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EDITING YOUR WORK

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Some writers cannot think past what happens after they finish writing their manuscript. They breathe a sigh of relief and run a quick spell check through it and think it's finished. Published authors know otherwise. They realise that getting ideas onto paper is only the beginning and have realised that all good writing is re-writing.

The First Draft

The main purpose of the first draft is to allow the words and ideas to flow onto the paper, so let things get out of hand. Throw in new ideas and seemingly unrelated facts, because it is often these digressions that turn out to be valuable to the final product.

You now have a rough draft for your structure, so go in and slash, hack and burn. Rearrange, put similar ideas together in paragraphs and sentences. Be ruthless in your pursuit of simplicity and in your desire to create a piece of work that others will enjoy reading.

The playwright Neil Simon once said 'rewriting is when writing really gets to be fun!'

Bearing in mind the various types of editing involved in re-writing:-

1. Structural Editing

This involves assessment of the conceptual integrity of the work. Ask the question, does the work fulfil its intended objectives? Is major rewriting or restructuring required? Is the language and style appropriate and effective? Is it repetitive? Does the writing flow? Is the tone natural? Is the balance right?

2. Copy Editing

This type of editing involves checking for appropriate use of language, grammar, syntax, spelling, punctuation and clarity of expression. Consistency is particularly important in this stage in terms of language, hyphenation, abbreviations as well as visual consistency, typography, headings, layout and so on. The accuracy of cross references within the text and appropriate acknowledgements should also be checked.

3. Proof reading

Proof reading involves checking that all editorial amendments have been incorporated. It also entails an integrity check to ensure that the document is complete (preliminary, body and end matter), including headings, pagination, references and contents. Another element of this verification edit is checking conformity with the publisher's house style and formatting, including instructions to typesetters. This was part of the process for the publisher to arrange with the proof-reader.

Think of the book as designing a house. The entrance should make a definite statement and once inside, a visitor should be able to move around from room to room without tripping over unnecessary information or running into dead ends. You achieve this ease of passage by saying things ONCE, saying them well and moving onto the next point.

Between each of these main points is a transition which leads the reader from one idea to the next. These transitions should be carefully worded, because they are like mortar between the brick, melding individual ideas into a sturdy unbreakable whole. For example, the transition in the above paragraph was achieved using the word transition in the first line of this paragraph echoes an important phrase near the end of the last paragraph. This enables the reader to make a painless mental connection.

The final stages of editing involve polishing to rework and refine your lead. Some writers do this between 15-20 times. That doesn't mean to completely overhaul our first couple of paragraphs, but it does mean tampering and tinkering until you are completely happy with your entrance statement.

When you read through your piece ask yourself the following question is this what I really meant to say? Will the reader have any trouble understanding it?

Now for the nitty gritty, replace passive words with active ones and abstract words with concrete ones.

When you start to get to the nitty gritty part of editing, you should be asking yourself, what can I leave out, this is because that every word omitted keeps another reader with you, while every word retained saps strength from others. So that whether you are writing 1,500 words or 200 words, each word must have a specific purpose.

One of the final checks is to read your work aloud, because this will show up any long and unwieldy sentences, flat patches and unnecessary words.

Sometimes we are too close to our writing that our eyes confine us by only seeing what we expect them to see, so get someone whose opinion you value and trust, to read it.

A quick check list should include looking for –

- Metaphors - never use a metaphor or simile, or other figure of speech that you are used to seeing in print.
- long words, where a short one will do
- If it is possible to cut out a word, do so and follow Hemingway's advice, 'less is more'.
- repetitive words