

# Learning From 8th Graders How to Strengthen Your Copy

## *By Will Newman*

*Substitute 'damn' every time you're inclined to write 'very'; your editor will delete it, and the writing will be just as it should be.*

**– Mark Twain**

Many of you already know the one thing I enjoy more than writing is teaching.

I love teaching you through *The Golden Thread*. I love teaching *Circle of Success* members in COS Targeted Learning Programs.

Teaching dedicated writers like you brings me joy.

And one thing I enjoy more than teaching dedicated adults is teaching teens. They may resist suggestions at first. But soon they make our collaborative efforts worthwhile.

I recently experienced that joy helping five 8th-grade students edit essays they'd written for a countywide contest. While I've developed a good relationship with each of these students, none was excited about editing with me.

Randi provides a good example of their resist/accept behavior. When I first made suggestions, she wrinkled her nose but made the changes anyway. About halfway through her 250-word essay, she got into the swing of editing. She saw the changes she made (through directed guidance) strengthened her writing.

When the next student came out, Randi warned her, "You're not going to like it at first, but it makes your writing better. And it's also kind of fun."

I tell you this not to inform you on how teens respond to critique. I tell you because I get the same initial resistance from many adult copywriters I work with.

Editing feels like work for most writers. It does for me. But I hang on to the second part of Randi's comment. Editing is also kind of fun ... particularly if you have a plan. The plan I used with the 8th-grade students is the same one I use for myself. Here it is ...

# ***1. You never edit just once ...***

Many years ago I heard a lecture by a Nobel Prize winner in chemistry who described a futile effort in particle physics as "Project Sherwood."

"It sure would be nice," he said, "if we could do it." Well, it sure would be nice if we could get all our editing done in one pass. But one pass is never enough.

If you want your copy to be strong, plan to go through it carefully at *least* four times using the remaining five strategies. You can combine some of the strategies in a single read-through, but do so with care. It's easy to forget one of the strategies while applying the other.

# ***2. Start with a quick read-through ...***

For your first pass at editing, read through your copy for glaring errors, omissions, extra words, and other mistakes that jump out at you.

You don't have to spend a great deal of time and effort on this reading/editing. You'll snag anything you miss on later, more careful readings.

# ***3. Make it active ...***

On your second read-through, eliminate *all* unnecessary passive sentences.

In passive sentences the doer of the action (the subject) follows the action (the verb). "The ball was hurled by the boy" is a passive sentence. Changing the sentence to the active voice – "The boy hurled the ball" – presents a more active, clearer picture of the boy and what he did.

For more information on eliminating passive voice, search the AWAI article archives.

# ***4. Just because you can doesn't mean you should ...***

Keep your words simple. Because good writers read extensively, they have a large vocabulary. Good writers also know when to use the more complex words (seldom, if ever) and when to use simpler words (most of the time).

## ***5. Limit the "ad-" words ...***

By "ad-" words I don't mean words found in advertisements. (Although you must eliminate ad-speak and advertising hype.) I mean adverbs and adjectives.

As a reminder: adverbs are words that modify verbs (action words). Often these words end in -ly or -like: "She ran quickly down the hallway" or "He walked crablike to the door." Those sentences are stronger when you replace adverbs with more active verbs. The first sentence could become "She sped down the hallway." The second: "He scuttled to the door."

Back in 7th and 8th grades we were taught to make writing colorful and more interesting by using adverbs. Forget that advice and use them sparingly. (I felt I needed the adverb "sparingly" there.)

Adjectives are words that modify or explain nouns, for example the word "large" in "large house." Get rid of the adjective with a better choice of noun. "The 15-room mansion" paints a better picture of the house.

On one of your read-throughs, check each adjective and adverb in your copy. Try to substitute more descriptive nouns for adjectives and more active verbs for adverbs.

## ***6. Little words make longer copy ...***

One of the times reading through your copy, look for the small words that you don't need like "of," "the," "a/an," and "that."

The previous sentence is an example. Here's how it reads without those words:

One time reading through your copy, look for small words you don't need like "of," "the," "a/an," and "that." Shorter and more to the point.

If taking those small words out doesn't change your meaning, the word doesn't belong.

These are the same strategies for editing I used with my five 8th-grade friends. There are many more, but if you use these six every time you edit, your copy will be "damn" stronger.

Or, following Mark Twain's advice: Your writing will be just as it should be.

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# 1 Response to "Learning From 8th Graders How to Strengthen Your Copy"

Hi, Will. I know you began in chemistry; I worked briefly writing grants and helping scientists with admin stuff in a chemistry lab way back when.

Thanks for this article and the Twain quote. My favorite quote by him is, ""I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead." Best, Barbara Field in San Diego

*Barbara Field* – over a year ago

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