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**Self-Editing Your Writing**

**By Mary Anne Hahn**

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Much of what I do at my "day job" involves editing what others have written. Eliminating typos, repairing damaged grammar, replacing missing or misused punctuation—I relish editing, in a roll-up-my-shirtsleeves and rub-my-hands-together sort of way.

Often I get to transform a garbled attempt to communicate into something that's clear, concise and, well, readable. Change a word here, slice a few there, and I can add pizzazz to something that started out flat and lifeless. I like to think of myself as a highly skilled word surgeon, deftly able to remove extraneous verbiage with my scalpel—er, pen—and often performing complete paragraph transplants with total success.

That is, until it comes to performing surgery on my own writing. Then I frequently feel like a word surgeon with fake credentials.

There are times when I simply cannot see how even one of my golden words could be improved, much less removed. How dare editors impose restrictive word limits? If I'd thought that any words weren't necessary, I wouldn't have written them in the first place, right? Maybe, for me, editors will make an exception. Once they read my incredibly crafted piece, they'll bend their own rules, run it as written, even thank me for ignoring their guidelines...

Or, more likely, they won't run the piece at all. If they do, they'll whittle it down to size themselves, and who knows what damage they'll cause? Not all editors can call themselves word surgeons, you know. Some treat our writing with all the delicacy of a demolition crew clearing the way for a new super highway.

## Self-Editing Your Writing

So if we want to keep what we've written intact and adhere to editorial guidelines at the same time, we need to self-edit. But how can we objectively view anything that we've subjectively written? How do we unemotionally apply our editor's scalpel to work that we poured our hearts into?

I believe that the first step in self-editing is to leave what you've written alone for a while, to detach yourself from it.

Recently, I wrote an essay specifically for the "My Inspiration" section of the National Association of Women Writers' newsletter,

"NAWW Weekly." In its original version, my article weighed in at a porky 900-plus words. The editor's word limit? Six hundred, maximum.

Eliminate over 300 words? Where? Squelching my first impulse to submit it in its entirety, and my second impulse not to submit it at all, I let the essay sit for several days. When I returned to it, I immediately found several wordy phrases that I could painlessly delete. Rewriting other sentences from passive to active voice reduced the word count even further (while grammar sites and books deal with passive/active voice at length, there's a nice summary here: <http://www.english.uiuc.edu/cws/workshop/grammar/active.htm>).

Yet, even with these changes, my piece remained too lengthy. Did I really want to slice it down further, at the risk of losing my reason for writing it? What, precisely, *was* my reason for writing it?

That's when I had an "ah ha" moment. I reviewed the essay again, and I began to find entire paragraphs that, although nicely written (in my humble opinion!), did not *directly* contribute to the main point. Although these paragraphs provided additional background and perhaps a dash or two of color, could the essay survive without them? The answer was undeniably "yes."

So, with nary a whimper, I wielded my pen/scalpel on those paragraphs, which brought the piece under the word limit. This enabled me to submit it guiltlessly, knowing I'd managed to walk that line between respecting the editor's guidelines and maintaining the integrity of what I wanted to communicate.

Okay, I'll admit that I *did* save the original version as well. Perhaps I'll submit the longer, more lush essay to another publication someday. But I'm pleased with the edited one as well. And yes, the essay ran.

(<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NAWWWeekly/message/45>)

So what did I learn from this exercise that I want to share with you?

1. First, go ahead and just write what you want to write.
2. Then leave it alone for a while. At least a day or so, maybe longer.
3. When you reread it for the first time, eliminate the obvious flaws. Cut out unnecessary phrases. Rework long, rambling sentences into shorter, sharp ones.
4. Ask yourself why you are truly writing the piece, and whether every paragraph contributes to your reason(s) for writing it. Delete those that don't make the grade. To assist you through this most

difficult step, focus on the fact that you want to get your work published. This enables you to let go of any sentences that stand in the way of you and your goal.

Finally, to help ease the pain of self-surgery, save your original work under one document name, and your edited result under another. You may be able to use those discarded paragraphs in another piece down the road.

Mary Anne Hahn has written numerous articles on writing, the writing life, business and career topics. She is also editor and publisher of WriteSuccess, the free biweekly ezine of ideas, information and inspiration for people who want to pursue SUCCESSFUL writing careers. To subscribe, <mailto:writesuccess-subscribe@yahoogroups.com>.

## **Write Science Right**

**By Ann E. Power, Ph.D.**

Write Science Right "

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## Self-Editing Your Writing

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