Editing Your Own Work: Part 1

Thomas W. Jones, PhD, CG, FASG, FUGA, FNGS, CGG ♦ Tom@JonesResearchServices.com

> This session focuses on "big-picture" editing, including stages of self-editing; focus; keeping the writer out of the narrative; editing the writing's overall structure, organization, and flow; and improving major and minor subdivisions of written genealogical narratives, including paragraphing.

Why edit yourself?

> "An editor edits above all to communicate to readers."
>
> —Plotnik, *Elements of Editing*, 2.

Clarity: To ensure that your readers don't have to struggle to understand what you are trying to say and will continue reading your work

Conciseness: To convey your work as efficiently as possible so that readers don't have to make their way around and through unnecessary words and will continue reading your work

Credibility: To convey your competence to readers so that they will give your work credibility and continue reading it

---

GENEALOGY STANDARD 69

"**Clear writing**. Genealogical writing meets general conventions for accuracy, clarity, and coherence. Written narratives are reasonably free from abbreviations, chitchat, convolutions, dead-end arguments, digressions, extraneous details, jargon, malapropisms, typographical errors, and other characteristics that interfere with readability. Writing style is straightforward and precise."

—Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 2 ed., rev. (Nashville, Tenn.: Ancestry.com, 2021), 38.

Iterative stages of self editing

> iterative: "involving repetition."
>
> —Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary

> "There is no hiding the fact that writing well is a complex, difficult, and time-consuming process."
>
> —Elbow, *Writing with Power,* 3.

Start with a focus: You write to share new or rediscovered knowledge or information in a narrative format. What is the story you want to tell? Is the story's focus the solution to a specific relationship or identity problem? Is the focus a single event? Is it a person or family? Or is it something else?

Draft a title: Write a title, in fewer than thirty words, that describes your story's intended focus and gives readers a reason to read it. Include the important surname(s) and location(s). Your paper's focus may shift as you do further research and writing. As shifts occur, recast your title as needed.

Write rough: Jot down words or sentences that describe why you are writing the narrative you are working on and what you expect the focus of your final written product to be. If some of the story's parts are apparent to you at this point, draft titles for those sections of your paper.

(Section continues.)

Iterative stages of self editing *(Continuing)*

> "So now you have a draft. Everything in it is of course provisional; nevertheless, the blank page is gone. Painlessly, you have made a start. . . . Amateurs try to write in one go: professionals draft and draft again."
>
> — Fowler, *How to Write, 17–18.*

Add flesh: Add information to sections of your paper, and title the sections. This may begin with any part of the paper—not necessarily its beginning or end section. Start with the part that interests you the most. This stage's goal is a rough draft addressing the ground you want your paper to cover. You may need to undertake further research to achieve that goal. Coverage, not detail, should be your focus at this stage. That coverage may change as you do more research and more work with your paper. Expect this stage to take weeks, months, or longer. As you do further work on your paper, you may add further information.

(Section continues.)

Revise and re-revise: This stage involves multiple iterations of writing and rewriting, which may occur over a period of weeks or months. You will add information and remove information. You may add new sections and remove other entire sections. You may bring back information that you deleted (and saved in a separate file). You may move sentences, paragraphs, and sections to help you see how they best fit together. Your goals at this stage are sequencing and organization, not polish. This stage ends when you believe your entire paper to be sequentially organized, but you may re-visit your paper's organization and sequencing at any point before submitting it to others.

> "Correcting is not revising. There's no bigger misunderstanding about how writing gets to be better. Correcting is small, local, instant. . . .It's easy to confuse fixing errors with revising ideas and reconfiguring the shape of text. . . . Sometimes it's hard to draw a line between a tiny revision and a big correction.... Proofreading isn't revising, either. Revisers correct, then they think bigger."
>
> — Germano, *On Revision, 25–26.*

Proofreading: This stage involves multiple iterations of reading and rereading your paper many, many times. You look for issues of sequencing and flow, titles of sections and subsections, paragraphing (including topic sentences), and technical issues, like capitalization, punctuation, spelling, and word choice. You question every word and punctuation mark: Is it needed or not? Is it correct or not? Will it be clear to naive readers? This work may send you back to prior stages, as the paper becomes cleaner and clearer.

Vetting: Ask someone—a naive reader, an expert in your subject matter, or both—to read your paper and to tell you about any problems—large or small—they see. Encourage the person or persons to ask you questions about the paper. Revise it accordingly. What one reader does not understand, many others also will not understand.

Submit: If you do not submit your paper for others to read, your work on it has been nearly worthless. Publication is ideal, because it facilitates your paper's availability to future generations of descendants and collateral relatives. Potential publishing venues include genealogical journals of national, state, and local scope, and genealogical-society newsletters. The Periodical Source Index (PERSI) indexes them all, optimizing their availability to readers and researchers interested in your topic in the future.

If your written narrative will appear in a formal or traditional setting and it is not an autobiography, you—the author—should be invisible in the story you are telling.

Keeping yourself out of your narrative

> "Place yourself in the background. Write in a way that draws the reader's attention to the sense and substance of the writing, rather than to the mood and temper of the author."
>
> —Strunk & White, *Elements of Style,* 70.

> "Technical Writers are trained to reveal almost nothing about themselves in their writing."
>
> —Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Palm Sunday* (New York: Dial, 1999)*,* 65.

Genealogical readers, especially those who are not close relatives, are interested in reading about ancestors and historical events, not about you, your research, and your reasoning processes.

This *does not mean* that you use another writer's voice—you should write in a style that is comfortable to you and appropriate for the setting where your writing will appear.

This *does mean* that, within your genealogical narrative, you should not refer to yourself directly (*I, me, myself,* or even *the author*), unless you cannot possibly avoid it. You also should not refer to yourself indirectly (*It is believed* or *is unknown.*) Referring to an existing source in the past tense (*The census showed*) also is an indirect way of intruding yourself and the present into a narrative set mostly or entirely in the past.

The grammatical subjects of most of your sentences should be the people you're writing about. If those people are deceased, those sentences' verbs should be in the past tenses. Sometimes your grammatical subjects will be sources or objects. If they still exist, those sentences' verbs should be in the present tense. If they no longer exist, the sentences' verbs should be in the past tense.

Editing your writing's overall structure and organization

> "Your lead [first sentence] must capture the reader immediately and force him to keep reading. It must cajole him with freshness, or novelty, or paradox, or humor, or surprise, or with an unusual idea, or an interesting fact, or a question. Anything will do, as long as it nudges his curiosity and tugs at his sleeve."
>
> —*Zinsser, On Writing Well*, 55.

The beginning section. This is the essay's introduction, but it usually is not titled. Introductions may contain one paragraph, but they usually contain more. Essays' beginning sections may have titled subsections, but they usually do not. This section introduces the essay's focus—specifically the research question, problem, forgotten relationship or identification, or other unknown or forgotten information that the research discussed in the essay's middle section will reveal. This section begins with an enticing sentence to draw readers' interest. This section sets the stage for the research findings that the essay's middle section will address. That stage may include the essay's chronological and physical setting and any related factors—for example, poverty, record loss, or unsuccessful or incomplete prior research—that may provide background information. The section likely will identify and firmly document "known" ancestors whose unknown parents, origins, activities, or something else. The section may include the research question's answer, if that placement helps readers understand how newfound information supports it. The section should begin with a sentence that will interest readers. It should end with a sentence foreshadowing or leading into the essay's middle section.

Edit your essay's beginning to ensure that readers will understand the research problem and all its relevant contextual factors. You also want to ensure that the section sets the stage for new research findings but does not disclose those findings.

Editing your writing's overall structure and organization *(Continuing)*

> Aristotle: "the proper structure of the Plot [is a] . . . whole . . . , which has a beginning, a middle, and an end."
>
> —*The Poetics of Aristotle,* part 7, trans. A. H. Butcher (New York: Mcmillan, 1902), 31.

> "Tell readers 'what you're going to say; say it; then tell them what you've said.'"
>
> — Dale Carnegie, *The Quick and Easy Way to Effective Speaking* (New York: Pocket Books, 1977), 75.

The middle section. This, the essay's longest section, will contain several to many paragraphs and pages. It usually is divided into titled subsections (called *subheads*). The middle section usually begins with the title of its first subsection. As needed for clarity, you may divide subsections into titled sub-subsections. In longer and more complex essays, you may divide the titled sub-subsections into titled sub-sub-subsections. Generally, these divisions and subdivisions reflect groupings (and subgroupings, if needed) of related research findings. In each division you present, discuss (analyze, correlate, or both), and assemble the research findings. Each division builds on prior sections. Eventually, you aggregate the findings and discussions into support for a conclusion—the answer to the research question or a solution to the problem posed in the essay's beginning section.

Font choices distinguish whether a title is the title of a subsection, sub-subsection, or sub-sub-subsection. For example, the title of a subsection might all caps centered on the page, the title of a sub-subsection might be all caps at the left margin, and the title of sub-sub-subsection might be italicized at the left margin.

Overall, the middle section bridges the essay's beginning and end sections. With new research findings, it builds on the background information in the essay's beginning and leads to the essay's conclusion. The research findings will be unfolded, discussed, dissected, and reassembled to support the conclusion.

Edit the middle section's structure by ensuring that related groups of sources, information, and evidence, or some combination, are grouped in titled divisions of at least two paragraphs. Ensure that any divided subsections have at least two titled sub-subsections. Ensure that the titles of divisions accurately reflect their focus (the reason why they are grouped together) and will draw readers into the section. Also check to ensure that the sequencing in the middle section is linear. If information in one division supports information in another division, ensure that the supporting information is sequenced to appear before the section that it supports. Ensure that you do not repeat information, unless the repetition is unavoidable. In sum, ensure that the middle section unfolds the relevant evidence in a linear fashion.

The end section. In formal publications, the essay's end section is titled *Conclusion*. It may contain one or a few paragraphs and no titled subsections. It summarizes the problem and solution and discusses any implications of that solution for a family or other researchers. Its last sentence brings the entire essay to a satisfying close. The end section may repeat information presented earlier but the wording should differ.

Edit the end section to ensure that it states the problem or question that is the essay's focus and also states the problem's solution or question's answer. Ensure that it discusses, in a separate paragraph, any implications of the research findings. Ensure that the last sentence provides closure.

Editing your writing's paragraphing

> "Make the paragraph the unit of composition."
>
> —Strunk & White, *The Elements of Style*, 15.

A *paragraph* is a group of sentences addressing a specific topic or theme. (A *sentence* is a group of words expressing a single thought.) Writers discuss one topic or a group of related topics in each paragraph.

Each paragraph should have a *topic sentence* stating the topic that the group of sentences have in common. The topic sentence usually is the paragraph's first or second sentence. It explains to the reader the relatedness and relevance of the various thoughts or facts that the paragraph's sentences contain. A topic sentence pulls a group of sentences together to make the paragraph meaningful. Topic sentences tell readers the significance of the paragraph's other sentences. They also make your readers want to read the paragraph. Rarely, if ever, should a paragraph's last sentence be its topic sentence. Readers won't know why they're reading what they're reading in the paragraph until—or *if*—they get to that last sentence. If communication breaks down, they might never get there.

> "The paragraph is a main unit of composition. . . . It develops a single topic, and so has a distinct, independent unity. As a distinct passage, it begins with a new line. . . It may be helpful to think of the paragraph as a box containing a bunch of closely related ideas about the topic. At paragraph end your readers are in a different place from they started; the paragraph has taken them from A to B."
>
> —Fowler, *How to Write*, 32.

Paragraphs end (or "break") when the topic or viewpoint changes. Paragraphs should not be too short—most should contain at least three sentences. Too-short paragraphs are "undeveloped." As you revise a paper, broaden a paragraph's focus to incorporate a too-short paragraph. Paragraphs should not be too long. Too-long paragraphs can be convoluted and hard to follow. Identify more than one focus in a long paragraph, and discuss each focus in its own paragraph.

Aesthetically, readers should see at least one paragraph break on every page. You decide whether you want to separate paragraphs with a first-line indent (which is common) or with space between the paragraphs (like this syllabus material). You must choose one or the other—you should not separate paragraphs with both white space and first-line indents. First-line indents often are 0.2 or 0.25 inches in width. Whatever you choose should be consistent for all paragraphs in the same written work.

In unpaginated electronic environments create a new paragraph with its own topic sentence every three-to-six sentences or so, varying paragraph length. Longer paragraphs seem harder to read in blogs, e-mails, and other online environments.

> "Being self-contained, paragraphs can be written in any order. If one of them gives you grief, leave it alone and go on to the next, and so keep up your momentum."
>
> —Fowler, *How to Write*, 38.

Write all or most of a paragraph's sentences in one tense. (In genealogical writing, this usually is the past tense.) Shifts in verb tense should be intentional, and the number of tense shifts within a paragraph should be few or none. Reword to minimize repetition of words and concepts within a paragraph or adjacent paragraphs.

When editing your paragraphs, check to ensure that all the sentences in a paragraph are related. Check also for a topic sentence, that it's near the beginning of the paragraph, and that it states the topic that holds the sentences together. Check to ensure that your paragraphs are neither too short nor too long. If too short, combine paragraphs into a broader topic. If too long, separate the paragraph into related, but separate topics.

Remember that paragraphing is both logical and aesthetic.

Editing your writing for flow

Transitions and flow occur at the *sentence level,* the *paragraph level*, and *the section level* (division or subdivision). Paragraphs group related sentences together, and section divisions and subdivisions group related paragraphs together. The essay's focus—as stated in the work's title, its introduction, and its conclusion—ties the sections together. Within that overall structure, sentences must flow from one to the next, paragraphs must flow from one to the next, and sections must flow from one to the next. At all three levels—sentences, paragraphs, and section divisions—the entire paper should flow from its first sentence to its last.

At the sentence level some combination of antecedent and its pronoun, content factors, parallel sentence structures, repeated words, and transition words (like *also, however, similarly,* and *yet*) help sentences flow from one to the next. You should not use any of those devices so frequently that they become noticeable.

At the paragraph and section levels first and last sentences provide linkages. A paragraph's or section's first sentence may refer, directly or indirectly, to a person, event, or other content in the prior paragraph or section. Similarly, paragraph's or section's last sentence may foreshadow content in the following paragraph or section. Rarely would you do both for the same transition. A one-sentence paragraph sometimes can facilitate the transition from one section to the next.

Subsection titles (subheads) also facilitate transitions from one section to the next. The title, stating the focus of a subsection, functions as a traffic sign. It tells the reader that the discussion of the preceding topic has ended and the essay is turning to the next topic. Subheads also serve to pique readers' interest in the section that the subhead announces.

> "As a rule, single sentences should not be written or printed as paragraphs. An exception may be made of sentences of transition, indicating the relation between the parts of an exposition or argument."
>
> —Strunk & White, *Elements of Style*, 16.

> "Learn to enjoy this tidying process. I don't like to write; I like to have written. But I love to rewrite. I especially like to cut: to press the DELETE key and see an unnecessary word or phrase or sentence vanish into the electricity. I like to replace a humdrum word with one that has more precision or color. I like to strengthen the transition between one sentence and another, I like to rephrase a drab sentence to give it a more pleasing rhythm or a more graceful musical line. With every small refinement I feel that I'm coming nearer to where I would like to arrive, and when I finally get there I know it was the rewriting, not the writing, that won the game.'"
>
> — Zinsser, *On Writing Well*, 87.

> "You can now begin revising from the specific viewpoint of READERS. Once you know what you have to say, it's time to think about explaining it to others. Imagine people reading your piece, and work at making it utterly clear to them. At each point you need to be sure you are not assuming knowledge of a later passage: in this sense there should be a single linear sequence throughout your piece. Be certain to close off every ambiguity, if it is only a momentary one."
>
> — Fowler, *How to Write*, 23.

Source material and recommended references on writing and self-editing

Bates, Jefferson D. *Writing with Precision: How to Write So that You Cannot Possibly Be Misunderstood*. New York: Penguin, 2000.

Blake, Gary, and Robert W. Bly. *The Elements of Technical Writing: The Essential Guide to Writing Clear, Concise Proposals, Reports, Manuals, Letters, Memos, and Other Documents in Every Technical Field*. New York: Longman, 1993.

Board for Certification of Genealogists. "Standards for Writing." In *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd edition revised. Nashville, Tennessee: Ancestry.com, 2021.

Cheney, Theodore A. Rees. *Getting the Words Right: How to Rewrite, Edit and Revise*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1983.

Clark, Roy Peter. *Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer*. New York: Little, Brown, 2006..

DeGrazia, Laura A. "Skillbuilding: Proof Arguments." *OnBoard: Newsletter of the Board for Certification of Genealogists* 15 (January 2009), 1–2. Online, *Board for Certification of Genealogists*. https://bcgcertification.org/skillbuilding -proof-arguments/ : 2024.

Dreyer, Benjamin. *Dreyer's English: An Utterly Correct Guide to Clarity and Style.* New York: Random House, 2009.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*, 2nd edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Fiske, Robert Hartwell. *The Dictionary of Concise Writing: 10,000 Alternatives to Wordy Phrases*. Oak Park, Illinois: Marion Street Press, 2002.

Flaherty, Francis. *The Elements of Story: Field Notes on Nonfiction Writing*. New York: Harper, 2009.

Fowler, Alistair. *How to Write*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Garner, Bryan A. *The Chicago Guide to Grammar, Usage, and Punctuation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Germano, William. *On Revision: The Only Writing That Counts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021.

Hale, Constance. *Sin and Syntax: How to Craft Wickedly Effective Prose*. New York: Broadway Books, 1999.

Hart, Jack. *A Writer's Coach: The Complete Guide to Writing Strategies That Work*. New York: Anchor Books, 2007.

Jones, Thomas W. "GPS Element 5: The Written Conclusion." *Mastering Genealogical Proof*. Arlington, Va.: National Genealogical Society, 2013.

Source material and recommended references on writing and self-editing
(Continuing)

Jones, Thomas W. "Proof arguments and Case Studies." In Elizabeth Shown Mills, editor. *Professional Genealogy: Preparation, Practice & Standards*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 2018.

Leclerc, Michael J. "Crafting Family Histories." In Elizabeth Shown Mills, editor. *Professional Genealogy: Preparation, Practice & Standards*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 2018.

Little, Barbara Vines. "Skillbuilding: It's Not That Hard to Write Proof Arguments." *OnBoard: Newsletter of the Board for Certification of Genealogists* 15 (September 2009): 20–23; online, *Board for Certification of Genealogists*. https://bcgcertification.org/skillbuilding-its-not-that-hard-to-write-proof-arguments/ : 2024.

Mathews, Barbara Jean. "Reporting on a Brick Wall: The Genealogical Travelogue." *Association of Professional Genealogists Quarterly* 17 (December 2002): 131.

Mills, Elizabeth Shown, editor. "Writing and Compiling." In *Professional Genealogy: A Manual for Researchers, Writers, Editors, Lecturers, and Librarians*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2001.

———. "Proof Arguments and Case Studies." In *Professional Genealogy: A Manual for Researchers, Writers, Editors, Lecturers, and Librarians*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2001.

O'Conner, Patricia T. *Words Fail Me: What Everyone Who Writes Should Know about Writing*. New York: Harcourt, 1999.

Peters, Nancy A. "Research Reports." In Elizabeth Shown Mills, editor. *Professional Genealogy: Preparation, Practice & Standards*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 2018.

Pinker, Steven. *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*. New York: Viking, 2014.

Plotnik, Arthur. *The Elements of Editing: A Modern Guide for Editors and Journalists*. New York: Macmillan, 1982.

Ross-Larson, Bruce. *Edit Yourself: A Manual for Everyone Who Works with Words*. New York: Norton, 1996.

Stratton, Penelope L., and Henry B. Hoff. *Guide to Genealogical Writing: How to Write and Publish Your Family History*. Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2014.

Zinsser, William *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. New York: Collins, 2006.