

9. Editing

The first draft of any piece of writing is a bit like the rough shape that a sculptor first hews out of the stone. Thereafter, it's a process of chipping away to reveal the final statue. As far as writing is concerned, your reader will focus on any redundant material, causing them to falter when they should read seamlessly on. Similarly, cut out too much and your reader will, quite literally, lose the plot. This stage, in other words, is where the real art of writing begins.

The following, therefore, are all tips. Your task will be to apply each one to something you've written:

- Underline each adverb and the verb that it qualifies [adverbs are words like 'quickly' or 'silently' that qualify – i.e. give further meaning to – verbs]. Where adverbs occur in dialogue you can probably leave them in, but every adverb in the narrative should be justifiable. English verbs have great strength and subtlety – they drive your work along – so get hold of a thesaurus and find the precise verb for the job. If you can't find a verb that gives you the exact shade of meaning, then consider retaining the adverb, but your goal should always be to get the most precise meaning in the fewest words. This will give your work a freshness and vividness.
- Now underline each adjective [words that qualify a noun]. Eliminating adjectives is perhaps not quite as important as eliminating adverbs, but too many – particularly *lists* of adjectives – will soon stifle your reader's imagination. [To see the importance of imagination to reading, consider how many people say that such-and-such an actor wasn't how they imagined the character in the book. You will often find that the character wasn't described in the book at all!]. Some adjectives may be essential – colours, for example – but most can be omitted without affecting the work in the slightest. Try it and see – you can always put them back.
- Are your sentences long and complex, or short and pithy? If the length varies throughout the piece, are they randomly varied or does there seem to be some sort of correlation between sentence length and content? In general, there's a tendency for long sentences to slow the action down, while short sentences speed it up. Many writers do this unconsciously, but knowing about it puts you in charge. You should aim for an equal balance of long and short sentences, but you can alter the balance to suit the pace of your work.
- Finally, try giving your work to someone else to read, preferably a fellow writer (but not a close family member). Ask them to pinpoint what doesn't work for them. [PS Learn to develop a thick skin]
- A bonus tip for those of you who write directly to the computer screen – print a copy of your first draft and make your initial alterations in pencil ...you may decide that you want to replace an adverb or an adjective, and you won't be able to if you've deleted it.