

Fresh Ears, Fresh Eyes: Final Editing Through Reading Aloud

by Sarah Gerwig-Moore*

I have always found the final editing process to be the most difficult. Each year in my clinic, The Habeas Project, my students and I may file as many as seven or eight court briefs. Belying the name “brief,” these documents are not short. And after working on a project for three or six or even nine months, it is common for teachers and students alike to lose momentum and interest in a project along with the ability to find the typo in the haystack.¹

My clinic students are tired (and sometimes both sick AND tired) from working long weeks and months on the same set of facts, cases, and legal issues.² They are often so tired, in fact, that their eyes glaze over misspellings, extra punctuation, or other typographical errors.³ They do not notice that we have used the same phrase, “the court held,” to begin the last four sentences. They skim over the subject-verb disagreement that has cropped up in the latest revision. The run-on sentence avoids their notice. So how is a teacher to reinforce the importance of careful final editing while keeping the project interesting and new?

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1. The process becomes more difficult as the writer continues to revise and edit. “Tackling detail work is not fun, especially if the writer has already spent too much time drafting the document.” Susan M. Taylor, *Students as (Re)visionaries: Or, Revision, Revision, Revision*, 21 *TOURO L. REV.* 265, 271 (2005).

2. “There is a point in the drafting process when the writer simply cannot read the draft ‘one more time.’” *Id.*

3. A similar problem to editing while tired is writing while tired. “Writing done while tired is more likely to have errors that go unnoticed.” Laurie Childree, *How Being Tired Can Affect Your Writing*, *HELIUM* (Dec. 7, 2008) <http://www.helium.com/items/125888-writing-when-tired>. Additionally, “[w]hen you are tired anything that you write makes sense to you but it might not make sense in the light of day.” *Id.* Students face the same problem when editing as they read and re-read in attempts to perfect an appellate brief.

What guidance can we give our students about seeing a project through to the end and putting the final polish on a writing product that is important to all of us?

In addition to the usual pep talks, cajoling, and threats, I also recommend requiring students to read a document aloud before calling it finished. This shift from relying on one sense to engaging another helps the students stay fully connected until the assignment has been carefully inspected.⁴ Editing on a page (or worse, on a computer screen) allows a weary student to depend on unreliable electronic editing functions or skim passively and ineffectively.⁵

Though it can prove noisy in a classroom environment, I have found this “read aloud” technique to be extremely helpful—and to produce much better final results than other methods.⁶ Reading aloud is best when done with a partner, but it is also helpful in a pinch when working on a solo project or when an editing buddy is not available. It is most useful, I have found, for one student to read the draft aloud to the primary author of the assignment. This enables the student reader to listen for word choice and notice typos because the words are not familiar. In turn, the student author is able to listen for problems with content or misstatements and pay attention to the clarity of the thoughts expressed. Schedules permitting, other students in the class listen in as well and can make their own suggestions. As the teacher, I also participate and make my own notes on the substance and process, but try to hang back to see whether the students identify concerns first. Reading aloud is not always necessary or even practical, but I ask each of my students to at least try the technique with one project every semester.

Even for my best students, achieving variety in sentence structure and word choice is one of the most difficult skills to learn. Many law

4. Focusing on the material in a different way, such as reading aloud, can be beneficial. Reading aloud is a “good way[] to learn something important about the rhythms of language” as well as “one of the most basic tests of comprehension.” Verlyn Klinkenborg, *Some Thoughts on the Lost Art of Reading Aloud*, N.Y. TIMES, May 16, 2009, at A18, available at 2009 WLNR 9345633.

5. Spell check and other electronic tools can be good to save time but “have caused many writers to become lazy editors of their work” and should “not undermine . . . professional skills.” Susan Hanley Kosse & David T. ButleRitchie, *How Judges, Practitioners, and Legal Writing Teachers Assess the Writing Skills of New Law Graduates: A Comparative Study*, 53 J. LEGAL EDUC. 80, 101-02 (2003). Additionally, spell check does not correct poorly organized arguments and analysis. *Id.* at 101.

6. In general, peer editing is more useful for the student performing the review because “the editor is the one who must think through all the rules” and who learns about his or her own writing in the process. Libby A. White, *Peering Down the Edit*, 16 PERSP: TEACHING LEGAL RES. & WRITING 160 (Spring 2008).

students (and lawyers, too) focus so heavily on content or technical correctness that style fails to become a priority. But it is boring to hear a paper read aloud when every sentence begins in the same way or follows a predictable format. Word variety becomes an obvious strength or weakness. It is impossible to ignore a run-on sentence, and even the unclear expression of an idea is sometimes easier to hear than it is to recognize on a page.

There are clinic cases in which reading aloud becomes far more than an editing technique. If the students will be required at some point to explain to a court the points made in a brief, the language must pass a “straight face” test. Spoken aloud, does our theme sound silly or trite? Will linguistic connotations work in our favor, or will they sound disingenuous? These substantive considerations are usually addressed quite early in the brainstorming and briefing process but are helpful to revisit periodically.

Though I am not aware of widespread use of a reading aloud technique in the clinical legal context, some legal writing colleagues encourage their students to read aloud to one another in their classes.⁷ In addition, I have heard from senior faculty that, as students on the law review, they were often expected to use this technique when proofreading to ensure that changes had been correctly entered and that the manuscript read well.

My students have responded well to reading aloud for stylistic and content editing. Invariably, the feedback and final results have been positive—and for a number of reasons.⁸ One student explained that she “did not realize how much my mind skips over and misses certain errors when I simply edit by myself, nonverbally, on a computer screen.”⁹ Another student offered the feedback that, after working for a time on a project, “you almost become blind to your own writing style and the big picture of your argument. Thus, reading it aloud to another person allows you to see if your argument actually makes sense to someone else.”¹⁰

7. See, e.g., PETER ELBOW, *WRITING WITHOUT TEACHERS* (1998). The cross-pollination between Mercer Law School’s Legal Writing Program and my clinic (which advocates nearly entirely through written briefs) has been especially rich. While I have been able to adopt some other standard legal writing practices, a former colleague began a practice of using records and transcripts in our “real” clinic cases as the basis for appellate brief assignments.

8. Working with a partner with similar interests is beneficial in several phases of the writing process while allowing the writer to “maintain the confidence you need to succeed.” Melissa J. Marlow, *Scholarship Buddies*, 56 J. LEGAL EDUC. 56, 57-58 (2006).

9. Interview with Leslie Eanes (Apr. 2008).

10. Interview with David Bikoff (Nov. 2009).

Perhaps the most important benefit of reading aloud is that it fuels a continued, lively interest in the material. This is probably most apparent when the students take advantage of the opportunity to read aloud by doing so in a rather theatrical or lighthearted way.¹¹ Those of us who teach writing enjoy the process ourselves—even, perhaps, the finishing touches—but we are all susceptible to the effects of criticism and fatigue. Whatever techniques we can devise to keep ourselves and our students engaged—and even having fun—will ultimately pay dividends.¹²

Of course, much of clinical teaching is about establishing good habits, and the practice of reading aloud also has utility after graduation. I began reading aloud to myself while still an appellate public defender and carried the technique with me into teaching. A number of willing colleagues have always been available to review my written work before I submit it to a court or journal, but I usually have begun the editing process much earlier by listening to the sound of the words on the page. It has made a world of difference in the quality of my work and my engagement with it.

In short, though having an independent editor is always desirable, reading a paper or brief aloud—with a partner or alone—is valuable as well. It is a useful way to help keep a project new enough to notice typographical or stylistic errors while using one's own ears to follow the flow of sentences and paragraphs. The result, I have found, is almost always a higher quality product, and the process is not only relatively painless but often quite energizing and enjoyable.

11. Klinkenborg states, “our idea of reading is incomplete, impoverished, unless we are also taking the time to read aloud.” Klinkenborg, *supra* note 4.

12. Interacting with written materials “in a non-traditional format” such as reading aloud “requires a grappling with the materials that results in a deeper understanding of it.” Bryan Adamson et al., *Can the Professor Come Out and Play?—Scholarship, Teaching, and Theories of Play*, 58 J. LEGAL EDUC. 481, 498 (2008).