



**BLUE PENCIL CONSULTING**

*From polished to published.*

## **Editing Yourself: How to Copy Edit Your Own Writing** **\*\* Tips and Resources \*\***

Be clear about your message and who your audience/community is. Keep your core message in mind to keep your writing on-target and relevant.

To make your point clearly, you first must have a clear point to make.

### **Think – Write – Rest – Revise!**

That's the 4-step process for making any piece of writing better.

### **Your readers are busy people!**

- Edit, edit, edit!
- Get to the point ASAP.
- Keep it short and simple.
- Bullet points and subheads make it easy to quickly scan a longer memo, blog post or media article.

Shorter paragraphs are better.

### **Take it easy on the jargon.**

Avoid sounding like those generic jargon-spouting executives that the “Dilbert” cartoon pokes fun at. If you use legal, technical or foreign jargon, will your readers know what you mean? If there's no other term but the jargon, be sure to define the terms. Make your website content (and other messages) accessible to those who don't know your topic as well as you do.

### **Try the “R-E-C-E-S-S Model” for editing your own work**

(courtesy of Carl Sessions Stepp, University of Maryland)

**Read** the whole piece – what's the message?

**Edit** for

**Content** (key points clear, logical, consistent?)

**Edit** for

**Structure** (grammar, punctuation, spelling, style, usage)

**Sign off** (re-read it one last time to make sure you haven't added new errors)

## Useful Resources

Spelling and usage questions? Yes, there's an app for that!

You can find the Merriam-Webster dictionary and thesaurus online or as a free app:

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/>

*The Associated Press Stylebook* – Key reference for editors and writers in all professions. “AP Style” is used by most media outlets and many businesses.

*The Chicago Manual of Style* is in its 16<sup>th</sup> edition and is a key reference for copyeditors. Available as a book or through an online subscription (\$35/year), see

<http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home.html>

*Getting the Words Right: How to Revise, Edit & Rewrite*, Theodore A. Rees Cheney, Writer's Digest Books, 1983 (There's a newer edition, with slightly different title: *Getting the Words Right: 39 Ways to Improve Your Writing* – same wine, different bottle)

*The Complete Idiot's Guide to Business Letters and Memos*, Tom Gorman, Alpha Books (2005) (Full disclosure: I was a contributor to the second edition)

*On Writing Well: An informal guide to writing nonfiction*, William Zinsser, Harper & Row (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1985) [there are later editions]

*The Elements of Style*, William Strunk and E.B. White (Longman Publishers, 2000, 4<sup>th</sup> edition) -- Love it or hate it, this has been a classic since the 1930s.

*Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing*, Mignon Fogarty (Holt Paperbacks 2008). See more on her blog at <http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com>

Grammarly ([www.grammarly.com](http://www.grammarly.com)) – A grammar-checker that, while it can be helpful, is no substitute for a human editor.

Regular posts on writing and editing on the blog at [www.Ragan.com](http://www.Ragan.com)

Find writing tips at my blog, [www.bluepencilconsulting.com](http://www.bluepencilconsulting.com) or contact me with questions, at [kate@bluepencilconsulting.com](mailto:kate@bluepencilconsulting.com)

Plain Language Guidelines from the US Government:

<http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/guidelines/FederalPLGuidelines/TOC.cfm>



## From PlainLanguage.gov (charged with “Improving Communication from the Federal Government to the Public”)

### Ambiguous Wording Rewritten:

Here are some examples of how using plain language can help clear up clarity problems caused by ambiguous wording.

---

#### EXAMPLE 1

##### Before

Right of use means any authorization issued under this part that allows use of Outer Continental Shelf lands.

##### After

Right of use means any authorization under this part to use Outer Continental Shelf lands.

#### EXAMPLE 2

##### Before

This regulation governs disaster assistance for services to prevent hardship caused by fire, flood, or acts of nature that are not provided by FEMA or the Red Cross.

##### After

This regulation governs disaster assistance that:

- (a) Consists of services to prevent hardship caused by fire, flood, or acts of nature; and
- (b) Is furnished by a provider other than FEMA or the Red Cross.

#### EXAMPLE 3

##### Before

This rule proposes the Spring/Summer subsistence harvest regulations in Alaska for migratory birds that expire on August 31, 2003.

##### After

This rule proposes the Spring/Summer subsistence harvest regulations for migratory birds in Alaska. The regulations will expire on August 31, 2003.

## Problematic Headlines

- Iraqi Head Seeks Arms
- Something Went Wrong in Jet Crash, Expert Says
- Police Begin Campaign to Run Down Jaywalkers
- Enraged Cow Injures Farmer with Ax
- Farmer Bill Dies in House
- British Left Waffles on Falkland Islands
- Teacher Strikes Idle Kids
- Miners Refuse to Work after Death
- Juvenile Court to Try Shooting Defendant
- War Dims Hope for Peace
- If Strike Isn't Settled Quickly, It May Last Awhile
- Cold Wave Linked to Temperatures
- Enfield (London) Couple Slain; Police Suspect Homicide
- Red Tape Holds Up New Bridges
- Man Struck By Lightning Faces Battery Charge
- New Study of Obesity Looks for Larger Test Group
- Astronaut Takes Blame for Gas in Spacecraft
- Kids Make Nutritious Snacks
- Chef Throws His Heart into Helping Feed Needy
- Local High School Dropouts Cut in Half
- Hospitals are Sued by 7 Foot Doctors
- Typhoon Rips Through Cemetery; Hundreds Dead

## More References and Fun

- Write like a spy – follow the CIA's *Style Manual & Writers Guide for Intelligence Publications*. See this article for more:
- <http://qz.com/231110/writing-tips-from-the-cias-ruthless-style-manual/>
- Watch the Weird AI “Word Crimes” video:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Gv0H-vPoDc>
- The latest list of overused buzzwords (July 2014, Mashable)  
[http://mashable.com/2014/07/22/stop-using-jargon/?utm\\_cid=mash-com-fb-main-link](http://mashable.com/2014/07/22/stop-using-jargon/?utm_cid=mash-com-fb-main-link)
- During the Miss America pageant, ABC was not able to spell the name of a contestant's favorite author. Shocking. <http://mashable.com/2014/09/15/miss-america-jane-austen/>
- Why we make typos -- for workshop <http://www.wired.com/2014/08/wuwt-typos/>

Exercise – How would you improve this?

## **BEFORE (client's draft blog post)**

I recently participated in a five hour video conferenced meeting. The technology was amazing. We had participants from across the US that only had to step into their business or home office to join the meeting. I could watch everyone's face in split screen, albeit in relatively low resolution. No one had to waste a day or two traveling. No one had to spend the night sleeping on a hotel bed, eating hotel room service. What wasn't to like?

As I reflected on the meeting I was reminded of the old doctor joke. "How did the operation go?" asked the colleague. "Oh, the operation went well." the Surgeon replied. "How is the patient doing?" was the followup question. "Oh, he died but the operation was a great success." The meeting didn't succeed in helping the participants driving to a greater understanding - it failed in its truth seeking objective. The participants didn't leave with any greater insights than the preconceptions they had coming into the meeting. When all was said and done, audio and low resolution video doesn't communicate nearly enough information.

Clifford Nass notes in the April issue of the ["Is Facebook Stunting Your Child's Growth?"](http://www.psmag.com/culture/is-facebook-stunting-your-childs-growth-40577/) PACIFIC\*STANDARD some of the issues with relying on non-physical communication such as Facebook. "The human brain is built to unconsciously detect remarkably small changes in other people's smile and frown muscles, pupil size (larger pupils indicate happiness), wrinkles around the eyes (genuine smiles have them, but false smiles don't), skin color (faces get pale with fear and red with rage), eyebrow movement (arching indicates puzzlement), pitch (happy is higher-pitched), volume (loud is more excited), speech rate (rapid can indicate fear), and posture (tight bodies and downward head indicate sadness). The absence of these cues from the text-based interaction typical of the Web."

In our high stakes strategic planning meetings we always specific a u-shaped or conference table arrangement. This enables people to watch and "listen" to all the non-verbal clues of their fellow teammates. We also ask everyone to put their wireless devices, cell phones and ipads, into airplane mode. (You can't really listen when your eyes are focused on the latest email or tweet.)

If you're interested in having a facilitated strategic planning meeting that moves you from concept to tangible implementation, check out [... contact info for client]

## AFTER – WITH THE EDITS

I recently participated in a five-hour video-conference ~~d-meeting~~. In so many respects, tThe technology was amazing. We had participants from across the US who that only had to step into their office at work or at business or home ~~office~~ to join the meeting. I could watch everyone's face in split screen, albeit in relatively low resolution. No one had to waste a day or two traveling. No one had to spend the night sleeping on a hotel bed, eating hotel room service. No one had to dip into their travel budget. What wasn't to like?

However, aAs I reflected on the meeting, I was-remembered ~~reminded of an old joke about~~the ~~old~~ doctors' joke. "How did the operation go?" one doctor asked his ~~asked the~~ colleague.

"Oh, the operation went well," the sSurgeon replied.

"How is the patient doing?" was the followup~~follow-up~~ question.

"Oh, he died, but the operation was a great success."

The meeting held via videoconference didn't succeed in helping the participants reach~~driving to~~ a greater understanding; in fact,– it failed in its truth-seeking objective. The participants didn't leave with any greater insights than the preconceptions they had coming into the meeting. When all was said and done, audio and low-resolution video doesn't communicate nearly enough information.

~~<div>~~In the April issue of Pacific Standard, Clifford Nass notes in the April issue of the~~<a~~  
~~title="Is Facebook Stunting Your Child's Growth?" href="http://www.psmag.com/culture/is-~~  
~~facebook-stunting-your-childs-growth-40577/" target="\_blank">~~PACIFIC\*STANDARD ~~</a>~~  
Clifford Nass notes some of the issues with relying on non-physical communication such as Facebook. "The human brain is built to unconsciously detect remarkably small changes in other people's smile and frown muscles, pupil size (larger pupils indicate happiness), wrinkles around the eyes (genuine smiles have them, but false smiles don't), skin color (faces get pale with fear and red with rage), eyebrow movement (arching indicates puzzlement), pitch (happy is higher-pitched), volume (loud is more excited), speech rate (rapid can indicate fear), and posture (tight bodies and downward head indicate sadness)." The~~fire~~ is an] absence of these cues from the text-based interaction typical of the Web, and we don't get the full effect of these cues from a videoconference, either.~~</blockquote>~~

In ~~theour~~ high-stakes strategic planning meetings that we facilitate, we always specify a a u-shaped table or a conference table arrangement. This enables people to watch and "listen" to all the non-verbal clues of their fellow teammates. We also ask everyone to put their wireless devices, cell phones and iPpads, into airplane mode. That's because ~~(y~~you can't really listen when your eyes are focused on the latest email or tweet.)

[To make for a better transition to your concluding call to action this could use one more short paragraph that links the need for face-to-face interactions with strategic planning meetings.]

# Red Pencils Ready?

By PHILIP B. CORBETT

AUGUST 19, 2014 8:00 AM The New York Times – After Deadline blog

[http://afterdeadline.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/08/19/red-pencils-ready-10/?\\_php=true&\\_type=blogs&module=BlogPost-ReadMore&version=Blog%20Main&action=Click&contentCollection=After%20Deadline&pgtype=Blogs&region=Body&r=0#more-1198](http://afterdeadline.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/08/19/red-pencils-ready-10/?_php=true&_type=blogs&module=BlogPost-ReadMore&version=Blog%20Main&action=Click&contentCollection=After%20Deadline&pgtype=Blogs&region=Body&r=0#more-1198)

For this week’s roundup of grammar, style and other editing missteps, we turn once again to the popular After Deadline Quiz. Try to identify at least one problem in each of the following passages; answers and explanations are below.

...

1. *Nearby, Tim Palmer, 28, a pharmacist who lives in Long Beach, laid on his back as happy electronic music wafted across the bright green lawn.*

...

2. *The captain, Lee Jun-seok, 69, has yet to explain publicly why he abandoned the ship with people aboard — an apparent violation of maritime protocol, if not the law — as it sunk beneath the waves.*

...

3. *The buildings went up without planning permission, safety regulations or proper infrastructure. Neglected by City Hall and the Israeli government, there are no regular municipal services or policing.*

...

4. *She quietly approached the Church of Cyprus, which said the frescoes had been secreted out of the apse and the dome of the church of St. Euphemianos in Lyssi, in a part of Cyprus that had been annexed by Turkey in 1974.*

...

5. *The statistics present a different picture of President Obama’s enforcement policies than the one painted by many immigrant advocates, who have assailed the president as the “deporter in chief” and accused him of rushing to reach a record of two million deportations.*

...

6. *The change in legal terms, which occurred shortly after a judge refused to dismiss a case brought against the company by consumers in California, made General Mills one of the first, if not the first, major food companies to seek to impose what legal experts call “forced arbitration” on consumers.*

HKS Workshop – 09/22/14 “Editing Yourself: How to Copy Edit Your Own Writing”  
Kate Victory Hannisian \* Blue Pencil Consulting \* [www.bluepencilconsulting.com](http://www.bluepencilconsulting.com)

...

7. Mr. Bratton has often cited Peel to argue that the number of stop-and-frisk encounters were too high for a city as safe as New York.

...

8. On Wednesday afternoon, two days before its scheduled closing, Rizzoli Bookstore was crowded with the sort of people who, never especially populous in Midtown Manhattan, appear even more like icicles in the desert: gray-haired women with Mohawks or turbans, students, men with indifferent facial grooming, older citizens.

...

9. Mr. Espaillat, who lost by less than 1,100 votes in 2012, still faces difficult odds in unseating Mr. Rangel.

...

10. They live in shelters built from Rubbermaid containers stuffed with straw and are fed a couple times a day.

...

11. Beyond adding cachet, the building's moniker comes from a Mercedes dealership along 11th Avenue, the other ground-floor tenant besides the Police Department.

...

12. In fact, an examination by The New York Times has found that there was virtually no investigation at all, either by the police or the university.

## Answers and Comments

1. Nearby, Tim Palmer, 28, a pharmacist who lives in Long Beach, **laid** on his back as happy electronic music wafted across the bright green lawn.

One of our most common missteps, and it drives readers crazy. The verb we're using here is "lie," not "lay," and the past tense is "lay," not "laid."

...

2. The captain, Lee Jun-seok, 69, has yet to explain publicly why he abandoned the ship with people aboard — an apparent violation of maritime protocol, if not the law — as it **sunk** beneath the waves.

Our rule for the past tense of these irregular verbs is to use the first choice listed in our newsroom dictionary, Webster's New World College. Make it "sank."

...

3. *The buildings went up without planning permission, safety regulations or proper infrastructure. **Neglected by City Hall and the Israeli government, there are no regular municipal services or policing.***

A dangler. What is neglected by City Hall?

...

4. *She quietly approached the Church of Cyprus, which said the frescoes had been **secreted** out of the apse and the dome of the church of St. Euphemianos in Lyssi, in a part of Cyprus that had been annexed by Turkey in 1974.*

This version of the verb “secrete” means “hide,” so this construction (“secreted out of”) doesn’t really work. Maybe we meant “spirited out of” or “smuggled out of.”

...

5. *The statistics present a **different picture** of President Obama’s enforcement policies **than** the one painted by many immigrant advocates, who have assailed the president as the “deporter in chief” and accused him of rushing to reach a record of two million deportations.*

As The Times’s stylebook says, use “different from” in front of a noun, not “different than.”

...

6. *The change in legal terms, which occurred shortly after a judge refused to dismiss a case brought against the company by consumers in California, **made General Mills one of the first, if not the first, major food companies** to seek to impose what legal experts call “forced arbitration” on consumers.*

This structure doesn’t work because the plural “companies” works with “one of the first ...” but not with “the first ...” Perhaps say “made General Mills one of the first major food companies, if not the first, to seek ...”

...

7. *Mr. Bratton has often cited Peel to argue that **the number** of stop-and-frisk encounters **were too high** for a city as safe as New York.*

We were led astray by the plural noun “encounters” in the prepositional phrase. Make it “the number ... was too high.”

...

8. *On Wednesday afternoon, two days before its scheduled closing, Rizzoli Bookstore was crowded with **the sort of people who, never especially populous** in Midtown Manhattan, appear even more like icicles in the desert: gray-haired women with Mohawks or turbans, students, men with indifferent facial grooming, older citizens.*

The city or the neighborhood might be “populous” — that is, containing a lot of people. The people themselves would be “numerous.”

...

9. *Mr. Espaillat, who lost by **less than 1,100 votes** in 2012, still faces difficult odds in unseating Mr. Rangel.*

For countable numbers like this, make it “fewer,” not “less.”

...

10. *They live in shelters built from Rubbermaid containers stuffed with straw and are fed **a couple times a day**.*

Don’t omit “of” from this construction; make it “a couple of times a day.”

...

11. *Beyond adding cachet, the building’s **moniker** comes from a Mercedes dealership along 11th Avenue, the other ground-floor tenant besides the Police Department.*

Why the slang “moniker”? It adds nothing; just say “name.” (The building in question is called Mercedes House.)

...

12. *In fact, an examination by The New York Times has found that there was virtually no investigation at all, **either by the police or the university**.*

What comes after “or” should be grammatically parallel to what comes after “either.” In this case, “either” was followed by a prepositional phrase, but “or” wasn’t. Make it “either by the police or by the university,” or “by either the police or the university.”