



# The Seven Rs of Effective Editing

COMMUNICATION CORNER No. 57

*by Philip Yaffe*

## Editor's Introduction

Each "[Communication Corner](#)" essay is self-contained; however, they build on each other. For best results, before reading this essay and doing the exercise, go to the first essay "[How an Ugly Duckling Became a Swan](#)," then read each succeeding essay.

*This essay is based on an article originally published in 2012. Although aimed specifically at journalists, it contains considerable good advice for all expository (non-fiction) writers. Not the least because it twice cites advice from my book *The Gettysburg Approach to Writing & Speaking like a Professional*.*

*I have edited the original text to direct it away from the fast and furious world of news reporting to adapt its very useful advice to the slower, more reflective pace of most other writers not subservient to daily deadlines. In most cases, my editing has shortened the text.*

*To read the full article in its original form, please visit:*

<https://strainindex.wordpress.com/2012/10/01/the-seven-rs-of-sub-editing>

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Whenever writers sit down to write, their fervent hope is that people will want to read what they wrote. This means that what they want to say must be coupled with precepts and procedures that will attract and hold the reader's interest. This is true of both creative (fiction) writers and expository (non-fiction) writers—but particularly expository writers.

Why?

When people encounter a piece of fiction, their principal reason for reading it is to be entertained, and perhaps also to be informed and enlightened. With expository text, the priorities are reversed. The principal reason for reading an expository text is to be informed and enlightened. This means expository text must quickly tell potential readers what they are going to learn and why they might find this knowledge important and/or useful to them.

According to [Nirmaldasan](#), an Indian writer and journalist, the task of creating successful expository text can be divided into what may be called the "Seven Rs of Effective Editing." These are:

- Read
- Remove
- Rectify
- Replace
- Reorder
- Rewrite
- Revise

Note these seven Rs are not independent; they are interrelated. Thus, while concentrating on one of them, it is necessary to also keep the others well in mind.

## 1. Read

Raw text must be read twice. A casual first reading tells us the sense of the text, highlighting the message they wish to convey. This must be followed by a second critical reading, which will reveal

merits and flaws. By reading and rereading the text, a writer can quickly move through the subsequent six steps to produce a piece that is “camera ready.”

## 2. Remove

In my book *The Gettysburg Approach to Writing & Speaking Like A Professional*, I wrote: “Nothing in a text is neutral. Whatever doesn’t add to the text, subtracts from it.” It is therefore the duty of the writer to eliminate anything in the text that doesn’t enrich the story. This could be a superfluous word, a superfluous phrase, an “interesting” but superfluous paragraph, etc. You may not enjoy doing this, but it must be done in the interest of readers.

Nirmaldasan provides some examples:

- **"Major crisis."** The superfluous word "major" because it is already implied in the word “crisis.” However, “water crisis” makes sense because it defines the nature of the crisis.
- **"The ship will arrive in the month of May."** The phrase “the month of” is superfluous. It is enough to write “The ship will arrive in May.”
- **"The secretary and the treasurer."** If the phrase refers to two persons, then it is correct. However, if the same person holds both offices, then the correct phrase would be "the secretary and treasurer."

If it is really important to make the distinction, then rewrite the sentence to make it crystal clear, e.g. "The meeting was attended by both the secretary and the treasurer," or "The meeting was attended by the secretary/treasurer."

## 3. Rectify

This means spotting and correcting all errors such as misspellings, fixing capitalization, inserting the appropriate titles of each person mentioned, such as Mr., Ms., Dr., Prof., etc., removing wrong dates, updating data, and checking hyperlinks.

It also means: 1) checking long sentences for logical coherence, and 2) checking short sentences for logical linkage. A long sentence with unrelated ideas should be divided into self-contained shorter sentences to avoid suggesting spurious linkages. Short sentences containing closely related ideas should be recast into a well-crafted longer sentence to make important linkages clear.

## 4. Replace

Replace unfamiliar words with familiar ones, ambiguous words with precise ones, and long words with shorter ones having the same meaning. However, do not automatically eschew a technical term simply because it is technical; sometimes it may be the only precise term available. In such

cases, the first time you use the technical term, tell the reader what it means. It is often useful to remind the reader of what it means the second time you use it.

## 5. Reorder

Structure your text according to the inverted pyramid, i.e., arrange information in order of diminishing importance. This makes it easier for the reader to understand the text -- and to decide when he or she feels they have read enough to satisfy their needs. Remember: The purpose of a well-written text is not to be read all the way through, but for the reader to take away from it what is really useful to them in the shortest possible time.

For more information about the inverted pyramid method, I suggest my article "[How to Improve Your Writing by Standing on Your Head.](#)"

## 6. Rewrite

*This bit of advice is aimed specifically at professional editors and will be of little use to the general reader. However, it might be of value to gain some insight into the operations of those newspapers, news magazines, and news radio and TV broadcasts that play such an important role in helping us understand and cope with the modern world.*

Less experienced editors often have an irresistible urge to rewrite everything that comes across their desk. This urge must be resisted; it is the job of the reporters to rewrite their stories. However, editors may rewrite for one or more of the following reasons:

- Merge different stories on the same topic
- Summarize a story because of lack of space
- Highlight the main point
- Simplify the story for easier comprehension.

When rewriting, the editor should use the reporter's original words.

## 7. Review

Review the edited text to ensure all the changes you made are justified. This also provides the opportunity to spot and correct errors that may have previously been overlooked.

Remember, the objective of a well-written expository text is to offer readers ideas and information in a form that is easy to read, easy to understand, and easy to remember.

## Writers on Writing

Although the seven Rs are aimed specifically at expository (non-fiction) writers, in large measure they also apply to creative (fiction) writers. Here are a few insightful comments practitioners of both genres have had to say on the subject:

"Easy reading is damn hard writing."—Nathaniel Hawthorne

"What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure."—Samuel Johnson

"When something can be read without effort, great effort has gone into its writing."—  
Enrique Jardiel Poncela

"Resist the temptation to try to use dazzling style to conceal weakness of substance."—  
Stanley Schmidt

"The writer does the greatest good who gives his reader the most knowledge and takes from him the least time."—Sydney Smith

Few writers ever have the opportunity to quote themselves. I don't know if anything I have ever said will be remembered a hundred years from now, or even a hundred minutes from now. But for what they are worth, here are a few ideas I have encountered, developed, and believed in for more than 40 years.

"Convoluting writing is easy, it takes little thought. Simple writing is difficult; it takes all the thinking you can do—and then some."

"Simple writing is a challenge whose rewards are boundless. Once a writer recognizes this, everything else falls into place."

"Good writing—and by extension good speaking—depend on only a handful of fundamental principles. Once you have mastered these, all the tips and techniques for applying them become almost self-evident."

"Continually ask yourself: 'Why the hell should anyone want to read what I am writing?' If you can't give at least three good reasons, stop writing and start thinking. Otherwise, you will be wasting everyone's time—and principally your own."

"Aim for the lowest common denominator. Virtually no one will object that your text is too easy, but some may object that it is too difficult. Focus on the readers who may not understand; they are your true audience. The others will not complain."

Let me conclude with something I wish I had said, but in fact comes from someone else.

"Don't write merely to be understood. Write so that you cannot possibly be misunderstood."—Robert Louis Stevenson

You will never find any better writing advice than this. Virtually everything you need to know in only 14 words. Remarkable!

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Philip Yaffe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1942 and grew up in Los Angeles, where he graduated from the University of California with a degree in mathematics and physics. In his senior year, he was also editor-in-chief of the *Daily Bruin*, UCLA's daily student newspaper. He has more than 40 years of experience in journalism and international marketing communication. At various points in his career, he has been a teacher of journalism, a reporter/feature writer with *The Wall Street Journal*, an account executive with a major international press relations agency, European marketing communication director with two major international companies, and a founding partner of a specialized marketing communication agency in Brussels, Belgium, where he has lived since 1974. He is the author of more than 30 books, which can be found easily in Amazon Kindle.

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