



(U) The Chisel and the Vision

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(U) This article is one of an intermittent series with tips on writing. The entire article below is unclassified.

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If you'd told me years ago that someday I'd pen a series of articles about writing, and that two sources of wisdom would be Michelangelo and the rock group Talking Heads, I'd have said that you were nuts. But here it is. When it comes to tips on editing, these guys have the answers. You doubt it? Let's see if you can be persuaded...

Now before you say to yourself, "The word 'editor' is not in my job title, so editing has nothing to do with me!" let me say that **everyone** is an editor. Or at least everyone **should be** an editor - if not of other people's writing, then at least his own!

Can't one just be careful and do it right the first time and avoid the need for editing? If you're writing anything of any length, the answer is "no." ... If you ever saw the movie [Amadeus](#), there was a scene in which the composer Salieri was looking at the original manuscript of a Mozart composition, and he was flabbergasted that the manuscript contained not a single change or correction. Mozart had written the piece from beginning to end exactly right on the first try. (We see a scene where Wolfgang is composing the piece on a billiards table, stopping only to bounce a ball around the table over and over again.) Incredible!

Well, that's why Mozart was Mozart, I suppose, because almost no one gets everything perfect the first time out. What's more, there's really no point in we non-Mozarts even trying. We'd just tie ourselves up in knots, afraid to write anything for fear of making a mistake. So cast your perfectionism aside for a while and just write. You can fix it later.

Now let's move on to the point where you've written something, and you are ready to start editing it. Many people think of editing as the process of holding a red pen in one's hand and going through a text changing "was" to "were" and a comma to a semicolon. That's important and necessary, sure, but it's the **last** thing you do. After all, there's no point in dotting the i's and crossing the t's, if you might still be adding or deleting whole sections to the essay.

When editing, the first thing you should do is read through the text, asking yourself these questions:

- What is the essential point I'm trying to get across?*
- Does everything in the text contribute towards making that



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- point?
- Are there any digressions or superfluous details I can delete?
- Should I rearrange the text so that there's a logical sequence to it?*
- Does it have a [strong opening](#) and closing?

The sculptor Michelangelo (you knew it was coming!) said, "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free." Editing is just like that. Here, the angel is the central point you are trying to make, and the carving is the process of removing all of the extraneous material that just gets in the way.

Talking Heads front man David Byrne, meanwhile, had a similar idea but expressed it more in "engineering" terms: "Cut back the weakness, reinforce what is strong."***

So, once you have pruned down the text and otherwise cut-and-pasted until you have a nice streamlined piece, then you are ready to go through in detail and fix the spelling, grammar, etc.

As a final step, and if you have the luxury of time, I suggest putting away what you've done for a while (maybe overnight) and looking at it with fresh eyes later. It's amazing how you can pick up something the next morning and you immediately see what needs to be fixed. Make those few final tweaks and you are done!

(U) Notes:

* (U) This is assuming that you are trying to convey some information or insight, and not writing a mystery novel!

** (U) In most cases, you'll want to **start off with the conclusion** and then provide evidence that supports it or further explains it. You may want to end with a "what's next?" section.

*** (U) From the song "The Good Thing" on the album "More Songs About Buildings and Food."

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