

# The writing is in the rewriting. Seven steps to getting it right.

By Walter Burek

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Writers who are so fluent, facile and sure-footed that they can write their stuff down and that's the way it runs are rare.

Ernest Hemingway rewrote the last paragraph of THE SUN ALSO RISES 28 times before he got it right. David Ogilvy confessed that he'd done as many as 19 drafts on a single piece of copy before presenting it to anyone.

What we're talking about here is good writing for easy reading. Writing that doesn't puzzle the stranger, but clearly conveys the meaning the writer intends.

It's a sweaty proposition, this rewriting, because it demands that we serve as our own critic, editor and teacher. And that means being able to spot the problem areas before we can even begin the revising, polishing and cutting.

Here are seven questions you must ask about your copy before you begin another round.

1. Are your sentences short enough?

Experts say that a "short" sentence is anything under 17 words. That doesn't mean you can't write longer sentences, just don't fill up the pages with them. Too many long sentences slow the reader down; a good mixture of sentence lengths actually heightens interest.

2. Is your sentence structure varied?

Starting every sentence with "a" or "the" makes your writing read like "duh." Varying the beginning of your sentences with nouns, adverbs and -- even an occasional conjunction -- keeps your reader from getting bored.

3. Have you been too passive?

Use the active voice, instead of the passive. Make it a habit. It makes your writing more direct, more energetic. And, usually, your sentences shorter.

4. Are your verbs active?

Action verbs rule. Use verbs that describe physical or mental activity instead of a state of being. "Our widgets outshine the competition" is more vigorous than "Our widgets are of the highest quality."

#### 5. Are you using little modifiers excessively?

Nouns and verbs that are specific give good writing toughness and color. So use adverbs and adjectives sparingly. And remember what your Strunk&White says about modifiers like "rather," "very," "little," and "pretty" -- "...these are the leeches that infest the pond of prose, sucking the blood of words."

#### 6. Is your phrasing too fat?

Vigorous writing is lean writing. Put your sentences on a diet by cutting unnecessary words: reduce your paragraphs by eliminating unnecessary sentences. Get rid of expressions like "the fact that," especially when "since" or "though" will do. Look for places where you can express a thought in one sentence instead of two.

#### 7. Does your beginning lead to an end?

All copy should have a clear beginning, middle and end. The shortest pieces as well as the longest. Begin with a lead sentence that captures the essence of the piece, then jump right into the action. Make sure the middle section is tight and well organized. Keep like items together. If you're comparing cars and trucks, describe the cars first, then the trucks. The end of your piece should have a crisp closer or zinger and contain a call to action or quote. For instance, an apt ending here might be something like this from Dickens: "All writing is misery."

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Walter is an professional advertising copywriter who writes, edits and publishes "WORDS@WORK", a FREE bimonthly newsletter of advice and about writing that works. To view his award-winning portfolio and to subscribe, visit <http://www.walterburek.com> . You may also subscribe via mailto: [WordsAtWork@comcast.net](mailto:WordsAtWork@comcast.net) .

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