

The Proof Angel Guide to Reviewing your writing

Why use this guide?

There is a limit to what you can spot by just re-reading. This guide sets out some strategies to help you review your work.

An editor polishes up your writing to make your message shine through. It is a good idea to do some revision before getting someone else involved because:

- The main objective of the first draft is getting ideas down. Redrafting gives time for your ideas to develop fully.
- Looking again with fresh eyes reveals all the places you rushed, or missed essentials. You will spot inconsistencies and places where you changed your mind. There might also be some holes in the logic of the piece, so the plot or argument doesn't make sense.
- As you move towards the end of the process, you will feel more pressure to get finished. Take your time to get it right without that pressure.
- There are plenty of danger signals to look for in any piece of writing. If you spot them yourself, it is more satisfying and cheaper than paying someone else to do it for you.
- Revising your own work thoroughly before passing it to someone else can stop the process becoming frustrating.
- You have more time to think about the options.
- There will be fewer amendments after editing.

Stage 1: Create distance between you and your work



When you read something you have just finished, your brain tends to fill in any gaps. Your readers won't be able to do this.

The Proof Angel is the trading name of Sarah Perkins, freelance editor and proofreader.

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You need a fresh pair of eyes so you can spot those gaps and fill them in. To do this, you need to create space by:

- Walking away for a while. For a short piece this is as simple as leaving it overnight, or while you go to a meeting. A walk can help. For a longer piece, leave it several weeks at least.
- Read aloud, or get your computer to read it to you. This is good for noticing words you have missed. If you read silently, to yourself, you will probably see what you think is there. Reading aloud also helps you check if the piece flows.
- Sometimes it helps to put things into a different font to change the appearance. Some people use Comic Sans for this purpose.
- For a long piece, or one with a complex argument, get a couple of others to read it and promise to tell you the truth. Ask people you trust, and listen to what they say. Leave it all for a while before going through what they have said and applying it.

If you try to revise your work too soon, you will remember the effort it took to create the piece, and you will be reluctant to change anything.

Stage 2: Organisation

Think about your target market

- What does your reader need?
- What do they expect?
- Have you stated your objective and achieved it?
 - If your article is about how to prune roses, can the reader go out and do it?
 - Does your story have holes in the plot?
- Particularly for non-fiction, will your readers find their way round your work? Do your headings guide them through?
- In factual work, it is often useful to check the structure by reading the first sentence of each paragraph.
- If you are writing a novel, have you included enough dialogue? A good rule of thumb is 50% should be dialogue.

Think about how your work looks

You need a logical structure, with consistent style. During the process, things drift as you change your mind. The work is not finished until it is tidied up.

Making a style sheet to record your decisions is an easy way to check each time the issue comes up.

Include things like:

- How are you setting out your headings? You should have a clear structure of chapter headings, with sub headings if necessary. These should be distinguished by consistent use of:
 - Upper and lower case letters.
 - Bold type.
 - Italics.
- Do you want numbers written out as words?
- Some words have more than one spelling. Choose one and stick to it.
 - Are you using *-ise* or *-ize* spellings?
 - Are you using okay or OK?
- How are you using abbreviations? Do you want e.g. or eg?
- Lists should be:
 - Formatted consistently: similar indents and bullet markers.
 - Punctuated consistently:
 - If the points are alternative ends to the sentence, the bullet should start with a lower case letter.
 - Bullet points that are complete sentences should start with a capital letter and end with a full stop.
 - Grouped with like items together. Each list should have an appropriate introductory sentence. Have separate lists of *must do* and *must not do*.
- Generally, the hyphen is going out of fashion. Look up common phrases in the dictionary to find out if they are 1 word, 2 words, or hyphenated. A note on your style sheet makes it quicker to check next time you find the phrase.

Stage 3: Reducing wordiness

Some flowery language is beautiful, and it can be an aim in itself. Using too many words can take away the impact of what you have to say. Long sentences are difficult to read. They cause people to stop reading or get confused. Your aim is to use the right words, and make sure each one counts.

Stephen King has a sign on his desk:

Second draft = First draft – 10%

These strategies all work towards that goal:

- Find long sentences, and divide them up into 2 or 3. Aim for 1 idea in each sentence.

- Writing peppered with dots and dashes can be distracting. Too much punctuation can be a sign that your sentences are too long. Get rid of the distraction and shorten your sentences.
- We call words that do not add anything redundancies. It can be difficult to spot this in your own writing. For some examples, try:
 - http://www.fun-with-words.com/redundant_phrases.html
 - <http://www.dailywritingtips.com/50-redundant-phrases-to-avoid/>
- Try to think of filleting your paragraphs and sentences. Words you don't need often lurk in:
 - Phrases at the beginning and end of sentences.
 - Introductory sentences, winding up to the main point.
 - Concluding sentences at the end of paragraphs.
- Prepositions need other words with them, so it is sometimes possible to cut out a group when you get rid of them:

<i>With the preposition</i>	<i>Without</i>
<i>In</i> the short term, we will...	We plan to...
<i>In</i> order to make...	To make...

- Prepositions can signal phrases that add nothing, such as *in the context of* and *in relation to*.
- Words that signal something is about to happen reduce impact:

<i>Danger sign</i>	<i>Add to the picture in the reader's head by</i>	<i>Exception</i>
<i>Started</i>	Show the effect of the rain or whatever started.	Referring back in time, eg I started to suspect him last week.
<i>Continued</i>	Why do we need to know it was still raining? Show us why it matters that it hasn't stopped yet.	None
<i>Then, after that</i> etc.	There is no need to explain that something else happened. Just show us what it was.	Emphasise a point in the timeline, eg <i>It was only then that I realised I haven't told Matilda I'm veggie now.</i>
<i>Suddenly</i>	Jump into the action and let the reader share the shock.	The reader needs to know the element of surprise: <i>Suddenly I'm not hungry any more.</i>

- Check whether adjacent words mean the same thing, like **combined together**.
- Watch for an abbreviation followed by a related word. Check that the word doesn't repeat the last letter of the abbreviation, eg:
 - PIN number (Personal Identification **Number**)
 - AC current (Alternating **Current**)
- Negative phrasing tends to get wordy, so watch out for **not** or the various forms using **n't**. Changing the verb to a positive one will usually shorten the sentence without changing the meaning:

Negative	Positive
I don't want to be difficult.	I'm trying to help.
He didn't hesitate.	He rushed in.

- **Currently** is a difficult word. It often adds nothing, even if you need to explain that the situation will change soon.
 - ❌ Chocolate is **currently** half price, but the offer ends on Tuesday.
 - ✅ Chocolate is half price until Tuesday.
- Is your adjective necessary? Test by substituting the opposite:
 - Hot frost doesn't make sense. Why say the frost was cold?
 - A quiet crash isn't possible. Why say it was loud?
- Watch out for:

Danger sign	Example	Notes
Prefix pre-	Pre -planned.	As opposed to being planned after?
Phrases connected by and .	Short and pithy.	The phrases often have identical meaning.
Suffix -wise .	Health wise , I've had a string of colds.	Often repeats the adjacent phrase.
That before a verb	I thought that I did.	"I thought I did" is shorter.

Stage 4: Improving the style

- Have you used the simplest form of the word you can? See **The Proof Angel Guide to Plain English**.
- Test whether you have shown rather than told:
 - Describe the signs of what happened and let the reader draw their own conclusion.

- Use all your character's 5 senses to help you do this.
- Adverbs add meaning to a verb, but strong verbs don't need their support. Most adverbs end in **-ly**, so look out for them. Then spot the relevant verb and improve it:
 - **Saying quietly** can become **whispering**.
 - **Walking quickly** can become **rushing**.
- Are you repeating yourself? Your character is elegant, or the report is ground breaking, but do you need to say so every time?
- Keep a list of your favourite words. Work down it using the **Find** option to make sure you haven't used them too often. Tick the items off as you go.
- When you see **which** used as a descriptor, it takes a comma. **That** doesn't:
 - We went to the house that collapsed yesterday.
 - We went to the house, which collapsed yesterday.
- Use dialogue tags like **Fred said** sparingly:
 - To avoid confusion
 - To improve the rhythm
 - To add some atmosphere or stage business.
- Weed out weak nouns such as thing and stuff.
- Check each **pronoun**, particularly at the beginning of a sentence. If the noun is a long way from the pronoun, or if it is unclear which noun you are talking about, rewrite the sentence.
- **Like** sounds uncertain. Action is not uncertain. Metaphors give livelier descriptions than simile.
- **Very** and **really** are weak words. What do they tell the reader? Use a more powerful adjective to give a more specific, stronger image.
- Watch out for **that**:
 - It is a classic word for clogging descriptions. Take it out for a more powerful image. Streets paved with gold are more direct than streets that are...
 - Make sure you refer to people as **who** rather than **that**.
- Have you used jargon? Do you need it? Will your readers understand?
- Point of view:
 - In business writing, who is speaking? If it is you, use **I**. If it is your firm, say **we**. Stick to one perspective.

- In fiction, when writing in the third person you describe what he/she/they are doing. Here it can make sense to change the point of view, but make sure the reader isn't confused.
- Have you pointed out something that is obvious to everyone? Trust your readers. Take out any sections that might annoy them.
- The verb **to be** gets between readers and the action. It comes into reported speech and passive forms of verbs. You can tell from the terms used that they are not about action, and so slow the pace:

Danger signs	With "to be"	Without "to be"
By	It was preferred by most of them.	Most of them preferred it.
Words ending in -ing	I was reading ing the other day...	I read the other day...

- If a phrase at the beginning or end of the sentence contains a verb, make sure it refers to the nearest noun or pronoun. Move things round until it does.
- When you see **it's**, check you mean **it is**. If that's not what you mean, substitute the possessive, **its**.
- When you see **your**, check if you mean **you're** (you are) instead.
- While on the subject of words that sound the same, many people get confused with these 3. Simply make a substitution and see if you still have a sensible sentence.

Word	Replace with	Example
There	Here	Over there is a blue one.
Their	Our	Their car is blue.
They're	They are	They're the blue ones.

- Make sure you close every set of brackets you open.
- Where you use speech marks, check:
 - Speech marks are consistent.
 - Choose between double (") and single (').
 - Whichever you choose, use the other for quotes within a quote.
 - Each time speech marks open, they also close, unless someone speaks for more than one paragraph. In this case, reopen the quotes for each new paragraph, but only close at the end of their last paragraph.
 - Make sure punctuation that goes with the words quoted is inside the quotation marks.

- If you are writing fiction, make sure that:
 - A character's name and features are consistent. Do blue eyes turn brown?
 - Time lines make sense. Do you have the full moon flooding the lawn twice a month?

For a summary of these notes, see [The Proof Angel Quick Guide to Reviewing Your Writing](#).

If you are publishing an eBook, you may find [The Proof Angel Guide to Fixing your Format](#) useful.