



# Four

## Editing by Ear

**W**hen I edit people's work, or talk about editing to them, they usually want to know (as my friend Rosanna did) what the principles of editing are. What rules do I use to decide, for instance, when to leave a word out or delete a phrase? No one does anything creative by merely following rules (although rules are necessary and helpful), and even the most routine and trivial writing is creative, whether it's a letter to a friend or a note to a delivery person. Unless you are copying a form letter out of a book or writing the fiftieth thank-you note in exactly the words you used for the other forty-nine, you are creating new language, new combinations, something that didn't exist until you put it down that way.

Grammarians and composition teachers recommend several kinds of rules and guidelines. Many rules, like those requiring that a declarative sentence end with a period or that writing proceed from left to right, do

what conventions typically do in the arts: make it possible to communicate a thought by providing a minimum of shared understanding between creator and consumer. Other rules make it possible to communicate with less chance of unintended confusion and misunderstanding: rules requiring that pronouns agree with their antecedents, for instance. Still others are not rules at all, but rather guidelines to conventional usage and precise meaning (distinguishing, say, between *reticent* and *reluctant*). Some, finally, are truly matters of taste, about which reasonable people differ, usually along conservative–progressive lines: should I have used the word *bullshit* in chapter 1?

What role do these rules and guidelines play in the creation of a piece of writing? It might work like this: we put down whatever comes into our heads, then go back over the result with a rulebook in hand, find all the violations of rules, and bring the text into line with the rulebook. Isn't that what we do when we rewrite?

No. We might do something a little like that, but bringing the text into line with the rulebook cannot be so automatic. Bringing it into line is creative too. Furthermore, sociologists' studies of obedience to rules show that rules are never so clear and unambiguous that we can simply follow them. We always have to decide whether a rule exists at all, whether what we have is really covered by the rule, or whether there might not be some exception that isn't in the book but one the rulemakers, we think, must have intended. We also need to interpret rules so that the result we get is reasonable, not some foolishness resulting from blind rule-following. (Harold Garfinkel [1967, 21–4] describes this practice, which he calls *ad hocing*, as a fundamental feature of all human activity.)

Mike Rose, drawing on his experience in advising students with writer's block, distinguishes two kinds of rules, one clearly better suited to the activity of rewriting:



Algorithms are precise rules that will always result in a specific answer if applied to an appropriate problem. Most mathematical rules, for example, are algorithms. Functions are constant (e.g., pi), procedures are routine (squaring the radius), and outcomes are completely predictable. However, few day-to-day situations are mathematically circumscribed enough to warrant the application of algorithms. Most often we function with the aid of fairly general heuristics or "rules of thumb," guidelines that allow varying degrees of flexibility when approaching problems. Rather than operating with algorithmic precision and certainty, we search, critically, through alternatives, using our heuristic as a divining rod—"if a math problem stumps you, try working backwards to solution"; "if the car won't start, check x, y, or z," and so forth. Heuristics won't allow the precision or the certitude afforded by algorithmic operations; heuristics can even be so "loose" as to be vague. But in a world where tasks and problems are rarely mathematically precise, heuristic rules become the most appropriate, the most functional rules available to us. (Rose 1983, 391-2)

Not surprisingly, students who thought rules about writing were algorithms (I'm not inventing straw men—some did) had trouble, while students who used them as heuristics didn't.

We can't, then, write or even rewrite by treating whatever rules we might decide on as algorithms. If not that way, how? We do it by ear. What does that mean? Looking at a blank sheet of paper, or one with writing on it, we use what "sounds good" or "looks good" to us. We use heuristics, some precise, some quite vague.

Most of the time, when social scientists write, they don't think about rules or guidelines at all. Although they don't consult a rulebook, they do consult something: a standard of taste, a generalized notion of what something ought to look or sound like. If the result doesn't conflict too much with that generalized picture

they let it stand. They work, in other words, like artists, who

often find it difficult to verbalize the general principles on which they make their choices, or even to give any reasons at all. They often resort to such noncommunicative statements as "it sounds better that way," "it looked good to me," or "it works."

That inarticulateness frustrates the researcher. But every art's [read "academic discipline's"] practitioners use words whose meanings they cannot define exactly which are nevertheless intelligible to all knowledgeable members of their worlds. Jazz musicians say that something does or does not "swing"; theater people say that a scene "works" or does not "work." In neither case can even the most knowledgeable participant explain to someone not already familiar with the terms' uses what they mean. Yet everyone who uses them understands them and can apply them with great reliability, agreeing about what swings or works, even though they cannot say what they mean.

[This] suggests that they do not work by consulting a set of rules or criteria. Rather, they respond as they imagine others might respond, and construct those imaginings from their repeated experiences of hearing people apply the undefined terms in concrete situations. (Becker 1982a, 199-200)

Sociologists' standards of taste do include rules they learned in composition classes, which they have trained themselves to apply almost automatically. I habitually scan almost anything I read for passive constructions; if it is my prose, I immediately consider whether and how to change them. I am not aware of applying a rule or heuristic and don't consult a book to know when or how to do it. But I know what I am doing and can state the relevant principle if asked (as I did for



Rosanna). Most sociologists use some such rules, many of which unfortunately work as unanalyzed algorithmic stumbling blocks rather than aids.

Most sociologists, however, have few consciously formulated heuristics. More often, they rely on the fallible and uninspected judgments of their ear. They develop that ear, their standards of prose, mainly from what they read. They read work they admire and want what they write to resemble it, to look that way on the page. That probably explains why scholarly writing so often deteriorates as students move through graduate school and into an academic career. They read the professional journals and want their work to look like what they read, for reasons I've already discussed. That suggests an immediate remedy for bad academic writing: read outside your professional field, and when you do, choose good models.

We are not stuck forever with the standard of taste we acquired when we entered our discipline. In fact, we change it considerably, even in the short run. We develop our taste not only from reading, but also from what our friends and peers say to us or what we fear they might say. A colleague of mine feared, when he wrote, the unlikely possibility that his prose would end up at the bottom of a *New Yorker* column as a hideous example of academic writing. Such fears can move a sensitive victim to study a book on style in order to incorporate the heuristics they recommend into his or her standard of taste.

But most sociologists (and probably most academic writers) don't hear many critical remarks about their prose or, if they do, don't hear them from anyone they have to pay attention to. Since ignoring problems of writing causes them no immediate and obvious trouble, they spend their time on statistics and methods and theory, which can and do. Editors and professors reject papers that use statistics incorrectly, but only sigh over those badly written. Because content matters more to a field's progress than style, professors will not flunk

smart students who write badly, and some highly esteemed sociologists were notoriously incomprehensible.

The spectacle of a field which cares so little for decent prose may shock outsiders as much it tires insiders, but that is sociology (and probably many other scholarly disciplines), now and in the likely future. As a result, young sociologists have no reason to learn any more about writing than they knew when they began graduate school, and will probably lose some of the skills they do have. If their college English classes have not given them a standard of taste that includes, as working rules, the elements of grammar and style, they will not spend the time to study them seriously. So they will learn to do their editing by ear, if they learn to do it at all.

Since I learned what little I know about writing and editing that way, fortuitously and haphazardly, I find it hard to produce general editorial principles on request. I can, however, give examples, preferably from the work of the person asking the question, and suggest general ideas that seem to be relevant to their problems. Of course, these notions can't be stated algorithmically. I can't say that you must never use passive constructions, but I can say that a particular passive construction misstates an important sociological idea. Nor is it always wrong to use long, abstract words. I have nevertheless, later in this chapter, stated such rules dogmatically because, while passive constructions are sometimes useful, sociologists do not need to be advised to use them, or long, abstract words either. They do those things automatically.

What follow are some examples of how I edit, with some discussion of the choices made, the reasoning behind them, and the guidelines those choices imply. This will put some more flesh on the prescriptions I gave my class. The examples come from early drafts of an article I wrote on photography (Becker 1982b; the published version differs from that quoted here.) The



examples are not remarkable; I can find their like in anything I have ever written and in much that I have published.

To begin, consider the following paragraph, which discusses the strategy of describing social groups through photographic portraits of their members:

Whatever part they [photographers] let stand for the person, the strategy implies a theory and a method. The theory is a simple one, but it is important to make its steps explicit, so that we can see how it works. The theory is that the life a person has lived, its good times and bad, leaves its marks. Someone who has lived a happy life will have a face that shows that. Someone who has managed to maintain their human dignity in the face of trouble will have a face that shows that. . . . This is a daring strategy, because it makes the little that the photograph does contain carry an enormous weight. We must, if the theory is to work and help us to produce effective images, choose faces, details of them, and moments in their history which, recorded on film and printed on paper, allow viewers to infer everything else they are interested in. Viewers, that is, look at the lines on a face and infer from them a life spent in hard work in the sun.

When I began rewriting this passage, the phrase "it is important to," in the second sentence, caught my attention as typical throat clearing. If it's important to do it, don't talk about it, do it. (This is a typical guideline which is by no means a rule.) I first changed "it is important to" to "we need to." That made the sentence more active, and slightly stronger, and introduced an agent, someone actually doing it. Things that are not done by anyone, but "just are," have a fuzzy quality I don't like.

Having made that change, I still wasn't happy. The sentence had three clauses which were just strung

together. If I can rearrange a sentence so that its organization displays and thus reinforces the connections I am describing, I do. So I cut the first clause, putting its content into an adjectival phrase. Instead of saying the theory was a simple one, I replaced "its steps" in the second clause with "the steps of this simple theory." A few words less, and the simplicity of the theory reduced to a small descriptive point: "We need to make the steps of this simple theory explicit. . . ." Having done it, I no longer had to say that we needed to do it, which was no better than saying it was important to do it. The rewritten sentence reads, "If we make the steps of this simple theory explicit, we can see how it works." It has sixteen words instead of twenty-three. The three strung-together clauses now make an if-then argument that is more interesting than the list it replaced.

Now look at the fourth sentence. I changed "Someone" to "People" for no very good reason, mainly because I wanted to get at "managed to maintain." Wordy phrases like "manage to maintain" try to make simple statements sound profound. Talking about people's ability to act evokes the academic urge to profundity. It seems trivial to say that people "can" do something. We prefer to say that they "had the capability of" or "the ability to" or even, striving for simplicity, that they "were able to." I almost invariably use such constructions in early drafts and replace them with "can" when I rewrite. So I changed the sentence to "People who have kept . . ."

Finally, consider the sentence about lines on a face: "Viewers, that is, look at the lines on a face and infer from them a life spent in hard work in the sun." I cut some words that weren't doing much work. I proved that "that is" was meaningless by taking it out and seeing that the sentence lost no meaning. Applying the same test, I changed "a life spent in hard work" to a "life of hard work." But I also saw a way to add a few words and make the image more concrete: "Viewers



look at the lines on a face and infer that they were baked in during a life of hard work in the sun." A slight transposition remedies the ambiguity of "they" and reads even better: "Looking at the lines on a face, viewers infer that . . ."

The final version, as published, went like this:

Whatever part a photographer chooses to stand for the person, he or she is employing a strategy that relies on a theory and a method. This strategy depends on the assumption that the experiences of life are recorded in faces, that the life a person has lived leaves physical marks.

Photographers, accordingly, choose faces, details of faces, and moments in their histories which, recorded on film and printed on paper, allow viewers to deduce what they don't see but want to know about. Portraits often contain a wealth of detail, so that careful study allows us to make complex and subtle readings of the character of the person and of the life-in-society of that person. Looking at the lines on a face, viewers may conclude that that these were baked in during a life of hard work in the sun. From these same lines, they can infer wisdom produced by hard work and age or, alternatively, senility and decay. To make any of these conclusions, a viewer must bring to bear on the image one of several possible theories of facial lines.

That doesn't exhaust what might be done here.

Two sentences, farther on in the article, combined several common difficulties. I gave an example of how a well-known contemporary photographed the interiors of buildings with people in them: "Some of Robert Frank's most compelling images are of offices after hours, with no one there—no one but the janitor cleaning up. A bank looks different when it is occupied by a janitor than when it is occupied by bankers."

I might almost leave this, in the style of a mathemat-

ics text, as an exercise for the reader to repair. Not to be a tease about it, however, I began by stating the first phrase more actively: "Robert Frank made some of his most compelling images. . . ." That let me rearrange and simplify the next construction: "Robert Frank made some of his most compelling images in offices after hours," and went on, cutting a repetition I thought forceful when I first wrote it, "when no one was there but the janitors." Why did I cut the "cleaning up" that followed "janitors"? Because I now meant to put that thought into a more concrete image in the next sentence, which I changed to: "A bank occupied only by a janitor pushing a mop looks different from one filled with bankers on the phone." That let me contrast the bankers' telephoning and the janitors' mop-pushing, rather than just mentioning their job titles and letting the reader fill in their characteristic actions. The rewritten sentence also eliminates the repetition of something being "occupied by" somebody. Saying that bankers "filled" the space emphasized the contrast between the bustle of daytime business and the quiet of night-time cleaning that Frank's photograph called attention to.

Here are some further short illustrations. I changed "if you do the former [there is no point in explaining the specifics of these examples], you may be able to" to "The former lets you." I changed "Older houses have lots of [if I had said, less colloquially, "many," it wouldn't have made any difference] rooms with doors on them" to "The rooms in older houses have doors on them." (And now, after publication, I realize that I should have deleted "on them" too.) I changed "according to the method just described" to "by the method just described" and "the change that has occurred in conceptions of privacy" to "the change in conceptions of privacy."

We spend a lot of time in my writing seminar making similar changes in specimens donated by friends, colleagues, and eventually the students themselves. Stu-



dents find it difficult at first to understand why, having rewritten a sentence, I then rewrite it again, and even a third or fourth time. Why don't I get it right the first time? I say, and try to show them, that each change opens the way to other changes, that when you clear away nonworking words and phrases, you can see more easily what the sentence is about and can phrase it more succinctly and accurately.

They also wonder if picking away at such tiny matters of wording really affects the result. They find the exercise tedious at first, and to be truthful, I prolong the first session unforgivably. I want them to see that there is always something more to discuss, something further possible change; that I can and probably will question every word and punctuation mark; and that they should learn to do likewise. They find the exercise unnerving. They cannot imagine raising all those questions about every sentence. Eventually I reassure them, as does their own experience. They discover that the process doesn't take as much time as they feared, that you can quickly spot the obvious problems and need worry only about a few that are truly difficult to solve. They learn that line by line editing is easy because the things to fix fall into classes. When you understand the nature of a class, you know how to fix the problems of the sentences that belong to it. (This is, I guess, my way of talking about rules and guidelines.)

What the students accept less easily is that, however long it takes, such detailed editing is worth doing. They can see that each change makes things marginally clearer and cuts out a few words that probably weren't doing much work anyway. But what good is that? I know that when I finished *Art Worlds*, I thought I had done all the editing the prose needed or could stand. A gifted copy editor, Helen Tartar, went over it and made hundreds of further changes, few as extensive as the ones I have just discussed. When I read the material with her changes, I felt the way I do when, looking through the viewfinder of my camera, I give the lens

that last quarter turn that brings everything into perfect focus. Good editing does that, and it's worth doing. The unnecessary words take up room and are thus uneconomic. They cheat, demanding attention by hinting at profundities and sophistication they don't contain. Seemingly to mean something, those extra words mislead readers about what is being said.

The sentences we just considered exemplify classes of problems and the way the problems can be solved. None of the guidelines I am going to give is original. It would be a wonder if they were. Generations of English teachers, editors, and writers have discovered and rediscovered them, taught them to students, and recommended them to writers. Some word-processing programs even find typical stylistic faults and suggest corrections. Here is my version, tailored to the needs of sociologists, but perhaps useful to scholars in other disciplines as well.

1. *Active/passive.* Every writing text insists that you substitute active verbs for passive ones when you can. (Doesn't that sound better than saying "The necessity of replacing passive verbs with active ones is emphasized in every book on writing"?) What matters more than the grammatical distinction between active and passive is the simple act of putting the crucial actions into verbs and making some important character in the story you are telling the subject of the verb. But paying attention to the grammatical distinction starts you on the right road. Active verbs almost always force you to name the person who did whatever was done (although gifted obfuscators can avoid the requirement). We seldom think that things just happen all by themselves, as passive verbs suggest, because in our daily lives people do things and make them happen. Sentences that name active agents make our representations of social life more understandable and believable. "The criminal was sentenced" hides the judge who, we know, did the sentencing and, not incidentally, thus makes the criminal's fate seem the operation of impersonal forces



rather than the result of people acting together to imprison him or her. Almost every version of social theory insists that we act to produce social life. Karl Marx and George Herbert Mead both thought that, but their followers' syntax often betrays that theory.

2. *Fewer words.* Scholarly writers often insert words and whole phrases when they don't want to say something as flatly as it first came to them. They want to indicate a modesty, a reservation, a sense that they know they might be wrong. Sometimes they want to recognize that readers may disagree by suggesting politely, before actually saying whatever they are going to say, that it merits attention, instead of just saying it right out, as though it of course merited attention. That's why I had said at first "it was important" to make the theory's steps explicit. But if it isn't important, why bother to do it? And if it is, won't doing it make that clear enough without a preliminary announcement?

We scholars also use unnecessary words because we think, like the student in my seminar, that if we say it plainly it will sound like something anybody could say rather than the profound statement only a social scientist could make. We give it that special importance by suggesting that some important process underlies what we are talking about. So I had at first spoken of people who "managed to maintain" their dignity. That hints, as "people who have kept" their dignity doesn't, that keeping their dignity was difficult and they had to work at it. But I was writing about photographers, not about people surmounting trouble. While people do maintain their dignity, just as the phrase suggests, this article doesn't talk about that, and it was therefore distracting and pointless to mention it. Similarly, "the change that has occurred in conceptions of privacy" makes the process of change in those conceptions important. If I delete the italicized words, the point I want to make is intact and I have removed a distracting reference to an unanalyzed process I won't mention again.

Sometimes we put those throat-clearing phrases in because the rhythm or structure of the sentence seems to require it, or because we want to remind ourselves that something is missing in the argument. We want to make an if-then argument, but we haven't consciously worked out the causal connection our intuition thinks is there. So we make the form and hope the content will appear to fill it. Or we do it out of habit. We get attached to locutions and formats. Like many scholarly writers, I often write sentences with three predicate clauses: "This book excites our curiosity, gives us some answers, and convinces us that the author is right." (The second sentence of the next paragraph is another good example, one that occurred naturally as I was writing.) But I often use that form whether I have three things to say or not, and then I have to scratch for the third thing, which is then vacuous. No harm. It comes out in editing.

An unnecessary word does no work. It doesn't further an argument, state an important qualification, or add a compelling detail. (See? I find unnecessary words by a simple test. As I read through my draft, I check each word and phrase to see what happens if I remove it. If the meaning does not change, I take it out. The deletion often makes me see what I really wanted there, and I put it in. I seldom take unnecessary words out of early drafts. I'll see them when I rewrite and either replace them with working words or cut them.

3. *Repetition.* Scholars create some of their most impenetrable obscurities by trying to be clear. They know that vague pronouns and ambiguous syntax can leave what they mean unclear, so they repeat words and phrases if there is any possibility of confusion. That may not confuse readers, but it usually bores them. I am not simply repeating the mechanical rule we all learned in high school: don't repeat the same word within so-and-so many sentences. You may have to repeat words, but you shouldn't repeat words when you can get the same result without doing it. Remember



my sentence: "A bank looks different when it is occupied by a janitor than when it is occupied by bankers." "When it is occupied" doesn't require repetition and makes readers' minds wander. If I think about it, I can create a more compact and interesting sentence, as I tried to do in that example.

4. *Structure/content.* The thoughts conveyed in a sentence usually have a logical structure, stating or implying some sort of connection between the things it discusses. We might want to say that something resembles or actually is something else (state an identity): "A mental hospital is a total institution." We might want to describe an identifying characteristic of a class of phenomena: "People who move from the country are marginal to the urban society they enter." We might want to identify something as a member of a class: "Monet was an Impressionist." We might want to state a causal connection or an if-then relation: "Slums produce crime" or "If a child grows up in a broken home, that child will become delinquent." We can state these connections as I have just done. That will be enough to make our point clear. But we can be even clearer by reinforcing the point syntactically.

Syntax, the way we arrange the sentence's elements, indicates the relations between them. We can reinforce a sentence's thought by arranging its elements so that its syntax also makes the argument or, at least, does not interfere with the reader's understanding of it. We can, for example, put subordinate thoughts in subordinate positions in the sentence. If we put them in positions of importance, readers will think they are important. If we make every thought in the sentence equally important grammatically by stringing together coordinate clauses, readers will think they are equally important. That happens when, giving in to habit, I say I have three things to discuss and then label them one, two, and three or just list them one after the other. We can usually make our point more forcefully by going from

one to the next in a way that shows how they are connected other than by following one another in a list.

5. *Concrete/abstract.* Scholars generally, and sociologists particularly, use far too many abstract words. Sometimes we use abstractions because we don't have anything very specific in mind. Scholars have favorite abstract words which act as placeholders. Meaning nothing in themselves, they mark a place that needs a real idea. Complex or complicated and relation exemplify the type. We say that there is a complex relation between two things. What have we said? "Relation" is such a general concept that it means almost nothing, which is why it is so useful in very abstract branches of mathematics. All it says is that two things are connected somehow. But almost any two things are related somehow. In disciplines less abstract than mathematics we usually want to know how. That's what's worth knowing. Complex doesn't tell us, it just says, "Believe me, there's a lot to it," which most people would concede about almost anything. Most of the spatial metaphors used in discussions of social life and other scholarly topics—levels and positions in social organizations, for instance—lead readers of concrete specificity that way. So do phrases which hint that what we are describing is part of a collection of similar things: "a set of" or "a kind of."

We also use abstractions to indicate the general application of our thought. We don't want anyone to think that what we have found out is only true of Chicago schoolteachers or a mental hospital in Washington. We want them to understand that what we found where we did our research can be found under similar circumstances anywhere in the world, any time in history. There is nothing wrong with that: it is a major reason for doing sociological research. We can best convince readers of the generality of our results by describing what we have studied in specific detail and then showing, in similar detail, what class of things it belongs to and what other things are likely to belong to



that class. If I show in detail how people learn to smoke marijuana from others and how that affects their experience of the drug's effects, I can go on to describe a class of similar phenomena in similar specificity: how people learn from others to understand their inner physical experiences. The specific case I have described in detail provides a model to which readers can refer my more general ideas. Without the specifics, the general ideas don't mean much.

Writing manuals tell us to use concrete details because they make the matter more alive to the reader, more memorable. Williams (1981), for instance, says: "Regardless of our audience, we can make writing readable and memorable by writing specifically and concretely. When we squeeze long, windy phrases into more compact phrases, we make diffuse ideas sharply specific. . . . The more narrow the reference, the more concrete the idea; the more concrete the idea, the clearer and more precise the idea (132-3)."

When we use concrete details to give body to abstractions, however, we should choose the details and examples carefully. The example that readers have in mind will bring in considerations not explicitly addressed in the general argument and color our understanding of it. Kathryn Pyne Addelson, a philosopher who has analyzed the ethical problems of abortion, says that philosophers typically concoct very fanciful examples—of hypothetical women impregnated by flying insects and the like—and that such a choice of examples lets them reach conclusions they would not support if they discussed the case of a pregnant forty-year-old woman with five children whose husband is out of work.

**6. Metaphors.** I am leaping through the current issues of a few journals in sociology (I don't think the results would differ if the journals were in history or psychology or English literature). On almost every page I find trite metaphorical talk. "Some cutting edge seems lacking" in a book being reviewed. Another book "covers a

huge terrain." A third deals with "a rich issue that has been impoverished by its context." My colleagues talk about "the growing body of literature," analyses that "penetrate to the heart" of the problem being discussed or "fall between two stools," and find "the seeds" of another society's institutional practices "planted in our own society." A theoretical approach leads to a "conceptual straitjacket." Researchers "mine" data or "ferret" or "tease" results out of them and get to "the bottom line." The most scientific document contains a lot of such metaphorical talk.

I usually cut such metaphors out of anything I am editing. All metaphors? No, only ones like the above. You can see their kind by comparing them to a masterful use of metaphor. Goffman's (1952) well-known paper "On Cooling the Mark Out," which uses the confidence game as a metaphor for those social situations in which someone cannot sustain the definition of self they have offered to themselves and the world. I would leave that metaphor in anything I edited.

The difference between the two kinds of metaphor lies in the seriousness and attention with which they are used. I don't mean how seriously authors take their subject, but how seriously they take the details of their metaphor. Goffman took the con game metaphor seriously. He compared the other situations he analyzed—the lover whose proposal is rejected, the big shot who can't get a table in a crowded restaurant, the person who can't manage the ordinary routines of everyday life well enough to avoid drawing attention to himself—to the con game point for point. In particular, he noted that the marks who lost their money to confidence men realized (and supposed that others would also see) that they were not nearly as smart as they had thought when they tried to get rich quick. Criminal tradition suggested to con men that they could avoid trouble by helping the angry victims restore their self-esteem, by cooling them out. So con men routinely assigned a team member to use well-established methods for achieving



that result. Goffman used the metaphor to discover and describe the same job and the same role in restaurants and other places where people were likely to be so exposed, and even suggested that, since some people suffered such exposure in many areas of life, we could probably find professionals who dealt with such problems in a more general way. He identified psychiatry as a discipline devoted to cooling out people whose pretensions social life had unveiled as phony. That discovery validated the metaphor for many readers. But the metaphor validated itself by being serious, by meaning that these other situations were like the con game in all sorts of ways, large and small.

The earlier metaphors I quoted from sociology journals weren't serious about their ramifications. When we say an argument has a "cutting edge," what tool are we comparing it to and what material is it supposed to be cutting? Who "covers terrain" in real life, how do they cover it, and what are the problems of terrain-covering? Is the literature being compared to a human body? Does that mean we should look for its heart, its liver, its stomach, its brain? The authors never meant us to take their metaphors that seriously. The comparisons these "tired metaphors" make no longer live in the minds of those who write them or read them.

A metaphor that works is still alive. Reading it shows you a new aspect of what you are reading about, how that aspect appears in something superficially quite different. Using a metaphor is a serious theoretical exercise in which you assert that two different empirical phenomena belong to the same general class, and general classes always imply a theory. But metaphors work that way only if they are fresh enough to attract attention. If they have been used repeatedly enough to be clichés, you don't see anything new. In fact, you think that they actually mean, literally, what they allude to metaphorically. Take the common expression, "to take the wind out of someone's sails." I had used that, read it, and heard it for years, but it never

meant any more to me than that you somehow deflated the person you did it to. Then I learned to sail. In sailing races, your opponents try to come between you and the wind, so that their sail keeps the wind from hitting yours. When they do that successfully, your sails, full of wind and pushing you along briskly a moment before, suddenly begin to flap empty. The hull's friction in the water, now that no wind is pushing to counteract it, brings the boat to a sudden halt. The metaphor came to life for me, recalling an irritating experience in all its fullness. But the metaphor means little or nothing to people who haven't had that experience.

All the tired metaphors once lived. As metaphors age, they lose their force from sheer repetition, so that they take up space but contribute less than a plain, nonmetaphorical statement. It is clearer and more pointed to say that a book's argument is diffuse than to say that "some cutting edge is lacking." If an author is lucky, no one pays any attention to the literal meaning of the metaphorical statement. When I hear about "babies being thrown out with the bathwater"—and I still do—I find it hard to keep a straight face. The same is true with "falling between two stools." What were those people trying to do with those stools, anyway?

Metaphors also deteriorate from misuse. People who don't know and understand the phenomenon well, who may really not know what they are talking about when they use the words, use them incorrectly, thinking they mean something else. The common metaphor of "the bottom line," for instance, refers to the bottom line of an accountant's report which, summarizing all the previous computations, lets you know whether you made or lost money that year. Metaphorically, it could refer to the final result of any series of calculations: the population of the United States as discovered by the 1980 Census or the correlation between income and education in someone's study. But people often use it to indicate a final offer, the price they will not lower,



the indignity they will not suffer: "That's the bottom line! I quit!" People who say that don't know, or don't remember, that the words have a financial referent. They probably use the expression because they like the air of finality "bottom" conveys, implying a point beyond which you can't go.

We can't, and shouldn't try to, avoid using another kind of metaphor, the ones permanently built into our language, which Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have analyzed in great detail. I'll give one example, of what they call

*orientational metaphors*, since most of them have to do with spatial orientation: up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off, deep-shallow, central-peripheral. These spatial orientations arise from the fact that we have bodies of the sort we have and that they function as they do in our physical environment. Orientational metaphors give a concept a spatial orientation; for example, HAPPY IS UP. The fact that the concept HAPPY is oriented UP leads to English expressions like "I'm feeling up today." (14)

Lakoff and Johnson go on to show how ubiquitously UP and DOWN and their relatives appear in our speech:

CONSCIOUS IS UP; UNCONSCIOUS IS DOWN  
HEALTH AND LIFE ARE UP;  
SICKNESS AND DEATH ARE DOWN  
HAVING CONTROL or FORCE IS UP;  
BEING SUBJECT TO CONTROL or FORCE IS DOWN  
MORE IS UP; LESS IS DOWN  
FORESEENABLE FUTURE EVENTS ARE UP (AND AHEAD)  
HIGH STATUS IS UP; LOW STATUS IS DOWN  
GOOD IS UP; BAD IS DOWN  
VIRTUE IS UP; DEPRAVITY IS DOWN  
RATIONAL IS UP; EMOTIONAL IS DOWN

Here is their analysis of the last example:

RATIONAL IS UP; EMOTIONAL IS DOWN

The discussion fell to the emotional level, but I raised it back up to the rational plane. We put our feelings aside and had a high-level intellectual discussion of the matter. He couldn't rise above his emotions.

Physical and cultural basis: In our culture people view themselves as being in control over animals, plants, and their physical environment, and it is their unique ability to reason that places human beings above other animals and gives them this control. CONTROL IS UP thus provides a basis for MAN IS UP and therefore for RATIONAL IS UP. (17)

The book contains over 200 pages of such analyses and examples. As I said, you can't avoid such metaphors. But being aware of them lets you use their overtones purposefully. If you ignore the overtones your prose will fight with itself, the language conveying one idea, the metaphors another, and readers won't be sure what you mean.

This chapter barely touches what goes into creating a standard of taste that will let you edit your own work, and that of others, successfully. The main lesson is not the specifics of what I have said but the Zen lesson of paying attention. Writers need to pay close attention to what they have written as they revise, looking at every word as if they meant it to be taken seriously. You can write first drafts quickly and carelessly exactly because you know you will be critical later. When you pay close attention the problems start taking care of themselves.