
Polishing Your Prose

How to Write Better

Bill Vossler



Polishing Your Prose: How to Write Better, is the first book ever to show in great detail, step by step, not only HOW to rewrite, but WHAT to rewrite, and WHY. The book illustrates how to choose words that will work best in your writing, and make your writing sing. The pages brim with suggestions on how to get your writing ship out of port.

Publishing Your Prose

How to Write Better

Order the complete book from

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/6274.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

Your Free excerpt appears below. Enjoy!

Polishing Your Prose

How To Write Better

by Bill Vossler

Polishing Your Prose: How to Write Better

Copyright © by Bill Vossler 2012

Table of Contents

1: Rewriting: Making Silk Suits From Sow Ears.....	5
2: Early Drafts Routinely Require Work.....	14
3. Pumping Verbs: Building Your Rewriting Muscles.....	22
4. Rewriting the Verb: Supercharge the Writing Engine.	24
5. Narrowing the Noun: Creating a Chihuahua.....	48
6. Eliminating Useless and Redundant Words.....	59
7. Figurative Language: Not Just for Fiction Anymore..	62
8. Adjectives and Adverbs: Disposable Words.....	69
9. Blocking Writer’s Block and Other Suggestions.....	73

Early Drafts Routinely Require Work

Why do you need to rewrite? Why does any writer need to rewrite?

Because first drafts, almost always, are wordy, clunky, ill-written. Or worse. First drafts are usually penned in heat and haste, without taking time to make thoughtful word choices, or digging to verify facts. Just as every digital photo can benefit from retouching, every first draft can benefit from rewriting.

The purpose of a first draft is to get words down on paper, sometimes the most excruciating part of writing. Once you have sentences and paragraphs and pages written, then you can work to strengthen them. Truth is, first drafts are made to be rewritten. That's why they're called *first* or

draft--which is defined in the dictionary *a plan, version, or rough copy*. They should be written in heat and haste, to translate the passion of your thoughts into words as they dart across your consciousness. Unless these inspired word combinations are plucked out of your creative mind-set hot and steaming, and set down, they will cool and harden and disappear for ever, except in rare circumstance.

Doubtless you've written hot, inspired, powerful prose, only to lose it to a computer glitch, lost power or thoughts that fled so quickly that you couldn't capture them. You are left with the hollow feeling that the rewrite from your memory, even moments later, is not as lyrical or as powerful.

Censoring Your Censor

You carry, in your brain, a time bomb. Every time you sit down to write, you arm it, and wait for it to detonate. *Who do you think you are? Who cares what you say? You're not a writer. You're not good enough. You don't know how to use punctuation, especially the semi-colon. You don't even know the parts of speech. You'll never make it. Give up.*

More writing careers have been derailed by censors than any other cause. The censor can be someone we loved, or not: mother, father, sibling, relative, priest, minister, elementary teacher, PE teacher, classmate, English or writing teacher. Or a combination. The list, like the ghosts of Banquo's issue, stretches on and on into eternity.

The censor is an evil sprite crouching on our shoulder, whispering don'ts and should nots and cannots into our ears. To write well, we must defeat this censor and its fears. That's difficult, because how do you tell your "mother"--often the embodiment of your censor--to go away and leave you alone; or shut up?

The censor is always negative. As a child, we needed a censor to keep us safe, guiding us onto the straight and narrow until we learned to make wise decisions for ourselves.

By adulthood, our censors have outlived their usefulness, preventing us from forging ahead through fear and guilt, hindering our creative instincts, and stifling honesty. So we must learn to control it.

My personal censor is embodied in one of my elementary school teachers, a beautiful but mean and spiteful young woman. She whacked kids mercilessly with a ruler; made fun of them; yanked hair; dug her fingernails into earlobes; screamed at us.

Down the years, like a disobedient and lazy child who has sponged off her parents, she occupied prime space on my shoulder until one day I became aware of her presence, and how she was holding me back, and kicked her into the outer darkness. She did not relinquish control easily or willingly, scratching and spitting, spluttering and screaming.

Fling away your censor by playing the adult role, and chastising it. Say aloud, "Go away! Leave me alone! Sit in the corner. Don't argue! Go! Now! Stay away from me."

This exorcism must be performed several--perhaps many--times before it will take. During stressful times, your censor might re-enter your life. Once you realize it, kick it out again.

Sounds weird, but please don't ignore it. The sooner you eliminate your censor, the sooner you can write without guilt or fear.

Can you write without dealing with your censor? Certainly, just as a car or a truck can operate on inferior gasoline for a while. But sooner or later the engine will get gummed up and stop.

Knowing you are creating “only” a first draft, which is by definition imperfect, helps you overcome your fear of the blank page, assuages your doubts about your abilities, and muzzles the censor sitting on your shoulder. (See sidebar previous page.)

Now is the time to follow the old writing dictum: **Get it writ; then get it right.**

This is not a license for producing gibberish. When you write your first draft you should have a general idea of what you’re going to write about, unless you’re free-writing. Even then a general direction will help you produce..

Once you’ve gotten your first draft down, **get it right**, through

rewriting, which is the means to getting your writing right.

As you rewrite, you’ll improve your writing. What you learn in rewriting will show up in future first drafts, each of which will steadily require less rewriting, with time.

You’ll never escape rewriting. But eventually many of your first drafts will require less rewriting, and nudge closer to the finished product than ever before.

My First Draft

Below in the original beginning of this chapter, three stages of rewriting are shown: crossing out, circling, and rectangling words. each a different rewrite.

Why rewrite? What’s so important about ~~rewriting~~^{it any way?}? Why not just ~~go~~^{fly} with the first ~~set of~~ words we get down and leave it at that? Really, what different does changing ^{A few} words here or there, or adding ~~parts~~^{or deletions} there and here actually make?

To paraphrase Mark Twain, ~~all~~ the difference between the lightning bug, and lightning ~~is~~^{especially} if you want to sell your writing ~~(or rewriting)~~ but also ~~to~~ improve your writing-
~~-aka communication-~~ no matter what you do.

As I rewrote, I realized the paragraphs did not say what I wanted them to say. After a dozen additional rewrites, I finally subdued the sentences into the shape I wanted them.

Though the final result is different, it contains the seeds of the first draft. The foundation for the beginning paragraphs, indeed the rest of the chapter, was laid in that feeble beginning.

Though the very earliest paragraphs did not make the final cut, they contained the sense of what I wanted to say. They provided the direction, say north, instead of south. With each rewriting, I trimmed and added and burnished and shifted until the paragraphs said what I wanted to say.

That's how rewriting works. Sometimes a first draft says exactly what you mean. Or very close.

Other times you might be flailing to discover what you mean, and in rewriting discover the direction, so alter your words to fit that new direction of thought.

It's easy to forget the scaffold the first draft provided for your final draft. Think again of Thorau's first clunky draft, which contained the same general meaning but not nearly the power as his final elegant one.

My first draft of the first paragraph would have sufficed, and probably done a creditable job.

But I wanted the first paragraph especially to be better than *okay* or *creditable*," to start the book in the right direction, and because this book carries my name. Anything that diminishes the book, no matter how miniscule, diminishes my reputation as a writer. Even the greatest reservoir can be emptied by a tiny leak. I want a useful and memorable book, so I rewrote the paragraph.

Other Benefits

Over the years I've discovered other benefits of rewriting.

1. Clearer Thinking. Because you are a slightly different person each time you sit down to rewrite, with your brain and your thinking in a different place than the time before, bringing new experiences, different thoughts or heightened feelings to the table, your perspective is different. You have a different viewpoint because you yourself have been "rewritten" since your last time.

Thus you see the words and thoughts you're reviewing in a slightly or entirely different way each time. As you go over and over the piece, you re-examine not only the words, but the beliefs and thoughts and premises behind the words. You narrow the beam, Scotty. You pare away unnecessary words and thoughts. Your writing becomes clearer, and

what is clear writer except clear thinking?

2. Connecting Disparate Thoughts and Ideas. Because you sit up to the rewriting table each time with a slightly different mindset, your roving mind pulls along unrelated or different ideas each time. If you are aware of these opposing or unusual concepts, you can combine them into a publishable idea, or the conjunction of them knocking together might suggest a topic to you.

For example, while writing a piece on how to take better photos, I remembered a quote Libby Custer, the widow of General George Armstrong Custer, had said after viewing a photo of Chief Gall, one of the warriors who had helped wipe out the U.S. 7th Cavalry at the Battle of the Little Bighorn, and her husband. She said Gall was one of the finest specimens of manhood that she had ever seen.

That juxtaposition made me wonder about old-time photography, and I wrote and sold a piece about Indian reactions to cameras and photography, called, "The Little Shadow Catchers."

3. Adding Metaphorical Language. Like adding pepper to a dish, metaphorical, or poetic language, like similes, metaphors, alliteration, and so on enrich language, clarifying it, making it easier to read and understand.

Seeing the piece several times during the rewriting process allows the writer to contemplate the possibilities of metaphorical language, especially alliteration (wind-whipped waves whispered wildly,) similes (he wrote like an angel,) or metaphor (his writing was angelic.) These will be dealt with in detail later in the book.

4. Promoting Layering. Each rewrite allows the writer to think about what other objects, for example, might help the reader picture the scene being set:

For example, the early versions of the beginning of my novel, *False Gods, False Voices*, read like this: *A blue heron flapped her wings, crying out to her brood. Too late. A red-tailed hawk swept down and grabbed one.*

After numerous rewrites, and added layers, the piece looks like this: *The screech of a blue heron, poised on one leg in murky slough water, was echoed by a human scream from Fossil Butte, 1,500 feet above. She frantically flapped her wings, croaking at the puff-balls in her brood.*

Still work to do, I think, but you can see the layering and get a better sense of the scene.

5. Increased Self-Confidence. As you rewrite, seeing and sensing the improvement in your writing builds confidence. *I can do this!* Your hard work is paying off.

Seeing your successful writing impels you to write more, and rewrite more, because you're having fun. Success is always fun.

The additional writing engendered by rewriting--call it practice--creates more facility in your first drafts, adding to your self-confidence. Self-confidence pushes you to work on different or more difficult pieces, which expands your vision and strengthens your writing even more, strengthening yet more your self-confidence.

Like a dog sensing fear, readers can smell a lack of confidence in a piece of writing. Not to mention editors.

The need for self-confidence in writing cannot be overstated, and rewriting and rewriting and rewriting some more helps build it.

6. Self-Respect. Writers often lose respect for themselves when they don't produce good writing. Or any writing.

This disdain leads to what I call interrupted serial writing, during which the writer produces some writing, is dissatisfied with it, doesn't know how to go any further, chastises oneself, and despite wanting to write, produces nothing for a while.

This start-stop writing cycle continues in inverse proportion, as the writer writes for shorter stints and produces less and less, while the chunks of time between sessions, with no writing, incr-

ease. A true recipe for depression, and unwillingness to write.

Getting restarted each time gets harder and harder, taking more and more energy. Often the writing must be kick-started, by a writer's conference or an inspiring event of listening to an accomplished writer read, the arrival of a writer's magazine, the chastisement of a spouse or friend, or any other of dozens of possibilities..

This haphazard method doesn't work because the impetuses are transitory, and are external, instead of internal. No amount of excitement about a writer's conference will wake up an unwilling writer in the morning and guide the seat of his pants into a chair. That's a job for the writer herself.

At this point, published writing seems to mock the writer. *There's a piece I could have done. I write better than that clown.*

Which is true, because some published writing is so poorly done that any unpublished writer could have done it. Even better.

Writers also lose respect for themselves because they feel guilty about avoiding writing. After all, they wanted to be a writer, and told everybody they were going to be a writer, and writers write.

So when they're asked how their book is coming along, or what they're working on, they say they can't find time to write right now. (Much less rewrite.)

In their heart they know that's a fib. They could make time if they wanted to--after all, they find time to watch TV, or read popular novels, or attend sporting events, or play computer games.

They lie to themselves, which makes them feel bad, and they know they are lying, which makes them feel even worse.

In this manner, there is no end of ways writers can lose respect for themselves.

7. Professionalism. Regular rewriting starts you down the road toward professionalism, "an assured competence in a particular field."

When you rewrite, you *know* you are doing what the professionals do. You are writing, and when you rewrite, you are making your piece of writing better. You are crafting it.

You may not immediately see the same results--selling your work regularly, for example--but you will feel in your marrow that this is the correct way to make yourself into a writer. This is how it's done.

To truly become a writer, you must not become discouraged for long. Take a walk, feed the dog, put another load in the washer--and then sit back down at your

writing table, take a deep breath, and continue writing.

That is the secret of writing. No matter how many times you get knocked down, you always get up one more time, to live and write--and rewrite--again.

Balm of Gilead

Rewriting cures many writerly insecurities, because rewriting equals production. You've written. Maybe not perfectly, but you've gotten words down on paper.

And that's a good feeling. All you have to do is look on the screen in front of you, or on your piece of paper.

While you're rewriting you'll notice that a few words here, a line there, even a paragraph, are pretty good. Another ego boost.

By working at rewriting, eventually you begin to enjoy it, which also gives you a joyous sense about your writing as well. So you carve out more and more time to do it. You gain self-respect because you are actually spending time writing.

You begin to *feel* like a writer, and that is, after all, what you set out to do.

That's why you need to learn how to rewrite.

Good Writing Contracts--And Expands

As we learned from the Thoreau rewrite in Chapter 1 (*If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer,*) poor writing, when deliberated upon and rewritten, can be made smaller. Weak and bloated thoughts can be tightened and cleaned up, forced into a smaller space.

Like squeezing juice from an orange, you get a sweeter and purer form of writing. Especially in nonfiction writing.

But good writing also expands, especially in fiction. During the first heat of writing, early drafts lay down the general outline of a scene, in the process often skipping over vital information the writer knows, and the reader needs.

Slower and more methodical rewriting enriches the fiction. Simply from having lived a time longer, whether just minutes, or days, or weeks, the writer now comes to the piece in a different frame of mind, his views altered, perhaps ever so slightly, from the original writing.

This different view gives the writer new eyes and insight into the first draft. She can see what is missing. More necessary details are layered in, words changed, sentences crunched or lengthened as needed. Whatever is necessary to strengthen the piece of writing.

This layering enriches the piece of fiction, clarifying the scene, illuminates what the writer chooses, nudges the story in a certain direction.

Good writing does not expand simply for the sake of getting larger, but because the added materials add to the writing, strengthening it, showing what has been happening, plopping the reader down right in middle of the action, engaging the reader in the creative dream.

The difficulty comes in deciding what should be included and what should be left out. Does the writer need to show the character's lips moving when he talks; or her eyes blinking when she watches the action?

That's for you, the writer, to decide. The lips must move only if that action portends something in the story. Otherwise, we assume that his lips move when he talks.

The same with her eyes. She blinks only if the blinking is germane to what is going on in the story, or if it adds something to the scene.

This is decided, often in the rewriting. As you write more, learning how the structure of fiction works, and how rewriting rejuvenates pieces of writing, those decisions will become clearer, and easier to make..



Polishing Your Prose: How to Write Better, is the first book ever to show in great detail, step by step, not only HOW to rewrite, but WHAT to rewrite, and WHY. The book illustrates how to choose words that will work best in your writing, and make your writing sing. The pages brim with suggestions on how to get your writing ship out of port.

Publishing Your Prose

How to Write Better

Order the complete book from

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/6274.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**