

Transcript to Class 3:

Language, Flow, and Other Self-Editing Basics

By Inspired Living Publishing Editor Bryna René

For your convenience, the following is the transcript to accompany Inspired Living Publishing's "Language, Flow, and Other Self-Editing Basics" audio class hosted by Editor Bryna René.

About Editor Bryna René

Bryna René is an experienced editor, published author, yoga instructor, musician, photographer, and "general creative" with a passion for helping others live in greater awareness and joy. Her editing portfolio includes numerous successful non-fiction titles, including all of Inspired Living Publishing Best-selling print anthologies, *Inspiration for a Woman's Soul: Choosing Happiness, A Juicy, Joyful Life, and Embracing Your Authentic Self*. To learn more about Bryna and her current projects, please visit www.brynarene.com and www.wordsbyaphrodite.com.

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Hello and welcome. My name is Bryna René and I'm the Editor for all of the best-selling *Inspired Living Publishing* anthologies.

Today's class, the third in our series, is entitled "**Language, Flow, and Other Self-Editing Basics.**" In this class, we'll talk about what to look for in your self-editing process and how you can hone your story so that it says more, and not less, about you and what you want to express.

In my experience, one of the biggest hurdles that new writers face is the tendency to equate their speaking voice with their writing voice. It's vital to understand that speaking voice and writing voice are very different, because the method of communication is so different.

When we hold a conversation, we tend to jump back and forth between subjects and time periods. We shift our verb tenses, mix up singular and plural, and generally tend to use many more words than necessary to convey the idea we are trying to get across. This verbosity is perfect for creating an engaging conversation. However, it doesn't work quite so well on paper.

When we write, we want to say exactly what we mean, the first time we say it. We don't want to spend an entire paragraph clarifying an idea, as we would in a conversation. Instead, we want to try to convey our message in as few words as possible so that the reader can absorb our message in a succinct way, and then move on.

Great writing leaves very little room for interpretation. Choose your words carefully to capture your intention to the fullest. Precise word choice is a luxury that we may or may not enjoy in normal conversation. Most of us (myself included), when speaking in a conversational and informal way, tend to draw from a superficial well of words. We choose the words on the tips of our tongues, the words that we use and encounter every day. We don't necessarily dig deeply for our word choices when we are speaking, because we have unlimited extra words to clarify our meaning for the listener, if he or she has questions.

When we are writing, we have a fantastic opportunity to really hone our language. Your writing voice, by its very nature, is different than your speaking voice. This doesn't mean that it is any less representative of you. This is a point of confusion for many new writers, who think that the pattern of their words on paper should be the same as that of their spoken words.

We all have very unique speech patterns which are going to translate into our writing. This happens naturally. Going back and honing your words, choosing more accurate words, making more concise statements; those are not a sacrifice of your voice. It's really important to be clear on that.

No matter what, if you are choosing the words for your story, they are going to be representative of you because you chose them. Just because they are not the first words that come to your mind it doesn't mean that they're not yours. So when you are going through your first round of self-edits after you have completed your first draft, look for those places where

what you're saying in three sentences could be said in one. Look for words that you use repetitively—the words that are always on the surface of your mind—and replace them with words that more accurately represent what you are trying to convey.

A thesaurus is a really wonderful for this process, especially when you are looking for descriptive words. We'll talk about description in more detail later in this class.

If you tend to be vague in your conversation (for whatever reason), the writing process is a great tool for you to explore precision in your communication, really honing in on what you feel and what you want to say, and choosing words that get to the heart of the matter without any guesswork on the part of the reader. Commit to what you're putting on paper. Being wishy-washy in what you write doesn't help you, or your reader.

Let's move on, and talk about tense and voice. As we probably all learned in grade school, there are three primary tenses in which we can write. We can write in the past tense, looking back upon the past from the perspective of the here and now. We can write in present tense, describing events as if they are happening right here in the moment; and we can write in the future tense, which speculates upon things that will happen at some time to come.

Future tense is generally not a good tool for storytelling, for obvious reasons. Future tense is for prophecy, and for any kind of writing that is focused on potential. It may happen, it will happen, but it hasn't happened yet. Pretty vague, right? That's why, in general, we rule out future tense for storytelling.

That leaves present and past tense. Present tense, again, describes action as it is happening in the moment. "I am walking to the store. I am purchasing these essentials. I am experiencing this feeling." There are writers who work incredibly well in present tense. However, this approach rarely works for the types of stories we're looking for in this project. Because these are teaching stories, we are going to be writing in past tense: "I did this. I experienced this. I felt this." We will be speaking from a present perspective on events that happened in the past.

When you are writing, it is important to maintain that perspective. I am my present-day self, writing about events that occurred in the past. Since most, not all, but most fiction and non-fiction that we read is written in this past tense mode, it's not difficult for us to drop into that style of writing—but if you had any confusion, I hope that this explanation cleared it up.

Once we've identified the tense in which we're working, we need to identify the voice, or point of view, from which we'll be writing. For this project, we ask that your story be written from the first person point of view. That means everything that happens in the story is going to happen from the perspective of "I." I did this, I experienced this, I felt this.

It is important to remember that, from this interior first person perspective, the only voice that is going to be present in this story is yours. Even though we can probably guess what other people are thinking or feeling, we cannot know for certain. So, when we write from this first person perspective, we never want to say, "Jackie was feeling this way," because we are not

Jackie and we don't know how Jackie was feeling. Instead, we can say, "I was sure Jackie was feeling this way," and still maintain that "I" perspective.

Another common mistake for first-time writers is shifting between first person and second person, or "you" perspective. When we shift from first-person to second-person point of view, we go from speaking about ourselves as ourselves to speaking to "you," as if we're having a conversation with the reader. "You did this, you experienced this." "If this happens, you will feel this way." This can be effective in some cases, and you may use this formula when writing blogs, seminars, etc., but for the purposes of this project, we want to avoid making that shift from sharing our story to addressing the reader directly.

Of course, we don't want to slip into third-person point of view either, which would be speaking about ourselves from an outsider's perspective. If I was speaking about myself in third person, I would say, "Bryna did this. Bryna felt this." Third person perspective is really commonly used in fiction writing, where we understand that the author's voice is different from voice of the character and that the story is being told about someone rather than by someone. We don't want to slip into that perspective in our own storytelling, because it creates a distance between you, the narrator of the story, and your personal experiences, which the story is intended to share.

Next, we will talk about choosing the right words for the task. We already discussed briefly how we have this superficial surface well of words that we dip into on a daily basis to facilitate our regular communications. When we are editing, we have a wonderful opportunity to dig a little deeper in terms of our word choices.

Again, be on the lookout for words and phrases that you use repetitively, and for clichés that show up in your writing. When you identify those, replace them with words, phrases, or examples that more exactly fit what you're trying to describe.

Let's talk about adjectives and adverbs, two parts of speech that modify other parts of speech in order to make our meaning clearer and, we hope, more precise.

There is nothing wrong with using adjectives and adverbs in our writing—even though Stephen King is famously quoted as saying, "The road to hell is paved with adverbs," We just want to make sure that we are using these descriptive words in a conscious and exacting way that really enhances the meaning of our transmission, as opposed to dulling it down.

We will start with adverbs. Adverbs are words that modify verbs. A verb conveys an action taken. For example, "I danced." A simple sentence, with subject and verb. An example with an adverb is, "I danced beautifully." The addition of the adverb "beautifully" to the verb "danced" gives the reader a more accurate picture of what I am describing. I could say, "I danced clumsily," and again, that would clarify my action for the reader.

The problem with adverbs is that they can make us lazy. Why use one word where two or three will do? But this kind of overuse clutters up our writing.

A great question to ask yourself when editing your first draft is, “Are my descriptive words really necessary to clarify the meaning of the words they modify?” For example, you might have written something along the lines of, “I ran quickly to the door.” Running is done quickly, so the word “quickly” is not necessary in this sentence, it is just an extra word. If you want to create a more exact picture for the reader, you could write, “I dashed to the door,” or “I sprinted to the door.” Or maybe you merely jogged to the door.

Any of those word choices offer more insight than the word “ran” or the verb and adverb combination, “I ran quickly.” So, anytime you see an adverb modifying your verb, your action word, it’s a great opportunity for you to ask, “Is there a better way for me to say this?”

Another reason to look carefully at our adverb choices is that adverbs tend to *tell* us what happened instead of *showing* us what happened.

One great example that I found on a writing website called thewritingforward.com, is this sentence: “‘Will you come over here and sit by me?’ she asked flirtatiously.” The addition of the adverb “flirtatiously” *tells* the reader how the woman was behaving. What we can do instead is *show* the reader how the woman was behaving.

The example given in the article is, “‘Will you come over here and sit by me?’ she asked, batting her eyelashes.” Of course, this is not a great example of creative or deep writing, but it does prove the point: the action of batting her eyelashes by this woman gives us a picture of her, such that the reader can infer her intention by her actions.

Any time we can *show* the reader what happened, rather than simply telling her, and allow her to take in the story based on the details we provide, the story becomes more absorbing, because the reader feels like she is there as a witness. It also helps to avoid that dreaded patronizing tone that sometimes happen in storytelling, when the writer ends up telling the reader what to think, instead of allowing the reader to think for herself.

If we choose our words carefully, especially those descriptive words, we can create a picture for the reader that allows the reader to come to the conclusions we desire about an event or situation, while at the same time allowing the reader to fully participate in the process of coming to that conclusion.

Let’s talk about the other set of descriptive words: adjectives. Adjectives do for nouns what adverbs do for verbs. While an adverb modifies, clarifies or describes a verb (an action word), adjectives modify, describe, or clarify nouns. Nouns, of course, are the words which denote people, places, things, ideas, and concepts.

The word “house” is a noun. If we are speaking about a house, we might describe it as “the blue house.” Blue is an adjective. We might describe it as “the big blue house” which evokes for our readers a picture of the house which is more detailed than simply saying “the house.”

When we use multiple adjectives to describe a thing or a person, we give an increased clarity to that description with every word that's added. So, the tendency can be to add as many adjectives as possible in front of a noun to give the clearest picture possible of that person, place, or thing. We can say "the big, tall, spacious, stately, brand new, blue house," and that would be an accurate description, accurate enough for someone to recognize that house if they drove by it.

However, we want our writing to be concise. So why not say, "the blue mansion," or simply, "the mansion?" The noun "mansion," different from the noun choice, "house," already implies many of these qualities: tall, spacious, stately. It doesn't imply "blue," so you might keep that one. Of course, this is a pretty silly example—but just notice if you tend to sprinkle your sentences with lots of adjectives, and if that is the case, make a game for yourself of going through your story and shortening as many of those expansive phrases as possible.

Also notice if your descriptive words repeat themselves. We could describe "a tall, thin, lanky man." However, the word "lanky" pretty much describes someone tall and thin, so there is no need to reiterate with extra words. It can be fun to search for the one perfect adjective that encompasses all of the other, less-precise words you originally wanted to use. Use your thesaurus, and see about giving your descriptions laser-pointed focus.

The reason I put so much emphasis on this word selection process, and the self-editing process in general, is due to my years of experience as an editor. One of the hardest things for writers in general, and new writers in particular, to accept is when an editor makes changes to their word choices. Very often, these changes are due to exactly what we have been speaking about: an excessive use of descriptive words, or improperly-chosen descriptive words. Improper or unclear descriptions cause confusion for the reader, and make it harder for her to connect to the story.

Part of my job as an editor is to make sure that everyone who reads your story experiences it in a clear way—a way that allows your message to shine through.

Before you submit your story for editing, please go through it several times, and look for those places in which you can be more precise. If you don't, that is something that I am going to have to look at in my editing process. I suggest you take the time to do it BEFORE sending me your story submission because the words that I choose and suggest might not necessarily be the ones that you would choose or suggest.

If you're submitting for one of the Inspired Living Publishing Kindle series, you will be working with a different editor, but the story requirements are the same.

The more streamlining you can do on your own, the more authentic your story and message are going to remain. Of course, I have worked with many people who really are looking for suggestions, "How can I make this come across more clearly? How can I convey this to my reader?" I am happy to make suggestions about those types of things during your editorial process, and if I have questions after reading your story I will be sure to note them.

I have experienced a lot of back and forth with writers about particular word choices. I think it's very important as a writer to be able to accept constructive feedback. I am never going to give you feedback that is meant to be hurtful, I am only going to give you feedback that is meant to be constructive and make your story more powerful for readers. That said, it's a really good idea not to get too attached to your word choices.

There is a joking axiom in the industry that writers hear all the time, and that is, "Kill your babies." Which is a horrible thing to envision, but in this case the "babies" are particular words and turns of phrase to which writers become unduly attached. The issue is, these words are not always the best for the task. From the perspective of a reader who doesn't know you and doesn't have any idea of your message, your personality, or your personal dynamic, your favorite words may simply not make sense.

This modification of word choices is a natural part of the editing process. That said, if there are words or phrases that you've trademarked, or that you use frequently in your blogging, marketing messaging, or speaking, you can work them in as long as they show up in a way that feels transparent for the reader.

The writing process can in many ways mirror a meditative or spiritual journey, in that it does require us to practice a degree of non-attachment. During your self-editing process, it is very important to maintain a level of objectivity. If you feel comfortable doing so, sharing your story with family or friends who can offer constructive criticism is a really good idea. They can often point out places where your narrative could use a little more "juice."

Members of a writing group or masterminding group are also good sources of feedback. They'll probably know far less about you and your life, so they may be even more objective when it comes to pointing out missing details. They may ask questions that you may not think to ask about your story. They may require clarification on points that you thought were perfectly clear.

Writing from that inside perspective, that "I" perspective, we often lose sight of what other people do and don't know about the situation, so again, getting an outside perspective and having people ask for clarity can really help you decide what details need to be included, and which may not be needed. It can also help you discover whether your descriptions are powerful enough, or if they're wishy-washy. Are your readers receiving the full impact of your message? Or do they seem to be skirting the edges of what you want to say?

Of course, you may choose not to have anyone read your story before you submit it, and that's fine too. It's merely a suggestion, an extension of the self-editing process, and something that I've found to be very helpful in the past.

This concludes class number three on self-editing basics. In class number four, we will talk about what to expect from the editorial process if you are participating in one of Inspired Living Publishing's print anthologies. (If you are submitting for one of our Kindle series, you will receive different information in your author package). Thanks for listening, and happy writing!