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HOW TO EDIT YOUR OWN WRITING AND OTHERS'

A Communications Workshop
Harvard Kennedy School

I. First, do no harm
   a. Don't edit too soon (for your own work: get some distance!)
   b. Be alert to the draft's stage of development
      i. 'Developmental' editing holds lightly to words, tries to identify key terms, images, and arguments
      ii. 'line editing' refines sentences and paragraphs when other things are already in place.
   c. Educate yourself about relevant conventions
   d. Preserve freshness and surprise
II. Evaluate drafts for the big things before launching into small. Ask:
   a. Is the idea clear, original, surprising, complex, and worthwhile?
   b. Are the design elements appropriate for the reader and venue? Does the piece:
      i. establish authority?
      ii. connect with reader concerns, anticipating reader's prior knowledge and degree of investment (or resistance)?
      iii. use appropriate word choice and key terms?
      iv. reference (and argue with) appropriate sources?
      v. follow the relevant conventions?
   c. Does the structure serve the argument and reader? Does it:
      i. Move from known to unknown, not drowning reader in either?
      ii. Anticipate the questions and objections arising from its analysis?
      iii. Keep its promise/thesis clearly in view at transitions, without creating too many boring or repetitive signposts?
      iv. Give the reader the context necessary to understand its judgments?
III. Get the words right. Look for:
   a. Clarity of characters and actions
   b. Active voice
   c. Efficient wording
   d. Coherent, cohesive paragraphs
   e. Appropriate degree of presence of author
      i. "I" only when it strengthens an argument
      ii. Moves that make something personal or impersonal
IV. Get punctuation, spelling, and other formalities right.
V. Some tools:
   a. Reverse outlines for structure
   b. "Which" hunts and searches for nominalizations
   c. % reductions
VI. Resources:
   a. Joseph Williams, *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*
   b. Theodore Reese Cheney, *Getting the Words Right*
   c. Roy Peter Clark, *Writing Tools*