work through the manuscript one last time, considering and deleting or replacing all of the words you highlighted.

## Remove Redundancy

The first draft of a story is where authors discover the story for themselves—they're the only audience at that point. Given that, it's easy to see why overwriting is commonplace in early drafts. When it's time to edit, though, redundancy in meaning should be addressed.

Don't confuse purposeful repetition with redundancy. If you intend to use complementary words and phrases to enhance, that's fine. But if you find yourself with some version of this—'*The valiant, brave, staunch knight approached the dragon.*'—put on your editor's hat and get to work.

## Focus on Nouns

Similar to the above point, creating a laundry list of modifiers is an indication that a more effective noun might better serve the sentence. For example, would it be better to write “an ugly, frightful, old woman” or simply go with “hag”?

## Replaces Phrases with Nouns

Why use many words when just one will suffice?

- at the present time vs. now
- due to the fact that vs. because
- · in close proximity vs. near
- · in regard to vs. concerning
- · in the event that vs. because
- · with the exception of vs. except

Don't be suckered into using bloated phrases that you've heard or read before. Trim and tighten if you can.

## Dump Unimportant Details

Pretty self-explanatory. If 'something' isn't important to the character, plot, or theme—cut it.

## Flip Negatives

Using a negative phrase often leads to flabby writing. Compare “Don’t walk too close to the lake!” to “Avoid the lake!” While both offer similar instructions, the latter is tighter and has more *oomph*.

A bonus to flipping negatives is that you’re losing the negative—the not vanishes. That means you’re left with a positive. While this creates a subtle effect, readers generally respond more favourably to positives than negatives.

## Avoid Adverbs

In his wildly successful book *On Writing*, Stephen King says, “*The adverb is not your friend.*” In case that doesn’t make the point strongly enough, he adds, “*The road to hell is paved with adverbs.*”

Consider the following:

*I believe you.*

*I totally believe you.*

Doesn’t the second one sound like sarcasm? Even when -ly words aren’t undercutting or confusing the point of a sentence, they’re often just unnecessary—especially in dialogue tags.

## Inflect Intentionally

When you inflect (conjugate) verbs, avoid overusing the -ing construction.

Compare “They were heading to the park” to “They headed for the park” or even “They went to the park.” Doing so makes the sentence more immediate. And shorter!

## Lose Intensifiers

Save intensifiers (*absolutely, completely, extremely, really, totally, utterly, very*, etc.) for the rare occasion that you need the extra emphasis.

## Dialogue Rules

- Don’t use dialogue tags every time someone speaks. Doing so will make your MS sound clunky.
- Alternate between dialogue tags, action tags, and no tags.
- Use ‘said’ and ‘asked’ for the smoothest reading experience.
- Use dialogue to build your story.
- Use correct punctuation

## Revisit One More Time

You shouldn't stay in revision or editing mode forever. But most writers end the editing process a smidge early, so even when you think you've done all you can, give it a few days or a week, then revisit it a final time. Often, that newfound distance will help you spot mistakes and story-improving tweaks you missed before.

## YOUR TURN

Look at the sentences below (taken from *Those People Next Door* by Kia Abdullah). Can you identify any problems? How would you improve these sentences?

*(Willa has just discovered she is pregnant)* **Tom leapt off his chair and dropped to his knees beside her. He drew his arms around her and pressed his face to her torso.**

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**He had a boisterous manner and was clearly of the mind that volume could stand in for dignity.**

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**For some inexplicable reason she wanted Linda to like her. She could sense that she held some form of unofficial power and wanted her as an ally.**

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# Ten Simple Rules: A Review!

## 1. Watch your sentence length.

A good rule of thumb is to re-examine any sentence that's longer than 20 words. Can it be split into two sentences?

## 2. Use simple and direct sentence structure.

Keeping your sentence structure simple will help make your piece more direct overall. Use parentheses ( ) and em dashes (—) sparingly.

## 3. Avoid jargon and technical language.

Unless necessary, of course.

## 4. Write in the ACTIVE VOICE.

I am going to write a blog post today. (active)

A blog post will be written by me today. (passive)

## 5. Avoid using *it is*, *there is*, or *there are* (weak) at the beginning of sentences.

It is expensive to rent a limousine. (wordy)

Renting a limousine is expensive. (concise)

## 6. Change *is* or *was* to an action verb.

A new shade is needed for the bedroom window. (wordy)

The bedroom window needs a new shade. (concise)

## 7. Change *is* or *have* with an -ing verb to a simple present or past tense verb whenever possible.

They were leaving before the second intermission. (wordy)

They left before the second intermission. (concise)

## 8. Omit *this* from the beginning of a sentence by joining it to the preceding sentence with a comma.

The director fired the cast. This resulted in a delay of the opening night. (wordy)

The director fired the cast, delaying opening night. (concise)

## 9. Remove *should*, *would*, or *could* when possible and use a definite verb.

They could see the problem. (wordy)

They saw the problem. (concise)

## 10. Change *-sion* and *-tion* words to verbs whenever possible.

I submitted an application for the job.

I applied for the job.