

Editing advice from the pros, aka ‘sit on your hands’

- 1. Pre-editing is the best editing.** Have a conversation with your writer first. (Or if you’re the writer, have a conversation with your editor.) Try to get a handle on what this piece of writing should turn out to be. Provide some guidance and communicate your expectations. Listen. This saves time and also avoids tears and temper tantrums.
- 2. ‘Sit on your hands.’** A great book editor, Benjamin Dreyer, puts it this way: Your first job as an editor is to listen to what a writer is doing. Before you start changing things, read anything you’re about to edit as if your hands were tied behind your back.
- 3. There’s always one more mistake.** Check every its/it’s. Check every name. This is, of course, the writer’s responsibility, but writers are not infallible. You are the safety net. Take that job seriously.
- 4. Say something positive first.** When you first get the article, the memo, the 500-page novel, please remember that the writer is probably neurotic and insecure. The writer is probably terrified about your reaction. Yes, even the famous ones. Even the highly respected ones. As the editor you wield immense psychological power, so be kind. Even if you don’t totally mean it, you can say, “I’m so glad to have this. It looks great.” Do this right away. This does not prevent you from a full and frank editing of the piece.
- 5. Most writing problems are really reporting (or research) problems.** When writers are giving you elaborate sentences filled with confusing syntax, they may be hiding something bad: They lack the facts. Considering sending it back for more research rather than trying to adjust the prose.
- 6. If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.** Editors like to put their mark on a story and feel like they’re earning their keep. Restrain this impulse. Ask yourself, “Am I making this better or am I just making it different?”

Writing advice from the pros, aka ‘murder your darlings’

1. **Read your copy out loud.** No, really. With your voice. In front of a mirror. And pay attention to your breathing. If you are out of breath, you might want to shorten that sentence. If you are confused by your own prose, you might want to rewrite.
2. **Check the spelling of every name. Then do it again.** This is another way to say “sweat the small stuff” because the small stuff really matters. This goes for dates, names of organizations, whether something really happened or you just think it did. Maybe.
3. **Make a bad start.** Remember, there is no such thing as “writer’s block.” If you think you have it, just start writing the worst draft you can imagine. And keep going. You can always fix it later. The art of writing is rewriting, not some kind of genius that magically spills out of your keyboard after an epiphany. The whole point of the first draft is to be bad. (If it turns out to be good, take the win.)
4. **Get to the point.** (See how I did that?) Less is more. Omit needless words. There are a lot of ways to say this, but they all amount to the same thing. Here’s a phrase to remember: “Lighter, tighter, brighter.” And here’s a radical approach that actually works: Imagine telling a friend (or an enemy) the three things you’re trying to get across in this piece of writing, in order of importance. Now, cross out the second and third ones. Everything should flow from that. You should be working toward your conclusion from the first sentence.
5. **Serve the reader.** As one editor says, “the easiest thing for the reader is to quit reading.” Your reader (and every reader) is often confused, often in trouble. Your job is to constantly be throwing that reader a life preserver. One way to serve your reader is to “murder your darlings.” This sounds bad, I know, so we will discuss it in real life with an example of someone who failed to follow this advice in her published writing.