

A Hands-On Guide to Editing Transcript

This is a transcript of the seminar, edited slightly for easy reading.

You can find the video and audio versions at www.writershuddle.com/seminars/apr2013.

Hi, I'm Ali Luke, and this is the April seminar for Writer's Huddle, *A Hands-On Guide to Editing*.

So, this month's seminar is a little bit different. I wanted to go through a very practical approach to editing, so rather than talk about editing in theory, or in a slightly more abstract way, we're going to look at a specific piece of writing. We'll see some areas in which that could be edited, and what that shows us more generally about editing.

This applies to you whether you are editing your own work, which is a tough thing to do well, or whether you are editing somebody else's work, and that could be in the context of a writing group, or it could be that you are editing a client's work and you are charging for your editing services.

It may be the case that some of what we go through might be a bit basic for you, but hopefully it will give you a good grounding in the fundamentals of editing, and it will give you a good starting point. Even if you feel that you perhaps know some of these things already, this is an opportunity to consolidate that knowledge.

Using the Seminar Materials

So, there are a couple of ways you could approach the seminar this month. You could take a look at the worksheet first, because that includes the scanned version and the typed transcript version of the piece we are going to look at.

If you are feeling quite confident about editing, you might want to go straight to the worksheet, have a look through the piece, see what changes you would make to it. Give it a full edit, or at least come up with a few ideas about it:

what you think isn't working, or what obviously needs to be changed, and so on.

If you're not feeling so confident about editing, you may want to go through the seminar first, and then take a look at the worksheet. I won't be going through every single line of the piece, so you may find you can have a look at some of the other paragraphs and see how you might edit those in the light of what we go through in the seminar.

The Meadow View Nursing Home Advertisement

oxfordmail.co.uk OXFORD STAR, Thursday, April 12, 2012 15

Guide2care

Meadow View Nursing Home
For the Extra Care You Deserve

Home
Set in four acres of grounds and backing on to open countryside, Meadow View Nursing Home is situated in the peaceful village of Standlake, about four and a half miles from WITNEY in Oxfordshire.

The property has been professionally extended and incorporates latest Health Authority recommendations. Nearly all rooms are on the ground floor, some having their own access to the grounds. Our Nursing care is of the highest standard with qualified staff on duty 24hrs a day. The skilled staff have been chosen for their dedication and friendliness.

About us
Meadowview Nursing Home is owned by Mr. Farhad Pardhan who is in day-to-day control of the business. He is also the proprietor of riverside nursing home.

The day-to-day management of the home is carried out by the Matron/Manager, Caroline Schofield who is a Registered Nurse and is responsible for the care provided to the residents.

Situated in the peaceful village of Standlake, about four and half miles from Witney in Oxfordshire, Meadowview Nursing Home is set in gardens and grounds amounting to approximately 4.5 acres, backing onto open countryside.

The Nursing Home can accommodate ~ residents. Most of the rooms are situated on the ground floor and are predominately singles. There are double rooms available for couples if desired. Most of the single rooms also have their own access to the Nursing Home grounds. Each bedroom has its own 'Nurse Call' system, smoke detectors, television point and provision for personal telephone if required. There is a lift capable of carrying a wheelchair and an attendant.

You may bring your own possessions and furniture if you so wish.

Unless there are overriding medical objections your room will be a lockable room and you will be given the key to your room on admission. This specialised lock would prevent other residents from entering the room. Screening and curtains are provided in shared rooms to protect privacy and dignity.

to a high standard. Each bedroom has its own 'Nurse Call' system, smoke detectors, television point and provisions for personal telephone if required. There is a lift capable of carrying a wheelchair and an attendant. Special 'Parker Baths' are installed. Residents are welcome to bring their own furniture and effects if they wish.

Our Services
Meadow View Nursing Home provides specialised care for the people and support for their families at a time when their previously maintained physical health is no longer responsive to curative treatment and life expectancy is reduced.

Our aim is to help residents achieve and maintain their maximum potential. Physically, psychologically, socially and spiritually throughout the last stages of their lives.

Activities
A full programme of activities is carried out within the home tailored to the wishes of the residents.

These include - games, musical movement, trips, & inhouse musical entertainment.

This is a full page advertisement in a local free paper here in Oxford, which I cut out and saved because I thought it was a good example of some writing in really quite bad need of editing.

Presumably the company have paid to have this advert in the paper – it's a paper which is free to readers, so it's funded solely by the advertisements, and it's a full-page ad, which you would think would cost a reasonable amount of

money. It's presumably a significant investment, and unfortunately they've really not made the most of that.

Why Reusing Web Copy for Print Doesn't Work

The biggest reason why this advert doesn't work is that they've taken the text of their website and put it straight into a full page advertisement in a newspaper.

Just by glancing at it, you can see that, because they've got subheadings which you would typically see on a website, so they've got "Home", which makes sense in this context, since it is an advert for a nursing home, but it's not necessarily the best thing to start with. They could just have cut that off the top completely.

Then they've got "About us", which is again a very typical title for a web-page, and they've also got "Our Services" further down. As somebody who works quite a lot with web writers and with websites, that's clued me in that this text hasn't been custom written for a newspaper.

It's not really been designed to be a print ad, and something else that makes that obvious is the repetition in places, so there's a couple of paragraphs in particular, one under "About us" and one under "Accommodation", where there's very similar wording. They basically say the same thing twice, which is a complete waste of space in a newspaper advert, they might as well have used that space to tell us something new. On a website that makes sense, because people might view two or three of the pages, not all six or seven pages.

There's a really key lesson to be learned here: one type of writing, one type of copy, does not usually translate from one form to another without some degree of editing.

If you're a writer or an editor for clients, it's really worth emphasising to them that you can't just take the text of their website and turn that into an ad, or take the text of a leaflet and turn that into a website, and so on. Those forms will have very different requirements because of how people read them.

So that's the most basic thing that's wrong – this hasn't been in any way customised to be a print advertisement – but there are also quite a few problems that would be problems on a website, in a leaflet, in an advert, in whatever form this writing took. That's what we're going to be focusing on during the seminar.

The Basics: Grammar, Spelling, Punctuation

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- **Correct**
 - look out for mistakes and typos
- **Consistent**
 - write words in the same way throughout
- **Clear**
 - rewrite ambiguous or confusing sentences

I'm going to begin with some of the basics, so these are things which are just simply wrong in the ad. It's not just a matter of whether we prefer it one way or another way, it's a case of they've got them wrong.

These are, in some cases, quite glaring errors, and whatever you're writing, grammar, spelling and punctuation matter.

If you're working on a piece of fiction they're important because, if you get them wrong, the reader will be jolted out of the story, it will be something that really just breaks the flow of their reading.

If you're working on a piece of persuasive non-fiction, which is what an advert is, then these are important because if you get them wrong they will give a bad impression. Sure, not every reader will necessarily notice every place where you've got it wrong, but if you've got a lot of mistakes, it really doesn't create a good impression of you, or of the service or the product that you're trying to sell.

In the case of this ad, which is for a nursing home, it's a real problem that they've got some of these wrong. If you're entrusting the care of perhaps a frail, elderly relative or friend to a nursing home, you really want to know that they're meticulous, they're going to do a good job, they have high standards, and this isn't, sadly, the impression that this ad creates.

There are three Cs here, when you are thinking about just editing these basics.

First, you need to make sure things are *correct*. Spelling mistakes, typos, grammatical mistakes and punctuation mistakes just shouldn't be there. You should definitely run your text through a spell checker, but also read through carefully yourself, because spell checkers don't pick up everything.

Next, you need to be *consistent*. This is a particular problem in this ad. They don't always write words in the same way throughout, there's a lack of consistency, and I'll be coming on to examples of that in the next few slides.

The thing to look out for is that the grammar, spelling and punctuation ensure that your words are *clear*. If a sentence is ambiguous or confusing, it could be grammatically correct, but if there are two ways to read it, then it needs to be rewritten.

Editing Example: The First Paragraphs

Home

Set in four acres of grounds and backing on to open countryside. Meadow View Nursing Home is situated in the peaceful village of standlake, about four and a half miles from WITNEY in Oxfordshire.

The property has been professionally extended and incorporates latest Health Authority recommendations. Nearly all rooms are on the ground floor, some having their own access to the grounds.

Our Nursing care is of the highest standard with qualified staff on duty 24hrs a day. The skilled staff have been chosen for their dedication and friendliness.

About us

Meadowview Nursing Home is owned by Mr. Farhad Pardhan who is in day-to-day control of the business. He is also the proprietor of riverside nursing home.

This is the first bit I wanted to go through, the first section of the ad, because even in those first few paragraphs there are some fairly glaring errors that a general reader (who's not a writer or editor) would pick up on.

The first is that the first line ends with a full stop (or if you're American, a period) rather than a comma. There should be a comma there, because the first line doesn't make sense on its own as a sentence.

It reads *"Set in four acres of grounds and looking out over open countryside"*, which doesn't make sense until you bring in the noun, "Meadow View Nursing Home."

Having a mistake like that in the very first line of your ad is obviously is not great, and it doesn't really get much better from there.

A Lack of Consistency in Spelling and Capitalisation

One immediate consistency problem is they haven't even spelled the name of their nursing home consistently. There seem to be two versions, one is "Meadow View" as two words, that you can see in the first paragraph, and then in the bottom paragraph, you can see that they've got "Meadowview" as all one word.

Obviously it's up to them what they want to call it, but they really should pick one and be consistent, because if they can't get the name of the home right, that really isn't creating a good impression.

Before we've got to the end of the first paragraph, we've got a couple more mistakes – "Standlake" is a place name, and should be capitalised, and then with "Witney", they've gone the other way and capitalised every letter as WITNEY.

There's no need for that, it looks bizarre and there's no reason why you would do that in the middle of a sentence. Even if they were going to fully capitalise every place name it would look weird, but it looks particularly odd when you've got "Standlake" not capitalised and "Oxfordshire" with just an initial capital.

The Details Matter

This piece is not off to a great start, unfortunately, and hopefully if you took a look at the worksheet before the seminar, you picked up on those mistakes.

The next one is a small thing, perhaps, but there's no real reason to capitalise "nursing" in the sentence "*our Nursing care is of the highest standard.*"

In the same sentence, "24 hours" really should be spelled out either with the number "24" or the word "twenty-four", and then the word "hours". Unless you're very short on space, or perhaps you're doing it in bullet points or some very informal way, there's no reason in this sentence to have "24hrs" written like that, and again there's a consistency issue, because when we have "24 hours" written later in this piece, it's written differently.

I've picked up on some of the basic mistakes here, I'm not saying every sentence is brilliantly written, but these are things that any proofreader could have picked up on.

To be honest, **anybody reading through this carefully ought to have been able to pick up on the majority of these**, things like having Standlake not capitalised, like having Witney all in caps, like having Meadowview spelled two different ways. You don't have to have a degree in English to pick up on those, you don't need to be a writer, they're quite obvious things.

Just one more example, on similar lines, with a lack of capitalisation and consistency here: "*riverside nursing home*". If you're going to capitalise "nursing home" in "Meadow View Nursing Home", it would be sensible to capitalise it here, and "Riverside" should definitely have a capital letter. So, again, this is not creating a good impression of this nursing home, or of their sister home, Riverside.

The Next Level: Content, Structure and Tone

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- **Audience**
 - Young, old, excited, worried...
- **Purpose**
 - To persuade, inform, entertain...

At the next level of editing, we can go beyond those basics to look at content, structure and tone

This is perhaps a more specialised task – most people could pick up on some of those basic mistakes as we said. To pick up on content, structure and tone, you need to be thinking more like a writer, or perhaps more like an editor.

In particular, you need to have in mind the audience or the purpose of the piece of writing.

Considering the Target Audience

Your audience could be young or old. In the case of this piece, I suspect that the audience is either really quite elderly and frail people who are themselves considering moving into a home, or their relatives, who are probably going to be quite concerned.

They might be a little bit frightened. They may never have researched a nursing home before. **Put yourself in the shoes of the people reading this.** Either they are themselves thinking about going into a home, they're thinking about giving up their independence, their way of life. There are a lot of worries and anxieties associated with that.

Alternatively, they might be someone with a relative, or perhaps a very close friend, who they are trying to help get into a home, and again, they're likely to be quite worried. They're anxious whether the home will be a good one, perhaps whether it will be value for money, which is sadly a consideration which people will have to make, and so on.

It's important that the advert addresses some of those worries, whether explicitly or implicitly, and it's also important that it's written in a respectful way toward both the potential resident of the home and the potential relatives of that resident. When someone reads this ad, it needs to come across well to them.

Considering the Intended Purpose

The Next Level: Content, Structure and Tone

- **Audience**
 - Young, old, excited, worried...
- **Purpose**
 - To persuade, inform, entertain...

The aim of the piece, since it's an advert, is getting people to do something – to take action. It's aiming to persuade them to email or call for more information, perhaps, or to make a decision to put their relative or to put themselves into that home.

In other pieces of writing, your purpose may just be to inform. If this was an article just telling people about the home, a newspaper article, or a magazine article, perhaps, then it might take a slightly different approach. It wouldn't be so self-promotional, it would have to be more balanced, and so on.

The other common purpose you might have would be to entertain people, in which case you wouldn't be focusing on giving information, but things like the tone of the piece, or possibly the structure, would become particularly important.

With the content, the structure and the tone, you need to think about *who* you are writing for, and *why* you are writing to them, because these will inform what you put into the piece. They also influences how you structure the piece:

what goes first, what's the most important thing, what note do you want to end on. Your audience and purpose influence the way in which you write, so whether it's formal or informal, whether it's jokey or serious, whether it's reassuring, and so on.

Any time you sit down to create a piece of writing, or when you sit down to edit a piece of writing, ask yourself "Who's the audience for this piece?" and "What's the purpose of this piece?"

Editing Example: Content, Structure and Tone

From "About Us"

Unless there are overriding medical objections **your** room will be a lockable room and **you** will be given the key to **your** room on admission. **This specialised lock would prevent other residents from entering the room.** Screening and curtains are provided in shared rooms to protect privacy and dignity.

[...]

The home caters for those who no longer wish or are no longer able to live alone due to increasing frailty, illness or disability.

Meadowview has a team of qualified, friendly staff dedicated to providing nursing care 24 hours a day. So **residents need not fear** that they would have to leave the home if **they** became ill. Health care Assistants work alongside the qualified staff to provide **you** with all the care **you** need.

Let's go through part of this piece with those things in mind. This time, we're focusing on basic errors, but on areas where the structure or the content or the tone is just not quite right.

The first problem, and this reoccurs throughout this whole advertisement, is that it's really not clear who it's being written to.

The blend they have isn't working. Either they need to write to the potential resident, using "you" or "your", or they need to write to the potential relative,

in which case they're using words like "residents" and "they", for the people staying in the home. As you can see, there's a complete blend of those here.

It might be appropriate, for instance, to address the main body of the article to the potential resident, and then to have a box or a separate section aimed at relatives, that would make sense. However, mixing them at random throughout the piece gives the impression that this has been written in a hurry, or it's not been very thought through.

Deciding Between Two Possible Audiences

Personally, I think the best way to approach this piece would be to write it directly to "you", to the potential resident

When relatives or friends read it, it will hopefully come across as respectful and reassuring, and as something that treats potential residents with inherent worth and dignity. These are all things that you want from a nursing home, so I think that would be the way to go with this piece. It could be written, though, to relatives, and that could certainly be done in a respectful and dignified way.

Giving the Right Level of Detail

Then another problem which is occurring, here and also in other places in this piece, is that the information being given is not always very helpful.

This first paragraph tells us that the room will be lockable and that the resident will be given the key, and then the next sentence tells us that this specialised lock prevents other residents from entering the room.

That seems an obvious thing for a lock to do. It's not clear why that sentence is even there. Now, it might be that the meaning behind this is that nurses and staff will still be able to get into the room when it's locked, but it doesn't seem to me that that sentence really adds anything, it's going into an unnecessary level of detail.

The next sentence, however, has almost the opposite problem. It tells us that screening and curtains are provided in shared rooms to protect privacy and dignity. **That's good to know, but there's been no mention of shared rooms**

previously in the article. We've been told that the majority are single rooms, and that there are some double rooms available, but nothing has been said about shared rooms, how many shared rooms there are, how many people there are in a shared room, whether you will have to share if there aren't enough rooms, whether it's optional and so on.

This sentence seems to throw up a lot of questions for the reader, without really answering any of them, and I think either it could be left out altogether, if there are very few shared rooms, or else there should be something put into the article about those shared rooms.

This illustrates how people sometimes try to sweep something under the carpet a little bit in writing. If there's an aspect of a product or service that you think won't be very popular, it is tempting to skate over it. In this case, maybe shared rooms won't be very popular with either the residents or the relatives of the residents, perhaps everyone would much rather have rooms to themselves, but I think by not being up-front it makes it seem like the nursing home has something to hide.

They'd be better off to answer those unanswered questions that are going to come up at the point that someone reads this sentence, rather than sweeping this in and trying to get it over with without giving much detail.

Be Conscious of Your Tone

Then, a small thing, but I don't like the wording of "*so residents need not fear that they would have to leave the home if they became ill.*" I think "*need not fear*" is a slightly odd way to put it, plus it brings fear into an article that is inevitably going to be read by people who are already feeling afraid and feeling anxious.

It would be better to phrase this in a more positive way, something like "*residents will be able to remain in their room, with all of their comforts around them, even if they're ill.*" Something like that, something positive, would work well, rather than having a sentence that raises this idea of having to leave the home due to illness – which is something which might not even have occurred to potential residents until they got to this point, they might have just assumed that they would be cared for in the home.

Our Services

Meadow View Nursing Home provides specialised care for the people and support for their families at a time when their previously maintained physical health is no longer responsive to curative treatment and life expectancy is reduced.

Meadow View Nursing Home offers specialised care for those whose physical health is in decline, and provides support to their families.

Our aim is to help residents achieve and maintain their maximum potential. Physically, psychologically, socially and spiritually throughout the last stages of their lives.

Further down in the article we come to a section about “Our services”, and there’s a great example here of writing which suddenly shifts in tone with this first paragraph:

“Meadowview nursing home provides specialised care for the people and support for their families at a time where their previously maintained physical health is no longer responsive to curative treatment, and life expectancy is reduced.”

That’s a very formal way to put this and not really, to me, a very warm or friendly way to say it. It sounds quite cold, it seems to be reducing people to “*treatment*” and “*life expectancy*” – which are very medical terms.

I’m also not very keen on “*the people*”. “*The residents*” would sound much more respectful. “The people” also doesn’t really sound right in the context, in reference to the residents of the nursing home.

I would rewrite this paragraph almost completely, removing particularly this section, *“their previously maintained physical health is no longer responsive to curative treatment, and life expectancy is reduced.”*

My version would be *“Meadowview nursing home provides specialised care for those whose physical health is in decline, and provides support to their families.”*

Now, that might not be perfect, but I think it's considerably better than the paragraph as it stands.

Then the next paragraph here reads:

“Our aim is to help residents achieve and maintain their maximum potential. Physically, psychologically, socially and spiritually throughout the last stages of their lives.”

That whole paragraph doesn't say anything, frankly. We've also got the same mistake we had in the very first line of this piece, where there's a full stop (period) where there should be a comma, because the second sentence doesn't make sense without being joined on to the first sentence.

It really doesn't say anything, a bit like a corporate mission statement that's just grand words without anything underlying it. Rather than having language like *“achieve and maintain their maximum potential”*, which is really quite abstract, or throwing in *“physically, psychologically, socially and spiritually”* to cover all the bases without giving any specifics, it would be better to try and say something more specific. Readers will want to know what would they actually *do*, rather than hearing about this woolly, vague aim.

Also, *“throughout the last stages of their lives”* is not really the most positive way to put it. The phrase emphasises the fact that these people are close to dying, and I don't think that's something that anyone reading it would want to be thinking about. Again, it would be better to just rewrite this, to either cut it altogether, or say whatever they're trying to say in a clearer and slightly more thoughtful way.

So, those are the things that I wanted to pick up on.

I hope you'll take a look at the worksheet and think about what you would edit in this piece. Think about what might be incorrect, like there's a full stop where there should be a comma and so on, and also consider what could just be worded better, because I think there's a lot of room for improvement here.

Please do come over to [the forums](#) and let us know your thoughts. You might want to have a go at rewriting this as a much more compelling ad, or you might just want to point out some of the errors in it. Either way, that could be a good learning experience for all of us, where we can see what other Huddlers pick up on, and share some ideas around editing.

I'd also be interested to know (in the forums or by email to ali@aliventures.com) whether you like this seminar format. I'm certainly not suggesting that I do every month's seminar in the same way, but there are times when it might be useful for us to go through material in a visual way, instead of having a purely audio seminar. Do let me know if this is working for you or whether there are ways in which I could make it work better for you, I'd be very grateful for the feedback.

I hope to see you around in the forums, and the very best of luck with your writing or with your editing.