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Know When It Is Time To Rewrite Rather Than Edit

Sometimes you have to clean house

By Kenneth F. Oettle

You have drafted a brief and met with your assigning attorney, who told you the draft, or a good part of it, misses the point. The paragraphs are out of synch, and the argument isn't clear.

Maybe you tried to build a theme around facts that are merely flavor. Perhaps you put the wrong spin on the cases, or you failed to marshal your best facts. When you return to work, your first thought is to salvage the draft.

Don't do it.

The wrong thinking in the draft will control you. You must let your investment in the draft go. You can't recycle the sentences by moving them around, just as you can't unpuzzle a jigsaw if the pieces have been mis-cut.

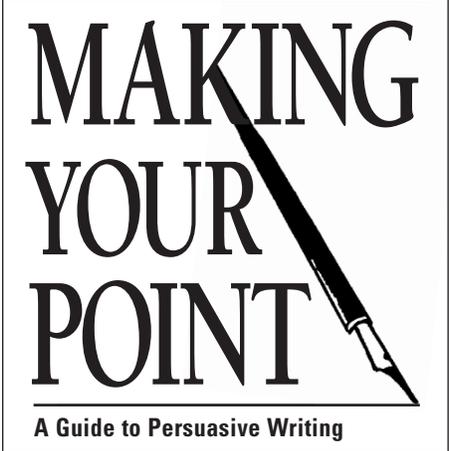
True, the thought of beginning from scratch is intolerable. If you can save time by reusing sentences and even paragraphs, then your initial efforts won't totally have gone to waste.

Your reluctance to discard product is a formidable impediment to improving the brief, not only because recycling old material doesn't work but because you waste energy trying to force a square peg into a round hole and because your focus on salvaging rather than rethinking keeps you from attack-

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ing the real problem — your lack of clarity.

The principal barrier to improving



MAKING
YOUR
POINT

A Guide to Persuasive Writing

faulty drafts isn't the difficulty of forming sentences and paragraphs. It is the confusion of not knowing precisely what you wish to say. If you are unsure of your point, you will struggle to express it. You can edit until your fingers cramp up, but you will accomplish nothing.

Conversely, if you know your point, the words will probably flow. You write more easily about what you understand.

Think and Talk First; Write Later

To get clear on your point, think about it. This seems extraordinarily obvious, but many writers just plunge ahead, fingers whirring over the keyboard, as if a moment's delay is a moment lost. They spend no time contemplating the problem.

You don't have to rent a room for a

weekend to think quietly. Just take fifteen minutes in your office, or pace the halls. Thinking about an issue will pay off not only in the strength of your ideas but in the ease with which you write.

When thinking has taken you as far as it can, and maybe even before, discuss your ideas with someone. Discussion does more than just develop collegiality. It provides a dialectic, the back-and-forth that allows you to explore the validity of an idea and the possibility of new ones. It brings fresh perspective, particularly if your listener doesn't have the same investment in the case as you and isn't constricted or propelled by wishful thinking.

A dialogue also lets you test several ideas in succession — something very difficult to do by yourself unless you take the unusual step of writing out alternative arguments. In a discussion, rejected theories can serve as springboards to viable ones. Under almost all circumstances, talking out an issue is more productive than sitting in front a blank sheet of paper or an empty screen.

Outlining Also Helps

Outlining has long been touted as an organizational tool, but some writers are suspicious of it. They deem it a diversion from the hard task of developing a dominant theme. The energy used to create an outline, some feel, would be better spent crafting one's core point.

Others fear that if they create an outline, they will have to feed it, that is, fill it in, and they'd rather let their creative juices dictate the direction their writing takes.

I don't reject these concerns out of hand, but outlining has saved my bacon many times. It provides psychological

as well as logistical support by introducing order to an otherwise unmanageable mass of material.

If outlining seems more of a barrier to you than a passageway, try reducing its scope. Write some ideas on a page and consider how they can be grouped or rank ordered. Let this be your small concession to regimentation. You can control the outlining process. It needn't control you.

After you think, discuss and outline, you are ready to write. The extra thinking and planning will pay off many times over. Not only will your writing be more to the point and more persuasive, but the task will be easier. Words flow more readily from the pen of a writer who has a clear idea.

Writing Helps Us Think

Suppose you can't seem to find time to think (if so, you aren't looking hard enough), or your thinking bears no fruit. And suppose you can't find someone to join you in a discourse, or you won't ask because you are afraid of looking stupid. You want a reputation as someone who always brings something to the table, not someone who looks for handouts. As for outlining, "passive

aggressive" best describes your attitude.

You might try free writing your ideas or free dictating them. Get something down that you can mull over. Think of it as notes, not product. You invest more in product than in notes.

Unless you have the mind of a chess master, chances are you will make more progress with something in writing than something in your head, even if the writing is verbose and disorganized. You may be discouraged by the drivel, but soon enough, a few pieces will fit together; some will drop away or be set aside for later; and an argument will emerge, like a chick from a shell.

Writing and thinking are synergistic. Not only does thinking help us write, but writing helps us think. We can see things on the page that we can't see in our mind, just as we play chess better when we see the board.

As W. Ross Winterowd said in *Contemporary Rhetoric* (1975):

Writing is not only the exposition of ideas, but also the working out of ideas. Often we really don't know what we want to say until we've said it. [at 33].

Ultimately, the writing process is a

subset of the scientific method: you gather evidence, form a hypothesis, test the hypothesis, gather more evidence and reformulate the hypothesis. Thinking, talking, outlining and free writing all help you formulate and evaluate your hypothesis. They bring you closer to the truth.

Puzzler

How would you tighten and sharpen the following sentence?

There is simply no support for this position in the December 5 order issued by the Court.

Run as fast as you can from "there is" and "there are," which are almost always useless, and drop "simply" as an unnecessary intensifier. Drop the reference to the Court because the Court's authorship of the order is implicit. End the sentence with "gives this position no support" rather than "does not support this position" to emphasize the lack of support.

The revised version:
The December 5 order gives this position no support. ■