

July 17, 2019

MEMO TO: Traci N. T. Fujita, Director  
Office of Council Services

F R O M: Shelly Espeleta, Legislative Analyst *Shelly*  
John Rapacz, Legislative Attorney *JR*

SUBJECT: **WEBINAR ON EDITING** (PAF 19-243)

We participated in an editing webinar entitled “Small Changes, Big Difference,” by ACES: The Society of Editing on June 20, 2019. The purpose of the training was to learn how small clean-ups in one’s writing can help to make copy smoother, clearer, and more concise for the reader. It is important for writers to keep their target audience in mind when determining what to edit and how to edit.

The webinar was led by Lisa McLendon from the University of Kansas who discussed the following topics: Wordiness, Clarity, “Secret Handshakes,” Words on the Verge, Bits of Grammar, Nuance vs. Brute Force, and Clarity over Style.

- **Wordiness.**

- Dummy subjects. Starting a sentence with “there is” or “there are” pushes information away from the reader and conveys zero information. It is okay to use “there is” or “there are” occasionally, but using them over and over again in a paragraph becomes tedious.
  - Example: *There were thousands of screaming fans packing the arena.*
  - Fix: Start with subject. *Thousands of screaming fans packed the arena.*
- Smothered verbs. Using a single verb is cleaner and clearer.
  - Example: *The editors held a meeting about election coverage.*
  - Fix: *The editors **met** about election coverage.*
- Relative clauses. “Who/which/that” clauses followed by a “to be” verb can be eliminated.
  - Example: *Composed of overlapping circles that are carved into the desert landscape, the house deftly reflects Wright’s philosophy of organic architecture.*

- Fix: *Composed of overlapping circles [that are] carved into the desert landscape, the house deftly reflects Wright's philosophy of organic architecture.*
- Wordy modifiers. Does the word really need to be here? "Couch potato" words do not help the reader.
  - Example: *All of the employees of the company received an extra paid day off as a bonus.*
  - Fix: ***All company employees** received an extra paid day off as a bonus.*
- **Clarity.** Be aware of noun and prepositional phrase "pile ups", modifier placement, and metaphors. Preserve the word order to ensure smooth transitions. It is acceptable to split a lengthy sentence into two sentences.
  - "Pile ups." The use of too many stacked nouns or prepositional phrases can bury the focus of a sentence.
    - Example: *Aira is a Milwaukee smartphone and smart glasses-connected startup technology company that connects visually impaired people to agents who provide real-time information.*
    - Fix: *Aira is a Milwaukee **startup** that **uses smartphones and smart glasses to connect** visually impaired people to agents who provide real-time information.*
  - Misplaced modifiers. Words and phrases used to modify a noun, but when used in a sentence and placed far away from what they are modifying, can be confusing for the reader.
    - Example: *Estimated to be about 50,000 years old, the Yukon Paleontology program thinks the specimens are the oldest mummified mammal tissue ever discovered.*
    - Fix: The words "50,000 years old" are meant to describe the specimens, not the program. *The Yukon Paleontology program thinks the specimens, **estimated to be about 50,000 years old**, are the oldest mummified mammal tissue ever discovered.*
  - Mixed metaphors. Metaphors are great for making complex concepts understandable, but using too many metaphors can be confusing for the reader.
    - Example: *But in the ensuing months, the plan has erupted into a volcano of controversy that has cracked a seismic chasm in the community.*

- **Fix:** *But in the ensuing months, controversy over the plan has cracked a seismic chasm in the community.* Is the writer referring to an actual volcano or an earthquake? Readers should not have to wonder, or even laugh, about the writer's intent.
- **“Secret Handshakes.”** These are style choices rather than grammatical choices. For example:
  - Since/because.
  - Due to/because of.
  - More than/over.
  - Less/fewer. Use “fewer” when counting. For an aggregate amount, use “less.”
    - **Example:** *The Gators led by 11 with just more than eight minutes left in the second half.*
    - **Fix:** *The Gators led by 11 with just **over** eight minutes left in the second half.*
- **Words on the Verge.** Knowing your audience is key to deciding what words to use. For example:
  - Decimate vs. destroy.
  - Comprise vs. compose.
  - Disinterested vs. uninterested.
  - Who/whom. When in doubt, use “who.” When writing for a legal, formal audience, use “whom,” but make sure the word is used properly.
- **Bits of Grammar.**
  - Subject/verb agreement.
    - **Example:** *A small group of dedicated editors continue to press for quality.*
    - **Fix:** *A small group (of dedicated editors) **continues** to press for quality.*
  - Subjunctives – hypothetical or contrary to fact vs. Conditionals – if/then, could happen.
    - **Example:** *If the bill **were to** become law, smoking **would be** banned indoors. **Subjunctive.***
    - **Example:** *If the bill **becomes** law, smoking **will be** banned indoors. **Conditional.***
- **Nuance vs. Brute Force.** When editing to make writing clear and readable, be sure to preserve the meaning, the emphasis, and the writer's voice.

- Example: *The group, which backed the confirmations of Supreme Court Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. and Justice Samuel A. Alito Jr., objected to the commentary.* Roberts' title is wrong.
- Fix: *The group, which backed the confirmations of Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. and Supreme Court Justice Samuel A. Alito, Jr., objected to the commentary.* Okay, but clunky.
- Better: *The group, which backed the Supreme Court confirmations of Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr., and Justice Samuel A. Alito, Jr., objected to the commentary.*
- **Clarity over Style.** Be careful of being too wordy.
  - Example: *The poll showed President Barack Obama's favorability rating fell from 79 percent to 47 percent – a 32-point drop. At the same point in their terms, former President George W. Bush has held steady, former President Bill Clinton had lost 14 points and former President George H.W. Bush had gained 15 points.*
  - Fix: Readers know these are all former presidents, so the use of the word "former" is not needed since these numbers are referring to when they were actually in office. *The poll showed [former] President Barack Obama's favorability rating fell from 79 percent to 47 percent – a 32-point drop. At the same point in their terms, [former] President George W. Bush [has] held steady, [former] President Bill Clinton [had] lost 14 points and [former] President George H.W. Bush [had] gained 15 points.*

In summary, small changes can help writing sparkle a little more and assist readers with a more enjoyable and informative reading experience.

Should you have any questions, please let us know.

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cc: Supervising Legislative Attorney