It seemed to me that the first person was absolutely necessary for that. Like a witness saying, "Look, I promise you this is true." I needed some agent to acknowledge the kind of psychological discomfort that anybody a lot less virtuous than this guy is bound to feel in the presence of someone like him, someone so passionate about a cause, someone so self-sacrificing and so gifted. I wanted this narrator to be able to say, in effect, to the reader, "Look I know this guy is beginning to make you feel uneasy, he's making me feel uneasy, too, at this point. And here's what I think about my uneasiness and its causes." And if I did it right, then it would take this "problem of goodness" away and allow the reader to see Farmer as I had finally come to see him and make him as palatable as he ultimately was to me. It was at a kind of late draft that I addressed this, which is when this whole process becomes for me a great deal of fun.

One of the biggest struggles for a young writer, or the biggest struggle for me, was not falling in love with the things that I had written. And I did begin to notice a pattern at some point: the things that I felt were best were the things that really had to be cut. Perhaps there was a psychological mechanism at work, where I was most protective of the things that I knew were most vulnerable or of the things that I had worked hardest on.

The problem is that the pattern's not always right. Sometimes you just found a really nifty way to do something. And there have been times when I have thrown those things away and had to rediscover them later. Sometimes they're good. That's the problem. You can't really be sure. But I think that at a certain point you do get over thinking that anything in a piece of your own writing is precious. It's important to.

III

THE DETAILS: MICRO-EDITING

I had a need to concentrate on each sound, so that every blade of grass would be as important as a flower.

Arvo Pärt

In 1959, before he talked about writing, novelist John O'Hara addressed an audience of New Jersey college students about reading: "I read slowly, because when I read . . . I am intently busy. It sometimes takes me half an hour to read a page, because I read first for the story, such as it may be, and then I go back over the page to see how the author got his effects, if he got them; or why he failed, if he did not get them."

For O'Hara, a discussion on writing best began with one on reading. The art of writing (and therefore editing), he knew, rests solidly on the art of reading. The micro-edit in particular thrives on a writer's ability to "read slowly."

But reading as slowly as O'Hara did in 1959 was easier then than now. The concept of being busy had not reached its apogee, as it has in the twenty-first century. To read slowly today is not

just unfashionable but nearly impossible. We are in a permanent hurry, and even a move to the sticks cannot protect us from the multiple occupations we administer as members of a global, web-connected community. The Internet helps us be more efficient. But it also compells us to do more things with more people, and have less time to read, let alone slowly. The micro-edit, more than the macro-, demands an unhurried pace. So, when you get to editing the fine details of your text, find it in your twenty-first-century lives to read at O'Hara's speed, circa 1959.

O'Hara also told the Jersey students to "proceed to write . . . , *watching every word along the way.*" Each word, not simply phrase, after all, means something. Every "it," "at," and "for"—and where it gets situated—is a choice. This may seem obvious, but word choice and placement carry even more weight than you might imagine. Take "Jane walked the dog." Or "Jane and the dog went for a walk." These two sentences mean very different things: in the first, Jane dominates; in the second, the dog is Jane's equal. The two sentences are also different in tone. In the first, the syntax is swift and casual. In the second, the sentence is made up of many small, evenly measured one-syllable bits (as opposed to "Jane and the dog went walking") and is, in its regularity, more formal. These sentences about Jane and her pup, on the surface so basic, are no simple textual matter.

You may ask, how do I cross this minefield of meaning? Fortunately, your voice has a sixth sense that will safely guide you much of the way. But voice easily falls in love with itself and, distracted, fails to notice the mines embedded in the page. Micro-editing protects you against your failed sixth sense.

The micro-edit is the once-over you give your text much more than once. You will likely encounter a greater number of errors

than in the macro-edit, but they are often simpler to solve than macro-problems.

Are you a natural macro- or micro-editor? Figure out if your strength is in the large picture or the details. Now take your strength and put it on a high shelf. Concentrate on the kind of editing that isn't easy for you, the kind you may even hate. I was not a natural macro-editor, and, in my youth, skirted the macro-issues of text whenever possible. Eventually, I forced myself to sit still long enough with a piece of writing for the macro-silhouette to reveal itself. I did this again and again until macro-editing, though still challenging, no longer frightened me. Natural-born macro-editors, who see the whole forest but not its parts, also need to sit and stare; they need to learn to read patiently and thoroughly, over and over again, until they see the bugs on the grass.

Fitzgerald was a natural micro-editor. He continually sought out the weak phrasings in his work and strengthened them. His micro-edits are a literary trove, from which we learn that the smallest errors can lead a writer to develop and deepen his material in unexpected ways. *The Great Gatsby*, in early drafts, displayed countless micro-mistakes: overemphasis, cliché, pedestrian language, generic and inauthentic dialogue. Fitzgerald edited his prose until virtually every phrase meant something essential and sounded fresh.

Since Max Perkins mainly addressed *The Great Gatsby*'s conceptual problems, his letters carry little evidence of Fitzgerald's microscopic edits. The evidence shows up, though, when we compare early manuscript drafts to the final one. Since *The Great Gatsby* does not offer before-and-after editing examples for every micro-element listed below, we will occasionally review examples from other authors.

MICRO-VIEW
1. Language
2. Repetition
3. Redundancy
4. Clarity
5. Authenticity: image, dialogue
6. Continuity: visuals, character
7. Show and tell
8. Beginnings, endings, transitions

LANGUAGE

Language reigns over every micro–narrative element. Repetitions, clarity, authenticity, demonstrative action—all involve the careful use of language, but language is something more than just the sum of these parts. Language is, in a word, voice. It determines that transcendent aspect of a writer's work, that unique style that for a painter emerges in the palette and stroke, and for a writer in the lexicon and syntax. Every choice we make, large and small, what we leave out and what we leave in a piece of writing, for instance, defines us, but our words and sentence design may be the most salient signs of our voice. Our true voice—that is, one unalloyed by mimicry or pretension—is what gives our writing its dignity.

Rooted in habit, however, language can be cumbersome to maneuver. Your individual linguistic style/voice has formed over the course of your life. For years we string particular words together in a particular order, until we end up mimicking ourselves. Our writing is at service to a script ingrained in us since our early youth. The seminal designer Kaj Franck used to tell his students, "Paint a pretty picture. Pick your own subject. But you can't use any of your favourite colours." One woman wondered

why she had to give up lemon yellow—she couldn't paint without it, she said. Franck's aim, an acolyte explained, was to "liberate students from acquired mannerisms or conventional aesthetics, anything that blocks original expression." With a similar motive, writers may need to edit out favorite riffs to force themselves to really *write*—not merely record the verbal mannerisms stored in the brain.

Our use of language is profoundly personal; still, there exist among us common mistakes. The following four tenets may help you avoid them.

Keep language fresh

Clichés can be rampant in early drafts. "All writing," according to Martin Amis, "is a campaign against cliché. Not just clichés of the pen but clichés of the mind and clichés of the heart. When I dispraise, I am usually quoting clichés. When I praise, I am usually quoting the opposed qualities of freshness, energy, and reverberation of voice."

Listen:

> It was no good anymore. It was no use pretending. We couldn't make it together. She and I had a breakdown in communication. We just couldn't go on. I wanted out. I was going nuts about my future. She could break loose and start over. No matter how much I wanted to live on the edge, I had to buckle down and come up with the goods for my boss. I've been broken up about it for months.

Any one of these sentences, let alone their aggregate, deserves "dispraise" because you've heard them before, perhaps twenty

thousand times. Reread your text for clichés. Ask yourself if your language is your own, or if you bought it from a verbal superstore.

One last, more positive note on clichés. Deadening clichés can be refreshed by an author's ingenuity. Take the scene at the Plaza Hotel, where Gatsby tells Tom, "'No, [Daisy and I] couldn't meet. But both of us loved each other all that time, old sport, and you didn't know. I used to laugh sometimes'—but there was no laughter in his eyes—'to think that you didn't know.'" The phrase "there was no laughter in his eyes" is a cliché, but Fitzgerald's odd placement of it—as an unlikely break in the dialogue—renews it. He restores an element of surprise to the words by putting them in a surprising place.

Keep language precise and concise

Avoid rhetoric that sounds lofty, says little, and obscures your meaning. Fitzgerald wrote, for example, "I was thirty. Beside that realization their importunities were dim and far away. Before me stretched the portentous menacing road of a new decade." The author edited out the second sentence; he must have seen that "realization" and "importunities" were blousy generalities that didn't add important meaning, and distracted the reader from the real point: Nick's fear of aging. Once that second sentence is gone, the paragraph is cleaner: "I was thirty. Before me stretched the portentous, menacing road of a new decade." We move fluidly through Fitzgerald's edited prose, undetained by filler.

Most detrimental to precision and concision are adverbs and adjectives. Terms like "really," "very," beautiful," "wonderfully," "truly," "amazing," "awful" rarely help your prose: "It was really fun; I'm very angry she came; she used to be a very beautiful person. It's truly amazing how she has changed. We were wonderfully

happy." Modifiers are often overused, vague, or superfluous, or all three. They mollify a sentence instead of strengthen it. As you edit, try removing adverbs and adjectives. Much of the time sentences will sound more vigorous without them. On occasion, you will find an adjective or adverb brings vital emphasis or meaning to a sentence. (Take the one I just wrote. In it, the adjective "vital" sharpened its meaning.) A modifier proves its worth when, in its absence, a sentence slackens. Then, of course, keep it.

The same rule of necessity goes for tiny words that clog sentences.

> She promised **that** she would stop me. } She promised she would stop me.
>
> This is a fine mess **that** you are in. } This is a fine mess you are in.
>
> **In spite of the fact that** I cook, I don't like to eat. } Though I cook, I don't like to eat.
>
> I pulled the plug **in order to** see if he'd yell. } I pulled the plug to see if he'd yell.
>
> **I would argue that** wordy sentences do not work. } Wordy sentences do not work.

In the last instance, notice how the writer inadvertently reveals his self-doubt. By using the phrase "I would argue that," he mitigates his idea and the reader senses the author's uncertainty. Commit to your ideas; be certain enough to write them without wordy precautions, announcements, or apologies. "I would argue that" is meaningless rhetoric, since you inherently argue your ideas by writing them down. The reader, by virtue of reading, wants those ideas, and not peripheral verbiage.

Many writing mishaps could be avoided if a writer thought harder about the notion of necessity—in other words, about language that is, or isn't, necessary. I think back to an exercise I did in theater school. The actors were told to create a dramatic scene and then act it out, but there was a catch: we were forbidden to use words. We did the scene in silence for a week. In the second week, we were asked to act out the same scene and add words. After having worked in silence for so long, we had learned to express ourselves with our body, our will, our intention. When, at last, we were free to use words, we hardly needed them. We chose to say only what we could not express in any other manner.

This exercise in verbal economy might well be applied to editing text. We might edit away much of our prose and see how our scene plays spare. With potential excesses removed, we can compare before and after versions to see which works better. Sometimes it's a toss-up. Both versions may sound good. That's when it's useful to recall the actors who did their scene in silence and ask: Is this word, phrase, paragraph *necessary*?

In an early draft of *Gatsby*, for instance, Fitzgerald wrote three unnecessary words into the sentence "His first instinct made him step hard on the accelerator." After editing, it read, "Instinct made him step on the accelerator." Pluck three simple words and you can expose the muscle of a sentence.

(Dialogue, however, comes to life from normal speech—superfluity, stutters, and all. To edit dialogue is to focus on authenticity before concision. The rule of necessity still applies, but it may be necessary, in order to be genuine, to include linguistic excess or errance.)

Whether minimalist or maximalist, it is essential to know when you are indulging a word or phrase you love for the sake of

it. Let go of your lemon yellow. "Let go," as Faulkner said, "of your darlings."

Keep language active and erect

Certain words have good posture, others slump. Present participles, or what I call the "ing" words, tend to slump.

> I was shaking my head, thinking about how stupid I'd been } I shook my head and thought about how stupid I'd been.
>
> He was drinking seltzer, shying away from the beer } He drank seltzer and shied away from the beer.
>
> You were singing in the rain, so I was listening } You were singing in the rain, so I listened.
>
> We were hiding your present as you were opening the door } We were hiding your present as you opened the door.
>
> They are arriving tonight } They arrive tonight.

The verb "to be" is a lazy verb that uses present participles to modify itself. The combination thickens sentences unnecessarily. In large doses, "to be" reveals an author's unwillingness or inability to energize his writing with livelier verbs, and "ing" words compound the problem. Of the two sentences, "We are dancing today at six" or "we dance today at six," which sounds stronger?

Of course there are times when the present participle is our only choice—because an action is drawn out or repeated in the present tense, or for rhythm. "You sang in the rain, so I listened" may be better with a present participle left in: "You were singing in the rain, so I listened." The perfect past tense, "sang," implies

an action that began and ended quickly, whereas the song probably went on for a while. I also prefer the asymmetrical sentence rhythm here of one "ing" left in. But sentences often do better with no present participle at all: "She kicked me as I slept." "They arrive tonight." With their "ing"s and "to be"s gone, verbs spring upright.

Another common "ing" construction creates a linguistic standstill: "He drank until dawn, becoming giddy with the girls." Or "They tore off the wrappers, their hunger distracting them from the sound of the key in the door." In the first clause, the action moves forward, only to get pulled back in the second by the present participle. In other words, the "ing" clause blunts the sentence's initial thrust by extending the action. Try, "He drank until dawn and became giddy with the girls." Or "As they tore off the wrappers, their hunger distracted them from the sound of the key in the door." Here, one action follows another, and the reader gets caught up in the momentum. The "standstill" construction can work. But it may be less elegant than others. Most troubling, many writers use it at every turn, and whatever finesse they had evaporates with the repetition of that one construct.

Although the present participle, especially as a modifier, can be useful, it is habit-forming. Editing is the only solution. Develop your editor's eye to see where your words slouch.

Keep language real

Avoid overwriting or pretention. Have you succumbed to a self-conscious choice of word or syntax? Does your work, or any part of it, feel artificial, effortful, irritating?

Like this: "We went zooming across the iridescent fields, navigating amongst the bellowing bonfires until the nature of fire and light had entered us and unbeknownst to our impertinent parents who had never appreciated the filial affection and respect we had bestowed upon their anachronistic Machiavellian selves, we bloomed and alighted upon a new era." If we let the air out, we might get something like this: "We zoomed across the fields and made our way between bonfires that made the earth into the sun; we absorbed the light, as our changeless parents slept unknowing, and aimed it at a new era." The second version still has a pulse and mystical feel, but also a discipline that the first lacked. The first is rife with clichés and phrases overly formal—unless spoken by someone in a past century ("we bloomed," "alighted upon," "unbeknownst," "amongst," "bestowed upon"), and vague (what exactly is "the nature of fire and light"? and how could it "enter us"?). The mixed imagery sounds sloppy too: "We went zooming" and "we bloomed." Are we a car or a flower? The sentence contains too many adjectives: iridescent, bellowing, impertinent, filial, anachronistic, Machiavellian. And the repetition of "ing"s at the start: "We went zooming . . . , navigating amongst" is cumbrous compared to "We zoomed . . . and made our way." I rewrote that overblown line with two goals: to keep its energy and distill its meaning. In the first sentence, the metaphor of light is incoherent. It was necessary to make a light that did not float around as a self-important, pretty idea, but had specific meaning. The revised light has become precise and consistent.

A writer's language largely forms a reader's experience. A sexy, shocking story told in uninspired prose will bore. Content is not worth much until a writer funnels it through a voice that has been clarified and deepened through editing.

REPETITION

Repetitions of words or expressions are only acceptable when the author designs them for a reason. While Fitzgerald purposely repeated "old sport" until it became a leitmotiv, his repetition of "self-controll" [*sic*] in the following passage was an accident. In an early draft of *Gatsby*, the confrontation scene read:

> "He isn't causing any row," whispered Daisy tensely, "You're causing a row. Please have a little **self-controll.**"
>
> "**Self-controll!**" repeated Tom incredulously, "**Self-controll.!**"
>
> "That's it," said Daisy brightly . . .
>
> . . . For a moment I thought she was going to get him away but unfortunately Gatsby who hadn't said a word looked up at Daisy suddenly with adoring eyes.
>
> "**Self-controll,**" repeated Tom sardonically, "I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from nowhere make love to your wife. . . . "

In the final version, the author scrapped two of his four "self-control"s (and also corrected his spelling):

> "He isn't causing a row." Daisy looked desperately from one to the other.
>
> "You're causing a row. Please have a little **self-control.**"
>
> "**Self-control!**" repeated Tom incredulously. "I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife."

Fitzgerald condensed the scene and more carefully measured his repetition, which made this passage more pointed and authoritative.

A less pronounced but still egregious repetition showed up when Gatsby confided his past to Nick: "The part of his life he told me about **began when** he was sixteen, **when** the popular songs of those days **began** to assume for him a melancholy and romantic beauty." This sentence may seem alright as it is, but I dare any reader to argue its elegance. Fitzgerald would delete it altogether.

If, when you are editing, you find your words have hardened into the wrong shape, and you cannot make them budge, try a rearranging game: see how many different ways you can say the same thing. You could try, "He told me about the part of his life that began when he was sixteen . . . " or "He told me when he was sixteen the popular songs of those days . . . " or "He told me about his life at sixteen, when the popular songs of those days . . . " or "The popular songs of those days, he told me, began to assume for him a melancholy and romantic beauty when he was sixteen." You may well nix them all, but the effort will have jiggled your brain, and very soon you will reinvent the passage to your satisfaction. Fitzgerald rewrote it like this: "It was this night that he told me the strange story of his youth with Dan Cody—told it to me because 'Jay Gatsby' had broken up like glass against Tom's hard malice, and the long secret extravaganza was played out."

Fitzgerald would not be satisfied to simply polish the given parts of his prose; he would raise the entire level of a sentence. The startling image of an exposed and shattered Gatsby, of a man made of glass breaking up against another man's hard stone, of the

failure of a "long secret extravaganza," added immeasurable power to a previously dull passage.

Simple repetition can, like cliché, work in a writer's favor. "There is no **confusion** like the **confusion** of a simple mind," says Nick, for example, in reference to Tom (chapter seven). Soon after, Nick repeats another significant word in close proximity to its first utterance: "I was **thirty**." And four sentences later: "**Thirty**—the promise of . . . " This is stylish, rhetorical repetition that creates emphasis, as well as a musical beat.

Words are not the only issue. Take care not to indiscriminately repeat a turn of phrase. Avoid, that is, overusing one particular sentence structure, such as, for example, a clause, then a colon, then a list. Single out the structure you unwittingly repeat, enter it in a notebook marked "patterns to break," and make it the only thing you look for on one or two read-throughs. Hunt down your habit, and train your mind to flinch at it.

REDUNDANCY

This is the repetition of an idea, as opposed to a word or phrasing. Good readers don't need to be told something again and again, if it is suggested or told clearly in the first place. Do not confuse redundancy with leitmotiv. While leitmotiv repeats a theme undercover, as it were, disguised as a word or image, redundancy brazenly repeats an idea on the surface of the text.

There are three types of redundant writers. One lacks inspiration, so writes something he has already written, only in different words. His redundancy is filler. The second type suffers from misguided generosity. This writer has found three fabulous ways to say something, and cannot deny any of them to the world. He uses all he's got instead of making a choice. Readers, though, can-

not absorb too many riches at once, when they all convey nearly the same meaning.

The third redundant writer suffers from distraction, brought on by fatigue or intense concentration. Distracted, the writer repeats himself in different words and never notices. Here, in an early draft of *Gatsby*, is one subtle example of what I would guess to be the last type:

> He might have despised himself, for he had certainly [taken] her under false pretenses. I don't mean **he had claimed to be young Gatsby son of a mythical millionaire,** old Gatsby, but he had deliberately given Daisy a sense of security about him; he let her believe that he was a person from much the same stratum as herself and that in case of any emergency he was able to take care of her. As a matter of fact he had no such facilities—**he had no comfortable family standing behind him** . . .

In the early draft, an idea is simply repeated, not grown: Gatsby is not the son of a rich man both at the start of the paragraph ("[not the] son of a mythical millionaire, old Gatsby"), and again at the end of it ("he had no comfortable family standing behind him"). That Gatsby is not heir to a fortune is given twice in different words. In the final version, Fitzgerald wrote:

> He might have despised himself, for he had certainly taken her under false pretenses. I don't mean that **he had traded on his phantom millions**, but he had deliberately given Daisy a sense of security; he let her believe that he was a person from much the same stratum as herself—that

> he was fully able to take care of her. As a matter of fact, he had no such facilities—**he had no comfortable family standing behind him . . .**

Here, Fitzgerald's description of Gatsby evolves with each sentence, from general to precise. First, we learn Gatsby is false: "he had . . . taken her under false pretenses"; then, we learn he is falsely rich: he has "phantom millions"; but then, in the next clause, the falsehood is made even more precise: it is not money in the simple sense, but the status and security it buys that Gatsby falsely traded on: "he let her believe that he was . . . from much the same stratum as herself" and could, under any circumstance, "take care of her." At this point, the passage culminates in a fresh, sharp point about money: "he had no comfortable family standing behind him." Gatsby has no *old* money, the loftiest kind. Instead of, as in the early draft, telling us this at the start of the paragraph only to repeat it at the end, the author steadily leads us up to it. By making us discover something after a series of incremental steps, he creates a far more compelling passage.

Just as calculated repetition can be stylish, so can calculated redundancy. A writer may wish to subvert the traditional authority of fiction or nonfiction by offering multiple versions of one idea. Think of Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, the film in which characters give their very different accounts of the same crime. Similarly, Bradford Morrow, in his short story "Lush," repeats one incident—a car accident—as it is viewed differently by three different characters: the woman who dies in the crash, the woman who doesn't, and the widowed man who was not at the scene. Morrow's redundancy exposes the impossibility of a writer telling something in a truly accurate light. Redundancy and repetition shape the open-

ing of Luc Sante's memoir *The Factory of Facts*, where the author repeats his family history nine times, with significant if small variations. Sante makes history redundant and therefore questionable. What *really* happened? Sante seems to ask. Which is the best way to tell it? Is the best way to tell it more important than what really happened?

Redundancy can be a useful subversive device. Your edit is the time to make sure you have chosen your crime, however, not simply discovered it by accident.

CLARITY

Muddled meaning is a plague among inexperienced writers, and well within reach of some veterans. Somerset Maugham wrote in *The Summing Up*: "[A cause] of obscurity is that the writer is himself not quite sure of his meaning. He has a vague impression of what he wants to say, but has not . . . exactly formulated it in his mind, and it is natural enough that he should not find a precise expression for a confused idea." If you cannot say clearly what you mean, you are not clear about your meaning. Clear thinking makes for clear writing.

A prep school headmaster once told me that for many teachers, writing student evaluations did not come easy. "For people who have trouble writing," he said, "the problem is ontological." If a person is not clear about himself, how can he be clear about his subject? The headmaster's reasoning was surely too pat, but he was on to something. What we are informs what we mean. If we are in a state of confusion, so will be what we write. Some teachers, for example, might want to please a parent, take down an irreverent child, come off more or less imperious or intellectual than usual. Confused motives easily lead to confused—unfocused

or convoluted—prose. To be clear, we must be natural. Anyone with a pen risks writing to an ideal instead of naturally. Before you can write clearly, then, you must be clear about who you are and what you are after in your work. Much of the time, we aren't clear about these things until we edit. Editing is the place where we sweep away the confusions we felt as we wrote. We force ourselves to narrow down our possibilities, to declare our mission, know clearly what we do and don't want to say and sound like.

A good way to become clear, after writing a dense, meandering draft of an essay, story, or chapter, is to ask yourself: What are the three main points I want to communicate? Just three, no more. Reread your draft with those points in mind, and you'll suddenly see the extraneous matter that needs cutting. (This method works best with nonfiction.) We often write two, three, or four times the ideas that our piece can effectively hold. Revel in the chance to edit out most ideas, until the essential ones can emerge and develop.

After you've settled on what's essential to keep, you need to check, when you edit, the order of things. I often find, for instance, that the first sentence to my paragraph is buried in the middle of it, and I need to move it to the top. By placing my summary thought at the start of a paragraph, I'm helping my reader follow, helping my point come up clear instead of being an afterthought. Leaving my paragraph written exactly as it came to me can sometimes work; but other times, it's confusing. I first wrote this paragraph, for example, for the upcoming section on continuity:

> Discontinuity shows up not just in details, but in voice. Daisy's authenticity, for example, broke down with the discontinuity of her voice in the exchange about the Dashiels. Continuity of voice and authenticity of character often overlap. Without the former it is impossible to have the latter.

I edited it into this:

> Continuity of voice and authenticity of character often overlap. The authenticity of Daisy's character broke down, for instance, with the discontinuity of her voice in the exchange about the Dashiels.

Once the clear idea surfaced, it wasn't hard to sweep away the excess around it.

Fitzgerald's first forays onto the page were sometimes ambiguous. It is worth parsing for one last time a passage we've already looked at from different angles. There is no better example of how to give muddled prose clarity than the scene where Nick and Jordan listen to Gatsby, Daisy, and Tom bicker in the Plaza Hotel. In an early draft, Nick says,

> I was thirty. Beside that realization their importunities were dim and far away. Before me stretched the portentous menacing road of a new decade.

A few paragraphs later, he rides home with Jordan in a taxi, and adds:

> I was thirty—a decade of loneliness opened up suddenly before me and what had hovered between us was said at last in the pressure of a hand.

Fitzgerald is trying to conjure Nick up, reveal his deepest concerns, but Nick remains hazy. His thoughts are opaque; a threat looms, but he does not say what it is. When he says "what had hovered between us was said at last in the pressure of a hand," he is suggesting there's something serious between him and Jordan, but what exactly is it? Whatever's hovering between them is held off at a distance. By removing the words "realization," "importunities," and "portentous," the writing is instantly more precise. And precision and clarity go hand in hand. Fitzgerald deleted the second sentence of the paragraph to focus on one main point: "Before me stretched the portentous menacing road of a new decade."

A few paragraphs later, Nick is in the taxi as before, but this time he picks up the dangling thread—the undefined threat—and sews it in:

> Thirty—**the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning brief case of enthusiasm, thinning hair.** But there was **Jordan** beside me, who, **unlike Daisy, was too wise ever to carry well-forgotten dreams from age to age.** As we passed over the dark bridge her wan face fell lazily against my coat's shoulder and **the formidable stroke of thirty died away with the reassuring pressure of her hand.**

Fitzgerald took a couple of wordy, imprecise sentences and transformed them into a crisp exposé of a single idea: the loss of youth. The danger of turning thirty is at last defined. The disillusionment that comes with age underscores the character descriptions, instead of being a coarse intellectual aside. And the final

sentence, a detached commentary on a detached relationship, becomes, through editing, a commitment to human tenderness, however flawed. By changing "a hand" to "her hand," Fitzgerald creates a truer intimacy and offers the poignant conclusion that human affection alone can compensate for the indignities of growing old.

Clarity, then, comes from the razing of superfluity, but also from the development of an idea. Knowing where to expand your text is as important as knowing where to shrink it.

A common obstacle to clarity is the fear of looking stupid. Many of my students complain their readers miss their point. These writers want to be understood, yet not too understood. They want to be subtle. But subtlety can lead us astray. As commonly preached in every beginner's writing class and worth repeating: do not assume the reader knows what you know. Also, don't forget process: to end up subtle you may first need to place your heart (or brain) on your sleeve, then selectively pull it off bit by bit, until only some tiny potent piece is left there. It is very hard to see the right tiny piece to leave until you see the whole thing spread out in front of you.

Writers who like to distinguish between "high" and "low" art, and put themselves safely on the mount, are most likely to suffer from being overly subtle. These writers believe "high" means to be restrained or coy and "low" means saying it plain and straight. But concepts of high and low only corner a writer. Restraint is elegant and noble, but plain and straight can be too. One of America's most erudite, poetic essayists, Eliot Weinberger, for instance, wrote an essay of over ten thousand words where nearly every short paragraph begins with the words "I heard," after which the writer baldly states the facts:

I heard the vice president say: "By any standard of even the most dazzling charges in military history, the Germans in the Ardennes in the spring of 1940 or Patton's romp in July of 1944, the present race to Baghdad is unprecedented in its speed and daring and in the lightness of casualties."

I heard Colonel David Hackworth say: "Hey diddle diddle, it's straight up the middle!"

I heard the Pentagon spokesman say that 95 percent of the Iraqi casualties were "military-age males."

I heard an official from the Red Crescent say: "On one stretch of highway alone, there were more than fifty civilian cars, each with four or five people incinerated inside, that sat in the sun for ten or fifteen days before they were buried nearby by volunteers. That is what there will be for their relatives to come and find. War is bad, but its remnants are worse."

The power of Weinberger's "What I Heard About Iraq" lies in the carefully structured accumulation of countless hideous and often shocking revelations. Weinberger refuses lyricism and coyness—typically associated with sophisticated writing—to impress you instead with what's true. In twenty-first-century America, where the obvious truth goes ignored, stating it simply and unequivocally is not so obvious. It is the essay's concept, structure, and rhythm that are subtle, not its language—largely ungilded reportage. Weinberger's radical simplicity instructs us to toss out our preset ideas of what it means to be and write smart. His tactics result in clarity at its most elegant. (The essay also provides a fine example of stylish repetition.)

The fear of looking stupid leads to another form of muddle:

the sentence-stuffed-like-a-turkey syndrome. Many writers stuff five ideas into one sentence because they think the more the smarter. One simple idea, they believe, will sound inadequate, and worse, banal. But when you put too many ideas into one sentence, each loses its distinction. A battle for attention ensues, where each idea kills off the other and none win. Do not be afraid of being spare. Did Beckett write many long, compacted sentences? Try this one about Jordan in *The Great Gatsby*: "She was incurably dishonest." Four words in one clause; no commas, colons, semicolons, or dashes. A sentence so curt, yet it conveys everything we ever need to know about Jordan. Also, the two words "incurably dishonest" call out the very theme of the book: the incurable dishonesty of American life, the sham of America's capitalistic dream that destroys any honest love and lover in its path. Fitzgerald's sentence is simple but hardly bland. If you've written a bird's nest, then, untangle your ideas. Separate them into a few sentences. One small sentence, written well, can tell more than an expansive one that's gangly.

If long, convoluted sentences are your natural bent, though, I am not here to sway you in a different direction. I'm here to remind maximalists to think about being clear as well as complex. When you edit, check to see that you're using the long, curvaceous sentence to say something, not as a catchall for the numerous ideas you've been unable to tease out and trim. In works by writers such as Dave Hickey, Virginia Woolf, and Henry James, convoluted phrasing, in essays or fiction, succeed at conveying meaning as clear as glass. In *The Spoils of Poynton*, James writes, "Knowing the church to be near, she prepared in her room for the little rural walk, and on her way down again, passing through corridors and observing imbecilities of decoration, the aesthetic mis-

ery of the big commodious house, she felt a return of the tide of last night's irritation, a renewal of everything she could secretly suffer from ugliness and stupidity." This sentence is the alter ego to Fitzgerald's four-word wonder. Both work. Although James writes long, he grows each idea from the one that precedes it. The reader does not feel assaulted by the quantity of ideas, but drawn into the logical, linear sweep of them. Complication in and of itself does not preclude clarity. But baroque prose demands tremendous rigor from the writer. If you stuff a sentence, you must know how to do so with complementary ingredients—ideas that do not compete but play off one another. Above all, as you edit, concentrate on determining when enough is enough.

Neville Wakefield likes to go overboard in his writing, then use editing to tuck in the flaps of his piece. His sentence about Daido Moriyama's New York City photographs is a perfect example:

> Their record is less the monuments that loom all around, than the transient ephemeral social architecture that fills the spaces in between—the pungent odors that hold the back seat of the cab after its occupant is long gone: the rodent citadels of garbage that pour onto the unclaimed sidewalk; the product-filled vitrines whose advertisements to consume stand between over lit bodega interiors and the flow of opportunism and dereliction on the other side.

As Wakefield's editor, my challenge was to respect his lyrical complexity even as I helped him comb out and clarify his meanings; then, sometimes, give those meanings a shave. I would not turn his long sentences into another writer's short ones—this was

Neville's piece, not someone else's and least of all mine. Here is how Neville's piece ended up, not much different from the original, just more transparent:

> They record less the monuments that loom all around than the intermittent social architecture that fills the spaces in between—the pungent odors that hold the back seat of the cab after its occupant is long gone; the rodent citadels of garbage that pour onto the unclaimed sidewalk; the product-filled vitrines of overlit bodegas that advertise to the street as they conceal the store within.

Remember to punctuate your languor with rest spots—the reader needs to breathe. You can rhythmically hold on to him by controlling the musical measure of your prose. As you edit, watch out for long-winded areas, where you lose track of and even interest in the content of what may be beautifully turned sentences. You may want to mete out short sentences amid the long, like sorbet served between the courses of a rich meal.

As editors, we must take care not to dumb down a text as we refine it. Mystery and poetic ambiguities enrich a work. Authority is key. Even avant-gardists who wish to debunk narrative authority must fuel their own writing with it.

When you edit, determine what is mystery and what is muddle; the first to be respected and left alone, the second to be respected and cleaned up. Any kind of sentence may work: long or short, loopdelooped or gimleted, so long as it reflects the author's clarity of mind—a clarity that often comes as you edit, and not before.

AUTHENTICITY: IMAGE, DIALOGUE

Writing that is authentic is credible, and without credibility your reader will abandon you in a blink. The imagery and dialogue of your piece, fictional or not, must be true, for instance, to the time period, social atmosphere, and economic class of your characters.

Most of all, the people in your writing need to feel authentic. John O'Hara said, "The basic, indispensable attribute of a novelist is the understanding of character and the ability to create characters." The same could be said of the short story writer, memoirist, and biographer. Unless you are writing for artificial effect, use imagery details and dialogue to help make your characters lifelike.

"Tell me what you eat," eighteenth-century philosopher-cum-gastronomist Brillat-Savarin said, "and I will tell you who you are." More commonly put, we are what we eat. In writing, we are what we eat, drink, wear; where we sleep, sit, dine, etc. Details give your work texture, depth, and credibility. When you edit, ask yourself: Would this character really drive an SUV? Eat crème fraîche? Sit in an Eames chair, wear pearls, use a fancy pen, sleep on a futon, drink cheap Scotch?

Authentic details can perform nice feats of indirection. Say you write an account of the days you spent living with a group of anti-American revolutionaries in Pakistan. You recall that at a meeting cigarettes were passed around. Were they local bidis or an expensive American brand? American cigarettes in the hands of anti-American fanatics present a fascinating contradiction. Did the leader wear a Rolex? The details indirectly make the point, and the reader has more fun interpreting them than being told what to think. The reader's thoughts will run deeper if he assem-

bles them for himself. Finally, it is better to let details speak, than to judge or explain your characters with your intellect. You can do no better than to authentically present them.

O'Hara, still lecturing to those college students, described an intriguing short story he once wrote

> in which no human being appeared. I described in detail, in significant detail, the contents of a hotel room. . . . When you finish reading the story you know that the man who had been occupying the room had been on the town the night before, that he had quarreled with his girl, and that he had committed suicide by jumping out the window.

Detail is so potent that one could tell a story with nothing but. When you edit, remove the random details. Significant details are the ones that describe more than what is visual. There is Gatsby's hair, for example, which looks like it's clipped every day. Choose the detail that has an echo behind it.

"Detail has to be handled with care," says O'Hara. "For instance when you are describing a man's clothes you must get everything right, especially the wrong thing." He offered this example: A man in the 1940s wears a well-cut, nicely fitting, double-breasted suit; a quiet, striped shirt from a London shirtmaker; and a small-figured necktie. But instead of the customary gold safety pin in his collar, he wears a miniature hunting horn. The hunting horn pin signifies wealth of the sort who likes to fox hunt. But a true gentleman would only wear his horn in the field during a hunt; by wearing it with his expensive suit to town, he flaunts his hunter status. The man doesn't know the unspoken rules of aristocracy. The pin has tipped us off that he is a phony.

Encoded, or as O'Hara calls them, "significant," details abound in *Gatsby*. The pearls Tom buys at the end indicate his continuous infidelity. Daisy already had pearls, we saw her wear them earlier in the book; this new strand must be for someone else. More symbolically, the cuff links of human teeth worn by Gatsby's gangster boss indicate all we ever need to know about the wearer's moral code.

Details may be many or few, but best not to shovel them in wholesale. Your obligation as an editor, for yourself or for another, is to carefully select details that both mean the most and are the most authentic.

Dialogue, like detail, offers the chance to build or destroy a character's credibility. For some writers, authentic dialogue poses the hardest challenge of writing. Yet, it cannot be overlooked, for "nothing," says O'Hara, "could so quickly cast doubt on, and even destroy, an author's characters as bad dialogue. If the people did not talk right, they were not real people. The closer to real talk, the closer to real people."

When you reread your text, ask yourself: Do people really say that? Or have you written dialogue you've seen in cartoons or books, heard in movies? Listen to the people around you; as you edit, try to match the authenticity of what you've heard with what you write. Listen harder to your own characters—as they respond to a given situation, let them talk before you put words in their mouth.

Fitzgerald, in an early draft, wrote dialogue as authentic as a trout that suddenly lays salmon eggs. At the Plaza Hotel, Daisy and Gatsby argue:

"That's it," said Daisy brightly,

"What's more if we're going to the Dashboards tonight we ought to be starting home."

"What Dashboards?"

"I don't know. They're your friends. You ought to—"

"You mean the Dashiels. Austin Dashiel."

"Well, whoever they are. You made the engagement and if you want to keep it we'd be—"

This is stilted, flat filler, but more importantly, inauthentic to Daisy's character. Daisy is flaky and weak, but never stupid. Throughout the novel, she makes witty remarks that counter the dumb-blonde cliché that would easily have defined her in a less able author's hands. It is her surprising wit that makes Daisy so compelling: she is a will-o'-the-wisp with a swift left hook. Listen to her elsewhere in the book: "Open the whiskey, Tom, and I'll make you a mint julep. Then you won't seem so stupid to yourself." Or,

Daisy: "Open another window."

Jordan: "There aren't anymore."

Daisy: "Well, we'd better telephone for an axe."

Or Daisy cries out from Gatsby's car to Tom's,

"Where are we going?"

Tom's group: "How about the movies?"

Daisy: "It's so hot. You go. We'll ride around and meet you after. . . . We'll meet you on some corner. I'll be the man smoking two cigarettes."

The Dashboard joke is beneath the "real" Daisy, who may be silly but not flat-footed. The whole exchange about the Dashiels was incidental in a book where everything means something, and sure enough, Fitzgerald deleted it.

O'Hara denigrates the use of taped conversations as a method to improve one's dialogue because dialogue must do more than record exactly what someone said. It must be massaged into an element that, as he puts it, "creat[es] and maintain[s] character, [advances] a story, and [gives] life to a scene." Sometimes it behooves a writer to write exactly what he hears. Usually, though, he's better off embellishing or cutting back on it, shaping it to suit a scene. In O'Hara's own *Appointment in Samarra*, two young boys are running from the police and one says to the other, "Well, if you go home—they know who you are at the store—so if you go home they'll have the cop, Leffler, he'll wait there for you." The boy's panic is beautifully embodied by his interrupted and incomplete sentences. People, panicked or not, usually speak the way they think, which is often disjointedly. They also punctuate their spoken sentences with "um," "okay," "you know," "basically," "like," "mmm," and "uh." To transcribe these utterances verbatim to the page would waylay the reader. O'Hara knew better than to replicate every "y'know." Some of the worst dialogue attempts authenticity by using "um" and "uh" to signal that a character is speaking naturally. Instead, the reader is alerted that the writer is trying too hard.

The choices we make with dialogue are about rhythm, subject matter, character development, and humor, not just credibility. "L'exactitude," said painter Henri Matisse, "n'est pas la vérité." Truth is not exactitude. We need to edit a character's speech so that it walks the very thin line between artifice and documentary.

CONTINUITY: VISUALS, CHARACTER

Writing demands so very much of us at all times that some one aspect of the process is sure to short-circuit at any given moment. The least profound, but nevertheless annoying, blowouts have to do with continuity.

Continuity is best understood by discussing its opposite. Discontinuity shows up when a black dog on page 4 is brown on page 200. Or a woman tells her husband on page 10 she's going to the doctor on Tuesday afternoon, but on page 120 she refers to Tuesday afternoon's bridge game. It is hard to recall every tiny thing you put down, and keep it right a hundred pages later. In the movie business, a continuity professional will make sure an actress is wearing the same red dress throughout one scene, even if the scene is shot over the course of seven days. But if you are writing on your own, without a publishing contract, you have to be your own continuity professional. If you have a publisher, you could leave it to the copy editor to find your slipups, but this is risky. Some copy editors work with remarkable finesse, some are sloppy. You cannot control which kind you get.

Continuity of voice and authenticity of character often overlap. Let's go back to Daisy. The authenticity of her character broke down with the discontinuity of her voice in the exchange about the Dashiels. In another example of discontinuity, Nick, in an early draft, described Tom's state of mind while they drove to Manhattan:

> In spite of all the things he had concealed Tom was not a secretive man and he felt alone in his unfamiliar silence. He looked at us several times as if he wanted us to talk, to comment—seeking not so much an idea as an arrange-

> ment of words that he could hang on to until his existence could right itself into action.

This fine meditation beautifully describes Tom's subtle inner workings. It is authentic in substance, as it portrays a very believable side of Tom. The problem is in its narrative discontinuity. All of a sudden Nick talks of Tom with the same introspection he uses to talk about himself and Gatsby. But while Nick and Gatsby are the complex conscience of the book, Tom is its physicality: we know him from his gruff speech and big, manly body. Nick has never before considered aloud what makes Tom tick, and he won't again; instead, he places Tom before us as a specimen too automated to analyze. He continually incarnates one thing in the novel—thoughtless machismo. By shading his actions with a peek into his emotional world, Fitzgerald diffuses the power of Tom as a symbol. Despite his symbolic nature, Tom is a credible, living character through action and dialogue, so there was no need to toss in an ill-fitting rumination too. Perhaps realizing this, Fitzgerald deleted the passage.

Continuity, like so much else, is best viewed and repaired when you edit. Lay out the whole manuscript (on a clothesline, wall, or floor) and see how both small details and narrative movements travel like pipelines through the geography of your work. Find the breaks, and if you're editing someone else, point them out; if you're editing yourself, fix them.

SHOW AND TELL

If the theme or plot of your work reveals itself gradually and fully through the action and characters, readers will feel the satisfaction of discovery and new understanding. They will say a silent

"ah" at the end, as all the written bits coalesce into a coherent whole. If, however, you dictate your theme or plot through a written PA system, readers will rightfully feel shortchanged. They will hear but not experience whatever point you're making; just as when I was growing up my mother knew that if she told me the meaning of a word, it would go in one ear and, before I experienced it with my own imagination, out the other; whereas if I looked it up myself, I'd interpret and absorb the meaning.

Be careful, then, not to tell your ideas or intentions too much or frequently. Fitzgerald, for instance, showed, didn't tell, what a gruff, macho ditz Tom was:

> I went up to New York on the train one afternoon, and when we stopped by the ashheaps he jumped to his feet and, taking my elbow, literally forced me from the car. "We're getting off," he insisted. "I want you to meet my girl." . . . his determination to have my company bordered on violence. "Hello, Wilson, old man," said Tom, slapping him jovially on the shoulder.

The jump, the taking of Nick's elbow and forcing him from the car, the command instead of an invitation ("We're getting off," not "Would you like to get off with me?"), the jovial slap on the shoulder: these histrionics reveal Tom's character better than any explication.

See if you've told too much or too little, and revise until you find the proper balance. In *Gatsby*, Nick regularly pauses to sum up what is happening and who is at stake. At the start of the book, for instance, he tells us straight out that Daisy's a tricky, insincere snob:

> I felt the basic insincerity of what she had said. It made me uneasy, as though the whole evening had been a trick of some sort to exact a contributory emotion from me. I waited, and sure enough, in a moment she looked at me with an absolute smirk on her lovely face, as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged.

Likewise, Nick's thoughts on Gatsby's fate, part of the novel's coda, tell don't show: "He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him." Fitzgerald's use of symbolism makes Nick's explanation far from expository. Gatsby had pursued the green light of money to arrive at a blue lawn of death (death is blue elsewhere in the book: "ghostly birds began to sing among the blue leaves"; "the blue smoke of brittle leaves"). The colors are suggestive, but still mysterious and open to interpretation, especially when read for the first time. Fitzgerald calibrated Nick's ruminations to clarify and emphasize, not spell out the book's meaning.

The point is not to do away with telling, but to edit your explanatory passages until they are well proportioned and well timed. In galleys, for instance, Fitzgerald moved Nick's historical rumination—an aside on the history of Long Island and, in effect, the United States—from chapter one to the book's last page. This straightforward history lesson worked, but had been offered prematurely, letting the thematic cat out of the bag too soon; the reader would have had little to figure out save the plot after that. Structure is a critical ally when you are telling instead of showing: in other words, when to tell is as important as what to tell. When

you edit, take note where your reading slows down. Then decide if that section is weak because you are explaining instead of enacting an idea.

BEGINNINGS, ENDINGS, TRANSITIONS

The most important sentence in your work may be the first. With it, you carry the reader out in a verbal undertow—or not. "In my younger and more vulnerable years," begins *The Great Gatsby*, "my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since." This first sentence prompts us to wonder about a lot: "More vulnerable" than what? Is the narrator invulnerable now, hardened even? What happened to make him so? And what advice would be trenchant enough to turn over in a son's mind for years? A fine beginning often poses a question, or many; but even if it doesn't, it presses the reader—perhaps with the lightest touch—farther into the story. It does this with wit, verbal texture, a syntactic sashay, a vivid setting, an ominous mood, a surprising image, a deeply rooted voice, an offhandedness that says you've entered the middle of a story that began long before you came; or some or all of the above.

What a fine beginning never does is succumb to verbal litter. The simplest and cleanest, such as "I received the following letter," which launches Chekhov's story "The Wife," depend on their clarity and command of voice. Chekhov's beginning also puts us in the middle even at the start. The phrase's immediacy cuts us clean off from our nonreading life and sets us instantaneously in the center of the story, as if we'd been on our way there even before opening the book.

Try this very different launch: "Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mir-

ror and a razor lay crossed." The sentence—the first in James Joyce's *Ulysses*—shimmies and glints. It feels jolly, holy, and a bit unnerving all at once: the words "plump," "Buck," "Mulligan," and "lather" roll in the mouth; even while the mirror and razor "crossed" form a crucifix; and the razor (dangerous in its own right) and glass set atop a filled bowl carried by someone about to walk down a flight of stairs suggests an accident waiting to happen. This is a first sentence that isn't content to only pose questions and foreshadow themes; it wants to be a painting and a fragment of music as well.

The best pulp-fiction writers hone beginnings and endings to their sharpest edge. Surprise and wit, among other things, are in their arsenal. Here are some examples of gripping first sentences: "I am going to kill a man" (Nicholas Blake, *The Beast Must Die*); "They threw me off the hay truck about noon" (James Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*); "I first heard Personville called Poisonville by a red-haired mucker named Hickey Dewey in the Big Ship in Butte" (Dashiell Hammett, *Red Harvest*); "Well, sir, I should have been sitting pretty, just about as pretty as a man could sit" (Jim Thompson, *Pop. 1280*); "Anna Halsey was about two hundred and forty pounds of middle-aged putty-faced woman in a black tailor-made suit" (Raymond Chandler, *Trouble Is My Business*). And though he was not a bona fide pulp writer, it would be a shame to leave out Flann O'Brien's first sentence in *The Third Policeman*: "Not everybody knew how I killed old Phillip Mathers, smashing his jaw in with my spade; but first it is better to speak of my friendship with John Divney because it was he who first knocked old Mathers down by giving him a great blow in the neck with a special bicycle pump which he manufactured himself out of a

hollow iron bar." These books all begin with pluck, if nothing else. And though we should not all start off our stories like murder mysteries, we might learn from these genre masters to care more about our first words.

Many writers do not find the first sentence to their book until they edit, because only then, on reading their draft, do they discover that the beginning is hiding on page 3 or 4. They had warmed up for the first few pages, and unwittingly placed the ignition farther in. Recently, I told a student that I thought the beginning of her book was a certain sentence on page 3 and that the first two pages could be largely omitted. She said, "That's the exact sentence that another teacher told me to start with." I took this as affirmation that beginnings are not arbitrary and a good one chimes out even when it's in the wrong place.

We need to think harder about not just the first words of a book or story, but of a chapter, section, or even paragraph that we are writing. Beginnings occur all through our work, again and again. To edit is, in part, to check if each beginning is sound, or if you've allowed in throwaways.

The counterpoint to a great beginning is, of course, a great end. But I am less interested here in the last line of a story or essay, which obviously needs to have flair, than in neglected endings: the last line of a paragraph or chapter. Chandler, for instance, knew how to end his paragraph as wryly as he'd begun it; the one above that catapults fat Anna Halsey into our consciousness ends with: "She said, 'I need a man.' "

Fitzgerald, too, was a master of the squared-off paragraph. He began and ended many with a startling mix of style, philosophy, and itch—the itch that can only be scratched by moving to the next paragraph, but we'll get to transitions in a moment. On page

1 of *Gatsby*, paragraph four begins with the narrator's confession: "And, after boasting this way of my tolerance, I come to the admission that it has a limit." It finishes like this:

> No—Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and shortwinded elations of men.

Fitzgerald ushers us in and out.

Between all starts and stops are, or should be, transitions; these are the links from one focal point to another in a piece of prose. They can be overt or subtle. An overt transition, for instance, may use the same word in the last line of the preceding paragraph in the first line of the next. Here is a sample of a fine start, finish, and overt transition in the essay "On Morality" by Joan Didion:

> First sentence: "As it happens I am in Death Valley, in a room at the Enterprise Motel and Trailer Park, and it is July, and it is hot."
>
> Last sentence: "With the help of the ice cubes I have been trying to think because The American Scholar asked me to, in some abstract way about 'morality,' a word I distrust more every day, but my mind veers inflexibly toward the particular."
>
> Transitional sentence that begins the next paragraph: "Here are some particulars."

The word "particulars" is an obvious bridge between the first and second paragraphs; between, in other words, her motel-room

heat and the story she is about to tell which has nothing to do with that room or heat.

Fitzgerald improved an unsuccessful transition in the scene where everyone drives into Manhattan, Nick, Jordan, and Tom in one car, Daisy and Gatsby in another. Tom is afraid that Daisy and Gatsby will turn off and disappear. In an early draft, Fitzgerald wrote:

> . . . I think he expected them to dart down a side street any minute and out of his life forever.
>
> At the polo grounds we got out and waited—after a blank moment the coupe appeared with insolent leisure around a corner.

In the published book, the same scene reads:

> I think he was afraid they would dart down a side street and out of his life forever.
>
> But they didn't. And we all took the less explicable step of engaging the parlor of a suite in the Plaza Hotel.

The first shift, from "forever" to the polo grounds, is abrupt, the second suave. Not all transitions need to be so direct, but the Didion and Fitzgerald examples demonstrate the beauty and function of a well-considered one.

A verbal transition can be as subtle as the continuation of one idea, without any particular note hitting hard as you move from one prose unit to the next. Subtle is good, obtuse is not. Your reader should not tilt his head, squint, and say "Huh?" because the relationship of one unit to the next is unclear or absent. If a

break between sections is needed, but no verbal transition—subtle or overt—makes sense, use a design ornament or a space break to move you through. At the end of the next paragraph you read, for example, you will find a gateway from one style of writing to another: from practical methodology to a summation of purpose.

In short, when you edit, add authority and sway to your beginnings; see if your chapters and paragraphs end with finality; and relate one paragraph to the next.

To break a text into nameable parts is a ruse—but one that allows us to approach our work in a more organized manner than while we write, which is usually in a state of hypersensitive distraction. Editing gives the writer a chance that writing never will: to see what he is doing. Most of us begin a text, maneuver it, pause. Sooner or later, we reread, realize we are not finished, and then rework it until, again, we pause. Sooner or later, we edit again, again pause; again edit, again pause; and one day we realize that we are not finished, and never will be, but we are willing, if not ready, to stop editing.

It can feel impossible to stop, a feeling that prompted poet Paul Valéry to remark, "a poem is never finished, only abandoned." The danger of ruining a good thing by overediting, then, is ever present. When I go back into my text one too many times, a voice starts to rise in my head, a haunting litany that says, "Don't fix it if it ain't broken." Tolstoy, ruefully admitting to overzealous editing, said, "I strike out what is vivid and replace it by something dull." So after you have been editing your text for a while, leave it alone for a day or a week. When you return, decide

if you're done or need to clip just one more word, move just one more section. The problem is that editing is rarely an experience of "just one more" anything.

The only solution is to try hard to hear the editorial wind when it shifts to worsening, not improving, your work. Then stop, undo the last edit, and applaud yourself for having brought your writing to a state of laudable imperfection. "What an editor must fear most," said Max Perkins, "is that he will influence the author too much." When you edit yourself, the same danger exists; the writer in you may be intimidated by the editor in you. If you have the slightest suspicion that you are overediting, you, writer, need to stand up against you, editor.

Self-editing can feel like a war between you and you. I hope these macro and micro chapters will help you end the war, and get on with the work. The macro- and micro-editing lists will not make editing less exhausting, but may make it more efficient and less demoralizing.

Micro-Edit Diagnostic Checklist

1. **Language:** Language determines that transcendent aspect of a writer's work: her unique style, her voice. Edit out favorite familiar riffs: Kill your shtick.

   a. *Keep language fresh.* Ask: Is this language my own or borrowed? Am I writing new words to fit this moment and this story?

   b. *Keep language precise and concise.* Ask: Is this word or phrase necessary?

      i. Avoid rhetoric that sounds lofty and says little.

      ii. Eliminate verbal filler.

      iii. Avoid adverbs and adjectives. As you edit, ask yourself how this or that sentence reads without them.

      iv. Eliminate tiny words that bog down sentences unless you are using them for a specific purpose (in dialogue, or to achieve a certain rhythm).

   c. *Keep language active.* Make your sentences active and upright. Ask: Have I overused the present participle ("ing" words), especially to modify the verb "to be"? Have I slowed down my prose by using the "standstill" construction, and created monotony by repeating it too many times?

   d. *Keep language real.* Avoid pretentious overwriting. Lyricism can be real, highfalutin rhetoric cannot.

2. **Repetition:** Have you repeated words and expressions? Repetition is only acceptable if there is a reason for it—such as creating a rhythmic pattern, emphasis, or leitmotiv.

3. **Redundancy:** Have you rehashed an idea? If so, keep the more affective expression of it.

4. **Clarity:** Is an idea muddy? A paragraph vague? Have you put three ideas into one sentence, where they are competing with each other and none are clear? Tease them out, and keep them separate in new, simpler sentences. Or structure one complex sentence more carefully.

5. **Authenticity (Image, Dialogue):** When you edit, make your images ring true. Ask yourself: Does each object mentioned make sense? Make sure your dialogue rings true to your characters and the world you've created. Ask yourself: Do people really say that?

6. **Continuity (Visuals, Character):** Make sure every aspect of a character is convincing. The tiniest alterations count. Also, keep the visual details straight: A cherry table on page 2 cannot be maple on page 7. In the movie industry, people are hired just to keep visual continuity. Hire yourself to do the same for your text.

7. **Show and Tell:** If you have a traditional plot, did you summarize it, fearful that your reader may not have "gotten it"? Cut out summary. Show what's happening along the way so there is no need for explanation at the end. The point should reveal itself in the action and dialogue.

8. **Beginnings, Endings, Transitions:** All three frequently need to be finessed when we edit. See if the beginning and ending of your sentences, paragraphs, and sections, and of course book, have grace, tension, and purpose.

   As you read, ask yourself if in places you feel abandoned by the author. This may mean that you didn't achieve a smooth or sensible transition; and instead have created a lapse that jolts a reader outside the story.