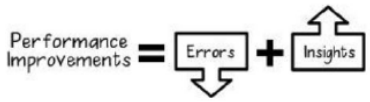
Exercise—Errors and Insights

In *Seeing What Others Don't: The Remarkable Ways We Gain Insights*, the psychologist Gary Klein suggests that two things are required to improve performance: reducing errors and increasing insights. He offers the following equation as a helpful visual.



Klein's book doesn't specifically link this equation to performance improvements in writing and editing, but its general framework seems to apply, as does his concern that sometimes people focus too much on reducing errors and too little on increasing insights. "We tend to look for ways to eliminate errors," he explains. "That's the down arrow. . . . But when we put too much energy into eliminating mistakes, we're less likely to gain insights. Having insights is a different matter from preventing mistakes."

Anyone hoping to become a better writer and editor might do well to heed Klein's advice and reserve time not just for spotting errors but also for accumulating insights. Eliminating mistakes will only get us so far. To really excel, we need to develop some insights—a new, more advanced set of compositional skills, strategies, and intuitions. The sections below are designed to help you do that while also maintaining the still crucial task of reflecting on and learning from persistent errors.

ERRORS

Think about things you have written in the past year, whether for a client, a judge, a colleague, or any other audience. What are some of the most common errors you make?

- Do you have trouble with commas?
- Do you struggle with transitions?
- Do you overload your sentences with unnecessary words?
- Are your professional emails too informal?
- Are your personal emails too stuffy?
- And how about the time you give yourself to edit: do you finish drafts when you say you will, or are you constantly missing out on chances to calmly and carefully raise the quality of your work?

Make a list of three to five of your most common errors and keep it in a place that you can both easily access and regularly add to. A small journal or diary will work well. It doesn't have to be fancy. It doesn't have to be expensive. It just needs to be something you can consistently use to collect and evaluate the things you most need to improve.

I recommend you divide your errors into two categories: (1) Mechanics and (2) Process.

- The **Mechanics Category** should be filled with errors like being too wordy or improperly using semi-colons.

- The **Process Category** should be filled with errors like failing to protect yourself from interruptions when writing or not reading your work out loud before submitting it.

To help you generate your list, consider doing at least two of the short tasks below.

(1) Read Top Twenty Errors in Undergraduate Writing by the Hume Center at Stanford University. Based on research by Andrea and Karen Lunsford, the collection can be useful even if you graduated from college many, many years ago.

(2) Ask one of your current supervisors or peers for one or two things they would like to see less of in the written material you submit.

(3) Ask one of your current supervisors or peers for one or two things they would like to see more of in the written material you submit.

(4) Take a look at The Habits of Highly Productive Writers by Rachel Toor (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 2014). Which of these don't you do?

(5) Review three or four pieces you've written in the past year. These can be briefs, business memos, contracts, blog posts, important emails—anything, really. But try to find at least two on which you have received feedback. What errors stand out? What did people consistently suggest you change?

INSIGHTS

In a separate section of your journal or diary, start writing down some insights. Like with your errors, shoot for three to five. These can be pithy observations you've gathered from other lawyers. They can be individual concepts or principles you've been taught by former teachers. They can even be ideas you've come up with yourself—about structure, about word choice, about anything related to writing, including where and when you seem to produce your best work.

To the extent that your *Errors List* may sound like warnings and admonitions—"Careful about comma splices"; "Don't overuse dashes"—your *Insights List* should sound more like epiphanies. Here's one from Brooks Landon, who has taught creative writing for many years at the University of Iowa.

Bad sentences are often long, but long sentences aren't necessarily bad.

Here's another, by Verlyn Klinkenborg, the author of the delightfully quirky book *Several Short Sentences About Writing* and a former member of the editorial board at the *New York Times*.

Sit back from the keyboard or notepad.

Sit back, and continue to think.

That's where the writing gets done.

Finally, here's a third, by ZZ Packer. Her book Drinking Coffee Elsewhere was a finalist for the Pen/Faulkner Award in 2000 and also selected by John Updike for the official book club of the *Today Show*.

The big issue was cutting. I finally cut as much as I could, about a fourth of the story, and actually liked it.

Other good places to look include:

1. A list of Zadie Smith's Rules for Writers published in *The Guardian* 2010 .

2. A set of How I Write essays published in *Scribes Journal for Legal Writing* in 1993. The collection includes pieces by Judge Richard Posner, Judge Patricia Wald, Judge Edith Jones, Judge Tom Gee, Professor Lawrence Friedman, and Professor (and now Senator) Elizabeth Warren.

3. Your notes from the best writing course you took.

4. A friend's notes from the best writing course they took. (Maybe your friend took a different writing course than you did or maybe they just took different notes. Either way, the additional perspective could lead to some helpful insights.)

5. A post called Timeless Advice on Writing created by Maria Popova on brainpickings.org. The advice comes from writers as different as Ernest Hemingway, Stephen King, Jennifer Egan, Isabel Allende, Michael Lewis, Kurt Vonnegut, E.B. White, Susan Sontag, George Orwell, and Jorge Luis Borges.

The nice thing about writing is that you are not the first to do it. Plenty of people have taken on the enterprise, and many have left useful tips and techniques to try. An insight can be as simple as discovering that something somebody else does also works well for you.

Errors

1. Tone that reads harsher than intended

I've been told that my writing can come off blunt or abrasive, even when I am trying to be clear or efficient. I don't mean to sound cold, but I know I can skip over "softeners" that help the reader into what I'm trying to say. This especially shows up in emails and direct responses.

1. Over-explaining when I feel uncertain

When I don't feel 100% confident in what I'm saying, I tend to pile on explanations to prove my point or cover all my bases. It makes the sentence longer than it needs to be, and ends up burying my actual message.

1. Skipping transitions

If I'm in a flow, I sometimes leap from one idea to the next without giving the reader a bridge. It makes sense in my head, but it can be disorienting for someone else reading it for the first time.

1 Editing too close to submission

Even when I know better, I sometimes cut it too close. Rushing to finalize a draft without space to breathe or reread out loud keeps me from catching small issues or improving tone.

Insights

1 People don’t owe me their attention

This mindset shifted everything. I no longer write assuming someone will finish what I wrote. I write to make them want to keep going.

2. Clear and direct doesn’t mean emotionally detached

I can be to-the-point and sound like a human. When I give myself a minute to revise for tone, especially at the start and end of a message, I come across more balanced and intentional.

3. Cutting something doesn’t mean I failed

If I remove a sentence, it’s not wasted effort. It just means I found a sharper way to say it, or realized it didn’t need to be said at all.

4. Starting is hard, but I need to get it right on the first try.

I write cleaner when I stop trying to write “perfect” out of the gat. First drafts can be messy. That’s what editing is for.

Exercise—S.M.A.R.T. Goals Self-Assessment

This self-assessment can be found in Appendix A of Good With Words.

[Note: I give the assignment below to students at the beginning of the semester. But it works as a helpful exercise at other times as well, even if you are not on an academic calendar.]

This assignment is designed to help us figure out where you are as a writer now and where you would like to be as a writer by the end of the semester. With that goal in mind, please write one or two single-spaced pages that will accomplish several tasks:

Tell a little bit about yourself as a writer.

This part of your Self-Assessment might include past writing experiences, whether pleasant or unpleasant, rewarding or frightening—or some combination of all four. It might also describe what you go through as you are preparing to write and as you are actually writing:

- Do you start with an outline?
- Do you end by reading what you have written out loud?
- Do you do your best writing in the library? At home? In the morning? At night?
- Do you have no idea where or when you do your best writing because you kind of just write whenever you have to and usually only because a deadline is fast approaching? (If this last question describes you as a writer, don't worry: plenty of great writers would not be great writers without deadlines, real and imagined.)

Finally, this part of the assessment might address the different kinds of writing you have done in law school, before law school, or perhaps while contemplating doing something other than law school.

- When, for example, was the last time you wrote something that you yourself actually wanted to read?
- What conditions helped you produce that piece of writing?
- What obstacles, in your mind, prevent you from producing something like that again given your current schedule, habits, and level of preparation?

Share some of your strengths and weaknesses as a writer.

What do you think you do well as a writer?

What do you think needs work?

This discussion can include not just an analysis of your finished product but other aspects of the writing process as well, such as getting through a first draft, editing down a final draft, or simply procrastinating to the point where you have written more words on Twitter in the past hour than you have on whatever

project you're supposed to be working on.

Conclude by identifying two goals for yourself as a writer this semester.

The first goal should be a "S.M.A.R.T." goal: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound.

Your S.M.A.R.T. goal could be something like trying out a good writerly habit for, say, the next 30 days. Here are some examples of habits my students have picked. (Their check-in date is usually halfway through the semester.)

1. **Carry a notepad with me wherever I go and jot down ideas when they come to me.** An electronic version of this goal can be fulfilled with the "Notes" function on an iPhone or similar device. But I encourage using a physical pad because something magical often happens when you take the time to put pen to paper. Your mind slows. Your thoughts crystallize. You might just produce a second idea by the time you write down the first.

2. **Draft in one place. Edit in another.** The geographical distance between these two places need not be massive. Draft in your apartment. Edit in the library. Draft in your bedroom. Edit in your living room. The point is to separate the sometimes chaotic outpouring of ideas that is drafting from the necessarily careful shaping of ideas that is editing. You do not want to edit a piece of writing through the eyes of the person who drafted it. Instead, you want to edit it through the eyes of what the novelist Zadie Smith calls a "smart stranger." Geographic distance, however minimal, helps you become that.

3. **Call a friend or sibling or parent during each writing assignment and try to explain to them what I've already written and what I still have left to write.** Writing often comes down to having a conversation on a page. Only, first, that conversation usually needs to happen with another person. So talk to people about what you are writing—and then thank them profusely.

The second goal should be a "Stretch" goal: a more ambitious goal that, even if you don't fully achieve, could lead to some beneficial outcomes and discoveries. Here is how a 2017 article in the *Harvard Business Review* described the two key characteristics:

1. **Extreme Difficulty -** "Stretch goals involve radical expectations that go beyond current capabilities and performance. Consider Southwest Airlines' early stretch goal of achieving a 10-minute turnaround at airport gates. A familiar task was involved, but the target was a drastic departure from the industry standard at the time, which was close to one hour."

2. **Extreme Novelty -** "Brand-new paths and approaches must be found to bring a stretch goal within reach. In other words, working differently, not simply working harder, is required. To get gate turnarounds down to 10 minutes, Southwest had to completely overhaul its staff's work practices and reimagine the behavior of customers. The airline did, however, famously figure out how to reach this goal."

Stretch goals are not for everyone. And they are certainly not for everyone during law school. But for the purposes of this exercise, assume that a stretch goal *is* appropriate for you right now. What would you pick? What is something that is extremely difficult and extremely novel that you'd love to try to pull off by the time you graduate—or even by the end of the year or semester?

Here is a list to help spark some ideas. Michigan students have done each of them. (Don’t let that fact make you think pursuing something similar wouldn’t be novel enough. The novelty would be in the change you would have to make to your current way of operating—not in the originality of the goal.)

- Publish an op-ed in a Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper
- Start a business
- Create a new student organization
- Get a Skadden or Equal Justice Works fellowship
- Win a national writing competition
- Win a national moot court competition

Note: Becoming a better writer would help with each of these goals.

Self-Assessment

My writing background is a mix of legal, compliance, academic, and professional contexts. These areas require clarity, precision, and tone awareness, skills I've developed through both training and experience. My natural style is direct and professional, which makes my communication efficient and to the point. At the same time, I'm refining how I use transitions and word choice to ensure my writing is not only clear but also inviting and well-paced for the reader.

I approach writing with structure and organization, often starting with bullet points or a loose framework to guide my drafts. I work best at a desk, with silence for professional writing and music for creative or project-oriented work. I thrive in structured environments and usually finish work well before deadlines. My goal is to always make complex information straightforward and actionable, whether for a legal audience, a cybersecurity setting, or a general reader.

Strengths and Weaknesses

My strengths include clarity, organization, and the ability to synthesize complex material into concise communication. These qualities are critical in both law and cybersecurity, where misunderstanding can carry real consequences. I also write with a strong, confident voice that makes my work easy to follow.

I continue to refine my use of transitions and tone calibration. My directness is a strength, but I'm working on ensuring that efficiency is paired with balance and nuance. By approaching drafting and editing as distinct stages, I'm able to sharpen both clarity and reader experience.

Goals

S.M.A.R.T. Goal:

For the next 30 days, i will begin each writing session by sketching a short outline. This habit is specific, measurable, and realistic, and it supports my broader goal of producing precise, well-structured writing across different contexts.

Stretch Goal:

My stretch goal is to create a professional writing portfolio hosted on GitHub. This will include polished reflections, exercises, and insights from this course, organized in a way that shows growth and versatility. By the end of the semester, I aim to have a public-facing repository that not only documents my work but also demonstrates my ability to adapt writing techniques across legal, compliance, and cybersecurity contexts.

Exercise—Résumé Review

This self-assessment can be found in the first Practice Section of Good with Words Chapter 1.

Background

Résumés are a great place to practice the idea of "the words under the words." They give you a chance to frame the same person—yourself—in different ways, to different audiences, for different purposes. As a result, they are a helpful reminder of the two most important questions to ask when sitting down to compose anything from a memo to a contract to a tweet:

- Who is the audience?
- What is the function?

By "function," I mean: What do you want this piece of writing to do? What's the goal? How do you want the people reading it to feel and react? Why are you even writing it in the first place?

Assignment

Find three organizations you would like to work for, whether now or sometime later in your career. Check out each organization's website and other promotional materials. See what kind of language it uses. See what kind of values it communicates. Study the ethos and culture it projects.

Then review your current résumé and ask yourself these questions:

1. How can I make the words under the words of my résumé match the words under the words of the organization I hope to work for?
2. How can I describe my education, skills, and experience in a way that will make it easy for the organization to recognize that I would be a great addition to its team?

While creating your three new résumés, spend some time thinking about your rich, varied background. Mine it for possible connections with your target audiences and then make an intentionally long list of your many characteristics and competencies. Deciding which ones should be highlighted to which people is an important part of advocacy. And it will be great training for when you might be asked to do this kind of highlighting on behalf of someone else as well as for when you eventually discover important policies and projects you feel passionate about championing.

To make this exercise more interesting and helpful, try to pick three organizations that are highly dissimilar. If one organization has an international focus, also pick an organization with a more local focus. If one organization has offices in big cities, also pick an organization that only operates in a single small town. Consider how these differences might affect everything from the projects you decide to describe in your résumé to the items you list in your "Interests" section. The point is to experiment with different versions of yourself and with new ways of saying the same thing.

One more note: don't feel limited to picking only organizations. If there is someone in particular you want to work for one day, create a résumé specifically designed for that person. You'll learn a lot about

what it means to tailor information in a purposeful, laser-like way.

Below are some examples of combinations you might choose based on people and offices graduates of Michigan Law have worked for in the past. Although I want you to be pragmatic when picking your own list, I also want you to stretch yourself a bit. Be creative. Be ambitious. Expand your menu of professional options.

Not every public interest lawyer, for example, stays a public interest lawyer. Nor does every corporate attorney remain at a big firm. Law school is a good time to start imagining alternative futures. But so are other points in your life: when you are visiting a new place, when you are reading a new book, when you are surrounded by people who could give you some helpful advice.

Playing around with your résumé is a pretty low-stakes way to experiment with possible career paths. It can also be quite practical—especially if you end up sending one of your revised résumés out.

Combination #1

- Sidley Austin's Chicago office
- The US Attorney's Office in Las Vegas
- The International Court of Criminal Justice

Combination #2

- Montana Legal Services
- Ford Motor Company
- Chief Justice John Roberts

Combination #3

- Davis Polk's Hong Kong office
- The Boston Consulting Group
- General Manager of the Los Angeles Lakers

Combination #4

- Office of the Public Defender in Columbia, South Carolina
- The Minnesota Supreme Court
- Google

Résumé Review Exercise

When I think about tailoring my résumé for different organizations, I come back to two guiding questions: *Who is the audience?* and *What is the function?* A résumé isn't just a skills list. It communicates values and priorities. The "word under the words" signal whether I understand what matters most to the organization I'm applying to.

To practice this, I looked at three very different organizations:

1. **Google (Cybersecurity & Compliance Team)**Google emphasizes innovation, adaptability, and solving problems at scale. A résumé for this audience would highlight technical coursework, cybersecurity certifications, and portfolio projects showing applied knowledge. Action verbs like *design, implement, and secure* would reflect Google's focus on building and protecting complex systems.

2. **Electric Frontier Foundation (Digital Rights Advocacy)**EFF prioritizes privacy, security, and ethical responsibility in the digital space. Here, I would emphasize my compliance knowledge, legal background, and interest in governance. Words like *advocate, defend, and protect* would align my résumé with their mission of safeguarding civil liberties online.

3. **CrowdStrike (Cybersecurity & Incident Response)**CrowdStrike focuses on threat detection, digital forensics, and incident response. A résumé for this environment would showcase my coursework in digital forensics and compliance frameworks, along with my ability to analyze and respond to risks. Terms like *investigation, response, and prevent* would connect directly to their mission.Looking across these three organizations, the lesson is clear: the same experience can be framed in different ways to mee different expectations. By adjusting the "words under words," I can assure that my résumé resonates whether the focus is innovation, advocacy, or technical expertise.

Exercise—Good Sentences (Education)

"[*New York Times* columnist William Safire] gave me the best advice I ever got as a writer, which is never to feel guilty about how much you read."

—Peggy Noonan*, The Time of Our Lives: Collected Writings* (2015)

To write good sentences, you need to read good sentences. So each week we will make sure to treat our brains to some high-quality material. You'll have a lot of choices to pick from. The only requirement is the one I mentioned in the Good Sentences video: pick your favorite sentence and write it out.

Don't copy and paste the sentence. Actually handwrite or type it. The point is to start to internalize the rhythm and structure of the kind of writing we ultimately want to produce ourselves.

You'll have an opportunity to share your pick (or some other good sentence you read this week) in the discussion prompt that follows this activity. You'll also, next week, get the chance to choose from a different menu of options.

Option #1

Choose something from the Education section of the Good Sentences* library. Here are a few to consider.

- Boys Are Not Defective by Amanda Ripley (*The Atlantic,* 2017)
- Farewell, Lecture? by Eric Mazur (*Science*, 2009)
- Theme for English B by Langston Hughes (*Montage of a Dream Deferred*, 1951)
- What Straight-A Students Get Wrong by Adam Grant (*New York Times*, 2018)

*The Good Sentences library was originally created for University of Michigan students, so there may be some pieces that you can't access unless you are a student enrolled in a program there. But click around. There is plenty of stuff that is available to everybody.

Option #2

Choose something from the December 2018 issue of the Good Sentences monthly email.

Option #3

Choose something from this list of book excerpts.

- I Am Malala by Malala Yousafzai (2013)
- Educated by Tara Westover (2018)
- Work Hard. Be Nice. by Jay Mathews (2009)

For this activity, I chose the line from Tara Westover's *Educated* (2018):

"*You could call this selfhood many things. Transformation. Metamorphosis. Falsity. Betrayal."*

I like this sentence because of its rhythm and precision. Each short fragment builds momentum, forcing the reader to pause on every word. The balance of abstract terms with emotional weight makes the line powerful without being long or complicated. It shows how much can be conveyed in just a few carefully chosen words, and that's a skill I want to continue building into my own writing.

Takeaways (Week 1: The Words Under the Words)

Share at least one of your takeaways from the week. Perhaps you'll help someone remember or better understand a concept that could be really useful to them.

One of my main takeaways from Week 1 is the idea of *"the words under words."* It reminded me that the word choice isn't just about surface meaning; it also carries tone, context, and hidden signals. Whether it's calling something an "estate tax" instead of a "death tax," or labeling employees "associates" instead of "workers," the language shapes how people think and feel. As a writer, being intentional about those choices can make my communication more effective and aligned with mu goals.