

Rewriting

The Secret to Writing Well

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You've come up with a great idea, done the research, and drafted an article. Well done! You've made it farther than most. Many people think about writing for publication, but few find the courage to start typing or the tenacity to keep at it until a draft emerges.

Still, important work remains. The article you have now is a rough draft—emphasis on *rough*. To smooth it out, you must rewrite it. Rewriting is the work writers do after the first draft. It includes revising to improve the draft's substance and structure, editing to make it clear, and proofreading to make it correct.

This article is a guide to the rewriting process: revising, editing, and proofreading. This process will strengthen and clarify your writing. It will transform your article from a rough draft to a polished manuscript—something that editors will want to publish, and people will want to read. Although rewriting is a lot of work, it's worth it.

Why Rewrite?

Admitting that your draft needs rewriting can be discouraging. After all, you worked hard to write it, wrestling your thoughts onto page after page until triumphantly placing that final period (Take *that*, world). At this point, it's tempting to run a spell check, fix the typos, and hit send.

Don't.

Despite your best efforts, the chances are nearly 100 percent that your draft is terrible.¹ But don't despair—this doesn't mean you're a bad writer. All first drafts are terrible. *All of them*. My first draft of this article was awful (ask the editor). So was the first draft of that splendid article you read recently. And that brilliant writer whose work you admire? Their first drafts are dreadful, too. But here's the key: Good writers rewrite

terrible first drafts until they're not so terrible. Poor writers don't.

Rewriting is the secret to writing well.² It's what separates good articles from those that might have been good—if only the author had expressed their high-quality thinking using high-quality writing. Rewriting is where the battle is won or lost.

So don't be discouraged. Writing a terrible first draft is a normal, necessary step in the writing process. After all, you cannot harness the power of rewriting until you have a draft to rewrite.

The Reader

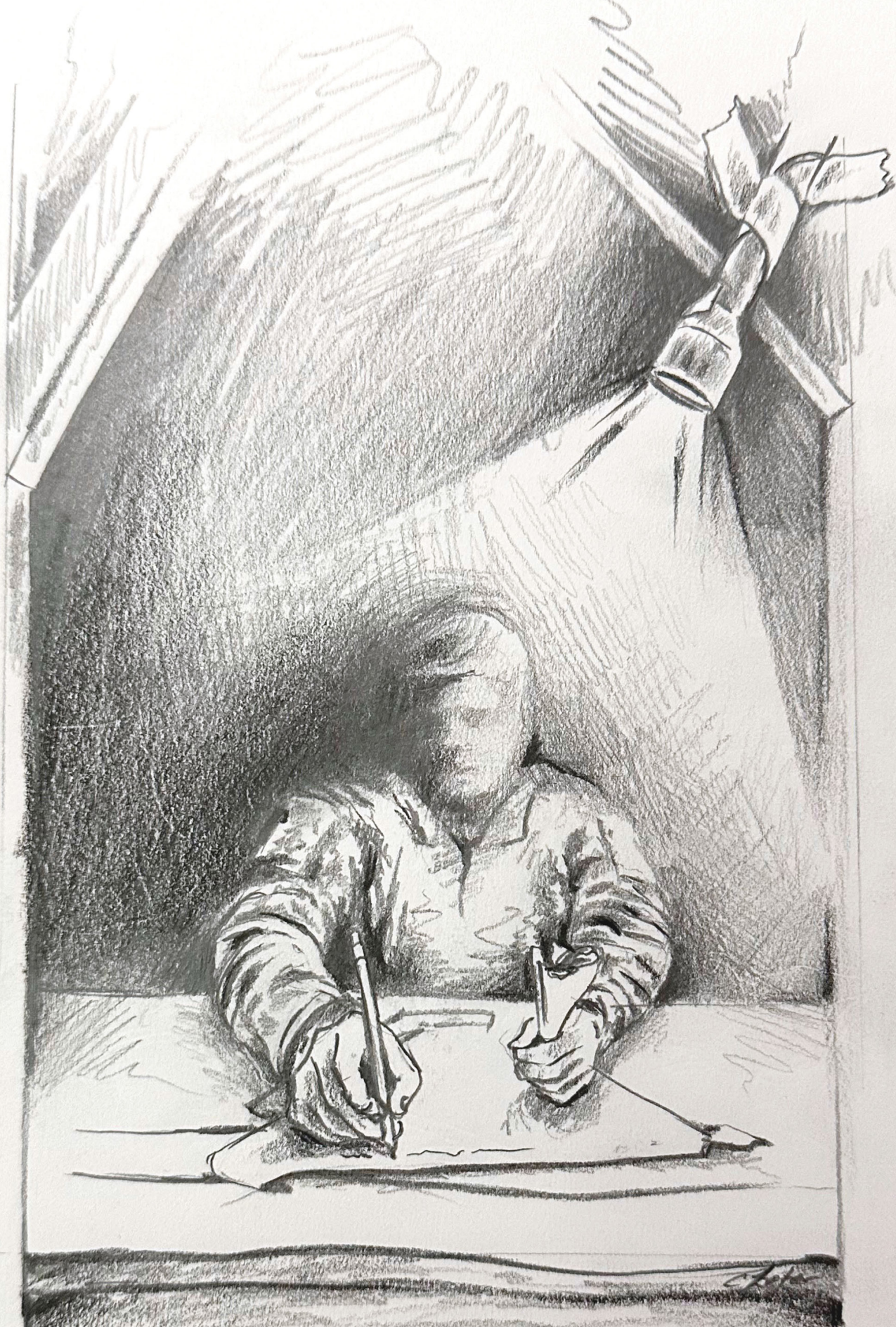
Effective rewriting requires you to see your writing as a reader instead of a writer. Up to this point, you've been thinking like a writer—sorting out what you want to say and putting it into words. Now, however, you must think like a reader. You've said something, but have you said it clearly and convincingly? That's up to the reader to judge.

And the reader is a brutal judge. The reader doesn't know or care how hard you worked or what you intend to say. All that matters is if they understand what you've written and find it compelling. If they don't, it's almost always your fault.

How can you satisfy this unforgiving creature, the reader? By critiquing your work as the reader will—coldly, objectively, and ruthlessly. When you find your writing isn't compelling or logical or clear (and you will), you must rewrite it, again and again, until it is so compelling, logical, and clear that the reader cannot ignore or misunderstand it.

Revision

The first rewriting task is revision, which improves the article's big parts. The goal is to clarify the article's



(Illustration by Sgt. 1st Class Curtis Loter, Army Multimedia and Visual Information Division [OCPA], U.S. Army)

main point (thesis) and align everything else—every page, passage, and paragraph—to support it. Don't worry about the small parts, like sentences, words, and punctuation. Save them for later. Fixing them now will only slow the revising. Besides, as I'll discuss below, you'll likely have to cut some parts of the draft. Time spent editing parts that you later abandon is time wasted. Focus on the big stuff.

Before revising a draft, rest it by putting it away for a few days or a week. The first draft will seem strong when it's fresh. But after some time away, you'll see its flaws clearly. Resting will help you be objective.

Start revising by finding the article's main point, the thesis. It should be stated clearly in the introduction and in one or two sentences (the *thesis statement*). Read that last sentence again. *State the main point early and clearly.* Don't make the reader hunt for it or guess.

Once the main point is clear, align everything else to support it. This involves four tasks: strengthening arguments, murdering your darlings, improving structure, and refining paragraphs.

Strengthening arguments. Revising a draft often reveals weak ideas. Arguments that seemed strong in the first draft now seem fragile. Strengthening them will require more research and drafting. This can feel like taking two steps back. But rest assured, all is as it should be. You are using your writing to clarify your thinking.

Writing is not the output of thinking. Writing is thinking. Inexperienced writers often imagine that thinking comes before writing. However, writing and thinking happen at the same time. Drafting helps writers discover what they have to say; revising helps them sharpen and strengthen it.

Murder your darlings. The second revision task is cutting needless passages. Revising often reveals passages that don't support the main idea. Cut them, or as English novelist Arthur Quiller-Couch said, "Murder your darlings."³ Dramatic? Sure. But the point is that writers tend to fall in love with writing that they worked hard to draft. Cutting it can be painful. Nevertheless, you must be ruthless. If a passage, paragraph, or page does not advance the main point, kill it.

Improve structure. A well-structured article presents ideas in an order that makes sense to the reader.⁴ A history article, for example, might use a chronological structure by discussing events in the order

The problem
Why the problem is important
The solution
How the solution solves the problem

(Figure by author)

Figure 1. Problem-Solution Structure

they happened. A problem-solving article might use a problem-solution structure, as shown in figure 1. Other writing structures include evaluation (discussing pros, then cons), comparison (examining what's the same, then what's different), and causal (discussing causes, then effects). The list goes on.

Articles may combine multiple structures. For example, in this publication's article on book reviews, Zach Griffiths combines analytical and evaluative structures (see figure 2).⁵

He first analyzes the book's main argument and then evaluates its pros and cons. The order makes sense. It would make less sense to critique the book's main argument before summarizing it. A logical structure makes the article easy to understand.

Refining paragraphs. Writing effective paragraphs is vital, and it's where many new writers struggle. Each paragraph should discuss one (and only one) idea. Revising paragraphs involves finding each paragraph's main idea, stating it clearly, and ensuring that the rest of the paragraph's sentences develop the idea.

Although paragraphing should be simple (one paragraph = one idea), bad paragraph advice is nevertheless easy to find—usually in the form of ridiculous rules: A paragraph is between 120 and 150 words long, or three to five sentences, or six to eight sentences, or one inch deep on the page.

Nonsense.

A paragraph is a unit of *thought*, not of

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Hook
Introduction
Main argument
Summary
Strengths
Critiques
Conclusion and reader recommendation

(Figure by Lt. Col. Zachary Griffiths, U.S. Army)

Figure 2. Combined Analytical and Evaluative Structures

sentences or words or inches. Each paragraph is as long or short as necessary to develop one (and only one) idea. Most paragraphs develop an idea using a series of related sentences. But they can also be one sentence—like the next paragraph—or even one word—like the last one.

Although most paragraph “rules” aren’t worth following, here are three paragraph guidelines (not rules) that work well most of the time.

First, state each paragraph’s main idea in the first sentence. Writers often bury the main idea, or worse, don’t state it at all. Find the sentence that states the main idea and move it to the beginning of the paragraph. If no sentence states the main idea, write one.

Second, organize the rest of the paragraph around the main idea. The first sentence states the main idea—the rest of the sentences develop it. When you find a sentence that doesn’t, move it or cut it.

Third, short paragraphs are better than long ones. If a complex idea requires a lengthy explanation, divide it into chunks and discuss one chunk per paragraph. The breaks between chunks will allow the reader to pause and process one chunk before moving to the next one.

Revision is done when you’re satisfied with the strength of your ideas, the order in which you’ve presented them, and the paragraphs you’ve built to communicate them. It’s time to edit.

Editing

Extant methodologies for the employment of editing techniques are collectively seen as the systematic

clarification and expurgation of the prose such that the reader’s subjective, constructed interpretation of the meaning of the text is, to the highest degree possible, congruent with the writer’s intentions.

Aren’t you impressed with that paragraph? Surely, I’ve convinced you that editing is important, not to mention showing off my astounding command of the language. I’ll bet you had to stop reading and look up “expurgation.” Look how smart I am!

In truth, I doubt you’re astounded, convinced, or impressed. More likely, you’re dumbfounded, annoyed, and depressed. Things between us were fine until I dropped that pompous drivel on the page. I’ll try again:

Editing is about making your writing *clear* so it’s easy to read and understand.

You’ll forgive me for making you read that bit of torturous text, but I had a reason: to show how this article might have been vastly different if I had made different writerly choices.

Writing well means making good choices. Because English is infinitely flexible, writers can choose to express the same idea in countless ways:

Observe attentively the effection of the rapid perambulation of a ternary cohort of visually impaired *Apodemus sylvatici*.

Behold, a trio of gentle souls cloaked in eternal twilight. Guided by nature’s unseen hand, they dart gracefully across the sun-dappled meadow.

Three blind mice. See how they run.

Same ideas—different choices.

Editing is the process of reconsidering choices. It focuses on the article’s small parts—words and sentences. As you drafted, you chose to use this word or that one, to write a sentence this way or that way, to put this sentence after that one. Editing is the time to revisit these choices, making sure they are good ones, and if not, to make better ones.

One Rule: Always Be Clear

What makes a writing choice better or worse? In professional writing, the best choice is the one that makes the writing *clear*—easy to read and understand. Clear writing is simple, concrete, and uncluttered.

Importantly, simply following English grammar rules will *not* produce clear writing. To be sure, good grammar is important. However, as the last section

shows, grammatically correct pompous drivel is still pompous drivel. Clear writing is a choice, not a checklist.

That said, there is one rule that you can count on in professional writing—one that I never break if I can help it: *Always be clear* (ABC). In the professional world, clear writing is always best.

This claim may seem brash. Isn't writing an art? Isn't what's "best" a matter of opinion? Sure—if we were talking about literature. But we aren't. We're talking about *professional* writing.

Professionals aren't reading your article for fun. They're reading it because it's professionally valuable. They want useful information, not entertainment. Professionals are also busy. They can't afford to waste time hacking through a jungle of convoluted writing.

Unfortunately, writing is rarely born with the clarity professional readers expect. That last paragraph, for example, was born as two longer paragraphs. Figure 3 shows how I edited them.

Most passages are born like the one in figure 3—dense and cluttered. Clearing them up requires meticulous editing. Here's how to do it.

Start with Subjects and Verbs

Clear writing starts with subjects and verbs. A basic sentence describes a subject doing something to an object: *Smith helped Jones*; *The tank crushed the fence*; *I see you*. Subjects, verbs, and objects form the core of English sentences, often appearing in that order: subject-verb-object (SVO).

The SVO sentence is a powerful writing tool because it's what readers expect.⁶ Kids as young as twenty-four months old string together subject-verb sentences (*Baby drink*). They add objects soon after (*Baby drink juice*). Our sentences become more complex as we grow, but subconsciously, we still expect them to start with subjects and verbs.

Consider, for example, this passage from a recent Army white paper (I've underlined the main subjects and verbs):

The Army must solve its recruiting challenges to successfully transform for the future.

Building on successful initiatives like the Soldier Referral Program and the Future Soldier Prep Course, which has brought more than 14,000 new soldiers into the Army

since its inception in the summer of 2022, the Army is now making more fundamental changes to its recruiting approach.⁷

The first sentence works well because it's what we expect—the subject (the Army) and verb (solve) at the beginning. The second sentence, however, makes us wander through thirty-four words before telling us who (the Army) is doing what (making changes). The delayed subject and verb require the reader to hold thirty-four words of information in their mind before figuring out why that information is relevant. As a result, the sentence is mentally taxing and hard to read.

Of course, not every sentence can or should be a simple SVO sentence. But even in longer sentences, getting to the subject and verb quickly makes things clearer. For example,

The Army must solve its recruiting challenges to successfully transform for the future.

Consequently, the Army is fundamentally changing its recruiting approach.

Moving the subject (Army) and verb (changing) to the beginning of the second sentence and adding the signal word *consequently* make the passage clearer.

Use Concrete Language

Concrete language is another way to make writing clear. Concrete language is words and sentences that readers can easily imagine. The opposite is abstract language, which is hard for readers to imagine. Compare, for example, these two sentences:

A reduction in program expenditures is being implemented because of the challenges arising from recent resource reductions.

The Army is cutting program costs due to recent budget cuts.

The second is more concrete because it replaces vague words like "resources" and "reductions" with concrete ones like "cut" and "costs." It's also built around an SVO sentence: *The Army* (subject) *is cutting* (verb) *program costs* (object).

Concrete language is effective because it activates the reader's visual brain. Humans, like other primates, are visual animals.⁸ We have evolved to use visual cues for everything from basic survival, like finding food and selecting a mate, to complex social behaviors. A large part of our brain is dedicated to processing visual information.

BEFORE

Professional ~~s~~ ~~readers~~ aren't reading your article for ~~pleasure fun on their beach vacation in their free time~~. They're reading it because it's professionally *valuable*. They want ~~you to give them~~ useful information, not ~~to entertain~~ *entertainment*. ~~They Want your article to inform, educate, or persuade them.~~

~~However, valuable writing isn't enough—your writing must also be easy to read and understand.~~ Professional ~~s~~ ~~readers~~ are ~~also~~ busy. ~~Although they want useful information,~~ they can't afford to waste time hacking ~~their way~~ through a jungle of convoluted writing ~~to get it~~.

AFTER

Professionals aren't reading your article for fun. They're reading it because it's professionally valuable. They want useful information, not entertainment. Professionals are also busy. They can't afford to waste time hacking through a jungle of convoluted writing.

(Figure by author)

Figure 3. Example of Editing

When we read, our visual brain tries to build a mental picture of the writing—like turning a script into a movie.⁹ Concrete language makes this mental movie easier to create. Unsurprisingly, studies show that humans process concrete language more efficiently than abstract language.¹⁰

As you saw in the example above, using subjects and verbs is one way to make writing concrete. Our brain is primed to notice people and things (subjects) doing stuff (verbs) in the world around us. The closer the writing is to this visual world, the easier it is for the reader's brain to process.

Another way to make writing concrete is by using specific rather than vague words. For example, instead of *addressing* a problem, *fix*, *solve*, or *correct* it. Instead of writing that something impacts the organization, state that it *improves* or *damages* it. Instead of,

Our organization is conducting an evaluation of the potential for the allocation of additional resources,

try

We're asking headquarters for more money.

Replace abstract words with concrete ones whenever possible.

The abstract sentence in that last paragraph is a good example of the bureaucratic writing style military

writers often use but shouldn't. Bureaucratic writing, like its namesake, is dense and confusing. People imagine that bureaucratic language sounds educated, credible, and official. It doesn't.

Compare, for example, these two passages—the first from a Department of Defense report on hazing, and the second from U.S. Navy Capt. Chris "Chowdah" Hill's command philosophy:

Hazing violates a Service member's basic human dignity, jeopardizes combat readiness and mission accomplishment, weakens trust within the ranks, and erodes unit cohesion. Any incident of hazing is an affront to the Department's values. DoD remains steadfast in its commitment to continuously evaluate its policies and procedures to prevent, detect, deter, appropriately address, and ultimately eliminate hazing across the Armed Forces.¹¹

Hazing is stupid, degrading and a colossal waste of time. Just like bullying, sexual assault, and sexual harassment, hazing does not create an environment where we love or value the Sailor. It does not give mission and purpose to Sailors.¹²

Hill's simple, concrete passage is shorter, clearer, and far more powerful.

Lastly, use caution with figurative language like analogies and metaphors. Figurative language brings concrete images to the reader's mind that may or may not be helpful.

Well-placed figurative language can help readers understand a complex or abstract concept. Earlier in this section, for example, I used the analogy of a mental movie to describe how our visual brain processes writing.

However, figurative language can confuse rather than clarify when it brings irrelevant images to the reader's mind. The worst offenders are clichés—avoid them. Ditch “think outside the box,” “grab low-hanging fruit,” and “run it up the flagpole.” Likewise, dump tired sports clichés, like “blocking and tackling,” “stepping up to the plate,” and “getting a ballpark figure.” These irrelevant images make it hard for the reader to focus on what matters.

Use Active Voice

You probably know that Army writing uses active voice sentences. This is good advice. Active voice sentences are usually short and clear, while passive voice sentences can be wordy and vague. Active voice sentences follow the SVO sentence pattern discussed earlier:

Private Jones mopped the floor.

In contrast, passive voice sentences begin with the object and end with or omit the subject:

The floor was mopped by Private Jones.

The floor was mopped.

The active voice sentence is shorter than the second and more concrete than the third.

Of course, using passive voice isn't always wrong. In fact, it's the better choice when the actor is unknown or unimportant, when the writer wishes to shift the sentence's emphasis, or when stating a general truth.¹³

Nevertheless, military writers often overuse passive voice, resulting in wordy, vague writing:

The physical locality of regions will be further defined in order to assist the SRAO's with their rotation plans. Regions will receive a list of all of their positions that may be used for rotational purposes. Also, a list of organizations that are exempt from the regionalization program will be provided to each region.

Quarterly updates via VTC are being implemented in order to offer regions a

forum in which they will receive updated information, provide their lessons learned, and receive assistance with their issues and concerns.

Metrics are being developed to help identify the strengths and weaknesses of the regionalization program. The results of this new requirement will be reported bi-annually by each region, and will be used to further develop and improve the process.¹⁴

When misused or overused, passive voice clutters the writing and confuses the reader about who is doing what to whom. Although passive voice sentences have their place, most of the time, active voice is best.

Declutter

Speaking of clutter—cut it. Clutter is extra sentences and words that aren't needed to convey the message. It's the smaller sibling of unmurdered darlings. Neither do useful work.¹⁵ Cut them.

Military writing is notoriously cluttered, as in this example from U.S. Army doctrine:

A relief in place is an operation in which, by direction of higher authority, all or part of a unit is replaced in an area by the incoming unit and the responsibilities of the replaced elements for the mission and the assigned zone of operations are transferred to the incoming unit.¹⁶

That's fifty-one words to say, “A relief in place is when one unit replaces another one.” We could even leave in a few specifics: “A relief in place is when one unit takes over another one's mission and area.” Still, the sentence is half the length of the original.

Cutting clutter starts with removing needless words. Every word in your article should be necessary to communicate your ideas. But if you look, you'll find that many aren't. For example, the extra words in everyday phrases:

It's entirely possible that he fully intends to freely admit his mistake.

Or unnecessary hedging and throat clearing:

I believe it is important to understand that Army units need good leaders.

Or needless adjectives and adverbs:

Extremely effective artillery totally destroyed the attackers but left the defenders very low on ammunition.

No matter the type, fix all clutter the same way: cut it.

If you're unsure if something is content or clutter, try the "useful work" test.¹⁷ Rewrite the passage without the word or phrase in question. If you can remove it without losing or changing the passage's meaning, what you removed wasn't doing useful work. Cut it.

Simplify

Simple writing uses common words in short, direct sentences. For example, we could simplify this passage from a recent Army white paper:

Following extensive consultations with Congress, Army leaders are moving forward with a significant force structure transformation.¹⁸

Simplifying writing makes it clearer:

After consulting Congress, the Army is changing its force structure.

Many writers mistakenly believe that big words and complex sentences make writing more credible. But the opposite is true. Simple language is *more* credible than complex language because readers can understand it. Not only can complicated writing confuse readers, but it may also cause them to suspect the writer is using fancy language to hide weak ideas.

Simplicity begins with simple words. Don't use long words when short ones will do:

We need assistance help because we don't have sufficient enough personnel people.

Simplicity applies to phrases as well. Watch for prepositions and prepositional phrases. They're easy to overuse and can often be simplified:

Her evaluation report was a reflection of reflected her performance.

It is advisable to Proceed with caution cautiously.

Watch also for nominalizations—especially verbs changed into nouns. Professor Helen Sword calls them "zombie nouns" because nominalizing verbs sucks the liveliness out of them.¹⁹ Lifeless zombie nouns require another verb to make them go, resulting in needlessly wordy writing. For example:

Trainers conducted an evaluation of the unit, held a meeting with unit leaders, and gave a presentation of the results.

The zombie nouns *evaluation*, *meeting*, and *presentation* require the writer to add *conducted*, *held*, and *gave*. Here's a rewrite:

Trainers evaluated the unit, met with unit leaders, and presented the results.

Turning the zombie nouns back into live verbs makes the sentence shorter and simpler.

Another way to simplify is by breaking up long, confusing sentences. Long sentences aren't necessarily bad. Mixed with shorter ones, long sentences give the writing variety and rhythm. However, things become confusing when writers pack too much information in one sentence, as in this fifty-four-word behemoth:

For example, a coordinated fire line—a line beyond which conventional surface-to-surface direct fire and indirect fire support means may fire at any time within the boundaries of the establishing headquarters without additional coordination but does not eliminate the responsibility to coordinate the airspace required to conduct the mission (JP 3-09)—illustrates a permissive control measure.²⁰

Not only is this sentence long, but it separates the subject (coordinated fire line) from its verb (illustrates) with a forty-five-word interjection. Breaking it up and keeping subjects and verbs together improves the passage:

A coordinated fire line is an example of a permissive control measure. It is a line beyond which surface-to-surface assets can fire without coordinating with the headquarters that established the line. However, the firing assets must still coordinate airspace to conduct the mission.

Long sentences are no crime but confusing sentences are. Remember, always be clear.

Lastly, while simple writing helps the reader, it also helps writers make fewer mistakes. Simple words are easy to spell and hard to misuse. Short, direct sentences are easy to write and less likely to have punctuation and grammar mistakes. Simple writing is good for everyone.

Proofreading

Proofreading comes after revising and editing. It involves finding and fixing grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors. This is important. If your article is sloppy, editors may also assume your thinking is sloppy.

Ironically, the best way to proofread isn't by reading but by listening. Read your article aloud or have text-to-speech software do it for you (I use Microsoft

Word's Read Aloud feature). Your ears will catch errors that your eyes will miss.

Double-check your work with software (I prefer Grammarly and Microsoft Word Editor). However, don't assume the software is always right. You know your article better than the computer does.

Finally, trust your ear. If it sounds correct, it probably is correct. Writing a great article doesn't require an English degree. You already know everything you need to know about the language. Don't worry about dangling participles, squinting modifiers, and split infinitives. I have no idea what those things are, but I still managed to write this article.

If you're worried about making egregious grammar mistakes, ask a friend or two to read it. For feedback

tips, check out Rebecca Segal's "A Writer's Guide to Giving and Receiving Feedback," included in this issue.²¹ Remember, the goal isn't perfect English—it's giving the reader a useful, clear article.

A Final Word

Rewriting is the secret to writing well. Rewriting turns rough drafts into polished, publishable articles. It starts with revising, which improves the big parts—thesis, structure, and paragraphs. Next is editing to improve the little parts—sentences and words. The final step, proofreading, fixes any remaining correctness problems. Rewriting will help make your article as clear and compelling as the ideas that inspired you. ■

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