

TINKERING

It's not always easy to say where rewriting (the Big Stuff) leaves off and editing (the Small Stuff) begins. For instance, I talk about style as Big Stuff and tone as Small, but the distinction, I confess, is almost arbitrary. As you'll see in chapter nine, an essay *evolves*, and the stages often blur. You probably won't be able to resist some tinkering when you rewrite. Like an auto mechanic, you'll notice a few small parts out of whack and start pulling here, twisting there, jiggling this connection, tightening that one, to make your prose engine run better, while a big problem in the exhaust system still waits. There's nothing wrong with that. We'd all like to be more organized, but we aren't. That goes double for writers.

Still, if you're going to be a good mechanic and not just another slob banging away with a wrench, it helps to have some idea what you're doing. There is value in remembering the separation of draft, rewrite, and edit. It can keep you from fussing with details when you should be thinking about what you're trying to say. Imagine the stages as different speeds in that vehicle you're fixing: Draft is overdrive, whipping along so fast the view is a blur—you're just trying to hold on around the corners; rewrite is travel gear, steady but slower, good for seeing the whole panorama; and editing is a stop-and-go crawl that gives you every bit of scenery in detail for as long as you want.

A good college essay—or any piece of writing—needs careful editing to develop. Just as you can learn to be your own rewrite department, you can be your own best editor.

tone: HOW TO WIN FRIENDS AND INFLUENCE ADMISSIONS OFFICERS

Tone, in writing and speaking, is the same—your *mood*. Admissions officers read your essay to discover the “type of person” you are, and your mood is one very transparent clue. Learn to control the tone of your writing voice the way you control the tone of your speaking voice; you wouldn’t want your boy- or girlfriend to think you were bitter or sarcastic when you felt friendly and forgiving. That’s how misunderstandings start, and you can’t kiss and make up with admissions officers.

Remember your audience. Would you boast at a party to someone you were attracted to—“Hi, I’ve really made myself a better person lately. I really know how to handle challenges”? Unlikely—unless you wanted to test how fast he or she could politely find someone else to talk to. Don’t boast in your essay. Many students do, on the mistaken premise that they must sell themselves.

Don’t whine. “I have some teachers who are mean, but others are all right.” Don’t plead. “I think First Choice is a great school and I’ve really wanted to go there for as long as I can remember.” Pleadings are described by admissions officers as “sweaty.” Controlling your tone means being sensitive to the effect of your words on a reader. Compare three possible lines you might use to explain poor performance in one class:

- A. I can’t stand physics.
- B. Physics is a stupid science.
- C. Physics is a mystery to me.

All may represent the truth as you see it, and you might say any one of them to a close friend who forgives you your little peevishness. But which would you use with Mr. Quark, the physics teacher, sitting across from you? The tone of A is aggressive, and B insulting. At least C, which expresses an honest humility, gives you a chance of being heard without raising the teacher’s hackles. Change the audience again. Which is best for talking to that hypothetical person I keep bringing up—someone you are attracted to but don’t know well? (Specifically, you don’t know whether he or she is a physics wiz. And you *really* want to get to know this person better.) A *could* work—but it would have to precede a pretty entertaining rap to be winning. B is out of the question—whiny and dumb. C in this case could express awe and wonder—your best bet to sound like an interesting person.

What kind of tone should you use in your college essay? Whatever suits you. Even stubborn can work, if you know you’re stubborn and don’t take yourself too seriously. A writer doesn’t pick his tone from a menu—“I think I’ll be bittersweet today, because I plan to be ironic tomorrow.” The mood grows out of the subject and the writer’s authentic feeling about it. But a writer learns to recognize through practice what sounds right, just as you have developed an instinct for the right way to talk to different friends. If you try to sound friendly and you don’t feel that way, it always sounds fake—to you and, you can be sure, to your audience.

But there is no fail-safe tone that will prevent you from bombing. I could say that admissions officers always like a tone that is Nice-and-Friendly, or Respectful, or Enthusiastic. It would make sense, but it wouldn’t be entirely accurate. *Trying* to sound Nice or Respectful or Enthusiastic, like trying to be funny or clever, doesn’t work. For one thing, Nice and Respectful turn easily into Boring and Sweaty, and Enthusiastic into Fluffy. Admissions officers will like who you are if you give them—and yourself—a chance. Remember the natural voice. You can only be

who you are and have the moods you have. Concentrate on using your moods to produce something entertaining and revealing.

Read your draft aloud—in what tone of voice would you say your lines? What do your chosen readers have to say about it? The good thing about writing is that if it sounds whiny or brittle or just plain fake, you can change it. Just like that.

DICTION

Diction is word choice, one source of tone. A dictionary, one source of words, nourishes a writer. A thesaurus, on the other hand—a list or a book of synonyms without definitions—can be a cauldron of artificial flavorings. Words extracted from the thesaurus (and not organically grown from your reading) may sound good. But artificial flavorings can also cause disease, and people who know the anatomy of prose can easily see the cancerous lumps forming in your writing. Too many college essays are choked with “myriad”s, “plethora”s, and other test-tube words:

A student’s scholastic experience encompasses a multitude of endeavors.

Yecch. It’s not entirely your fault—this elephantiasis of the word infects more than college essays. Even baseball players (and announcers), usually so vivid, have caught it: a pitcher no longer throws “heat” or “smoke,” he now “has good velocity.” This is plain bad, an attempt by insecure people to sound educated. Velocity certainly doesn’t sound any faster than speed—we don’t talk about something moving at “the velocity of light,” which is a good deal quicker than even MLB’s best. (Physics teachers tell me that, technically, velocity and speed aren’t even interchangeable, though baseball people don’t know that.) Perhaps because

players today earn astronomical salaries, they think they deserve more expensive words to describe their pitches. But inflated language doesn’t make the fastballs any faster; it just makes the speaker sound pretentious and dumb. Get good value from your words.

By all means *learn more words*—by reading more, and by listening to people who speak clearly and vividly. That’s the only way you’ll understand how to use them. (Nobody—no *writer*—learns words from vocabulary lists.) Sometimes it means training your ear to distinguish the lively from the flat when both come from the same source. Ballplayers today, for instance, also say a pitcher “can bring it,” or “throws gas,” two vivid metaphors.

Another way to build your cache of words is to learn the exact names of things you touch and see every day. For instance, here are some words that name common parts of a house: cornice, dormer, gable, widow’s walk, garret, wing, gutter, shutter, rafter, clapboard, eave. Though you probably see these architectural details every day, how many of them do you recognize by name? Knowing—and using—the names for the parts of a boat, of a church, of a flower, of a cow, of everything around you, helps your language come alive.

One suggestion: In your word researches, lean toward the plain and solid word where you have a choice between it and a more scientific-sounding one; of the two words for a dolphin’s nose, for example, *beak* is more vigorous than *rostrum*, and the implied comparison with birds even catches something of a dolphin’s playfulness.

Good writing knows the names of things, and good words are accurate and lively. I guarantee that if you are reading this book, you already know enough words to write a good essay.

But even among familiar words, not all are created equal. A few have come to mean so little—not only in college essays (though especially there) but also in memos, letters, speeches, and conversation—that they are almost meaningless. These you must un-learn:

interpersonal	commitment
interact	leadership (and “leadership role”)
responsibility	individual (in place of <i>person</i>)
excellence	objective (as noun)
integrity	aspect
diversity	factor
situation	endeavor
relationship	tendency
bottom line	considerable
utilize	
values	
achievement	
dedication	

There are many more, and I don't even have room for empty phrases like “at the present time” (which should be simply “now” or “today”). Many applicants use these puffs of smoke in a wrong-headed effort to appear intelligent and worthy of admission. But language like this is the hallmark of people who have nothing to say and usually know it. “I have come to admire and respect him,” wrote one New York politician of another recently, “for his commitment to values we all cherish in American life.” The words are like incense, filling the air with pretty-smelling smoke that drowns every whiff of the sharper, less pleasant odor of truth. Which values? How does he know we *all* “cherish” them? Who's we? Can someone be committed to values? What does that mean?

Some of the words on my list are bad because they are jargon, like *bottom line*. Some are pretentious, like *utilize* and *individual*. Some are so vague we never know what their purpose is in a sentence: *situation*, *aspect*, *commitment*. Like so many feathers, these words just take up space and insulate us from meaning. Others have been degraded by dishonesty and overuse: *integrity*, *excellence*, *responsibility*, words so often used to de-

scribe criminals, incompetence, and evasiveness that they make literate people laugh. They are almost always used to manipulate an audience, not communicate. Here are other smoke balls:

obviously	virtually
clearly	unquestionably
rather	particularly
somewhat	relatively
kind of, sort of	

It's cheating to begin a paragraph with “Clearly. . . .” If it is clear, don't say so; just show it and stop stacking the deck against the reader. If it is not clear—which it usually isn't when “Clearly. . . .” raises its beguiling head—then saying so is dishonest. *Clearly*, *obviously*, *unquestionably* are loaded dice intended to cheat the reader.

I was kind of tired.

Megan is rather opinionated.

That's a somewhat risky endeavor.

More cheating, here from cowardice rather than emptiness or deception. Don't waffle. If you have something to say, say it: I was tired. Megan is opinionated. That's risky.

Clearly, in the rush of your draft you will use many words that don't pull their weight. Obviously, you can revise out all sloppiness, all smoke screens, all cheating. Unquestionably, you will write a better essay if you do.

TRANSITIONS

Writing transitions is the art of getting from here to there and back in your thoughts without jolting readers out of their seats. (Though sometimes you *want* to jolt them.) An essay is like a chain. Each link (idea, anecdote, description) is complete in itself and yet is also part of the one before and the one after. Many of the usual devices for connecting parts of an essay are useful and quick if not skillful: *but, instead, now, later, then*. But others are clanky: *nevertheless, therefore, moreover, in addition, thus, more important, secondly* (and *thirdly*), *finally*, and other formal, archaic-sounding words.

Sometimes you can't avoid the ordinary devices. Updike, the least clanky of writers, calls on them in making transitions in "Beer Can": although he shifts simply from present to past with the use of "was" in his third sentence, he brings back the present with "Now we are given, instead." Then "However" and "But" take us into the future. Because the shifts are quick, the words do not call attention to themselves, and we hardly notice the transitions at all. That's the goal.

In "Summer Beyond Wish" (p. 150), Russell Baker doesn't even try to make smooth transitions. He moves from scene to scene like a filmmaker, in sharp cuts. He can do this because he's arranged his images in gradually increasing importance and because he's followed the sequence of a day—morning images first, then afternoon, and then evening.

Transitions connect or contrast time or thought. Sketch the big movements of your essay, the way an artist suggests with a few broad strokes the main shapes in his composition. Is the piece an If . . . but no . . . therefore essay? Or is it in two sections, Once . . . but now? Or a simple time sequence: This . . . then this . . . then this? There are as many formats as there are essays. Charting the main transitions in your draft can help you polish its shape.

TRIMMING THE FAT: AN ABSURDLY BRIEF GUIDE

Many college essays are bloated with sentences that could be tightened or completely eliminated. When you've got only five hundred words—and often fewer—to nourish readers, every one must count.

In other words, *simplify*. Here are ways to reduce the most unsightly sentence fat.

1. *Who, which, that, and what* often swell a sentence with blubber. Use them only when necessary.

FAT:

Uncle Nathan is someone who cares only about fly fishing.

TRIM:

Uncle Nathan cares only about fly fishing.

FAT:

Todd had a dog which he took on long walks.

TRIM:

Todd took his dog on long walks.

FAT:

What Betty hoped was that the president would admit a mistake.

TRIM:

Betty hoped the president would admit a mistake.

2. *There and it* are often unnecessary.

FAT:

There were geese swimming on the pond.

TRIM:

Geese swam on the pond.

FAT:

It is the love of fly fishing that keeps Uncle Nathan going.

TRIM:

Love of fly fishing keeps Uncle Nathan going.

FAT:

At the end of the play there was a groan from the audience.

TRIM:

At the end of the play the audience groaned.

3. Be alert for fatty uses of the word *thing*.

FAT:

The thing I'm interested in is science.

TRIM:

I'm interested in science.

4. Trimming *thing* in that example also allowed me to cut *is*. Lazy uses of *is*, *am*, *were*, *was*, *are*, and the other forms of the verb *to be*, can cause ugly sentence spread.

FAT:

Fifty years ago, it was natural for athletes to play before adoring crowds.

TRIM:

Fifty years ago, athletes expected to play before adoring crowds.

FAT:

In a telephone survey it was shown that there is little support for secret operations.

TRIM:

A telephone survey revealed little support for secret operations.

The verb *to be* is not always so expendable. But be careful with it. Check your drafts to make sure every use of *to be* pulls its own weight.

5. Cut *second helpings*. When you're trying to get your prose into shape, needless restatements overstuff a sentence.

FAT:

My brother is an honest person. That's a quality I respect in him.

TRIM:

I respect my brother's honesty.

We know honesty is a quality and your brother is a person.

Try cutting out the second helpings in this paragraph:

A piano is a temperamental thing. The unpredictable nature of this instrument is apparent to anyone who has an old one, as we do. My mom's big upright has good days, when it sounds like a concert grand. It also has bad days, when the keys become stiff or sticky as a result of slight changes in humidity, and it never quite acts the same under different conditions. It's often as stubborn as a mule. When the temperature is colder, the tone has a harder character than when it is warm. At these times it makes sounds more like something being tortured.

Double helpings: We know a piano is a thing. "The unpredictable nature of this instrument" treads the same ground as the first sentence. "It never quite acts the same under different conditions" is completely unnecessary. A rewrite might look like this:

An old piano is as temperamental as a mule. On good days my mom's big upright sounds like a concert grand. But when the humidity changes quickly, the keys stiffen and stick and the tone hardens, and it whines and groans as if tortured.

6. *Replace vague verbs.* Verbs are the muscles of writing. *Become, get, do, make, and have* can be weak; they don't generate motion or action. Reread the two paragraphs above.

WEAK:

the keys become stiff or sticky

STRONG:

the keys stiffen and stick

WEAK:

the tone has a harder character

STRONG:

the tone hardens

WEAK:

it makes sounds more like something being tortured.

STRONG:

it whines and groans as if tortured.

7. *Replace passive verbs.* Use the active voice. The passive voice fattens on lazy uses of *to be*:

PASSIVE:

Gooden's next pitch was lined by Boggs into left.

ACTIVE:

Boggs lined Gooden's next pitch into left.

PASSIVE:

This bread was baked by Mr. Schiller.

ACTIVE:

Mr. Schiller baked this bread.

PASSIVE:

In the scene it was proved that Gatsby was innocent.

ACTIVE:

The scene proved Gatsby innocent.

As you can see, sometimes one fatty usage leads to another—in this case, a sagging *it* developed a passive verb, which led to a lazy *was*.

One warning about all this butchering. You can't always cut out an *is*, or a *which*, or a *there*. These words have their uses. "It is hot," for example—two empty calories out of three—can't really be tightened or improved. The same is true of the passive voice—a writer will now and then use it purposefully, as Russell Baker does on page 150. When Baker writes, "Kerosene lamps were cleaned and polished," the passive expresses a child's feeling of distance from grown-up chores, as if they somehow get done magically without a *doer*.

Writing isn't a matter of rule, but of taste. Read, write, and ruthlessly edit, and you won't mistake fat for good meat.

CORRECT DOESN'T COUNT

When you trim the fat, you're strengthening, not correcting. No grammar book would complain of "the keys become stiff or sticky." It's correct, but that doesn't make it good. Many people write empty, deceitful prose that is perfectly "correct." But many people don't get in to First Choice University. Think about what you're trying to say and *don't be concerned about correctness*.

Why not? Because admissions officers—not being editors or English teachers—don't know or care much about the fine points of grammar. Most admissions officers—like many writers, and most of the rest of us—wouldn't know which is correct:

- A. Chris is one of those reporters who always meets his deadline.
- B. Chris is one of those reporters who always meet their deadlines.

Even admissions readers who *do* know can't pause long enough to think about it, and it doesn't make much difference. (B is correct; "who" refers to reporters, not Chris.)

I don't mean throw grammar and punctuation out the window. Just don't *think* about it. Unless you have problems with the basics—periods at the end of sentences, subject-verb agreement—it's not an issue. By senior year you know enough grammar to write a college essay. Use what you're familiar with and don't get fancy. Concentrate on the writing.

Spelling is different. I've seen otherwise intelligent admissions officers get themselves into a lather about student spelling, as if it mattered. (Usually because the applicant misspelled the name of the college.)

In the era of spell check, the expectation is that your piece will be perfect. But remember:

Spill chick it goon, bus in it no enough. Pleas hare a fried red you're wort, be case your mite makes man mistook an no seen them wan you rear threw you daft. Think you.

Even so, one typo or spelling error won't sink you as much as an empty idea, vaguely developed.

TAKE THE TIME TO BE SHORT

As you may be beginning to see, it takes time to simplify. If I plan a week in advance to drive to French Lick, Indiana, I will probably consult a map

and take the shortest route. But if I must leave *now*, with no time to plot a course, I'll probably get lost or go the long way around. It takes time—and effort—to be quick.

I'm going to start with the assumption that you're a Last-Minute Louie (or Louise). I, too, am one. I know people who prepare for weeks—outlining, sharpening pencils like mad, and stacking up neat piles of paper—and finish days ahead of schedule. They are beneath contempt. But because I am so slow, I know the lengths you have to go to leave yourself enough time at the end to be ruthless in revision. If you know you're a deadline dawdler, set yourself an artificial limit way ahead of your actual schedule: tell a friend or a teacher or whoever's serving as your reader that you'll have a polished final draft ready to read a week before your deadline. This sounds silly and transparent, but it works—you'll usually miss your phony deadline too, but not by much, and then you'll have three or four days to mull over your final draft and buff it to a high sheen.

You must figure into your schedule a time to put your essay away for a day or two when you have finished a complete draft. Getting away from it allows you to come back with fresh eyes. Weaknesses you missed before suddenly cry out, and new ideas arrive for transitions, for endings, for refining the lead. The shape of the whole and the details are visible when you can look at them as if for the first time.

Taking time also helps you be ruthless. The writer of the bathroom essay cut this paragraph, originally the fourth in the piece, entirely:

I'm not sure I know why it happens, but it works in almost any bathroom, though ones with windows are especially good. I have to admit the bathroom is a strange place for inspiration. Most people don't want to think about the bathroom, something you can tell from the dishonest name we've given it. (I've seen plenty of bathrooms without bathtubs and even showers, but never one without a toilet.) Why not call it the "toiletroom," to be accurate? Or something upbeat

like SaniRama? My little brother calls it “baffroom,” a good name. It sounds like a fast-car noise in a cartoon.

It’s a good paragraph. It’s funny, and it says something. The writer worked hard on it and never thought about doing without it. Then, after putting the essay away, he had two problems: (1) he saw this paragraph as a digression, and (2) the whole essay was too long. So the paragraph had to go.

What is too long? The Common App states only a *minimum* word limit: 250. But the ballpark figure is 500 words. Is 600 too long? No. 700? Not necessarily. But remember your readers. In almost thirty years of teaching I have never—not once—been handed an essay that could not have been cut down and that would not have been better at least a little shorter.

But now let’s look at what all this rewriting and editing does for an essay, from notes to final draft.