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You Have To Walk a Mile in the Reader's Shoes

To judge your own work, imagine you are the reader

By Kenneth F. Oettle

At all stages of the writing process, from pre-writing through proofing, the self-critical faculty is crucial. You may work diligently and in a timely fashion, but if you cannot evaluate your ideas and the words you use to express them, then your effectiveness as an advocate is compromised.

We all evaluate our own writing, even work that is “dictated but not read.” In the manner of the scientific method, we formulate hypotheses, test them, reformulate them and test them again.

To some degree for each project, we ask ourselves whether we have a point, and if so, whether we have made it. If we perform this self-checking and self-correcting function relentlessly, we may write well.

Letting Time Pass

An associate asked how she could gain the perspective to evaluate her own work. The easy answer, I said, is to let time pass between drafts. A gap in time provides a fresh view because the mind regroup data.

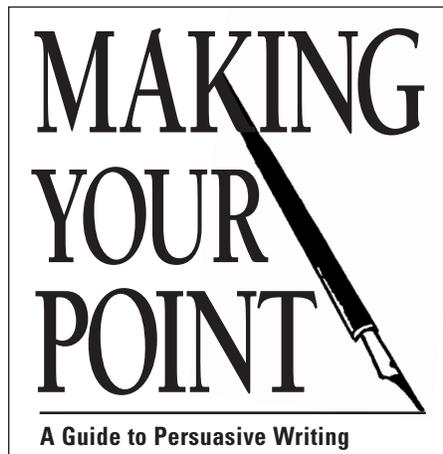
Like a computer, the mind performs functions on data, which means it sorts data. Unlike a computer, the mind may not recreate the same groups each time it

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visits a database. Memory degrades, and new ideas emerge. Groupings shift, like crystals in a kaleidoscope.

The more time that elapses between visits to the database, and the more complex the data and the issues, the more the mind may forget or reject its groupings. It may create new groups, new sets and subsets, possibly better than the old.

Hence, the easy answer to the ques-



tion of how to gain the perspective to edit your own work is to set it aside and come back to it.

Finding the Right Mind-Set

The more difficult task is to create a mind-set that fosters regrouping, one that enhances the perspective that comes naturally with the passage of time. If you wish to do more than just give your mind time to regroup data, you must develop a mind-set for self-criticism.

The way to develop this mind-set is to imagine being the reader. Pretend to be receiving, not sending, the message.

By imagining yourself to be the reader, you can evaluate your work dispassionately and, as necessary, reformulate it. As the imagined third-party reader of your own draft, you continually ask yourself three questions:

- Can I understand this?
- What are my concerns?
- Have my concerns been addressed?

The first question addresses an elemental building block of communication: To convey an idea, you must make it understandable. From the reader's perspective, is the piece well-organized? Is the prose dense or convoluted? Are the ideas clear?

The second question addresses the actual or apparent weakness in your case. You may have a strong case with no real weakness, but you can't expect the other side to acknowledge that. They will, at a minimum, allege some reason why your client doesn't deserve to win. You have to anticipate that.

The third question asks if you have addressed the reader's concerns. That, ultimately, is the test of persuasion. It is the hardest question to ask yourself, let alone answer.

In short, if you can put yourself in the place of the reader and take an honest look at your own work, you may be able to sail between the Scylla and Charybdis of self-analysis: insularity — meaning the failure to see your writing as the reader sees it — and self-deception.

During the writing process, your intimacy with the material keeps the data and the relationships among the data in current awareness, making simulation of unfamiliarity more difficult. This fosters insularity.

Though you may see all the connections, the reader may not. In your insularity, you don't realize the reader can't

see them as you can. As time weakens the connections in your mind, you become more like the reader — dependent on the printed page.

As for self-deception, sometimes you don't have a point and don't realize it. You state your conclusion three times and think you are making a point. You misread or misinterpret cases. You are in the grip of your own desire to have things be as you want them to be.

Taking a Step Back

All writing instructors agree that to overcome insularity and self-deception, you have to “take a step back” from your work. Putting “distance” between yourself and your writing is another metaphor. The distance you need to establish is the ability to see your writing as others see it. The step you need to take, meaning the function you need to perform, is to imagine yourself as the reader.

You have to ask yourself what questions the reader may be asking and what concerns the reader, such as a judge, may have. Your job isn't just to assert the equities for your client (“My client's ox was gored as follows”). You have to anticipate the court's concern that if it rules for you, it will be negating the equities on the other side. How can you help it resolve that conflict?

The court will wish to do what is fair, and to do what is fair, the court has to figure out which way the scales of justice tip — that is, to determine whose equities weigh more. The court will not ignore the other side's equities, so you can't either. You have to account for them.

Puzzler

How would you tighten and sharpen the following sentence?

At the completion of the hearing, the Chairman moved for a resolution granting petitioner's application, however, the application was denied by a 3-2 vote.

Most “however's” are unnecessary. Just say the Chairman's motion to grant the application was denied. That eliminates the need to punctuate however correctly (preceding it with a semicolon rather than a comma) and knocks out the second “application.” Technically, the motion, not the application, was denied.

“Motion to grant” is shorter than “motion for a resolution granting” (the resolution is understood), and “end” (of the hearing) is shorter and more precise than “completion.”

The revised version:

At the end of the hearing, the Chairman's motion to grant petitioner's application was denied by a 3-2 vote. ■