**[Revision – it’s not just about cutting words](http://patthomson.net/2015/04/16/revision-its-not-just-about-cutting-words-out/)**

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We’re all told that the essence of revision is rewriting. Write and then write again. Rewrite. And rewriting means cutting, getting rid of the excess verbage we poured onto the page as a ‘brain dump’. We’re also told that the best way to deal with rewriting our crappy first draft is to adopt a ruthless attitude to our own work. As [William Zinsser](http://www.williamzinsserwriter.com/), the go-to for many on how to write well, puts it:

*The newly hatched sentence almost always has something wrong with it. It’s not clear. It’s not logical. It’s verbose. It’s [c]lunky. It’s pretentious. It[‘]s boring. It’s full of clutter. It’s full of clichés. It can be read in several different ways. It doesn’t lead out of the previous sentence. It doesn’t… The point is that clear writing is the result of a lot of tinkering.* (83-4)

The solution to all this klutz and clutter is serial rewriting, which Zinsser describes as a process of ‘reshaping and tightening’. The big challenge, Zinsser says, is not to resist or get grumpy, but to get to love the process.

*Learn to enjoy this tidying process. I don’t like to write; I like to have written. But I love to rewrite. I especially like to cut: to press the DELETE key and see an unnecessary word or phrase or sentence vanish into the electricity. I like to replace a humdrum word with one that has more precision or colour. I like to strengthen the transition between one sentence and another. I like to rephrase a drab sentence to give it a more pleasing rhythm or a more graceful musical line*. (87)

Now I don’t disagree with this. But I do worry about someone cherrypicking this section of Zinsser’s book and assuming that rewriting is just a process of a bit of strategic trimming, a matter of tidying things up. Revision is often so much more than tinkering. It can be moving big chunks of material from one chapter to another, or shifting the order of the moves within a chapter. Rewriting the crappy first draft is not simply about cutting and replacing text at the level of the paragraph and the sentence. It’s also about attending to the overall structure of the argument. And it’s not at all uncommon in a thesis or a scholarly monograph to have several goes at getting the optimum order of ‘stuff’, despite all of our best efforts at planning, outlining and [storyboarding](http://patthomson.net/2013/03/28/story-boarding-the-thesis-structure/).

However, rewriting can also be about **adding** words as well as reducing them. Yes, not writing less or writing differently, but actually writing more. It’s a mistake to think that revision is always about getting rid of some things and replacing designated dull words with some that are better, more lively.

Rewriting may mean finding the places in the text where the writing is poor because we are struggling to express an idea, to put into words something that we can barely get our head around. Not quite knowing what to say and how to say it is often a problem for researchers, be they doctoral or much more experienced. That’s because the research enterprise is about work at the edges of our thinking. By definition, making a contribution to knowledge means that we are always on the borderlines of what we know and can say. Inevitably, the struggle to make sense of our data appears in our writing. It’s not at all surprising that some of the problems in our crappy first drafts arise from the fact that we can’t quite yet say what it is we want to.

And rewriting can also be required in a text where our argument  is foreshortened – when we’ve left out some of the moves that are going to help the reader follow our line of thinking. Now the omission of steps in our argument can be because we are just so familiar with what we are saying that we simply forget to put in all of the necessary interim moves because they seem so logical to us. But just as often we miss steps out because while we know the general direction of the argument, we know its overall shape, we haven’t yet worked out all the middle moves that are needed. We haven’t yet sorted out the examples, counter examples, elaborations and/or illustrations that will help the reader to understand. Or perhaps our truncated text results from us knowing the moves but not getting the rhetoric working properly – we haven’t yet got the meta-discourse that actually carries our reasoning, we just have the substance.

If we think that rewriting and revision are just about cutting and reshaping, then we may very well miss the good/new/exciting insights that are struggling to emerge from our draft. Rewriting might just get rid of possibilities, cut off potential thoughts before they’ve fully developed – rather like whisking the lawnmower over the grass and forgetting that there are bulbs just coming up, cut the top off them and they can’t grow. Or the rewriting will efficiently  eliminate potentially good arguments, rather than us doing the additions that will make them work properly.

It *is* important to take all of that good advice about rewriting, cutting and tightening. But it’s also equally the case that we need to look, in the revision stages, for the places where we have to remake big structural decisions, and the places where we have to think more and add more in order to develop and mature our analysis and contribution.

Coming across a [c]lunky bit of writing can be a sign you need to trim words, or it can equally be a time to grow those sentences before you tighten them up.

Reference  
Zinsser, W (2006) [On writing well.](http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/53343.On_Writing_Well) The classic guide to writing non fiction. £rd Edition:. New York: Collins