



Crisp Prose

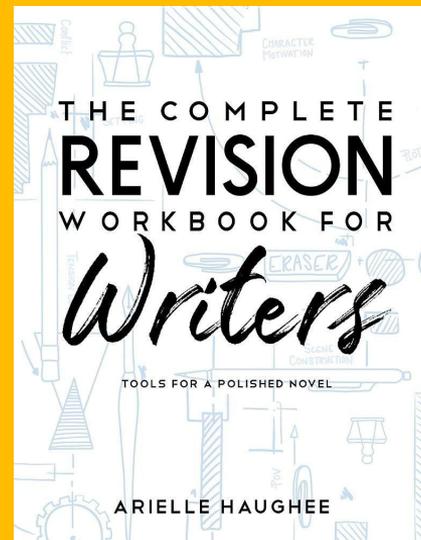
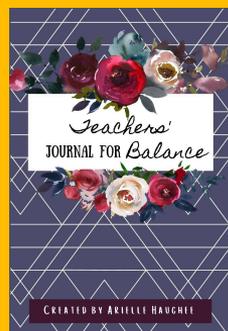
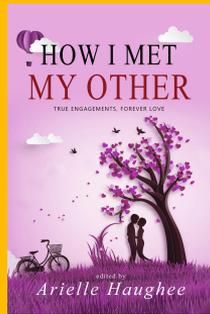
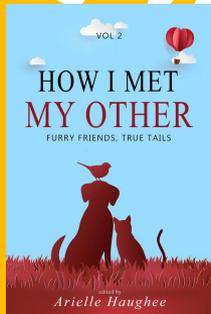
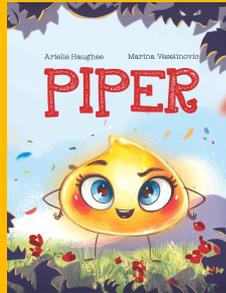
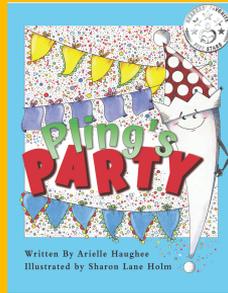
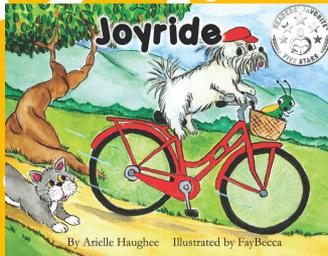
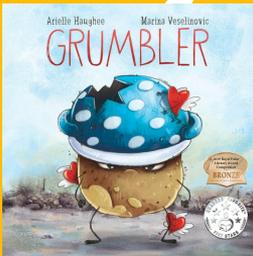




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To Discuss:

Importance of Crisp Prose

What to CUT

What to REPLACE

What to TRIM

**BONUS!! Most Common
Editing Mistakes**

Hands-on time!





What is “crisp” prose?

Writing that is direct in its subject and delivered in a way that is as efficient as possible.

Cluttered prose has many superfluous and unnecessary words. It is indirect and inefficient.





Example

Cluttered:

While walking slowly across the room, the old, wrinkled woman gave a slow, steady smile to the tall and good looking teller working behind the long counter at the very large bank. (32 words)



Crisp:

The elderly woman smiled and approached the handsome teller behind the bank counter. (13 words)

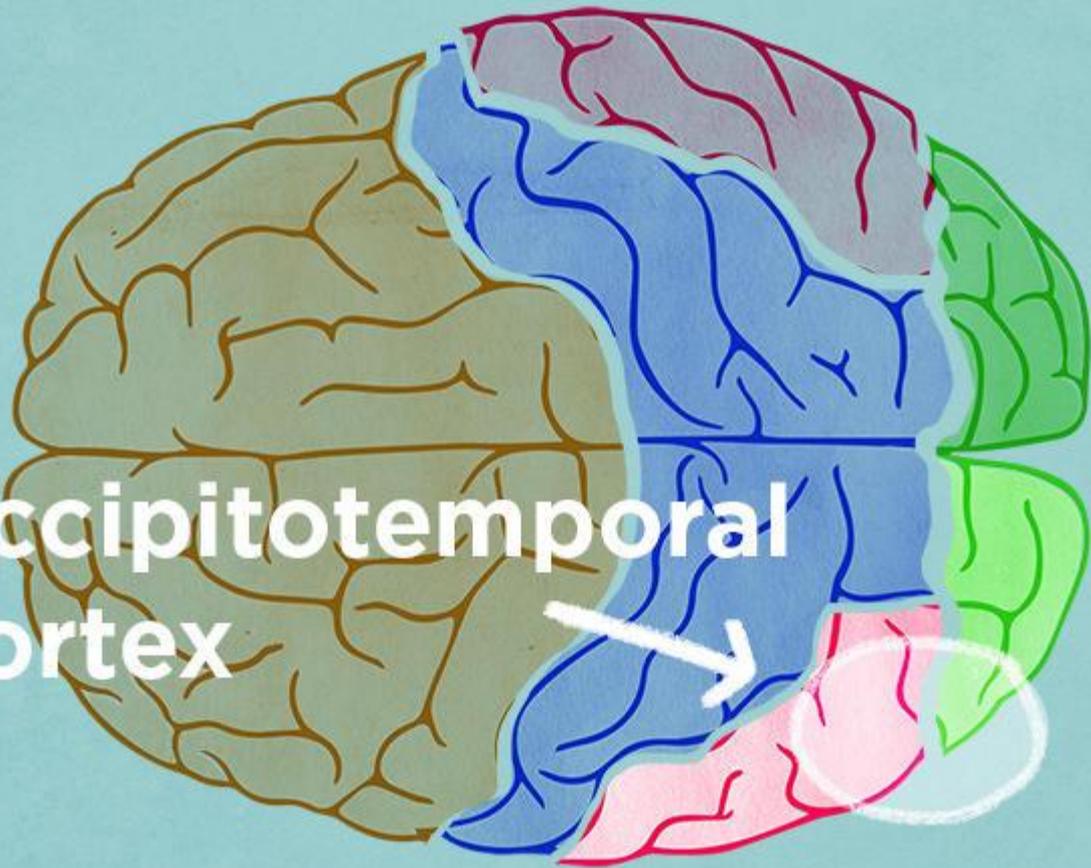


The Brain and Reading

As you read this, the left occipitotemporal cortex is decoding each group of letters into its spoken equivalent

- x One part determines meaning while the other part is automatically recognizing words
- x You slowed down while reading occipitotemporal because part of your brain didn't recognize it automatically

**Occipitotemporal
Cortex**





The Brain Reading Cluttered Prose



- x The part of your OT cortex that automatically recognizes words is working faster than the part that determines meaning
 - x You have to slow down and reread to determine meaning so the other part can catch up/do its job
- 



“

Cluttered prose is the first red flag for agents and editors. It makes the brain work twice as hard to determine meaning. Readers stop reading.





Questions to ask yourself

- x Does it move the plot forward?
 - x Does it reveal character?
 - x Does it contribute to theme or tone?
 - x Is it integral to understanding the setting?
- 



1.

What to CUT (word level)



THAT



- ✗ CUT the word THAT whenever it isn't necessary in the sentence
- ✗ Does the sentence make sense without it?

I believe that my family wishes that I was dead.

I believe my family wishes I was dead.



JUST

- ✗ JUST is often used for unnecessary emphases
- ✗ The sentence itself implies the emphasis
- ✗ often overused in dialogue

“I just need to speak with the mayor for just one minute,” she begged.

“I need to speak with the mayor for one minute,” she begged.



Sense Words

- x A word telling the sense the character is using
- x Look, feel, saw, heard, noticed...
- x CUT these and just say what is happening

She saw a strange man peek through the garage window.

A strange man peeked through the garage window.



Sense Words Example

Turning Basque around, I watched as the stablemen assisted John onto the old mare. She stood still as a wall, and despite the sour-faced rider, she seemed not to mind the weight on her back. Knight Valiente and Princess Sonja rode up beside me, their natural poise making it clear they weren't strangers to riding in the least. They watched as John squirmed and shifted, grunting to find some position of comfort on top of his saddle.



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BEGAN TO



- ✗ BEGAN TO, BEGINNING TO, STARTED TO...
- ✗ Just put the action unless the action is interrupted for dramatic purpose

Gerald began to open the letter, his eyes scanning the page.

Gerald opened the letter, his eyes scanning the page.



Action AS

- ✗ When the word AS is used to show two things happening concurrently
- ✗ Delete AS and make two sentences or turn the next verb to a gerund

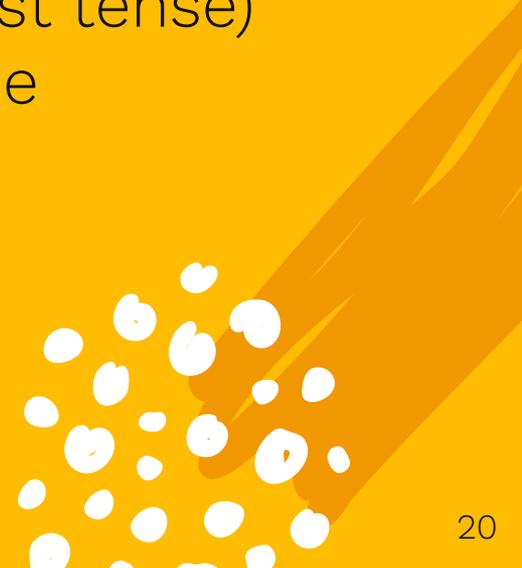
He smiled as he lifted the saber to charge.

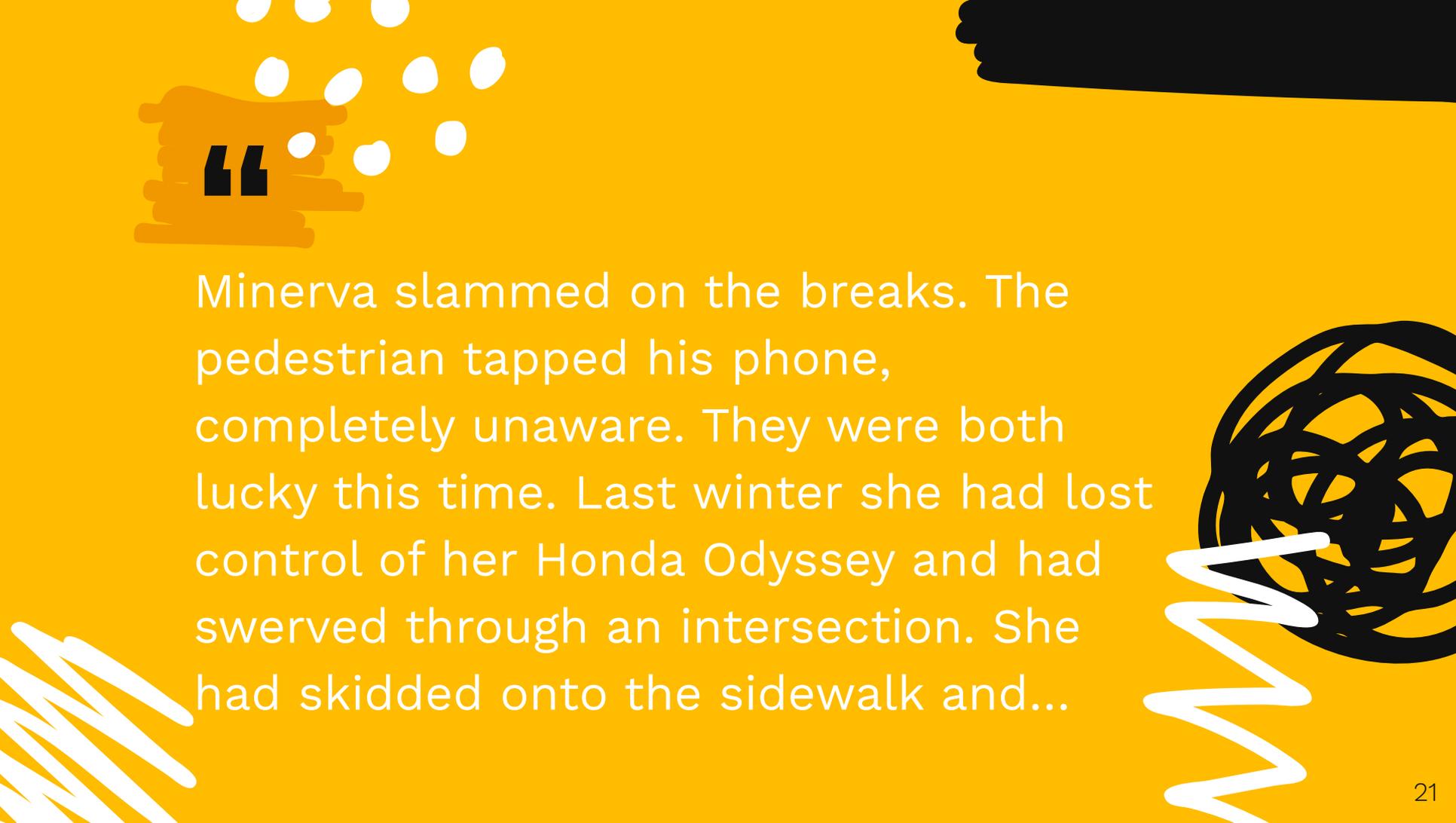
He smiled. He lifted the saber to charge.

He smiled, lifting the saber to charge.

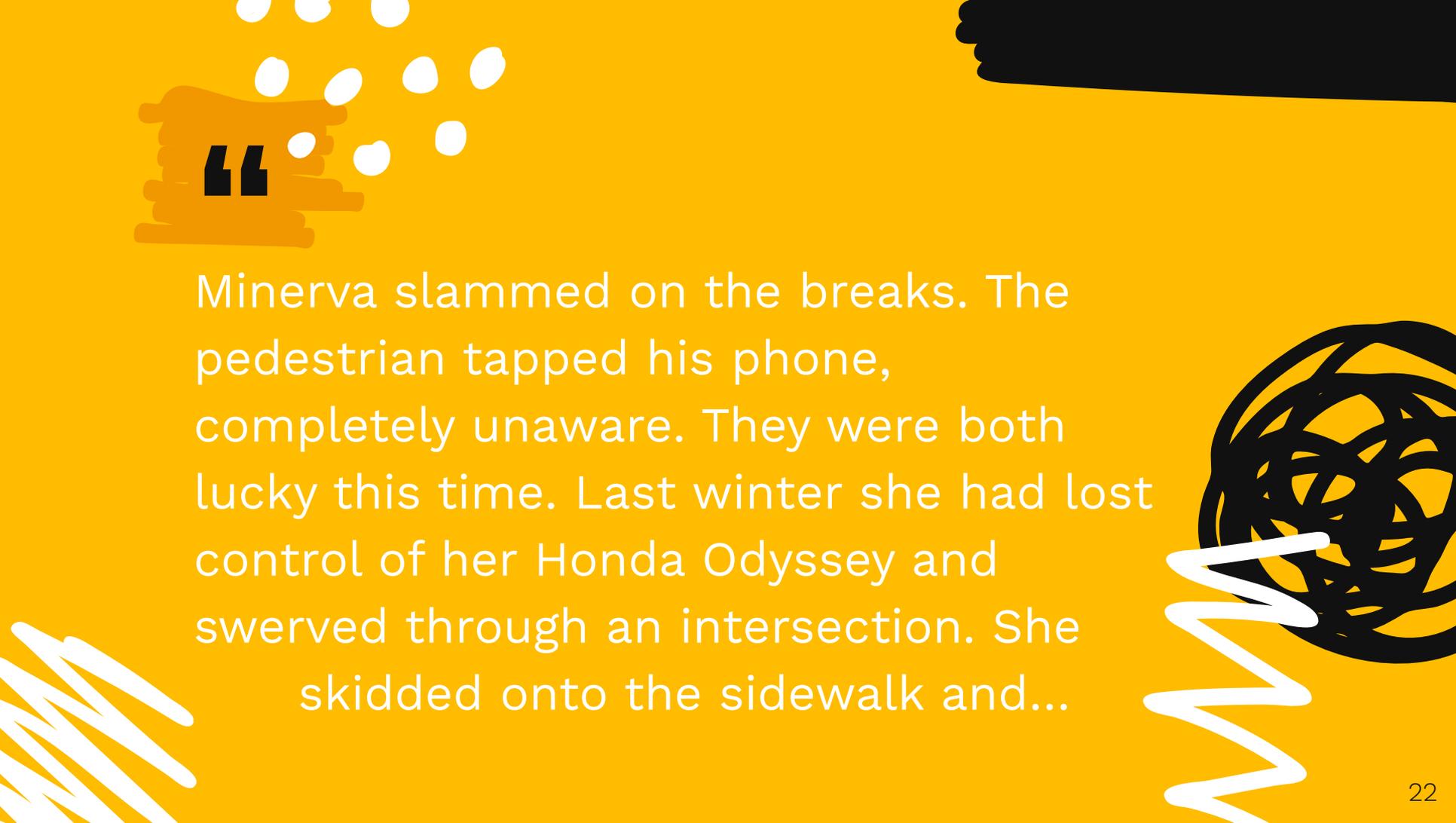


Past Perfect HAD

- x Occurs when you are doing a flashback while writing in past tense (past past tense)
 - x The first had alerts the reader to the flashback, the rest are implied
- 



Minerva slammed on the breaks. The pedestrian tapped his phone, completely unaware. They were both lucky this time. Last winter she had lost control of her Honda Odyssey and had swerved through an intersection. She had skidded onto the sidewalk and...



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What to CUT in Dialogue

- x Use contractions unless intentionally elevating speech
- x Greetings are almost always unnecessary
- x YES and NO can be cut if followed by a sentence that gives the answer
- x Fillers like WELL, UM, UH can usually be cut
- x Speaker tags can be cut if an action sentence shows who is talking

Jason entered the salon. “Hello,” he said. He stared at the list of services on the wall. “I have never been here before. Um, uh. I guess I will have the deep tissue massage.”

“Are you comfortable with deep pressure?” the attendant asked.

Jason smothered a laugh. He said, “Yes. I played football. I am used to getting beat up.”

“Okay. Your massage therapist will be Kendall. Follow me,” she said. She gestured toward a hallway.

They entered a dimly lit room with a sheet-covered table. “This is Kendall,” the attendant said. “Enjoy your massage.”

“Hello,” Kendall said. Kendall had muscular arms and looked like she played football herself. Her long dark hair parted in the middle, reminding Jason of the girl from *The Ring*. She cracked her knuckles. Jason gulped.

“Lay down on the table,” she said. She squirted oil onto her hands and rubbed them together with a knowing look in her eye.

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Repetition Example



Gripping the doorknob, I paused, inhaling John's scent and focusing on his heartbeat. *He's asleep. Good.* Pushing through I was silent. John was hunched over the tiny table, his shirt and jacket tossed across the only bed in the room, and I scoffed. *Such a child.* Shedding my coat and pulling off weapons and kicking off boots. I did my best not to let the weight of my items clunk against the wooden floor. Drawing the lock, I turned to the bed and pulled his items off, halting a moment as I stared at the jacket. *I hope I never have to see his blood across this cloth again.* Shaking the past from head I hung them on a coat rack and turned to the sleeping man at the table.

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The background is a vibrant yellow. In the top-left corner, there is a cluster of small, orange, bean-shaped patterns. In the top-right corner, there are several thick, horizontal black brushstrokes with white scribbles over them. In the bottom-right corner, there is a cluster of black dots of varying sizes, and below it, several long, thin, orange brushstrokes.

2.

What to REPLACE (sentence level)



Adverbs

- x Trade a verb + adverb for a stronger verb

She walked quietly out of the room.

She tiptoed out of the room.

Lauren smiled and gently touched his arm.

Lauren smiled and caressed his arm.





VERY

- x Instead of very + adjective, pick a stronger word

Sarah is very bubbly and makes people smile.

Sarah is effervescent and makes people smile.





Verb + IN/WITH Feeling



- ✗ Can sometimes be cut or
- ✗ Can be replaced with better contextual clues or with a stronger word
- ✗ Yelled in exasperation, covered in fear, sighed with relief

Elaine cried in agony when she hung up the phone.

Elaine wailed when she hung up the phone.

Elaine crumpled when she hung up the phone.





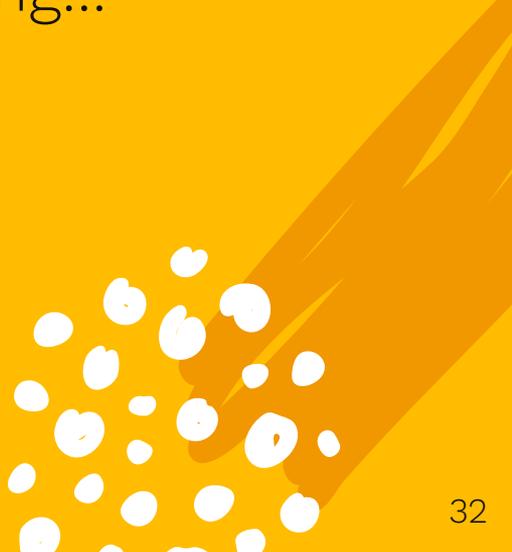
WAS + Gerund



- x Occurs when writing in past tense
- x Was smiling, was leaving, was holding...
- x Just use the past tense verb

The baby was laughing at the dog.

The baby laughed at the dog.





3.

What to TRIM (paragraph level)



Redundancies

- × Extra phrases and sentences that are unnecessary because they've already been shown



Maddux bolted across the room and shoved his head under my feet. With each crash of thunder he jumped. Tiny, desperate whimpers streamed from his mouth. It was storming, and he was scared.

Redundancies

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Multiple Clauses

- ✗ Sentences with long strings of clauses should be trimmed or broken into two sentences.
- ✗ Short sentences give big impact

Early in the morning, we got up and grabbed our gear before heading down to the truck that was parked at the end of the driveway so Pete wouldn't notice that we were sneaking out while he slept on the couch.



Multiple Clauses

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Early in the morning, we got up and grabbed our gear before heading down. The truck was parked at the end of the driveway so Pete wouldn't wake up while we snuck out.





Sentence Length

- ✗ Short sentences (two or three words) give big impact
- ✗ Cut a regular length sentence into two short ones for more oomph

We tiptoed across the living room and turned the doorknob when Uncle Pete sat up.

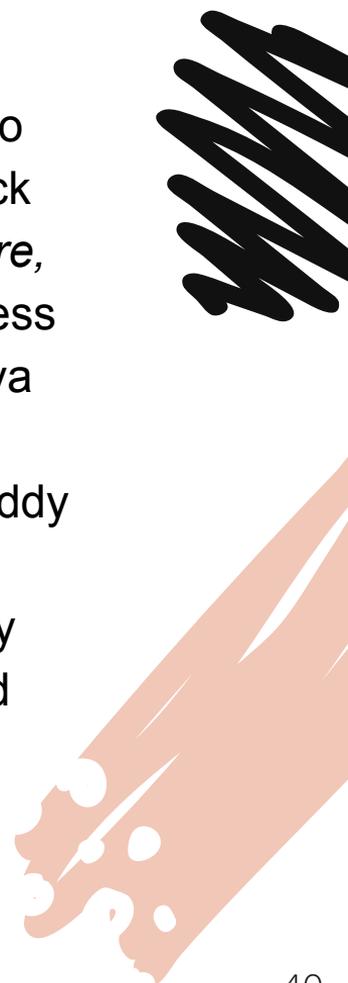
We tiptoed across the living room and turned the doorknob. Pete sat up.

Example One





The ring of eyes around the war table all fell silent waiting for me to say something on what had incited them to throw angry words back and forth amongst themselves. *This isn't my place to be sitting here, but...* even for a matter as trivial as who would be escorting Princess Sonja Regius and Royal Knight Valiente Animamea back to Captiva City seemed to bring the worst out in those who sat across this wooden plane. Winter had started to show signs of fading, the muddy ground peeking through snowy fields and icicles melting away to puddles on the streets. Scanning the room, I refused to give up my stoic silence. My thoughts still circling back to all that had unfolded starting with Falco. [125 words total]



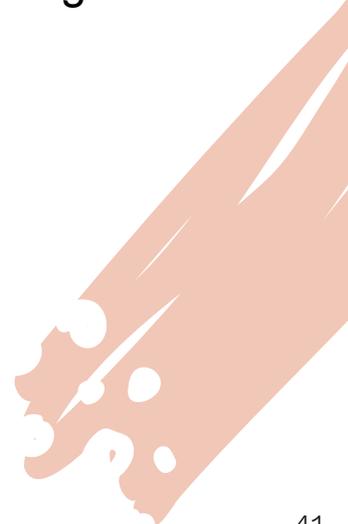


The ring of eyes around the war table all fell silent waiting for me to say something on what had incited them to throw angry words back and forth amongst themselves. (31 words)

The war table fell silent. All eyes stared at me. (10 words)

Winter had started to show signs of fading, the muddy ground peeking through snowy fields and icicles melting away to puddles on the streets. (24 words)

Muddy ground peeked through snowy fields, and icicles turned to puddles in the streets. (14 words)





Example Two





They all glanced to one another, murmuring, and nodding for me to continue as they settled into their seats. Heartbeats calming in my ears signaled they were ready to listen. Leaning forward, I inhaled deep taking in everything their bodies betrayed and did what I had seen my father do a million times at this very table. *To think I would finally get to be the one to unravel the war room on my own accord.* This is what it meant to be a Blood Prince. What it meant to challenge a Traibon by coming into *their* war room and watch as we dominate all who dare to enter.

They began to shuffle, even physically sweat. A smirk crested on my face as a memory echoing from a time my father settled an argument between two farmers over a pig. He knew the pig didn't belong to either of them. And now, I understood how he'd figured it out so precisely. [161 words total]



They all glanced to one another, murmuring, and nodding for me to continue as they settled into their seats. (19)

They looked at each other, nodded, and returned to their seats. (11)

Leaning forward, I inhaled deep taking in everything their bodies betrayed and did what I had seen my father do a million times at this very table. (27)

I inhaled deep, taking in what their bodies betrayed, just as my father did many times at this very table. (20)

A smirk crested on my face as a memory echoing from a time my father settled an argument between two farmers over a pig. (24)

I smiled recalling a time my father settled an argument between two farmers over a pig. (16)

Common Editing Mistakes



Versus!

- Blonde (female) v. blond (male/neutral)
- Peek (your eyes) v. peak (mountain)
- Gray (USA) v. grey (England)
- Premiere (performance) v. premier (status)
- Aide (an assistant) v. aid (to help)
- Alter (to change) v. altar (holy table)
- Soothe (to calm) v. sooth (truth)
- Fiancée (woman) v. fiancé (man)



Versus!

- Lay v. lie
 - You lie down, but you lay something down.
- Farther v. further
 - Farther for physical distances, further for figurative ones
- Everyday v. every day
 - Everyday is an adjective
- Toward v. towards
 - Toward is preferred in US, towards in UK
- Less v. fewer
 - Use fewer when it is something you can count



Military Names

- Lowercase without full title
- The navy, the army, the air force
- United States Navy, United States Army, United States Air Force
- The captain, the major, the lieutenant
- Captain John Warbock, Major Lisa Stone



Hyphens



- Hyphens are used more for ADJECTIVE forms of words
- A dictionary-wielding librarian helped me. (noun + adjective = adjective)
- Three computer-literate accountants also helped. (“ “)
- A three-year-old child is three years old. (age)
- Blue-green algae on a reddish-brown rock. (color)
- The half-hour session starts in a half hour. (time)
- The three-thirty train leaves at three thirty. (time)
- The dress needs a one-and-a-half-inch hem. (measurement)
- He gave a matter-of-fact reply. (adjectival phrase)
- My great-grandmother knew my great-great-grandmother. (familial)

Quotes in quotes

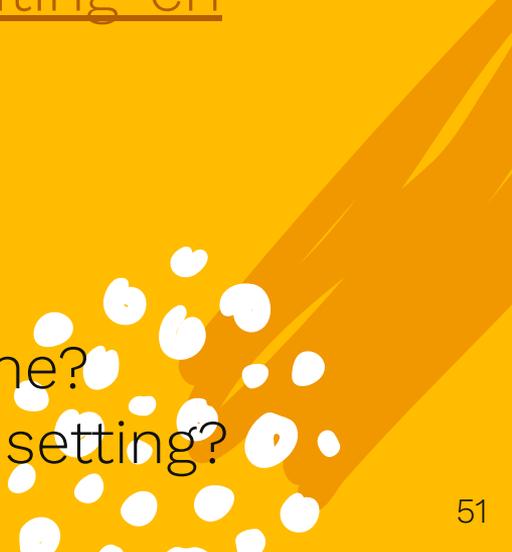


- Periods and commas always go inside quotation marks
 - “She said, ‘Leave me alone.’”
 - “He picked up a real ‘winner,’” Stan said.
- Question marks and exclamation points can go outside.
 - “Sean yelled, ‘Go away’!”
 - “What do you mean a real ‘winner’?” Lucy asked.





Editing Checklist Practice

- x Click on checklist link
<https://www.ariellehaughee.com/editing-checklist.html>
 - x Use on a piece of your writing
 - x Does it move the plot forward?
 - x Does it reveal character?
 - x Does it contribute to theme or tone?
 - x Is it integral to understanding the setting?
- 

EDITING CHECKLIST FOR CLEANING UP PROSE

CONSIDER EDITING	EXAMPLES
PASSIVE VERBS	Was, were, is, are
SENSE WORDS	Look, notice, saw, heard, smell
ADVERBS	Quickly, angrily
WEAK VERBS	Walked, set down
WAS + GERUND	Was running (ran)
VERB + IN FEELING	Yelled in exasperation
THAT	I knew that he went...
JUST	She just wanted...
VERY	He was very upset.
FELT	She felt sad.
SUDDENLY	Suddenly the door shut.
ACTION "AS"	He yelled as he jumped...
BEGAN TO/BEGINNING TO	She began to open the door...

LANGUAGE

CONSIDER EDITING	EXAMPLES
UNAWARE POV SLIPS	She didn't notice... He didn't realize...
PATTERN OF SENTENCE BEGINNINGS	She this...She that... She this...She that...
TOO MANY PAST PERFECT "HAD"	She had gone and had seen, and had decided...
GREETINGS IN DIALOGUE	Hello, good morning, how are you?
SPEAKER TAGS	Use mostly "said"
NON-CONTRACTIONS IN DIALOGUE	"She is not here." "I am hot."
OVERUSE OF CHARACTER NAME	*Use pronouns as much as possible
SENTENCE LENGTHS	*Check for a variety in sentence length and structure
STRINGS OF PREPOSITIONS	By the river near the bluff over the mountain...
MULTIPLE ADJECTIVES	The dainty, elegant flower in the blue speckled shiny pot.
EXCLAMATION POINTS	*Limit to as few as possible
LONG PARAGRAPHS	*Break up as appropriate

LANGUAGE



Thanks!

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