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How to rewrite a paper: Culling common errors

Hannah B. Suthers

I. Introduction

A previous paper of mine outlined how to get your story down on paper and in publishable form (H.B. Suthers, NABB 2:110-112, 1977). A large part of the labor in producing a brain child consists of rewriting. Then, too, the editor's and referees' verdicts are invariably: rewrite.

This paper offers suggestions on how to overcome the "rewrite" blues. The title was chosen deliberately. You are not going to avoid errors in writing, and you don't want to be concerned about errors while rapidly writing down your first draft. The first draft is your raw material, the essence of what you want to say. The task of the rewrite is to give shape to your raw material, to discipline it into a concise form, free of errors.

Then, to overcome the initial paralysis from the editorial dictum to rewrite, you may need to go through a similar process to the one you underwent with the first draft. You will need to overcome the tendency to regard your written word as set, fixed. You must think of better ways of saying the same thing.

The aids that follow are applicable toward both your rough draft and your revision that the editor requires for publication.



II. How to check the rough draft

- A. Check organization by outlining your story
 - 1. Like a skeleton in a body, an outline gives shape to your paper
 - 2. For example, this presentation is in outline form
 - a) A formal outline makes you think through your ideas more thoroughly
 - b) If a formal outline blocks you, simply list your ideas under headings

B. Check that the parts meet their purpose

- 1. The introduction should state clearly and concisely the thesis of the paper
- 2. The body should develop every issue in the introduction
 - a) Statements should be supported by data
 - b) The body should not be too brief to develop ideas
 - c) Nor too long with unnecessary repetition
- 3. Conclusions should be logical, based on data
- 4. The summary should list findings or conclusions

C. Make a clean copy with wide margins, space on bottom

D. Set the draft aside for at least a few days

- 1. You want the written word to get cold in your memory
- 2. Then you can see it again with a fresh mind and some impartiality

III. How to revise the rough draft

A. Take the draft out of cold storage and read it with criteria II.B. in mind

B. Check paragraph structure

- 1. Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence
- 2. Follow with sentences that give reason, example, or detail in support of the topic sentence
- 3. If the topic requires more than one paragraph, connect paragraphs with a transition sentence or phrase
 - Starlings are aged by length of iridescence on the throat hackles . . .
 - As the young of some species have sparse thigh feathers . . .
 - Darkness of the underwing coverts is useful in separating adults from young birds . . .
 - Another age indicator appeared quite by surprise . . .
- 4. Give a conclusion to each topic before moving on

C. Check sentence structure

1. Are modifiers close to the words they modify?
 - a) Faulty order
If they were captured for the first time as old birds according to the earlier theory they would be classified as indeterminates and considered young.
 - b) Right order
If they were captured for the first time as old birds they would be classified as indeterminates and according to the earlier theory considered young.
2. Are constructions parallel within a sentence?
 - a) Shifted
Most male deaths occurred after banding year 2 when the birds were at least 4 years of age, but most females died by banding year 2 before 3 years of age.
 - b) Parallel
Most male deaths occurred after banding year 2 when the birds were at least 4 years of age, but most female deaths occurred by banding year 2 before the birds were 3 years of age.
3. Are the sentences wordy?
 - a) Wordy
It appears to be evident that hackles wear faster on old birds.
 - b) Revised
Hackles wear faster on old birds.
4. Is the passive construction overused?
 - a) Overused
The reason that more than one tree cavity was defended by a pair was that a roost was needed as well as a nesting site.
 - b) Revised
A pair defended one tree cavity for nesting and another for roosting.

D. Check grammar and syntax

1. Is it clear to whom or to what each pronoun refers?
 - a) Unclear
Bachelor males preempted nesting cavities and by doing so they were available for future mates.
 - b) Revised
Bachelor males preempted nesting cavities keeping them available for future mates.

2. Do the pronoun and antecedent agree in number, gender, and person?
 - a) Disagree
When a flock flies into town to forage they disperse.
 - b) Agree
When a flock flies into town to forage it disperses.
3. Do the subject and predicate agree in number and person?
 - a) Disagree
The data indicates a differential migration.
 - b) Agree
The data indicate a differential migration.
4. Does the participial phrase at the beginning of a sentence refer to the subject?
 - a) Dangling
Once thought to migrate, this study shows that the birds are residential.
 - b) Related
This study shows that the birds, once thought to migrate, are residential.

E. Read aloud to catch errors, inconsistencies, awkwardness.

F. Make a clean copy of the revised draft.

IV. The final draft

- A. Look at your intended journal for style of titles, subtitles, headings, punctuation, abbreviations, captions, literature cited
 1. The inside cover usually has instructions to authors
 2. The *Auk* and *Wilson Bulletin* use the Style Manual for Biological Journals

V. The galley proofs

- A. Check the proof against your manuscript, word by word
 1. Watch for your errors, and typesetter's errors
 2. Watch for editor's improvements that change the meaning of your sentence
 3. Check for errors in tables, captions
 4. Check that literature citations in the text agree with the references in the Bibliography
- B. The final say on the proofs is yours; you are responsible for what appears there

VI. In conclusion

A. Effective communication is the goal of all your work

1. Look at it as a creative challenge and have fun!
2. You didn't know you had it in you, did you?

B. If you desire help, the following people will look over your work and make suggestions for your revision. Write any one of them and send a copy of your paper:

Dr. Charles H. Blake
P.O. Box 10
Hillsborough, NC 27278

Mr. Walter P. Protzman
P.O. Box 237
Hopewell, NJ 08525

Dr. Jeff Swinebroad
10423 Kardwright Court
Gaithersburg, MD 20760

Mrs. Hannah B. Suthers
4 View Point Drive
Hopewell, NJ 08525

Dr. Charles T. Collins
Dept. of Biology
Calif. State Univ.
Long Beach, CA 90840

Mrs. Eleanor L. Radke
P.O. Box 446
Cave Creek, AZ 85331



Further aids

The Elements of Style. William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White. Second Ed. Macmillan Publishing Co., New York. 1972. (A 78-page gem; get this if nothing else.)

A Dictionary of Modern English Usage. H.W. Fowler. Second Ed. Oxford Univ. Press, New York. 1965. (Alphabetical entries of topics.)

A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage. Bergen and Cornelia Evans. Random House, New York. 1957. (Word preferences, grammar, style, punctuation, idioms.)

The Careful Writer, A Modern Guide to English Usage. Theodore M. Bernstein. Atheneum Press, New York. 1973. (Alphabetical entries of problems.)

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Attention: Plotters
(Data, that is)

The editors of NABB have obtained a supply of Cram outline maps to assist banders (and authors, in particular) who wish to plot dispersal and migratory patterns of their study species.

Two types of maps are available: U.S. maps are 8½" x 11", have outlines of all the states with state names printed in small type, and indicate degrees of latitude and longitude. North American maps are 11" x 16", are folded for mailing, and also indicate degrees of latitude and longitude.

Prices are 50¢ for one map, 10¢ for each additional map. Postage and handling are included. Order from Eleanor L. Radke, P.O. Box 446, Cave Creek, AZ 85331. Please make checks payable to Western Bird Banding Association. (Costs and proceeds will be shared by EBBA and WBBA.)

CRAM'S
8½ x 11 Outline Map
UNITED STATES
(State Names)

SCALE
0 100 200 miles

Base Map
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The George F. Cram Company, Inc.
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