

HOW TO EDIT AN ESSAY

This document is all about how to make an essay readable. As an example I'm taking a sociology essay on "Consumerism replacing Class in Australian society". What I have written here is designed to be read in conjunction with the essay. I've written this commentary as I correct the essay, as a sort of running commentary. However it becomes very long winded to do that all the way through, so I've written it in 3 parts – first my editing thoughts, then a detailed discussion about the structure, then the final part talking about the grammar and sentence construction.

The main thing to realise when doing this sort of editing is that, although the results can seem miraculous, they aren't. Editing is a stepwise process, with each step being simple and straightforward. Believe me, you won't go from a draft to a final document in one step (well you might in a tiny bit of writing, and you will get close after many years of practice). Writing clear, interesting, readable prose takes a bit of work – but the point of this document is to show that it isn't magic, and it isn't difficult.

HOW TO USE THIS DOCUMENT

Look at the associated documents in association with this text:

Document 1: the original version

Document 2: the editing process with all the changes tracked

Document 3: the final version

So what I suggest you do is read the original essay (Document 1), then read the final version (Document 3). Then look at the original with the Word tracking (Document 2). The final version isn't necessarily what I would have written if it were my essay, and it isn't as perfect as it could be. However it's good enough to show you what can be done.

PART 1 : A running commentary on my first look

Firstly I read through this essay to get a feel for how it was written. It was obvious that there were grammatical mistakes – some of the sentences didn't read properly (which is what grammar is for), and looked as if they had been put on the page straight from the head. This is fine for a draft because at the draft stage you just want to get your ideas down while you think of them – editing gets in the way. But here some of these draft ideas slipped through into the final text.

Another obvious thing was that a lot of the sentences simply had too many words in them. When you write, try to be sparse. There isn't much to be gained by extra adjectives, phrases and clauses in a sentence. You will see what I mean in the text below when I discuss removing bits of a sentence. Almost always it makes the sentence easier to understand and often it makes you, the author, think about things more clearly. Again, don't try to write this first off, just put down what's in your head – then edit it later.

Finally it was clear that the essay was not going to work well as a single block of uninterrupted text – it needed to be broken up. The way to do this is with section headings, which guide the reader through the flow of ideas. Even if your writing is dense, or the concepts complicated, a section heading tells the reader what is supposed to be going on in the next few paragraphs. Headings have another purpose in editing – they tell you what you are supposed to be concentrating on in the next few paragraphs. In particular they mean you have to structure the paragraphs in the section in a particular way - into an introductory sentence or two, then develop an idea (or ideas), then have a conclusion of sorts. And in the conclusion you need to build some word, phrase or sentence that will link the section to the next one.

WHAT I DID TO EDIT THIS ESSAY

So what I did after reading the document was first to go through and put in section headings – they didn't have to be right, just more or less right. Then I took each section and edited it. What follows here is the section headings plus my thoughts as I went through. As I said before, it's not all my thoughts for every bit of the essay, but enough to show you what I did.

Read these comments along with the essay. If you can, use the tracking feature in Word to show where I changed things.

In any case, read the original and the final copy to see what I changed.

“INTRODUCTION AND CONCLUSION”

Now I had a structure to work with. Inevitably there has to be an introduction and a conclusion. I don't bother with the conclusion till the end, but edited the introduction to make the sentences easier to read. Not much though - as you will see this is largely a matter

of changing a few words around, but the effect on readability is considerable. And don't worry if you go back and write the introduction again after final editing, it's quite normal to change your ideas along the way.

“INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY AND STATUS GROUPS”

This paragraph was edited to make it readable and clear – compare it with the original and try to work out what I did.

Then go on and read the next section where I discuss my changes in more detail.

“INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY AND STATUS GROUPS” (a running commentary as I edited the essay. The numbers are line numbers as in the corrected texts)

68: this doesn't read right. Simplify by saying Weber defined the theories, then introduce the idea of status groups, which is what you want to talk about in this paragraph. When I realised this I altered the paragraph title.

74: when you reference Bourdiou for the first time you have to put the reference in. Thereafter you can say: (ibid) if it's the same reference. 'Ibid' is latin for 'the same'.

74: You can't just say Webers ideas are similar to B's and leave it at that. Hence put in Both/..

80: you can't say 'using both their theories illustrate' it's not English. Restructure the sentence and it makes sense. Just by deleting Using both, and 'application – their' it makes sense.

81: 'Whereas' means you have to use a certain grammatical construct: "Whereas A, B did something else". You haven't used this here, so the sentence has to change. Just use Where, and 'by contrast' to emphasise the difference. And take out the 'you', it doesn't fit with the 'we' pronouns already used in the essay. After writing the next sentence I went back and altered this one to 'the possibility' – because the next sentence says we actually stay the same. So you can't have both, but you can have both the possibility of 'change' and the actuality of remaining in the group. ee

82: this sentence reads clumsily. What I think it says is that we have to keep consuming in order to stay within the group. But you have just said it can be fluid. So I have to work this into a sentence. 'In practice ... often' fits the bill. 'Walls' is unnecessary. As is Consumer social group – social group' does fine, especially since you are going to use the word 'consume' in the sentence (too much repetition dulls meaning unless you are using it as a trick to emphasise the word – not something you can get away with often).

83: The emphasis is on the 'consuming', so it's better to give it its own sentence which makes the idea stand out more. And the meaning changes as I write – it needs more emphasis on the lifestyle consumption to stay in the group. So I after reading what I had written I changed the sentence a bit more to reflect that.

PART 2: REORGANISING THE IDEAS

“THE GROWTH OF THE MIDDLE CLASSES”

(showing how to organise the ideas better)

This section is a good example of where writing gets into trouble – you’ve got the ideas, but I don’t think they are clearly defined and I don’t think you fully understand the way the ideas fit together. This is really the key to this sort of writing – you’ve got to develop a theme, preferably of your own, by getting ideas from the literature and telling a story (of sorts). Sometimes the story doesn’t declare itself until you have written a bit, and sometimes you get better ideas as you write. [and sometimes you finish the essay then rearrange the whole thing.] You’ll see ideas develop as I go through this section.

The way to do it is to get the basic ideas down first – on scrap paper if you like, then put them in some sort of order, then write about them. Don’t worry if you change things, and don’t worry if it seems a bit clumsy to start with. The best way to do this is to state the ideas as simply as you can – one sentence per idea is best. If you do that it’s much much easier to understand them and the story tends to fall into place by itself.

So how do I do it? First off I read the paragraph to get an idea of what it says, so I can understand what each sentence is trying to say. Paragraphs are made up of sentences, and how you arrange them is important. But you also need to know what sentences do - sometimes sentences introduce new ideas, sometimes they go together with opposing ideas (then you need a third sentence to resolve the dispute). And sometimes sentences are just there to develop a progressive logic – or a list. (Like this paragraph I’ve just written).

At the moment I’m struggling to understand your paragraph. Reading it several times I can’t really see one idea coming out clearly. Actually it’s OK to have two or three ideas in a paragraph if they follow each other and the paragraph is there to develop the logic of the change. But it needs to be explicit. In other words you need the paragraph to be there to argue the logical progression. And yours doesn’t.

So let’s look at the paragraph:

It seems to me that you’re saying that the growth of the middle classes meant there was a need to replace the feudal system. I can’t quite see why at the moment.

Next you’re saying there needs to be overproduction to satisfy increased choice. Fair enough.

Now you’re saying that Barthes says the identity people want depends on the symbolism of the objects we consume. I think you kind of said that in the previous section. So what’s new here?

Well, perhaps what’s new is the idea that we are ‘told’ to want objects. Which introduces the idea that our identities are defined for us. Which links in with the Woolworths paragraph further down.

I'm not sure why you are introducing the idea of 'consumption play' here. It's a new concept, but it seems very like the previous paragraph. I'm not sure what to do with that right now. And since you haven't explained 'consumption play', I don't know what it is.

Then finally, at line 100 onwards, you say that because of the rise in the middle classes, who want choice in the objects they consume, there has to be more objects. Which in turn means people are much more inclined to choose their own stratum in society.

At least that's what I think you're saying. If so it leads nicely into the next section, which seems to be dealing with the obsession with self.

OK then, so in summary I think the paragraph has the following ideas:

- 1: the feudal system was replaced with consumerism
- 2: this meant overproduction and increased choice
- 3: We are defined by our objects, and thus our identity, but actually we are told what to 'be'.
- 4: This is people 'playing with' consumption??? (at the moment I don't get this)
- 5: in any case there has to be increased production because people are much more conscious of, and want to choose, their own social group/class.

So it looks like 2 and 5 are much the same, 1 and 3 have been said already, leaving 4 as a new idea which hasn't been defined. Let's see what we can do with that....

Altering the paragraph

The first two sentences are altered – mainly by removing phrases – to say something directly, which is the growth of the middle classes required a growth in production.

That deals with items 1 and 2. But now you have to lead on into the next ideas – because there has to be a reason for introducing the paragraph the way you did. So lines 91 to 95 talk about Barth. You say Barth develops the idea of identity through consumerism. He says that what we consume defines our identity, but we both want things and are told what we want. So our identity is defined both by ourselves and by what we are told. But look at the second sentence of the paragraph – it emphasises choice. So perhaps you can use the word 'choice' to lead into Barths ideas – there isn't as much choice as we think. In order to do that, I simply add a linking sentence saying just that. "But...". In fact doing this changes the whole emphasis of the paragraph, as you will see later – it turns out to be a very important idea in the development of the essay.

Now the next sentence is rejigged to introduce Barth, and the concept of identity and choice. With not much change in the writing the focus is now on being told what we want.

The next sentence, about 'consumption play' I now don't think helps at all. I'm struggling to make sense of it, because I don't understand what it means. Often it's better just to get rid of it in that case, so away it goes.

So how to connect this (new) idea of being told what to 'want' and so what to 'be' with the last two paragraphs? The sentence about 1940 etc is fine, if the unnecessary phrases are removed (always try to do this, it makes your writing much clearer).

Changing the last two sentences is important because as they stand they just rehash the previous section, which is pointless. So what I am striving for here is to introduce the idea that everyone can afford to define themselves now. The point being that, in the next section, you are about to talk about 'self', so I want to switch the reader's attention to 'self' here in preparation for the next section.

However I'm not happy with the switch from the important idea that we are being told what we want to the rise of production. As it stands it was introduced in the middle of the paragraph but just left hanging. The two ideas don't seem to be connected at the moment. So I brought in the last sentence to marry these two ideas together.

This whole exercise has focussed in great detail on one paragraph, but it has been done deliberately to show how ideas develop as you work at your writing. Sometimes you have the idea of what you want to say in your head, and writing comes easily. Often it doesn't however, and you need to dissect out a meaning from what you have written. Actually, in practice, it is a great shortcut to simply say out loud – to a sound recorder or a friend – what you mean to say. Then write down exactly what you said. That, you will find, is pretty well what you should write – the key to writing clearly is to be simple, and we mostly say things simply.

PART 3: GRAMMAR AND SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION

“THE OBSESSION WITH SELF”

(this shows how to change grammar and sentence construction)

In this paragraph I am going to concentrate on the grammar of the sentences rather than the structure. A number of sentences in this essay don't make sense, not because the ideas are wrong but because the grammar is incorrect.

This obsession with self is driven with the ideal of abundance

Something is driven 'by', not 'with', usually.

Saying something is the 'ideal' of abundance isn't really English – you have ideals, you don't drive things with them.

I'd say something like “Our obsession with 'self' is only possible because of the abundance of goods.”

As Marx is portrayed in Public Sociology (Woodward, 2011: 156),

What you mean is “Marx, quoted in, said.....”

He is stating that the objects that we consume to develop our 'individual identities' end up consuming us because we are obsessed with the need to keep up with the consumer society we strive to be a part of.

Reads much better if you say:

“The objects we consume end up consuming us because we are obsessed with the need to keep up with the consumer society”. A nice play on the word 'consume'.

All I did here was cut out irrelevant phrases. Every time edit one of your sentences yourself, think what you can remove: adverbs and adjectives can often go, and determiners of adjectives (“a very big box”) are often better lost (“a big box”) without changing the meaning. Your writing becomes more powerful the simpler it is.

In light of advertising and social pressure, we feel we need and desire these objects that will 'make us who we are'. Let us be a part of a group and community. To feel accepted because we wear, act, eat and buy the right objects for that certain, select consumer group.

These sentences are clumsy. The first sentence would be better off without “in the light of” (replace it with “because” or nothing at all). “These objects” is better as “those objects” but

even better as “objects”. What does the middle sentence contribute – it isn’t a proper sentence. The third one isn’t a sentence at all – you can’t start with an infinitive clause: effectively you should say “to feel accepted ...we [do something]”. You said “to feel accepted ...” And then you just ended the sentence (the clause with ‘we’ in it isn’t an end, it’s just a clause).

See what I wrote instead – all I’m doing is removing some phrases, turning the sentences around, or simplifying the writing. It’s much more effective when it reads like this:

“Advertising and social pressures force us to desire and need objects because objects ‘make us who we are’. Objects allow us to be part of a community. We feel accepted because we wear, act, eat and buy the ‘right’ objects for the group.”

The next two sentences are OK, but the concluding paragraph of this section doesn’t quite summarise what has been said. It reads as a rehash of the previous section, but in a concluding sentence like this you need to say something new – something the reader will have (or should have) got from reading your section.

First I tidy up the sentences, removing phrases and trying to make each word count, rewriting the words to put forward a single idea. Look at what I’ve done: it doesn’t change the basic meaning of what you said, but it does refine it and state it much more simply. For example I can take out “to be able to” and replace it with “to”- simple enough, but the more you do this the better your writing will become. Initially we all put down a lot of verbiage – like when you’re drawing you put in a lot of sketch lines to define the object. But in the same way as a sketch, these lines are removed to leave the object you want to portray. So get rid of the verbiage and you are left with clear, concise sentences. Then you can add interesting bits, or rearrange the paragraphs, clarify or emphasise ideas. But you can’t do this until you have defined your basic text.

Initially this seems difficult, and the result seems like magic. But it isn’t - because you can stage the process into simple acts. So first you cut out the verbiage, then you simplify the sentences, then you re-read the whole thing and put in what’s missing. Each of these is simple and doesn’t take much effort.

The point is, you can’t go from your initial draft to the final one in a single step – it’s too difficult. You have to stage it. The better you get at writing the closer the first draft gets to the final one, but never expect to be able to write perfect essays straight away – the trick to writing perfect essays is to learn the staging process. Then it becomes easy.

So what are you going to say in this conclusion? Well, when I reread the section it seems to me that you are saying

We now have an abundance of goods which allows us to define ourselves. However, as Marx and Fromm point out, goods promise us happiness and freedom, but actually ensnare us because they define us – they define our social class, our identity and our behaviour.

This is a fairly powerful idea, and when you set it down in the essay it begins to define the ideas you are trying to get across. But remember I didn't get this from thinking about sociology (in fact I know nothing about sociology at all) - I got it from simply re-reading the section after it had been re-written and saying to myself "What does this section say?". This is often the case when you're writing- writing forces you to put down ideas in a logical sequence, and this very act forces conclusions you hadn't thought of initially.

DESIRE VERSUS NEED (and continue the editing process through to the end of the essay)

In these sections I'm just going to re-write the text using the techniques I discussed previously. Now you know what they are:

- 1: read the whole section and pick out the ideas,
- 2: state them in a single sentence each
- 3: sort out what the flow is
- 4: write the flow, making sure each sentence is grammatically correct as you go
- 5: look at the whole thing and see what it means - adjust sentences as needed.

You will see that these sections have become much more readable, and the ideas can be clearly seen and understood.

CONCLUSION

After I've done all this, I go back and reread the essay. At this stage there isn't much to do – correcting a bit of grammar, putting in a word here and there. Frequently a small tweak will change the sense of a sentence or a paragraph. What I'm striving for is readability – the person should be able to finish the text and not feel they have had to concentrate on the writing to understand the ideas. The writing should be easy to read, and the sentences should flow from one to the other. What you want the person to do is have the ideas form in their minds, while your story links them together – the writing should be transparent.

It looks like magic. It isn't, it's a process you go through – step by step – to achieve a result. It takes a bit of practice, but not much. Each step is simple, and if you concentrate only on what you have to do in that step, the whole process is fast and enjoyable.

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