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From *The Little Book of Self-Editing for Writers*













 Key Point	 What to look for	 Ask yourself...	 Fix it
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		Part One: Search and Destroy										
		Adverbs										
		Search for words ending in “ly.”										
		<p>How many of your verbs are weaklings hoping for help from an adverb?</p> <p>How many times have you added an adverb instead of choosing a stronger, more precise verb?</p> <p>How many times have you used these and similar words?</p> <table><tr><td>Very</td><td>Absolutely</td></tr><tr><td>Definitely</td><td>Mostly</td></tr><tr><td>Simply</td><td>Really</td></tr><tr><td>Totally</td><td>Terribly</td></tr><tr><td>Completely</td><td>Utterly</td></tr></table>	Very	Absolutely	Definitely	Mostly	Simply	Really	Totally	Terribly	Completely	Utterly
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Simply	Really											
Totally	Terribly											
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		<p>Eliminate unnecessary adverbs. This will turn out to be <i>most</i> adverbs. Be brave.</p> <p>If you added adverbs to help out weak verbs, replace those verbs with strong, specific ones that convey more meaning.</p>										









		To Be								
		Search for “was” and “were” (This search will reveal a lot of passive voice, too).								
		How many times did you use “was ____ing?” instead of a stronger verb?								
		Replace “was” with stronger verbs that convey more meaning. Replace “was ____ing” usage with stronger verb forms.								
		To Have								
		Search for “had.”								
		Have you used “had” instead of stronger verbs that convey more meaning?								
		Replace “had” wherever possible with another verb that paints a better picture. Remember that “had” is <i>not</i> a weak verb when used to establish the past perfect tense in flashbacks.								
		The Weakeners								
		Fish Heads (and Tails)								
		Search for words like these at the beginnings and ends of your sentences: <table><tr><td>As always</td><td>At that moment</td></tr><tr><td>Finally</td><td>For some reason</td></tr><tr><td>Just then</td><td>Next</td></tr><tr><td>Prior to</td><td>Suddenly</td></tr></table>	As always	At that moment	Finally	For some reason	Just then	Next	Prior to	Suddenly
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		<p>Are you handicapping your sentences and paragraphs with unnecessary words at the beginning?</p> <p>Are your sentences trailing on unnecessarily with surplus words that blunt their effect?</p> <p>Are you beginning your sentences and paragraphs where the action really begins, and ending them on the strongest idea—the strongest word?</p>										
		Chop off the beginnings and/or ends of your sentences and paragraphs if they don't carry their weight. Increase the clarity of your prose.										
		Filler Words										
		<p>Search for these common filler words:</p> <table><tr><td>Began to</td><td>Continued to</td></tr><tr><td>Decided to</td><td>Just Managed to</td></tr><tr><td>Kept ____ing</td><td>Proceeded to</td></tr><tr><td>So to speak</td><td>Started to</td></tr><tr><td>To say the least</td><td>Was able to</td></tr></table>	Began to	Continued to	Decided to	Just Managed to	Kept ____ing	Proceeded to	So to speak	Started to	To say the least	Was able to
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So to speak	Started to											
To say the least	Was able to											
		Have you filled your sentences with unnecessary words that add little or no meaning?										
		Notice where these kinds of words have crept in unneeded. Eliminate them to trim the verbal fat from your writing.										
		Nominalizations										
		Search for “-tion,” “-ence,” and “-ship.”										

		How many times did you use a noun constructed from a verb? Can you rephrase to use the actual verb?
		Turn false nouns back into verbs wherever possible to restore motion to your sentences.
		The Word That Wasn't There
		Search for "some."
		Have you used "some" when a word suggestive of an actual amount would paint a better picture? Have you used "some" where the sentence might work better without it?
		Where you've used "some" in place of a more descriptive word (some soldiers as opposed to three soldiers, a platoon of soldiers, a regiment of soldiers, etc.), replace it with a word that lets the reader picture the number or amount. Where you've used "some" as a filler word, eliminate it if it doesn't improve the rhythm of your sentence.
		Repetition and Redundancy
		Look for places where something you've written is stated or implied elsewhere, or obvious to the reader from context or point of view.
		Have you avoided repeating information that was evident, obvious, or actually stated elsewhere, though perhaps in a different way? Have you eliminated extra words that explain too much and distance the reader from the character's experience? Is your writing free of "As you know, Bob" phrases such as "as you know," "as we discussed," "Like I told you before," etc? Have you included "spare parts" that assume your reader doesn't already know which body parts go with which actions?

	Eliminate information that's unnecessary and repetitive to give the reader a direct, clear experience of your story.
	Dangling Modifiers
	Look for modifying words and phrases that are out of place in your sentences.
	<p>Are your modifying words and phrases next to, and clearly intended for, the words they're supposed to be modifying?</p> <p>Could a reader mis-read any of your sentences because of the position of a modifying word or phrase?</p>
	Move modifying words and phrases next to the words they modify to avoid confusion and unintentional humor.
	Passive Voice
	Look for sentences in which the subject is not performing the action described by the verb, but rather having the action performed upon them by someone or something else.
	<p>Is the subject of your sentences acting (good) or being acted upon (bad)?</p> <p>Have you provided a subject for each sentence, or have you used the dreaded "there was?"</p>
	Activate your writing by making the subjects of your sentences the actors therein.
	Homophones
	<p>Read over your manuscript carefully to be sure you haven't committed any homophone errors.</p> <p>Your spellchecker is out of its league here.</p>
	<p>Have you used "its" and "it's" correctly throughout your manuscript?</p> <p>Are you sure you know the difference between "affect" and "effect," "peak," "peek," and "pique," "born" and "borne," "discreet" and</p>

		“discrete?” Those are only a few of the most common homophone traps.
		Go over your manuscript and correct homophone errors. The best prevention is careful reading, re-reading, and proofreading. Go to http://www.homophone.com/ and familiarize yourself with the common homophones.
		Point of View Violations
		Look for information that the POV character could not know. Look for places where you accidentally slip into another point of view.
		Is everything told from someone’s point of view? Is that point of view consistent? Can you see, hear, and feel what the POV character does, and only what he does? Are you keeping point of view consistent and only switching at chapter or scene breaks?
		Stay consistently in one character’s point of view at a time. Rewrite any section where a character experiences something he should not, or doesn’t experience something he should.
		Part Two - The Self-Editor’s Toolkit
		The Most Hated Writing Advice Ever (Show, Don’t Tell)
		Be vigilant for places where you report what’s happening rather than putting the reader into the scene and letting them see, hear, and feel for themselves.
		Are you letting your readers directly experience what the POV character sees, hears, or feels, or are you <i>telling</i> them what she experiences? Are you letting the reader experience as many of the POV character’s senses as possible? Sensory writing puts your reader in your story.

	<p>Rewrite with the intention of providing a direct and immediate experience for your readers. Always choose to show the reader what's happening through the story's action and enrich their understand of character through reaction.</p> <p>If you're wasting words telling the readers things they already know or can infer, you're missing opportunities to help them understand the character, the theme, the world, and the story.</p>
	<h2>Two Languages</h2>
	<p>Pay attention to the type of English you're using. Latinate words are cooler, more distant, more formal. Anglo-Saxon words are shorter, plainer, and more direct.</p> <p>Search for places where you've used one type of English and the other would do a better job.</p>
	<p>Are you using short, simple words where you need more formal language?</p> <p>Have you used formal language where you need to be more direct or casual?</p>
	<p>Rewrite to favor Anglo-Saxon words and Latin-based words where each type of language is most appropriate.</p>
	<h2>Pacing</h2>
	<p>Notice the length of your sentences and paragraphs. Note whether their length supports the pace that will do the most for that scene or bit of narrative.</p> <p>Look for a variety of sentence and paragraph lengths, generally getting shorter when the action speeds up, and longer when it slows down.</p>
	<p>Do your sentences generally show a pleasing variety of length rather than being all short or all long?</p> <p>Did you vary sentence and paragraph length according to whether you are trying to speed action up (and slow reading speed down) or slow action down (and speed reading up)?</p> <p>Did you vary the ratio of Latinate words to Anglo-Saxon ones</p>

		depending on the pace you're establishing?
		Rewrite with an eye to controlling the pace of your writing to best effect, using varying word, sentence, and paragraph length to their best advantage.
		Dialogue Tags
		Inspect your dialogue for labored tagging that will make your dialogue over-dramatic or even unintentionally humorous.
		Have you avoided tags like “shouted,” “shrieked,” “whispered,” “sobbed,” “rasped,” “hissed,” “spat,” and “intoned?”
		<p>Replace as many as you can with “said” and other neutral tags that readers will scarcely notice.</p> <p>Make your dialogue distinctive enough—and each character’s intention clear enough—that you can leave out most dialogue tags and the reader will still be able to follow the conversation.</p>