

Getting from Draft to Final

14

Writing is a process that goes beyond a first draft. You may do it all yourself, but it's better if you include other people.

- Think of writing as revising with yourself as your own first editor. Read as you write. Read before you send or post. If you can, let your writing rest. Then, read it again. Read it out loud. Use the spell checker, dictionaries, handbooks, and style guides. Edit, revise, and proofread. Also, check your links. Check your facts.
- If you have colleagues, share drafts and help each other. You can also use a spouse, partner, in-law, or friend as your colleague. Two sets of eyes are always better than one.
- By yourself, with your colleagues, or with a usability specialist, walk your personas through their conversations.
- You may be lucky enough to have an expert editor to help you, especially for blog posts or longer pieces of content.
- Technical, legal, or policy specialists may have to review your content before it gets posted. You may have to negotiate what you may say and how you may say it. You can make those reviews positive experiences.

This chapter has guidelines and tips for all five of these situations.

Read, edit, revise, proofread your own work

Let's explore these guidelines for helping yourself:

- Think of writing as revising.

First draft ≠ final draft

The best writing comes from revising.

- Read what you wrote.
- Check your links.
- Check your facts.
- Let it rest.
- Read it out loud.
- Use dictionaries, handbooks, and your style guide.
- Run the spell checker, but don't rely on it.
- Proofread.

Think of writing as revising drafts



Do you ever get writer's block? Find it hard to sit down to write? Procrastinate as long as possible?

Some people find it hard to start writing because they think that whatever they put down has to be perfect on the first try. Not so!

Your first draft should not be your final draft. A good way to get over writer's block is to remember that you can fix it later. Perfection is never achievable, but you'll get closer to it with each revision. (And you must at some point stop revising and meet the deadline to publish!)

When you look at a book like this one, you see only the final result. You don't see the many, many drafts it went through. If you watched me for half an hour, you would see lots of backspacing; deleting; cutting, adding, and moving text; rewriting; starting over; staring into space; trying something and rejecting it; and so on. Writing is a very messy activity.

Successful writers read their own work. They read it – and revise it – many times. Even with social media (and email!), you can – and should – read what you wrote before you send or post it.

Read what you wrote

If you've ever been embarrassed by a message you sent or posted without reading what you wrote, you know how little things slip by. Your fingers may not have typed what you thought they did. You may have left out a word – or put in an extra one. You may have thought you were making sense but, on reading it, realize that others may not understand what you mean.

You may find writing even the first draft easier if you follow the method of this book: Think conversation. Have a persona. Imagine the persona's conversation. Write a clear headline. Outline with good headings. Write the conversation that goes with each heading. Look back at Checklists 7-1 and 7-2 to remind yourself of a way to put together good web content.

As you read what you wrote, ask yourself:

- Does it really say what I want to say?
- Would someone else take the same meaning from it that I do?
- Does it fit with my other writing? Does it fit with other content on the web site?
- Is my tone right for the situation?
- Is it as clear and concise as I can say it?
- Will my readers know all the words I am using? (If not, must I use words that will be new to my readers? Have I explained new words and concepts clearly?)
- Are the sentences grammatical? Are the words spelled correctly? (If you are writing for social media where telegraphic words are okay, you still need to ask: Am I using spelling that is going to make sense to my readers?)

Check your links

If your content includes links, click on each one. Make sure the link leads to a page with the same words you used in the link – or at least something similar enough to reassure your site visitors.

And remember not to rely only on
[Click here](#) for your links.

Check your facts

Make sure what you say is accurate. How do you know the sources you used are credible?

For example, Wikipedia and other “pedias” are great resources – but open community writing and editing doesn’t guarantee accuracy. Search engines may give preference to sites that other sites link to, but that measure of “success” or “trust” doesn’t guarantee accuracy. Even reading the same information over and over on different sites does not make that information true. The sites could all be copying each other or the same original site.

When considering the credibility of what you read online, ask questions like these:

- Do the facts make a consistent whole, or does information in one place contradict information in another place?
- Is the source a respected authority on the topic?
 - Government: Are they an impartial, research-based, data-gathering, and data-delivering group, or are they politically biased?

- Nonprofit: Are they nonpartisan and nonpartial, or are they pushing an agenda?
- Commercial: Are they being even-handed, or are they slanting information to market their product?
- Does the article name the author? What can you learn about that author?
- Does the content have a date so that you can tell when the information was written?

Many sites now include dates and authorship or ownership – information they can publish from their content management system. For example, [Figure 14-1](#) shows this information from a typical page at the web site of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

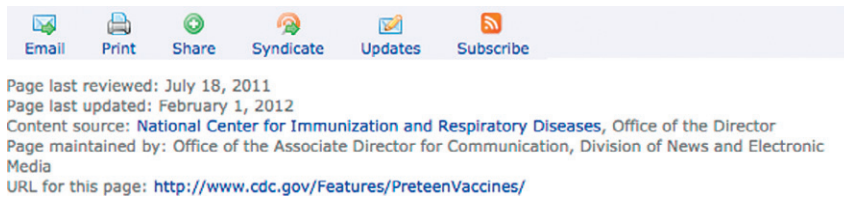


Figure 14-1 You can increase people’s sense of trust by showing how up-to-date the information is and who is responsible for the information.
www.cdc.gov

Remember also that you can still check facts offline. Find a person who knows and check the facts with that person. Use books. But keep in mind that just because it is in print (offline or online) doesn’t make it true. Books – even textbooks – sometimes copy errors from each other.

Let it rest

Many good recipes require rest time for the food. So does good writing.

You don’t have to post anything immediately – even a blog entry, a tweet, or a comment. I know bloggers who write at lunchtime and post in the evening. I often schedule a tweet for a few hours from when I write it so I can review it after I’ve been away from it for a bit.

For web content that is going to last a long time, you should be able to put your draft away for a day or two as part of your writing process.

Why let it rest?

When you are too close to what you have written, you are likely to miss problems.

- You may not notice flaws in the logic or gaps in the information. You know what you want to say, so you don't see where your readers may not follow your points.
- You don't notice typos. You read the words you intended to write instead of the ones that are there. You skip over words that shouldn't be there.

You can, of course, fix and repost after publishing – even for social media entries. That's a tremendous advantage that online media have over paper. But sending a second tweet to say “sorry, this is what I meant,” or having people on your RSS feed see each slightly updated blog entry, can annoy them and embarrass you. Get it right before you send it.

What should you do after your draft has rested?

When you go back to your draft after a few minutes, hours, or days; you'll read it with fresh eyes. Ask yourself:

- Is this really what I want to say?
- Can I say it more clearly? More concisely?
- Do I need to add anything to make it clearer?
- What can I cut?
- Does it have the right tone?
- Will the headline work well where it will appear on the site?
- Are there headings? Enough headings? In the right places? In the right words?
- Did I catch all the typos?

Read it out loud

Reading your content out loud may seem like a strange thing to do, but good writing sounds good when spoken. When you read out loud, you'll know if your sentences, paragraphs, and list items are short enough. If you hesitate, stumble, or have to take too many breaths in one sentence, rewrite!

Use dictionaries, handbooks, style guides

Don't mislead, misinform, or annoy your readers by misspelling words or using words incorrectly. Lots of help is available online. Use it.

Read this sentence:



Read it again carefully. Do you see the problem? Did you see it when you first read the sentence?

Part of your content strategy is choosing or writing a style guide. Follow it.

Style guides – Interlude 5 right after this chapter

Run the spell checker but don't rely on it

You know that the spell checker is only checking each word against the program's internal dictionaries.

- If the word is in the dictionary, the spell checker will accept it, even if it's not the right word in the right place. (If you've ever typed “now” for “not” or “our” for “out,” you know what I mean.)
- If the word is not in the dictionary, the spell checker will reject it, even if it is the right word in the right place. (On my own computer, of course, I've added my name to the dictionary. But if you try it on yours, the spell checker will probably want to turn Redish into “reddish” or “radish.”)

Read this sentence out loud:

Eye kin knot sea ewe.

Spell checkers would say it is fine; but, of course, it is not.

Proofread

Because the spell checker isn't perfect, you should also proofread what you wrote. A good way to do that is to go through what you have written *line by line* from the *end* of your copy back up to the beginning. That helps you look at each word separately and not get caught up in reading for meaning.

Share drafts with colleagues

Successful writers share their work in draft, try their writing out with relevant audiences, and revise based on what they learn from their early readers. Let's explore these guidelines for sharing drafts:

- Accept and learn from the process.
- Work with colleagues to fit the content strategy.
- Share partial drafts.
- Have someone read it out loud.
- Ask what your key message is.
- Pay attention to comments.
- Put your ego in the drawer, cheerfully. 😊

Accept and learn from the process

Your attitude about sharing drafts is critical. Make it fun. Make it a learning experience. I love the way Tom Brinck, creative director and usability specialist, puts it:

You should delight in feedback and getting your content just right. You should enjoy the surprises and discovery when people come from a

Check out Tom's book: Brinck, Gergle, and Wood, *Usability for the Web: Designing Web Sites that Work*

different perspective and want something you totally didn't expect. If you're brewing in resentment over having to suppress your supposedly good ideas, you're going to die young of stomach ulcers. Take the opposite perspective: Share your ideas and love what you learn, not as your ideas are "shot down," but as your ideas compete in an ecology of good ideas and improve as a result.

Work with colleagues to fit the content strategy

If you are part of an organization, you should also be working with other web team members to be sure your content fits the content strategy. Fits = appropriate tone, message, style. Fits = good length for the design and the medium.

Remember that the web site represents the organization and not you – or others – as individual writers. That's part of what content strategy is all about: making the site the "voice of the organization." The content strategy may allow you your own voice, especially for blog posts or articles that you sign. But for most web content, most of the time, in a large organization, site visitors should not be able to tell who wrote what.

Share partial drafts

Share one piece or part of a piece to see if you are on the right track with message, level of detail, tone, organization, writing style, and so on. That could save you lots of time and grief. The earlier you learn what to change, the less effort it takes to make the changes. The Internet has many options now for sharing drafts.

Have someone read it out loud

Find a few people who are part of the audience you want to reach. Ask them to read your web content. Ask them to read out loud. Where they hesitate, stumble, or reread: rewrite!

Ask what your key message is

When they have read your content, don't ask for their reaction. Ask them what message they get.

Pay attention to comments

Use what you hear from sharing early drafts.

Also pay attention to what you hear *after* you have published or posted. With social media and responder technology now so prevalent on the web, you get to hear what others think about your content *after* as well as before you put it up. Learn from the feedback you get. Use it to converse even better in the next content you write.

Put your ego in the drawer, cheerfully 😊

If you are writing poetry or fiction, your own blog, or your own site, your voice as author is a large part of what you are projecting through your web content. That's fine.

But if you are part of an organization, it's not about you as author. It's about communicating so clearly that your site visitors can satisfy their own conversations with the site.

Of course, you should take pride in your work. That pride can be in working as a team with colleagues to have a web site that has a consistent writing style, tone, vocabulary, and message.

Don't get into arguments about what "I" like or what another "I" likes. Put your "I" away. Make everyone else put their "I" away. Get out your personas. Talk about the conversations your site visitors come to have with your content.

Also put your ego in the drawer when you get feedback. Listen with an open mind. Don't get defensive about your writing.

You don't have to act on every suggestion, but consider each with respect.

When you start to bristle at comments, read the quote from Tom Brinck again.

Walk your personas through their conversations

Throughout this book, I've urged you to write every piece of content with a specific persona in mind – to imagine the conversation that person wants to have with your content. You can also use personas and conversations to assess how well the site is doing.

When I do a persona-based, conversation-based review, I work with the web team to understand

- the business goals for the site or app
- the site visitors they hope will use the site or app (personas)

- the scenarios that will bring those visitors to the site or app (conversations)

Then I try to carry through those conversations as if I were the personas. When the persona would run into trouble, I turn on my hat as a user experience expert and identify the reasons the web site is likely to cause problems for people like the persona.

You can do this for your own content. You can ask a colleague to do it with or for you. If you have usability colleagues, get them to do it with or for you.

Let editors help you

If you can, take advantage of help from a copy editor (“details” person) and a developmental editor (“big picture” person). You may want different people as copy editor and developmental editor. Although some people can do both well, the tasks require different skills. If your organization doesn’t have editors, you and your colleagues might take on these roles for each other.

Get help with the details

Copy editing is looking at the “little picture” – the details of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. The best copy editors are very detail-oriented. They read your words very carefully.

Great copy editors are good spellers. They know the conventions of grammar and punctuation. If they are part of an organization, they know the organization’s style guide.

It’s almost impossible to catch all the typos in your own work. If at all possible, always have someone else copy edit your content.

Get help with the big picture

A developmental editor starts by going over the three planning questions from Chapter 2 with you:

- What are you trying to achieve through this content?
- Who are you conversing with through this content?
- How will those people use what you are writing? What are their scenarios, their conversations?

<http://redish.net/blog/review-your-web-site-through-personas-and-conversations>

**Also do usability testing –
Chapter 15. Walking personas
through conversations is a great
technique to use even before you
do usability testing.**

With the answers to those questions, a developmental editor helps you

- select the content your site visitors need
- make your key messages obvious
- write a good headline
- organize the content logically for your readers
- break up your content with clear headings
- write so your content is easy to scan, read, and use
- write with words your site visitors know

Negotiate successful reviews (and edits)

Everything in this section applies to working with editors as well as with reviewers. So add “and editors” in your mind as you go through these guidelines.

Your web content may have to go through review with

- managers
- policy analysts
- lawyers
- technical staff
- editorial staff
- web publication staff

Of course, not all content goes through all those reviews. But if your content goes through any of these reviews or if you are one of these reviewers, the hints in this section may help make reviewing a good experience. Let's talk about reviewing in three stages:

- setting up good reviews
- getting useful information from reviewers
- using reviews well

Setting up good reviews

Good reviews start at the beginning of a project – not at the end. When you first get an assignment, find out who will review what you write.

Meet with reviewers at the beginning

Discuss and agree on

- roles and responsibilities
- the schedule for drafts and reviews
- your plans for the content

Practice the doctrine of no surprise

The surest way to get a negative reaction is to shock your reviewers (or your editors) by showing them something that they do not expect and to which they can exclaim, “That’s not the way we write here!”

Never shock. Always work with people *before* you deliver a draft so they know what to expect. Deal with any concerns they have about style or content *before* you give them content to review.

Doctrine of no surprise:
Work with reviewers *before* giving them a draft so they’ll know what to expect.

Help your reviewers understand good web writing

When I said just now, “discuss and agree on your plans for the content,” I meant making sure your reviewers agree from the beginning on

- purposes: what you want to achieve through this web content
- personas: who the content is for
- scenarios, conversations: what will bring people to your content
- content: what you plan to cover (if you have an outline, share it with them)

If your reviewers don’t think in terms of personas and conversations, this might be a great time to introduce both the concepts and your specific personas and their conversations.

If the conversational style that you have worked on throughout this book is different from what your reviewers expect, spend the time and effort to convince them of how important and useful it is. You are welcome to use examples from the book (with credit, please). Even better, of course, give them a copy of the book with relevant pages marked.

You might create a “before” and “after” example for even a small piece of your web content to show reviewers what you will be doing. Get them to express their concerns early so you can discuss the concerns and allay their fears.

Getting useful information from reviewers

Stay in touch with reviewers, but don't overdo it.

Tell reviewers when the schedule changes

Schedules change. If a change affects when you will get your content to reviewers, let them know. Negotiate new dates. Don't just assume they can accommodate every slip in your schedule.

Give reviewers a “heads up” a few days in advance

Everyone is overly busy, including your reviewers. Remind them when you are about to send a draft.

Make your expectations clear

It's frustrating to expect a technical review and then get your draft back with nothing more than a few commas changed. Improve your chances of getting what you need by making your expectations clear.

Deliver your draft for review with individual cover emails. Tell each reviewer

- what stage the draft is at
- what specific help you need from that reviewer
- when you must have the review back
- to call or write if he or she has questions or needs to renegotiate dates

And remind reviewers politely that you expect them to comment and suggest, not to rewrite. Writing the content is your job.

If you have specific needs, let reviewers know

In your cover email, remind each reviewer of that reviewer's role (policy, technical, legal, etc.). In addition, you may have specific questions for a reviewer. Develop a way of asking that makes it obvious you have a question and who that question is for. I often use square brackets [], put the reviewer's name in bold, and use a color so that it stands out on the screen, as in this example:

[Jim: Please tell me who is responsible for approving travel requests. I want to turn the passive sentence in the original into an active sentence here. Please fill in the blank for me at the beginning of my sentence. Thanks.]

If you use a different color for each reviewer, they can each quickly find what they should answer.

Thanks to Ahava Leibtag for the suggestion of different colors for different reviewers.

Using reviews well

When you get reviews back, read them carefully and with an open mind.

Don't get defensive

Reading reviews is another good time to put your ego in the drawer. Be open to reviewers' comments. You don't have to agree with all of them. You may not have to – or be able to – make all the changes every reviewer wants. But you must consider them all respectfully.

Don't automatically accept changes

If you get conflicting comments on facts, find out what the real story is. If you are not sure that a change is correct, do the research to find out. If you get conflicting comments on style, work to resolve the differences – or to convince reviewers that your style is best for your site visitors.

Rewrite to avoid misunderstandings

If a reviewer misunderstood something you wrote, you may not have stated it as clearly as you could. Try again. And run that piece by the reviewer again.

Persuade

If the reviews that trouble you are based on different perceptions of purpose, personas, conversations, or appropriate style, you may need to evangelize clear writing. Within the constraints of your organization's culture, push for clear web writing even for legal and technical information. Your site visitors need you to do this for them. I hope the guidelines, explanations, and examples in this book not only persuade and mentor you, but also prove useful to you in persuading and mentoring others.

Negotiate

The teamwork that creates successful web sites often involves compromise. Work with reviewers to put accurate, reliable, and clear information on your web site. Remember that even legal information can be accurate, sufficient, and also clear and easy to understand.

**Clear legal writing – Interlude 4
after Chapter 11**

Communicate

Reviewers who feel that you ignored their comments are less likely to give your content a thorough review on the next round. Keep a summary of the changes you make and do not make, especially for legal, policy, and technical reviewers. If you have several rounds of review, include the summary from the previous round. Your reviewers need clear communication just as your site visitors do. And your explanations can help educate your reviewers about clear writing.

Summarizing Chapter 14

Key messages from Chapter 14:

- Read, edit, revise, proofread your own work.
 - Think of writing as revising drafts.
 - Read what you wrote.
 - Check your links.
 - Check your facts.
 - Let it rest.
 - Read it out loud.
 - Use dictionaries, handbooks, style guides.
 - Run the spell checker but don't rely on it.
 - Proofread.
- Share drafts with colleagues.
 - Accept and learn from the process.
 - Work with colleagues to fit the content strategy.
 - Share partial drafts.
 - Have someone read it out loud.
 - Ask what your key message is.
 - Pay attention to comments.
 - Put your ego in the drawer, cheerfully. 😊
- Let editors help you.
 - Get help with the details.
 - Get help with the big picture.
- Negotiate successful reviews (and edits).
 - Meet with reviewers at the beginning.
 - Practice the doctrine of no surprise.
 - Help your reviewers understand good web writing.
 - Tell reviewers when the schedule changes.
 - Give reviewers a “heads up” a few days in advance.
 - Make your expectations clear.
 - If you have specific needs, let reviewers know.
 - Don't get defensive.
 - Don't automatically accept changes.
 - Rewrite to avoid misunderstandings.
 - Persuade.
 - Negotiate.
 - Communicate.