

Editing Your Own Work: Part 2

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This session focuses on “nitty-gritty” editing, including capitalization, punctuation, sentence structure, spelling, word choice, and reducing word count. Attending to these characteristics adds clarity, credibility, readability, and polish to your written work. That attention is part of the process editing your own work.

Reducing your word count

“Cutting the fat is probably the quickest and surest way to improve. No matter how solid your grasp of grammar, punctuation, spelling, and other fundamentals, you cannot write well unless you train yourself to write with fewer words.”

—Richard Lederer, “Introduction,” in Fiske, *Dictionary of Concise Writing*, 12.

“Just as your speech is filled with many words that add nothing to what you say, your writing is often larded with words that obscure your meaning rather than clarify it. Trim this fat to direct your readers’ attention to important words and ideas.”

—Ross-Larson, *Edit Yourself*, 3.

Reducing word count as you edit your own work is the easiest and most significant way to improve your writing. Editing yourself always should focus on reducing your essay’s word count. Remove unnecessary words as you work on each draft of your essay and as you make passes through your essay to revise and polish it. This is important from two interrelated perspectives:

1. From the writer’s perspective, concise writing is clearer, more credible, and more polished than wordier writing. It is the best way for you to present the information you want to communicate to your readers.
2. From the reader’s perspective, concise writing is easier to understand and more enjoyable to read. Readers will get more from concise writing than they will from wordier writing.

Removing words is easy. The hard part is detecting superfluous words in your own writing. You can reduce your word count in dozens of ways, however, with alertness to contexts, parts of speech, and words that repeat or are unnecessary. Here are some examples of how to do this:

- Question every word you have written. If a word is not essential to the sentence or paragraph where the word appears, delete it.
- Avoid repetition. Delete words that appear repeatedly. Also, delete words that have the same meaning as other nearby words that are less important.
- Pay special attention to adverbs (words that modify verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs). Most adverbs add little or no meaning to your writing. Using adverbs, like *very*, for emphasis often has the opposite effect. Delete them where you can.
- Pay special attention also to adjectives. They are not as bad as adverbs for adding little or nothing to your writing, but many adjectives add little information of value. Be wary especially of adjectives that repeat the meaning of the noun they modify or are implicit in the meaning of that noun—like *dry desert* or *brave soldier*. Delete them where you can.
- Note all uses of passive voice. Not only is the passive voice often unnecessary, it uses more words than the active voice. Changing a passive-voice verb to an active-voice verb helps reduce your word count. Make that change wherever you can.

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“Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.”

—Strunk and White,
Elements of Style, 17

- Note all conjunctions—like *and*, *but*, *or*, and *however*. Many of them will be unnecessary. You often can delete conjunctions joining independent clauses into compound sentences by separating the clauses into separate sentences. Join independent clauses with conjunctions only when meaning would be lost by separating them.
- Note prepositions, especially the preposition *of*, denoting possession, and then reword to reduce word count—for example, change *the son of John* to *John’s son*.
- When you need to refer to two versions of the same item or person, use an appositive instead of a status verb—or example, instead of *John was* [status verb] *a stable manager and he sold horses* [9 words], write *John, a stable manager* [appositive], *sold horses* [6 words].
- Writing as you would speak is a good way to begin writing, but when we speak we use many more words than we need in writing. Once you have started writing you should move away from writing as you would speak and, instead focus on communicating more cleanly, clearly, and concisely.
- Keep an eye on the word-count area at the bottom left of the page in a Microsoft Word file.
- Consult references like Robert Harwell Fiske’s *The Dictionary of Concise Writing* and Bruce Ross-Larson’s *Edit Yourself*. (See the source list at the end of this handout.)
- More than half the 110 pages in *Edit Yourself* provide examples of ways to improve overly wordy phrases. Its first chapter, titled “Fat,” addresses seven categories of unnecessary wordiness, each with a list of examples and ways to convey the same meaning in fewer words. Examples from genealogical writing illustrate each category:
 1. Superfluous nouns. Change *tract of twenty acres of land* to *twenty acres*.
 2. Superfluous verbs. Change *made changes in their plans* to *changed their plans*.
 3. Superfluous article and prepositions. Change *many of the immigrants* to *many immigrants*.
 4. The opening “It.” Change *It was Mary who died first* to *Mary died first*.
 5. The opening “There.” Change *There were two streams running through the farm* to *Two streams ran through the farm*.
 6. Overweight prepositions. Change *in regard to his crops* to *about his crops*.
 7. Weak modifiers. Delete words like *actually*, *at this time*, *certainly*, *in fact*, *namely*, *needless to say*, *particularly*, *really*, *truly*, *very*, and many more. None of them carry any meaning of importance besides the meaning of the verbs, adjectives, or adverbs they modify.

Editing your capitalization

Capitalization refers to beginning a word with a capital letter (also called an *uppercase* letter). The concept is familiar, but applying it can be complicated. Many words that are correctly capitalized in one context should be uncapitalized (all *lowercase* letters) in other contexts. The guidelines here begin with the most familiar contexts. They also address some of the complications:

- Without exception, complete sentences should begin with a capital letter. *Independent clauses* have the syntax of a complete sentence, but they can be part of a complete sentence. Thus, independent clauses that do not begin a sentence (including independent clauses following colons) should not begin with a capital letter—unless the independent clause’s first word is a word that otherwise would need to be capitalized. (See below.)
- All words that are proper nouns—names of specific persons, places, and things, including publications and works of art in various media—should be capitalized.
- Note that some nouns can be proper nouns in one context and a common noun in another context—*China*, for example, refers to a specific country, and *china* refers to dishes in a particular kind of cabinet.
- Also, words derived from proper nouns will not be capitalized when they do not refer directly to the specific person, place, or thing—for example, *arabic numerals* and *the roman alphabet* do not refer specifically to Arabia and Rome.
- Personal titles are capitalized when they precede a person’s name, but not in other contexts—for example, *the society’s president*.
- Words that would be proper nouns when they refer to a specific person, place, or thing are not capitalized when the words refer to a generality, not the specific person, place, or thing—what is called a *generic usage* of the word or phrase. This is usually true when a grammatical article—*a*, *an*, or *the*—precedes the words. Examples include *the county courthouse*, *the county clerk*, *a society’s board*, and *the army’s general*. Exceptions include situations where the article is used for emphasis—for example, *the Bonair Hotel* and *the Jones children*.

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“**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*,
2nd ed., rev. (Nashville, Tenn: Ancestry.com, 2021), 38.

Editing your capitalization

(Continuing)

- Genealogical writers with questions about capitalizing typically consult either or both of two resources while editing their own writing:
- A reputable dictionary. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th edition (the most recent edition of the print version) is the recommended hard-copy dictionary. It is updated online. (See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>). Apps containing the dictionary are available for mobile devices and desktop computers. Dictionary entries typically are lowercased. If the dictionary entry is capitalized, the word likely is one that should be capitalized wherever it appears in your writing.
- The *Chicago Manual of Style*, 17th edition (the most recent), provides an entire chapter on “Names, Terms, and Titles of Works,” which addresses capitalization. Nearly all the chapter’s subsections have genealogical relevance. The topics include personal names; titles and offices; epithets, kinship names, and personifications; ethnic, socioeconomic, and other groups; names of places; historical and cultural terms; calendar and time designations; religious names and terms; military terms; and names of ships and other vehicles.

Editing your punctuation

In narrative writing genealogists most frequently use eight kinds of punctuation marks:

- *Commas* [,] separate words or phrases in a series. In genealogical writing, which follows *Chicago* style, a comma setting off the last item in the series is conventional. Commas also set off longer clauses and phrases at the beginning or end of a sentence when the commas add clarity. In pairs, they set off appositive information within a sentence. That pairing includes setting off a state’s name after a city’s name mid-sentence—for example, *Akron, Ohio, is . . .*
- *Dashes* [– and —] include the en dash, which is about double the length of a hyphen, and the em dash, which is double the length of an en dash. En dashes most commonly connect numbers or words at the ends of a range to show they are not hyphenated—for example, 1822–47, 1907–1958, and May–December. Em dashes set off phrases—usually in pairs within sentences—to give them greater separation than commas would provide. Spaces neither precede nor follow either kind of dash.
- *Ellipsis points* [... and] within quotations signify that you have omitted words that appear in the original. If the omitted words include a period at the end of a sentence, use four periods. Otherwise, use three. Whether or not to insert spaces between the dots is an aesthetic decision. Once you make the decision, you should apply it consistently within the written work. Do not use ellipsis points at the beginning or end of a quotation. By definition, quotations come from longer passages. Using ellipsis point to show that you have omitted the preceding and following words is unnecessary.

“Manuscript editing, also called copyediting or line editing, requires attention to every word and mark of punctuation in a manuscript.”

—*Chicago Manual of Style*, 17th ed., 79, sect. 2.48.

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Editing your punctuation

(Continuing)

- *Hyphens* [-] commonly join compound words—like *great-grandmother*. They also join words that jointly modify a noun—for example, *test-taker's* surname.
- *Periods* [.] appear at the ends of sentences, after abbreviations that are not acronyms or initialisms, and within URLs. They also separate citation elements in bibliographies, reference lists, and source lists (but not in reference notes).
- *Question marks* [?] occasionally appear in genealogical writing, usually at the end of a rhetorical question.
- *Quotation marks* [“ ” ‘ and ’]. Double quotation marks set off quoted words within your writing. Single quotation marks set off words that appear between double quotation marks in a passage you are quoting. Double check to ensure that each quotation mark has a partner. Do not use quotation marks around block quotations. Within block quotations, retain the double quotation marks, if any, that appear in the quoted material.
- *Semicolons* [;] set off groups of phrases with internal commas. They also precede long conjunctions—like *however* and *nevertheless*—joining two independent clauses into a compound sentence.
- *Square brackets* [] surround a writer's words inserted within a quotation.

All the above except the dashes and a symbol for three tightly spaced ellipsis points appear on most computer keyboards. Those exceptions appear in Microsoft Word's Insert-Symbol tool under “More Symbols,” where writers can devise keyboard shortcuts—*alt-N* for the en dash, for example—for symbols they use frequently.

Parentheses [()] and slashes [/] rarely appear in genealogical narratives, though both are common in footnotes containing citations.

Editing your sentence structure

Sentences of any structure are a group of words expressing a single thought.

You can structure your sentences in any of three ways:

Dependent clauses are groups of words that do not form a sentence but can be attached to a sentence or be part of a sentence. They may appear in the sentence after a comma, but not always, and after words like *which*, *where*, *when*, *who*, or *that*; or after a verb form.

- *Simple sentences* are straightforward constructions with a subject, verb, and object in that order. They are one independent clause and have no appended dependent clauses or prepositional phrases.
- *Complex sentences* are expanded simple sentences that contain only one independent clause. The expansion, including one or more dependent clauses or prepositional phrases, creates the sentence's grammatical complexity.
- *Compound sentences* contain two or more simple sentences, complex sentences, or both joined together in one sentence. A comma or a semicolon usually separates the parts, and a conjunction also separates the last element of a compound sentence.

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Editing your sentence structure*(Continuing)*

Editing your sentence structure involves several considerations:

- Note each sentence's word count. (In Microsoft Word select the sentence and check the word-count area at the screen's bottom left.) Edit to ensure that your sentences are neither too short (fewer than three words) nor too long (more than thirty words), with few exceptions. Also, edit to vary the sentences' word count; strive for a mixture of shorter and longer sentences.
- Note the number of thoughts that the sentence addresses. If more than one, consider breaking the sentence into separate sentences, each expressing a single thought.
- Note each sentence's structure. Is it simple, complex, or compound? Where you can, simplify complex and compound sentences by moving the attached clauses to stand-alone simple sentences or by removing them entirely.
- Note each sentence's elements. Do they appear as grammatical-subject-verb-grammatical-object in that order? If not, consider revising the sentence to incorporate that more straightforward and readable sequence of sentence elements.

Editing your spelling

Use your software's spell-check feature, but do not trust it. Software catches and corrects many spelling errors, but it also flags correctly spelled words and misses incorrectly spelled words. When in doubt about a word's correct spelling, consult a reputable dictionary.

When you believe you have finished revising your essay, proofread it at least three times, one of which should be a "cold" reading several days after you previously looked at the essay. Many writers catch more spelling errors when they read a printout than they do when reading a computer screen. Also, ask a family member or friend to proofread the essay for spelling errors.

Double check your sources for the spelling of names and the original spelling of quoted material from time periods when correct spelling did not exist.

"When you, the writer, 'see again' the words you've written, you'll find something you can revise to make your work *more accurate, more concise, more helpful, more euphonious, more humorous, more serious, more in-keeping-with-the-time, more appropriate, more dramatic, more heart-stopping, more memorable, more . . .* or somehow *better* than the words that had originally arrived to convey to the world the vision your mind had seen." [The ellipsis points appear in the original material.]

Theodore A. Reese Cheney, "Introduction,"
Getting the Words Right: How to Rewrite, Edit & Revise
(Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1982, [vii].

Editing your word choices

As you polish and proofread your essay, you should question every word. Besides addressing whether each word is needed or not, you need to consider at least five other factors:

- If you are uncertain of any word's exact meaning or whether you are using it as the correct part of speech—is *contact* a noun, verb or both?—consult a reputable dictionary.
- If you are uncertain whether your usage of a word is correct in a specific context—is *politics is* or *politics are* correct?—check a reputable usage dictionary.
- Note any long or complicated words and consider replacing them with shorter and simpler words.
- Note any words with Greek or Latin roots, and consider replacing them with synonyms having Anglo-Saxon roots. Your dictionary will tell the linguistic origin of each word you check.
- Check for repetition of words. Where possible, replace each repetition with a synonym. Use a categorical thesaurus to find synonyms. Categorical thesauruses offer more synonyms than dictionary-type thesauruses, which includes those that are online or built into word processors and other software. The back half of a categorical thesaurus is an index showing groups of synonyms for related words. The book's front half gives synonyms for all the grouped words.

Source material and recommended references on writing and self-editing

(Differs from the list for part 1)

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

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.

The Chicago Manual of Style, 17th edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. [See especially chapter 6, "Punctuation"; chapter 7, "Spelling, Distinctive Treatment of Words, and Compounds"; and chapter 8, "Names, Terms, and Titles of works." All are especially applicable to genealogical writing.]

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

Einsohn, Amy. *The Copyeditor's Handbook*. Berkeley University of California Press, 2000.

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Source material and recommended references on writing and self-editing

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

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.

Jones, Thomas W. "Capitalization, Italics, Punctuation, and Other Citation Subtleties," in *Mastering Genealogical Documentation*. Arlington, Va.: National Genealogical Society, 2017.

Kipfer, Barbara Ann, and Robert L. Chapman, editors. *Roget's International Thesaurus*, 7th edition: New York: Collins, 2010.

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th edition. Springfield, Massachusetts: 2004.

Merriam-Webster's Concise Dictionary of English Usage. Springfield, Massachusetts: 2002.

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.

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

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