

Polish Your Story

by Simon Kahoko Mureu

Many budding writers complete writing their first draft of any given story and then immediately send it to the editor. This is a great mistake. Good writers know, all too well, that the article must be treated.

To smooth a rough board, it must be planed, sanded and polished. It's the same with writing.

After writing your story, as a good writer, let it sit for several days. Do not think about it. Forget it for a while. Then, review it. This is how:

1 *Look at the "big picture."* Write down the purpose in writing your story or article. This will help you evaluate the picture of what you have written.

Read your story from start to finish without making any changes. Then ask if it accomplishes the very purpose intended. If it doesn't, try to identify where it fails and do your best to fix it. Write notes on the edge of the paper stating what needs to be changed or added.

2 *Look at the length.* When a story is too long, check to see if you can cut a paragraph or say the same thing with fewer words. Even if it means dropping some details, ask if those details are absolutely necessary to tell the story. Usually the extra details can be cut.

3 *Look at the sentences.* What is their length? Count the number of words in the longer sentences. Good writing uses varied sentence lengths from four words up to 20 or more. Sentences that set readers adrift should be cut into two or three sentences.

4 *Look at the words.* If the words are long and complicated, see if you can replace the hard word with an easier one. This is not writing down to the reader—it is communicating!

5 *Look at the lead.* Ask if your introduction catches the reader's attention. If it doesn't, change it. Rewrite until you have a strong lead that hooks the reader.

6 *Look for feedback.* Have someone else read your story. Ask them if it's clear. Note any place where the reader was confused. Do not ask your spouse to read your articles, as this may cause marital arguments! Rather, look for a friend who can read it and give an honest critique.

Why is all this necessary? As a good writer, you want to make sure the article communicates clearly with its readers. You want to make your article accurate and interesting, bringing it to the level of your readers. You want to make the expressions tight and clear, the material consistent. You want to correct the grammatical errors, the spelling, and the structure.

If a budding writer can polish his or her first draft, editors will love it. Editors know when an article has been both edited and polished.

Polishing an article is painful. It is hard work. It takes time, but it is worth the effort. Smooth out the rough edges of your work before it lands on the editor's desk. This is a discipline no writer should ignore. ❖

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