

EDITING OF PROFESSIONAL REPORTS: A RHETORICAL MODES APPROACH

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Technical writers, teachers, and theorists are paying considerable attention to, at least, three important phases of the writing process: pre-composing, composing, and revision. Presently, we find particular interest in rhetorical invention, the pre-composing phase. Among the heuristics for examining and solving problems are D. Gordon Rohman's "pre-writing," Kenneth Burke's "dramatistic method," Young, Becker, and Pike's "tagmemic invention," and brainstorming or journal keeping. Those focusing on the composing phase are divided between regarding the writing task as either product or process. It is in this second phase that we find approaches through rhetorical modes vs. approaches through purpose as ways to divide writing into manageable segments. Revision, the third phase, generally brings attention to matters of organization and cohesion. Perhaps current studies of sentence combining can be regarded as a contribution to the revision phase. We are left, however, with a fourth and very significant phase of the writing process, editing, which has either been ignored or treated as little more than the correct exercise of grammar, punctuation, and spelling. For example, in Barrett J. Mandel's "Losing One's Mind: Learning to Write and Edit," he suggests that "Following the rules is the issue"¹ when editing. And a perusal of the technical writing texts reveals

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either a chapter or an appendix on piecemeal editing suggestions such as sentence length, usage, and mechanics. But these treatments of editing concerns invariably omit any program or theory for actually applying the suggestions.

I believe that, as technical writers or teachers of technical writing, our task is to flesh out the fourth phase of the writing process. And in so doing, we need to ask (1) what is the relation between editing and the other phases of the writing process? Are heuristics for invention and composing isolated from the editing phase? And (2) what does the editing phase involve and include?

In this paper I will outline the beginnings of what I think is a viable program for editing technical paragraphs. I will contend that heuristics and approaches to composing should extend through all phases of the writing process, including editing. In particular, I am interested in how a rhetorical modes approach to composing can serve as the grounds for an editing program. In this program, I will resurrect the topic sentence as vital to clear technical paragraphs and illustrate that editing can go beyond attention to grammar, mechanics, and spelling.

Only J. C. Mathes and Dwight W. Stevenson in their text, *Designing Technical Reports*, have made a solid contribution toward a program of editing for technical writers. Perhaps because of its complexity and its restriction to an engineering audience, the text has not received wider discussion and adoption² by those of us writing or teaching in disciplines as varied as business, agriculture, and journalism.

Mathes and Stevenson ask that writing be viewed as segments, which are defined as the whole report, subsections made up of clusters of paragraphs, or a single paragraph. Despite variation in length, each segment is characterized by a single rhetorical mode or intent. The topic sentence must identify the rhetorical intent of the paragraph, and each sentence is checked or edited as it relates to the topic sentence and to the sentences preceding and following it.³

Thinking in terms of topic sentences and the relation of sentences in a paragraph to the topic sentence is a perfectly simple idea that many of us teach or use as a method in the composing phase. Yet the simplicity of the idea is precisely its virtue as a basis for editing. By asking writers in their editing phase to check for clearly located topic sentences

with singular rhetorical intent, we are focusing on two of the most common problems in technical writing. The first problem arises from either the absence of or the buried placement of the topic sentence in the paragraph. While placing the topic sentence first in the paragraph is not necessary for all writing purposes, technical audiences usually find difficult material is easier to scan and follow if major generalizations are given before details. The second problem occurs when a reader cannot immediately identify a writer's purpose, whether the writer intends to classify, describe, compare, etc. Often writers of complex material fail to identify their rhetorical intent in the topic sentence or they confound the purpose of paragraphs by suggesting mixed rhetorical modes in the topic sentences. For example, writers frequently confuse description with process. And often readers cannot determine whether a writer intends to treat cause or effect.

To help writers clarify the intent of their writing and consistently develop that intent in the paragraph, I will illustrate the following as suggested initial steps in the editing phase:

1. Check that the paragraph has a topic sentence that establishes a pattern for the paragraph.
2. Check that the topic sentence establishes an unambiguous rhetorical purpose.
3. Scan the paragraph to make sure focus and pattern of all sentences follow the designated rhetorical purpose.

Check That the Paragraph Has a Topic Sentence That Establishes a Pattern for the Paragraph

The first step involves making sure the paragraph does have a topic sentence to establish rhetorical purpose and locating its placement in the paragraph. In the following student paragraph on tax indexing, a topic sentence is present, but its position at the end of the paragraph is ineffective.

The index only measures the change in prices of a "fixed market basket" of consumer goods and services because the market basket is statistically designed to reflect only typical urban buying habits. It is generally agreed that it does not measure a particular household's or individual's cost of living because no two are alike in their tastes, preferences,

locations, or other unique features. Thus the index can over or understate an individual's real cost of living increase. *Though widely referred to as the "cost of living index," it does not really measure anyone's cost of living unless one just happens to purchase all of the items measured in the exact proportions they are given in the government's calculations.*

If the last sentence, the topic sentence, were moved to the beginning of the paragraph as shown in the revision below, it would logically set up the contrastive relation between the topic sentence and the sentence which appears first in the original draft. Placing the topic sentence first also makes explicitly clear the qualification intent of the overall paragraph and guides the explanation of what the index does do, which is developed in the remainder of the paragraph.

Though widely referred to as the "cost of living index," tax indexing does not really measure anyone's cost of living unless one just happens to purchase all of the items measured in the exact proportions given in the government's calculations. The index only measures the changes in prices of a "fixed market basket" of consumer goods and services because the market basket is statistically designed to reflect typical urban habits. The index does not measure a particular household's or individual's cost of living because no two are alike in tastes, preferences, locations, or other unique features. Thus the index can over or understate an individual's real cost of living increases.

Establishing rhetorical intent at the outset helps not only the reader but also the writer who has established a guide whereby the following sentences can be checked for structural consistency. When the topic sentence is placed first, we find the second sentence is structurally parallel ("index measures") to the form of the first ("tax indexing does . . . measure"). We might say that each sentence in progression is in effect "determined"⁴ by the form of the one preceding it.

When we isolate the subjects and verbs in the original and the edited paragraphs, we see the structural consistency in the edited version. By establishing rhetorical intent and a sentence pattern in the topic sentence, the writer has some-

thing with which to check the pattern of the remaining sentences.

Original		Edited Version	
index	measures	indexing	does measure
basket	is designed	they	happen
it	is agreed	index	measures
it	does measure	basket	is designed
two	are	index	does measure
index	can understate	two	are
they	happen	index	can understate

By looking for structural consistency of subjects and verbs in accordance with the topic sentence, the writer is also able to identify structures such as the indefinite "it" which produces wordiness and which places important information in the subordinate clause.

Check That the Topic Sentence Establishes an Unambiguous Rhetorical Purpose

After making sure the paragraph has a topic sentence placed effectively, check to see that the topic sentence accurately reflects the rhetorical intent of the paragraph. In the previous paragraph on tax indexing, exposition/qualification was clearly the rhetorical intent. In the two topic sentences below, the function of the sieve and the uses of a certain class of ceramic materials are clearly the purposes.

A sieve is a screen mesh basket through which small particles pass and are separated from coarser particles. (function)

In the last decade industries have expanded their use of exotic ceramic materials. (exposition-detailing uses)

If, however, we were to change the above sentence, we would seriously confuse rhetorical intent.

In the past decade industries have altered their method of increasing density of exotic ceramic materials. (process or comparison)

As the topic sentence is now written, the paragraph could be either a comparison or the description of a process. The phrase, "in the last decade," and the word, "altered," suggest a previous method or methods might be discussed in the paragraph. We could also expect the paragraph to be a comparison of one or more methods. Editing the paragraph would require rewriting the topic sentence to clarify rhetorical intent.

In the past decade industries have changed from

mechanical to chemical methods to increase density of exotic ceramic materials. (comparison)

Hot pressing increases density of exotic ceramic materials. (process)

The example below also illustrates mixed rhetorical intent in the topic sentence. At least two possible rhetorical expectations are possible in this sentence.

It has been determined that the new highway must avoid all land areas of high value.

“It” assumes the focal point in the sentence but reveals no information about the subject or intent of the ensuing paragraph. “Has been determined” suggests the paragraph will possibly support an assertion while “must avoid” implies argumentation or specification. The writer, in fact, had neither of these in mind as the purpose of his paragraph. He wanted to illustrate a specification for a new highway location as the completed and edited paragraph below demonstrates.

The new highway must avoid all land areas of high values, which are identified on the attached aerial mosaic. Block 1 is an airport, blocks 2 and 11 are housing developments, block 3 is state property used by the Iowa Department of Transportation, and blocks 4 and 5 are trailer courts. Block 6 is the Iowa Highway 14 interchange, blocks 7 and 8 are large shopping centers, block 9 is property owned by the Marshalltown Community College, and block 10 is a cemetery.

While the first two steps of editing as described here can help writers identify sentences that need to be rearranged and words and phrases that need to be changed, many problems cannot be corrected by mere editing. However, an editing program that will enable writers to check topic sentences, unambiguous rhetorical intent, and consistent sentence patterns can lead them back to the revision phase, which they might otherwise not know to do.

The student paper below on how inflation affects mortgage credit could not be helped by editing alone. The draft of the first paragraph shows a number of problems.

Interest Rate Ceilings and Their Effect on Home Mortgage Credit

Home mortgage and housing construction are financed at the mortgage interest rate by thrift institutions, that is, savings and loan associations

and mutual savings banks. Thus the supply of this credit is affected by the mortgage interest rate and the amount of lending undertaken by the thrift institutions. In the discussion below a further *reason* for the amount of lending by the thrift institutions *is developed*.

The title of the paper suggests a cause/effect relation with an emphasis on effect. Yet, the last sentence in the paragraph with the words, “further reason,” places stress on cause — interest rates as the cause of higher home mortgage rates. And, of course, the bulk of the paragraph is not about either the cause or the effect that the writer says she will develop in the paper.

The writer of this paper returned to the revision phase and found that her actual interest was in describing the process “Whereby inflation adversely affects mortgage credit.” She came up with the revised and edited paragraph below. And although editing alone did not produce the final draft, editing did help her check that her paragraph had a topic sentence and that it was effectively placed in the paragraph. Editing also helped her establish an unambiguous rhetorical intent of process and carry through the process pattern with parallel time markers (“stages,” “first step,” “after,” “will lead,” “in turn,” “will then be invested”).

The purpose of this report is to analyze the *process whereby inflation adversely affects mortgage credit*. Specifically, this report deals with those *stages* that lead from a period of high inflation to reduced levels of home mortgage funds. The *first step of this process* is the onset of inflation in a normal economy. *After a few years this stage will lead* to a period of high interest rates to slow down this excess demand. These high rates *in turn will lead* to reduced deposits at banks and savings and loan associations. These withdrawn funds *will then* be invested elsewhere in higher sectors, and savings and loans will have to reduce the level of their mortgage activity.

Scan the Paragraph to Make Sure Focus and Pattern of All Sentences Follow the Designated Rhetorical Purpose

Once topic sentences and rhetorical intent are checked, the third step involves scanning the sentences in the paragraph to make sure each follows the pattern established in the topic sentence. This step asks writers to focus on

diction and on the noun/verb pattern in a sentence as it relates to the noun/verb patterns throughout the paragraph.

In the following example from a long report on a carton crusher design, the writer has inconsistent sentence patterns in the Plan of Development statement of his Introduction.

This *report begins* with the specifications set up by the Maytag Corp. for their appliance cartons and a design to meet those specifications. The *operation* of the design including an analysis of the total time expenditure for the test *is then presented*. *This is followed* by a cost analysis of the overall design. Finally, the *report provides* an appendix containing calculations for the strengths and dimensions of critical parts of the machine.

Vertical scanning of the noun/verb patterns reveals active voice in the topic sentence but passive voice in sentences two and three. The chronology set up in the first sentence (“report begins with”) is not effectively carried through into the second sentence. The passive voice construction (“is presented”) and the signal of chronological development (“then”) are delayed until the end of sentence two.

Vertical scanning and checking sentence patterns enabled this writer to identify the rough transition between sentences one and two. By putting sentences two and three in active voice and by placing the chronological signal at the beginning of the sentence, the rhetorical pattern of the entire paragraph can be clarified as the revision beneath the chart illustrates.

Original	Edited Version
report begins	report begins
operation is presented	it illustrates
this is followed	portion details

This *report begins* with the specifications set by the Maytag Corp. for their appliance cartons and a design to meet those specifications. *Then it illustrates* the operation of the design, including an analysis of the total time expenditure during the test. The next major portion of the *report details* a cost analysis of the overall design followed by an appendix which contains calculations for the strengths and dimensions of critical parts of the machine.

Focusing on nouns and verbs allowed this writer to see not only the necessity of patterns consistent with the topic

sentence but also the importance of exactness in word choice. When the passive voice ("is followed") was deleted from sentence three, the writer was left to find a more exact word. And since the report included an exhaustive cost analysis, the writer chose the more precise word, "detailed," to describe it.

Although passive voice was edited out of the example above, parallelism of sentences to re-enforce the rhetorical pattern of a paragraph is not an argument against the use of passive voice in all cases. Certainly passive voice can be appropriate to the nature of some material and to the rhetorical intent of some paragraphs.

Assuredly, the initial three steps I have demonstrated here are only the beginning of an editing program. And, no doubt, some paragraphs are more complex than the examples I have used for illustration. I have also not treated segments larger than the paragraph, and I have not written in detail about the sentence level except as the sentence relates to the entire paragraph structure. The editing steps, however, are applicable to segments both smaller and larger than the paragraph.

I have also suggested that an editing program be grounded in a rhetorical modes approach. Extending attention to rhetorical modes through editing helps overcome the charge sometimes issued against a rhetorical modes approach to composing. For example, Caroline D. Eckhardt and David H. Stewart in "Towards a Functional Taxonomy of Composition" argue that rhetorical modes are merely techniques and force the writer's attention to means rather than ends. Like other critics of a rhetorical modes approach, Eckhardt and Stewart find a "means" approach inapplicable to the real world and not a practical system for many students.⁵

Whether or not freshman composition students find rhetorical modes the most useful way to approach composing is outside the scope of the discussion here. It does seem to me, however, that technical writers very often think of their writing tasks in terms of a responsibility to describe, classify, compare, etc. for readers. For technical writers general purposes are most naturally and effectively identified within modes. The charge of impracticality is further invalidated when a rhetorical modes approach is coupled with an editing program. What has more practical value than an editing program which results in improved readability of written communication? Finally, the greatest

advantage of an editing program grounded in rhetorical modes is a heuristic that spans the composing, revision, and editing phases of the writing process. Composing and editing are not phases in isolation from one another.

Although the editing program I have demonstrated here is built upon the relatedness of composing and editing, it also helps define expectations that are particular to the editing phase. We cannot expect editing to treat extensive organization problems, but we can expect editing to identify problems, such as weak organization, that signal the writer back to revision. We can also rely on editing to treat such problems as clarity, conciseness, consistency, and exactness, in total a great deal more than attention to spelling, grammar, and mechanics.

NOTES

¹ Barrett J. Mandel, "Losing One's Mind: Learning to Write and Edit," *College Composition and Communication*, 29 (Dec., 1978), 366.

² Certainly, Mathes and Stevenson's treatment of audience (Ingrid Brunner, J. C. Mathes, and Dwight W. Stevenson, *The Technician as Writer*, Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1980 and J. C. Mathes and Dwight W. Stevenson, *Designing Technical Reports*, Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1976) has been widely acknowledged by technical writing teachers. It is their editing program, as elaborated in this essay, that has remained largely unexamined.

³ J. C. Mathes and Dwight W. Stevenson, *Designing Technical Reports* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing), pp. 113-143.

⁴ Mathes and Stevenson, p. 143.

⁵ Caroline D. Eckhardt and David H. Stewart, "Towards a Functional Taxonomy of Composition," *College Composition and Communication*, 30 (Dec., 1978), 339.