

diary of a mad freelancer

There are millions of people who develop grotesque facial ticks when they hear the words "nine to five." We call them "freelancers."

Don't Fear the Red Pen

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I have a confession to make: I'm long-winded. That's right. Verbose. **Fustian**. Rambling. I'm in love with the sound of my own typing. And I'm an editor.

When it comes to editing others' work, I can be a harsh mistress, dicing, slicing and re-jiggering text like the 8th grade English teacher of your middle-school nightmares. Seth Godin would be proud. Yet when it comes to my own beautiful words, I let them flow like the Ganges.

But as the lovely Marian Schembari noted in her recent **blogging adventure**, we all make mistakes. Typos, incorrect usage and errant apostrophes are the bane of us all. Unfortunately, if you're a writer — or worse, an editor — your mistakes seem to shine like a lighthouse beacon for all to see. So how do I save face? Ladies and gentlemen, I self-edit like nobody's business.



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How does self-editing become second nature for a writer who's never met a dependent clause she didn't like? This is how.

1) Just Write

Simplistic, I know. Don't agonize over how you're going to write it, just write it. Stop stressing over le mot juste. You have your topic and a vague idea or opinion of what you want to communicate, so just get your thoughts on the screen (or paper, if you're like to kick it old school from time to time). The point is: You can't edit a blank page.

2) Embrace the Process

You type a paragraph, and by the time you reach the end, you realize your closer works better as your opener. A quick copy & paste and voila! Magic! Or your fingers linger restlessly over the keys as your focus deteriorates and you can't seem to get unstuck. So you abandon that line of thought and move on to the next paragraph where the words fly from your keyboard with lightening speed. Embrace the process. This is your right brain telling your left brain to shut the hell up. You're doing what I call an "organic dev edit."

NB: Development editing is that horrible beast that exists to make mystery writers scream and technical writers cry.

3) Pause to Correct

So you've hit a wall. You can't reach the finish line because your brain won't play nice anymore. Pause. Breathe. Go back to the beginning. ... Why are you hyperventilating? I said: "Breathe." Pause to correct any typos, grammatical faux pas and verb tense shifts (an Achilles heel of yours truly). Sure, re-reading and correcting these errors helps you get a jump on editing your final piece, but it also helps tighten your writing and root out any stray thoughts that might have derailed your progress. This step may occur several times before you reach the end. Have no fear; it too is a part of the process. When in doubt, see #2.

4) Edit "Someone Else's" Work

You've finished writing. It's not perfect, but you're feeling a little proud right now. Guess what? It's time to get mean. There's 3 ways to go about this:

- You're an English Comp professor with a trusty red pen who just found out he's not getting tenure
- You're a loving parent who doesn't want you to feel discouraged because you try oh so hard
- You're a friend who doesn't want to see you look foolish by clinging to clunky phrases and excessive rambling

Depending on the day of the week and the subject matter at hand, you're going to become each of these personas. Sometimes, you'll be all three in one day. Just remember: You're not the writer anymore; you're the editor. This is going to hurt.

5) Step Away

For journalists penning articles, copywriters building campaigns, authors creating book proposals, this step usually involves leaving the piece alone for a night. When you awake in the morning, you have a semi-fresh perspective and you're more likely to catch any mistakes that escaped you the day before. Once you're happy, send the hallowed text on its merry way.

For bloggers racing against the clock, this step involves hitting publish, walking away, then coming back to read through your work after its had time to embarrass the hell out of you. Sadly, due to time constraints, there's no real way around this end game. But returning to your blog post a day or two after you've hit publish often helps you discover missing words, hackneyed cliches and funky formatting that mars your otherwise benevolent masterpiece. Make the necessary changes, once you're happy, hit "Update."

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Now I can't promise that my self-editing style will work well for you, because as I mentioned, I'm a long-winded writer. In the end, I believe in hacking away the excess, but never at the expense of conveying the author's complete thought or destroying the author's voice. The truth is editing someone else's words is a lot easier than editing your own, but we can't be slaves to our own egos if we want to stay relevant in the world of freelancing. Writing riddled with typos, poor usage and repetitious language hurts your image and job prospects. Self editing will only help you improve as a communicator for your product, your brand and your business.

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