

QUICK TIPS TO EASY REVISION: MICRO CONCERNS

(PODCAST 29 TRANSCRIPT)

Click link for Podcast 29, Quick Tips to Easy Revision: Micro Concerns:

<https://kuportal-a.akamaihd.net/ascmmedia/wc/podcasts/29easyrevision.mp3>

Greetings everyone. This is Kurtis Clements with another effective writing podcast. In this episode, I am going to share with you some quick tips for easy revision, and my focus is going to be on micro-matters—that is, sentence and word level concerns that can help you clarify your writing.

For many writers, all revision means is correcting errors—but this is not revision. Revision means to re-vision a piece of writing. When you revise, you re-see what is on the page in an effort to improve the content as best as you can. Revision is something the writer does to improve upon the content and the presentation. The writer Naomi Shihab Nye had this to say about being told to revise: If a teacher told me to revise, I thought that meant my writing was a broken-down car that needed to go to the repair shop. I felt insulted. I didn't realize the teacher was saying, "Make it shine. It's worth it." Now I see revision as a beautiful word of hope. It's a new vision of something. It means you don't have to be perfect the first time. What a relief! How many of you have felt this way about revision—that it was akin to being told that there is something wrong with the writing? Many students—and you may be in this group—still feel this way, but it's important to realize that writing is a process, and a process takes time.

One's first effort is usually far from what one is capable of producing and the way to improve upon your skills is to use that process to produce better writing and, in time and with practice, your writing will likely improve sooner. However, this does not mean that you won't have to revise, for even the best writers—professional, published writers—revise. Good writing takes time. As journalist and writing guru Donald Murray put it: You can't order good writing like a Big Mac. Indeed, unlike McDonalds where you can walk in, slap your money on the counter, and get what you want, you can't sit down and just churn out good writing. You have to let your ideas percolate and coalesce and then, through a series of drafts, the writing—and more importantly, the ideas in that writing—will begin to appear and take shape and do their job: effectively communicate meaning to an audience.

Ok, so let's turn our attention to some practical suggestions for revision—in this case, quick tips to easy revision: micro matters. Why easy revision? Because these tips are a systematic method that you can employ to spruce up your sentences so that they are lean and precise. None of these tips deal with grammar or mechanics. This approach to revision is non-threatening, logical, and objective—in short, easy, but you have to be willing to work at it. One caveat: This approach works best when you feel your paper is in good shape—that is, it's not a first draft, but, rather something you've worked on even if more work is needed. Make sense? Ok, here we go!



Quick Tip 1: Use strong verbs! Get rid of as many forms of the verb “to be” as possible. Circle, box, highlight—in some way identify—every “to be” verb (am, is, are, was, were, be, been, being) in your paper. Count the number of “to be” verbs you have used and change as many as possible. The verb “to be” is the most commonly used verb in the English language, and while you will use it, it is not a particularly strong verb, so when you can find a better verb to use, you definitely want to. What’s better: He was in charge of coordinating the project and reporting the results to his team, or he coordinated the project and reported the results to his team? He coordinated the project and reported the results to his team, right? With concrete verbs like “coordinated” and “reported,” you get an image in your head and the entire sentence is tighter, active, and more direct.

Beyond scouring your paper for forms of the verb to be, get in a strong verb frame of mind, and any time you can change out a “good” verb for a better verb, do it. Listen to this example and tell me what sentence is better: (A) The workers put the crates of bananas into the truck, or (B) The workers loaded the truck with crates of bananas. What do you think? You may think there is not much difference, but in my mind the second sentence, hands down, is the better of the two. The verb “loaded” is much more concrete and precise than “put.” Imagine an essay of 600 hundred words or more with an abundance of sentences with verbs like “put”—what would that do to the prose? Using too many imprecise verbs would slog down the movement of the writing and sully the clarity of the ideas.

Quick Tip 2: Avoid passive voice. What’s passive voice? Passive voice is a sentence that (1) uses a passive verb construction—some form of the verb “to be” (you remember those verbs, don’t you?) used in conjunction with a verb that does not end in “ing” (in most but not all cases, the verb will have an “ed” ending); and (2) a sentence is in the passive voice when the subject of the sentence does not perform the action the verb describes. Listen to these two sentences: (1) The sky is filled with stars. (2) Stars fill the sky. Which one is better? The second, don’t you think? The second sentence says the same as the first but does so more directly—the subject of the sentence, stars, performs the action the verb “fill” describes, for it’s the stars that fill the sky, right? The passive voice “is filled” is eliminated.

Not happy with the verb “fill”? Ok, fair enough—change it to . . . blink! Stars blink overhead. That’s an even more vivid sentence than the original. Indeed! Remember, a good rule of thumb is to examine all of your verbs. Ask yourself if every verb is as strong and vivid as possible. Try to use the best verbs you can. Sometimes the process is as easy as replacing one verb with another, but other times you may need to rework the sentence a bit. Working on the word level will bolster your sentences so that they are sharp and authoritative. Taking the time to address such sentence-level issues will help you develop good writing habits and, in this case, before you know it, you are thinking about the verbs you use as you draft.

Quick Tip 3: Read your work out loud. That’s right: read your work out loud. That’s exactly what I did when working on the script for this podcast—I read the work aloud, and if something sounded flat or clunky, I fixed it. Indeed, there is much that you can learn about your paper by hearing it read aloud. Concentrate on the rhythm of your sentences and make sure the “sound” of the prose seems to be working. The words and sentences should flow smoothly and sound pleasing to the ear.

Pay attention to sentence lengths. In fact, a good exercise is to count the number of words you have per sentence in a representative paragraph and take note of what kind of length variety exists. If all of



your sentences are about the same length that is telling you something. Listen to this example from Gary Provost's book *Make Your Words Work*. This sentence has five words. This is five words too. Five word sentences are fine. But several together become monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is getting boring. The sound of it drones. It's like a stuck record. The ear demands some variety.

Now listen. I vary the sentence length, and I create music. Music. The writing sings. It has a pleasant rhythm, a lilt, a harmony. I use short sentences. And I use sentences of medium length. And sometimes when I am certain the reader is rested, I will engage him with a sentence of considerable length, a sentence that burns with energy and builds with all the impetus of a crescendo, the roll of drums, the crash of the symbols, and sounds that say listen to this, it is important. Did you hear the point where the writing was singing off the page? You can work toward this kind of fluid writing by reading your work aloud and making adjustments as necessary. Sometimes it's a matter of combining sentences or separating sentences or finding a more precise word to use—but it is through this process that your writing will improve. To quote Peter Elbow, "Writing is just a matter of adding, deleting, changing, and rearranging."

Quick Tip 4: Eliminate weak modifiers. You might be saying: A weak modifier—what? Modifier. A word that helps describe another word in the sentence. Adjectives and adverbs. Sometimes such words add to the clarity of the idea, and sometimes such words are simply not needed—they are for all practical matters wasted words. Some of the most commonly abused weak modifiers include every, really, very, and pretty, so be on your toes, and weed out such unnecessary words—words that won't at all be missed.

What is the difference between these two sentences: The idea was really clear, or the idea was clear? In my view, the idea is either clear or it is not, and the word "really" does nothing to help me understand the degree to which the idea is clear. I'd say the two sentences express the same idea, though the second does so more efficiently. For those of you who may be groaning, keep in mind that while the difference between the two sentences may be slight (I wouldn't argue that, but let's just say some folks feel this way), imagine a paper with too many sentences that use "really, every, very, and/or pretty." Too many weak modifiers—words that are not needed as they don't change the meaning—will take away from the meaning because they get in the way. OK?

So remember: Every writer should work really hard to follow this very helpful tip, or, better said, writers should work hard to follow this helpful tip. In a future podcast, I am going to discuss the idea of writing tight, one of the hallmarks of effective writing, and at that time, I'll revisit this tip of eliminating weak modifiers. For now, though, I trust you have some quick revising tips that will be of service to you. Give them a try and see what you discover about your own writing and what happens to it as a result of using these tips.

Thanks for listening, folks. Happy writing!

