



# 5 Tips for Effective Editing

Adapted From Harvard's Writing Center

[<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/%7Ewricnr/documents/edit1.html>]

## 1. Read your essay aloud.

When we labor over sentences, we sometimes lose sight of the larger picture, of how all the sentences sound when they're read quickly one after the other, as your readers will read them. Your ear will pick up some problems your eye might miss. If something strikes you as problematic, don't gloss over it. Investigate to uncover the nature of the problem. Chances are, if something bothers you a little, it will bother your readers a lot.

## 2. Make sure all of your words are doing important work in making your argument.

Be sure all of your words and phrases are necessary, tight, and sharp. You want every word in your sentence to add as much meaning and inflection as possible. Don't use 14 words to say what can be said in 5 words. Also, use words to make your sentences more lively and interesting. For example, use "acknowledges, argues, believes, suggests, or claims" instead of "says."

## 3. Keep in mind the concept of *le mot juste*.

Always try to find the most perfect words, the most precise and specific language, to say what you mean. Only with concrete, clear language can you convey to your readers exactly what you think about a subject. Without such language, you can only speak in generalities. Everyone has already heard generalities, and they mean nothing, or something very different than you intended, to your readers. Use a thesaurus to remind yourself of options when trying to find the perfect word.

## 4. Beware of inappropriately elevated language – words and phrases that are stilted, pompous, or jargony.

When we puff up our prose to sound more reliable or authoritative, we usually only sound like we're trying to be smart – a sign to our readers that we're not. Reconsider inserting words or phrases because you think they'll sound impressive. If your ideas are good, you don't need to strain for impressive language. If your ideas aren't good, pompous language won't help anyway. Rule of thumb: most parts of speech function better and more elegantly when they play the roles they were meant to play [inappropriately elevated language often results in nouns being used as verbs]. Keep using nouns as nouns and verbs as verbs for the best, most clear language.

## 5. Be tough on your most dazzling sentences.

We're all guilty of trying to sneak in our favorite sentences where they don't belong because we can't bear to cut them. But, great writers are ruthless and will throw out brilliant lines if they're no longer relevant or necessary after revision. Remember, readers will be less struck by the brilliance than by the inappropriateness of such sentences.

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