The 7 deadly sins of reviewing (and how to avoid them)

Plain English Foundation®

Overview

Executives and team leaders often tell us that reviewing their team's documents is one of the most challenging parts of people management. Do you struggle to get your team's writing to meet your organisation's standards? Do you find yourself thinking it will be quicker if you just get in and rewrite the text yourself, and there goes your evening?

Reviewing is a different skill to writing, and being a good writer doesn't necessarily mean you'll be a good reviewer. Even highly skilled writers can make changes that don't materially improve the document or that even take it backwards.

More importantly, the review process can damage the writer's confidence in themselves and the reviewer. This can also affect the writer and reviewer's relationship.

This guide outlines the 7 common traps that reviewers can fall into and delivers tips to help you avoid them.

Rate yourself as a reviewer

Take this quick questionnaire to test yourself.

1 Do you impose choices that suit you rather than the reader?

2 Do you often leap in to rewrite the text yourself?

3 Do you give more feedback on word choice than overall structure?

4 Do you develop the document rather than the writer?

5 Do you tell writers what to do without explaining why?

6 Do you give feedback that is not always constructive?

7 Do you give advice that's at odds with the last document you reviewed?

If you answered 'yes' to any of these, read on for our 7 deadly sins of reviewing.

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands where we work, learn and live, and we pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

1 Do you impose choices that suit you rather than the reader?

In our professional writing workshops, we ask people to nominate what most frustrates them as a writer. Almost always they will say, 'Reviewers who impose their own personal style'.

They're talking about changes that seem entirely subjective and don't obviously improve the document's effectiveness. At the least damaging end of the scale, these changes can be around word choice.

Let's say that the writer has written this:
The team will assess how to improve our tender process.

A reviewer might get busy with a metaphorical red pen and suggest instead:
The team will ascertain how to ameliorate the department's procurement processes and procedures.

If the writer had the courage to ask why this version was better – and most won't – the reviewer might say something like, 'I just think it sounds better'.
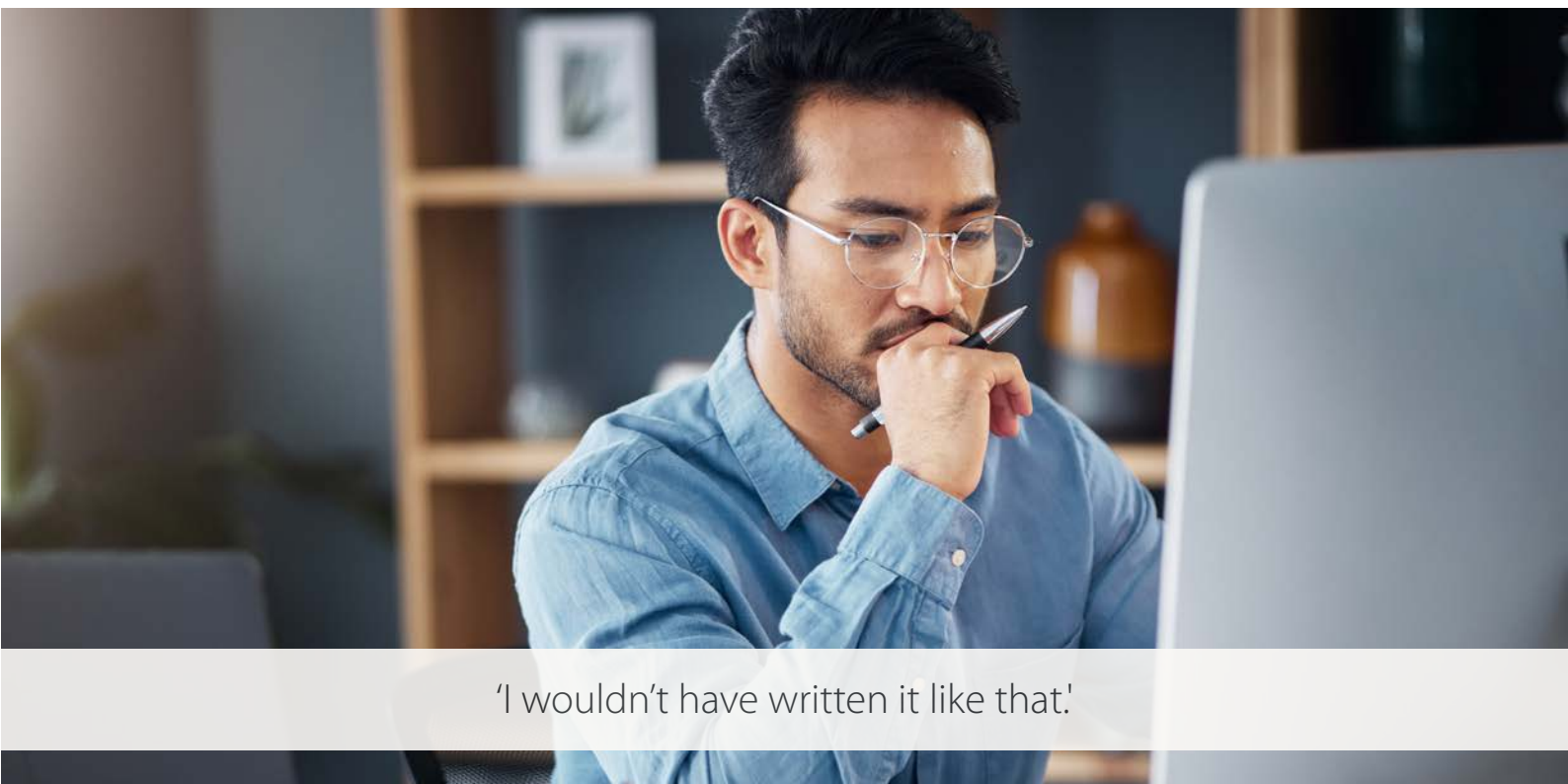
'I wouldn't have written it like that.'

In the same vein, as the reviewer, we might suggest a structural change because we 'think it flows better'. Or we could try to justify a change in formatting because we 'think it looks better'.

These may be astute suggestions that will absolutely benefit the document, but often they are not. Frequently, we are merely falling into the trap of making choices that suit our own preferences, and we'd struggle to justify them.

Reviewers who please themselves are less likely to satisfy their readers

If we make such subjective calls, we force the writer to keep speculating on the question, 'What will my boss like?'

Why is that so bad? For a start, we can be unpredictable. We all have our linguistic quirks, even the best of us. Pity the poor writer who has to second guess them.

But there's a far bigger concern. What we like personally shouldn't come into the writing task because the document isn't always being written for us reviewers. It exists solely to communicate with the final reader.

So, the real question that every writer and reviewer should be asking is this: what will work best for the reader?

Research confirms which document features promote reading

While we can never be absolutely sure what any individual reader will prefer, we have a lot of evidence about what generally works.

We know, for example, what time-poor readers want early in the document. We also know that, typically, they're disappointed.

We know which structures will suit those same busy readers, and they're not the traditional ones that many reviewers still try to impose. (It turns out that the structure many people consider to be 'logical' isn't so logical after all.)

We also know a lot now about the formatting choices that can aid swift communication. Here again the research challenges many common approaches.

If we can switch to thinking only about what will suit the reader, we get 3 benefits:

1   We will share our writer's clear understanding of the goal we are working towards.

2   Documents will more often achieve that goal because every choice we make seeks to influence the people who really matter: our readers.

3   Our writers will come to trust and value our input because it's based on an objective standard, not a personal and often unsupported preference.

Tip 1: Base your review on what will work for the reader.

2 Do you often leap in to rewrite the text yourself?

Let's be clear. We know that sometimes this is unavoidable because of:

- the importance of the document
- the limited time available
- the inexperience or resistance of the writer.

But most reviewers are aware that rewriting is something we want to avoid.

Becoming a co-author steals too much of our precious time

Yes, we could probably finalise the document faster if we did it ourselves. But can we really afford the time? When we regress from reviewing to rewriting, what else are we neglecting?

It might be justifiable as a one-off, but it's not going to be sustainable, time-wise or for our ongoing relationship with the replaced writer.

Writers tend to resent being elbowed out of the way

If writers aren't fond of capricious suggestions, imagine how thrilled they are when the reviewer actually takes the reins. The first time it happens, they could interpret it as a reviewer who is willing to selflessly sacrifice their own tasks to help them out of a sticky situation. Bravo!

But that rosy assessment is likely to vanish if we do it persistently. They'll begin to think that we don't have faith in their ability.

That said, there are a couple of powerful reasons why we'd do this only as a last resort. But it's also instructive to dig deeper into our motivations.

Leaping in to rewrite can show we need to develop our diagnostic skills

It's true, time pressure will be the main reason we'll take over from the original writer. But this entirely reasonable justification could be masking something else.

Are we taking control because we find it easier to change the document than explain what the document needs? This can seem the easier option for some reviewers.

If we've found writing easy, we're not always aware of what we're doing and why it works. We might read a document and know that something is wrong but struggle to articulate it.

If this is the case, we'll find it far easier to leap in because we're confident that, once we're behind the wheel, our instincts will take us where we need to go. And this may well be true. But equally, we may also be guiding the document towards our own preferences. Remember Tip 1.

Either way, we have stopped being a reviewer, and we have compromised our ability to objectively judge any changes.

Tip 2: Rewrite it yourself only as a last resort.

3 Do you give more feedback on word choice than overall structure?

Reviewers can become stuck in the habit of reading

When we're asked to review a document, the great danger is that we don't actually review it. Instead, we start reading it.

When we do that, we scrutinise line by line, where we tend to notice issues such as:
- words that are either too formal, too informal or just plain wrong
- grammatical mistakes such as mismatched subjects and verbs
- poor use of apostrophes, commas or semicolons.

These are issues of expression and style – what we call micro issues – that will detract from the professionalism of the document. We will want to correct them at some point, but they are generally not what we should be looking for on a first pass.

If we do look at the smaller issues, we risk not addressing bigger issues that will make a more profound difference to the document.

Most documents need a structural review rather than an expression edit

When we run workshops for decision-makers, we ask what most frustrates them, and they rarely nominate concerns around expression, let alone style. Their pet peeves tend to be:
- too much information
- too little information
- documents that don't get to the point.

These are issues of clarity and brevity that we can't address solely by looking at the micro level. In fact, we'll be wasting our time if we allow ourselves to be distracted by expression and style. We can only address these more important issues by focusing initially on content, structure and design.

We need to ask if:
- the core message is clear
- the structure is appropriate
- the design supports the content.

Tip 3: Prioritise structure over expression.

4 Do you develop the document rather than the writer?

If so, we understand. When there are so many documents to review and so little time in which to do it, it's very easy to focus on the document and defer the development of the writer.

But there are good reasons to not forget about the writer entirely.

Focus only on fixing the document and you may face the same problem next time

Yes, it's frustrating when we're already under the pump, and we get yet another document that needs more than a light review. Only those destined for sainthood would see a flawed document as an excellent learning opportunity for the writer. If our first thoughts aren't generous and kind-hearted, we shouldn't judge ourselves too harshly.
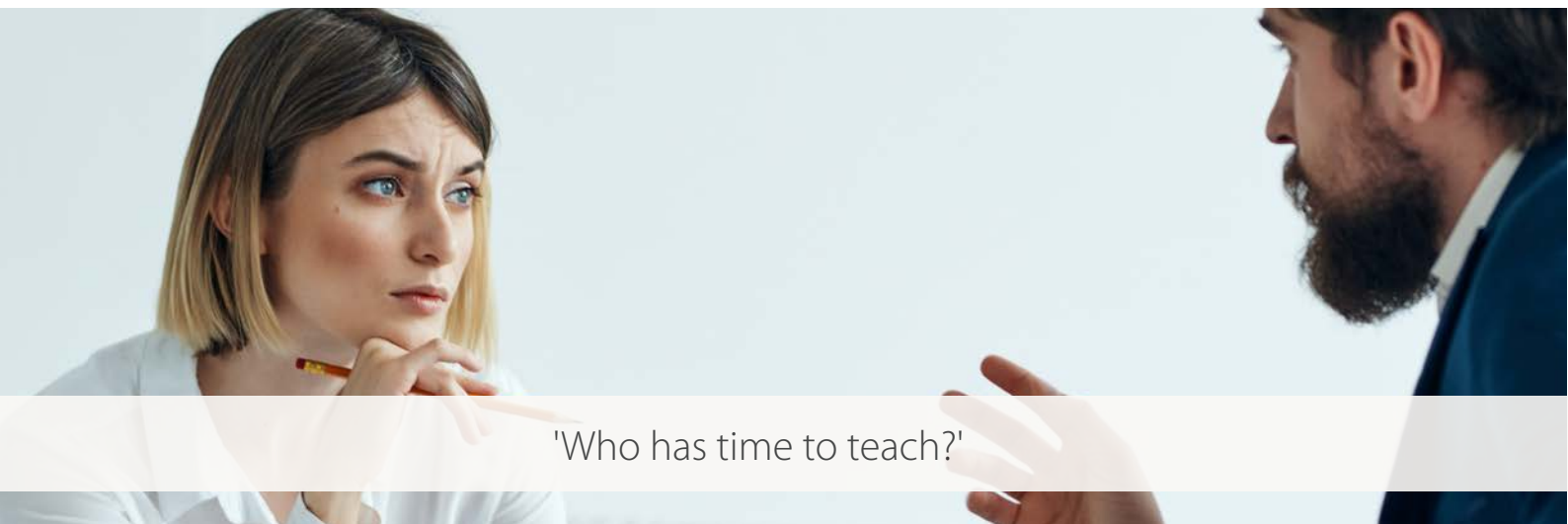
'Who has time to teach?'

However, if we don't use this document to develop the writer, the next document might be equally flawed, leading to even greater frustration.

Developing the writer has wider repercussions

The only way we get to move from the gruelling work of a structural edit to the relative bliss of a light expression touch-up is to take every chance to advance the writer's skills.

Ideally, we will do this at the time, but that's not always possible. Sometimes we have to give very direct instructions or even – last resort, you promise! – leap in and rewrite it ourselves.
At these frenetic moments, it's simply not feasible to use a patient, Socratic line of questioning to deepen a writer's understanding of a draft.

But once the dust has settled, we should find a little space to walk our writer through the changes. The time we invest here can save us more time later on, help protect the writer's self-confidence and deepen the respect our team feels for us.

Tip 4: Develop the writer, not just the document.

5 Do you tell writers what to do without explaining why?

We identified earlier that some reviewers, even very good ones, can find it hard to articulate what they want writers to do.

Most of us would struggle even more if we had to supply reasons for why we do what we do. Yet, without that rationale, convincing a writer to change can be nearly impossible.

Human beings generally won't change until they understand why

Most of us don't like change, and it's only with reasoning that we can come to accept it. Unfortunately, when it comes to writing, most of us are short on explanations.

Think about many of the beliefs we hold around language:

- Never split the infinitive. Why?
- Don't start a sentence with a conjunction. Why?
- Don't end a sentence with a preposition. Why?

As it happens, we'll struggle to find reliable, modern support for any of these grammatical 'rules'. But the point holds – we were often told what to do but not why.

Not explaining our changes means that writers' poor habits will persist

What if we want our writers to use active rather than passive voice? What argument would we use? That they should do it because the style manual says so? That typically doesn't sway hearts and minds.

The problem becomes even greater when we need to recommend macro-level changes because we received little to no instruction around structure and design.

How many structural models are you aware of? Which would you use where? And more importantly, why?

It's little wonder that we'll want to leap in and rewrite a document or avoid walking our writers through our changes. Most of us haven't been well equipped to explain why they should do what we're telling them to do.

Tip 5: Explain not only what to do, but why.

6 Do you give feedback that is not always constructive?

Those new to editing often expect that formal training in reviewing professional documents will cover how to discuss a someone's writing ability politely and give feedback constructively.

What may come as a surprise to many when they begin to explore the editing process is that the feedback itself is generally not the real challenge.

Good feedback depends far more on diagnosis than delivery

We can consider the writing task from 2 angles. We need to focus first on what to say before we can think about how to say it. Unfortunately, we tend to focus too little time on the first step and far too much on the second.

'I'm dreading giving feedback - the draft's in such bad shape.'

The same is true of reviewing. Working out what the writer needs to do is far more important than how you deliver that advice. The first of these 2 skills is the rarer.

If we focus on the micro rather than the macro and struggle to articulate what we do, let alone why, it's going to be very hard to deliver insightful feedback. Our advice is going to be especially unreliable if it's based on our own subjective preferences rather than deferring to a broadly accepted objective framework.

In short, if we've not been following best practice in all the previous sections, it will begin to explain why we might think we need help with how we present our feedback.

On the bright side, if we can address those earlier issues with the document, giving good feedback becomes far less mysterious.

Try turning specific grievances into a general lesson

During the review, look for patterns. Is there a persistent issue that pops up in several places? If we can identify a general pattern rather than nitpick over every transgression, the feedback can be shorter and more productive.

Obviously, we should tailor our feedback based on:

- the writer's experience level
- the time you have available
- your relationship with them.

If they're seasoned and their self-esteem is robust, we can afford to be more direct. But if the writer is new or we sense their confidence is fragile, we'll need to take more time to explain our expectations.

We'll then draw from a variety of feedback delivery styles, including:

- compliments ('Your core message effectively summarises the key reasons')
- questions ('Will this structure help the reader find what they need?')
- suggestions ('Consider if the subheadings could be more useful at a glance')
- commands ('Add the reason in subheading 2 to your introduction').

The only style of feedback we should avoid – and the style that is unfortunately common – is judgement.

Judgements can leave your writers confused and dispirited

The worst kind of feedback is subjective, vague and generally unhelpful. A reviewer with well-developed diagnostic skills will look to make their comments objective, crystal clear and, ideally, inspiring.

Here are some examples that can point the pathway to more constructive feedback.

Subjective feedback	Questions to develop better feedback
I don't like the opening.	Why isn't it effective?
	What element of best practice does it not comply with?
	Is it getting too long to get to the point, for example?
The middle section is boring.	Why is it not engaging?
	Is it the wrong structure?
	Or is it the right structure with excessive detail?
Change this.	Why? Is it unclear?
	Is it an issue of tone?
	Is it not sufficiently persuasive?
	Do we need to be more diplomatic?

Generally, the feedback session will go well if we:

- remain calm
- stay objective
- maintain the writer's confidence
- show we genuinely care.

Tip 6: Look for patterns, tailor feedback and avoid judgements.

7 Do you give advice that's at odds with the last document you reviewed?

Now we've developed our own reviewing skills, all that's left to do is fix the rest of our organisation. Seriously.

Writers get frustrated when their reviewers are not on the same page

Writers frequently tell us that what frustrates them most is 'Getting contradictory advice from 2 different reviewers'.

Writers will develop their documents in line with your insightful feedback. For them to then be reviewed by someone who's still working to their own subjective guidelines is incredibly frustrating.

It also wastes more of everyone's precious time.

Sharing an objective framework can streamline the approval process

We won't ever get 2 reviewers to agree on everything. We might disagree on the best reasons to make our argument or the best way to counter likely criticism. We might not see eye-to-eye on the exact level of detail, and some of the words might not be exactly as we would have them.

But if we both apply the same objective framework, we should be able to agree on the structural pillars that are critical to achieving our communication goal.

What's more, when both reviewers prioritise macro over micro, they tend to spend less time arguing over word choice. You will both know there are bigger fish to fry.

We won't ever entirely eliminate differences of opinion, but we can definitely minimise them if everyone is singing from the same song sheet.

Tip 7: Get everyone to follow the same objective framework.

On the next page, we've summarised our key advice for reviewing other people's writing. From reviewing the document rather than rewriting it, to keeping feedback objective and constructive – follow these tips for efficient and effective reviewing.

For further advice and individual feedback on your reviewing skills, consider attending Plain English Foundation's Masterclass in Reviewing.

7 reviewing principles to apply

1   **Base your review on what will work for the reader.**

     ✗   Don't impose your own style as it will frustrate writers and not always improve the document.

     ✓   Do keep the reader in mind so that you and the author share a common understanding of the document goals.

2   **Review the document and don't rewrite it.**

     ✗   Don't leap in and edit too readily as it steals precious time and can sap the self-esteem of the writer.

     ✓   Do develop diagnostic skills so you can guide the writer more efficiently and keep your objectivity.

3   **Prioritise a structure review over expression editing.**

     ✗   Don't read line by line as it can lead you to highlight grammar and punctuation errors and neglect larger issues.

     ✓   Do focus first on macro elements to ensure the edit addresses key reader concerns.

4   **Develop the writer, not just the document.**

     ✗   Don't focus solely on improving the document or you'll face the same problems next time.

     ✓   Do invest time in the writer, so you encourage self-reliance and save time with the next reviews.

5   **Explain what to do and why.**

     ✗   Don't give feedback without justification as it can appear subjective and be less persuasive.

     ✓   Do offer reasons with your suggestions so the writer understands how the change will benefit the reader.

6   **Keep feedback objective and constructive.**

     ✗   Don't nitpick every issue, make subjective comments or refer to anything other than objective parts of the document.

     ✓   Do look for patterns in the document's issues so that you can turn the review into a lesson that develops the writer.

7   **Get everyone to follow the same objective framework.**

     ✗   Don't limit your reviewing system to your team, because this risks writers risk getting contradictory feedback.

     ✓   Do call for wider consistency among reviewers to improve efficiency and foster confidence in the approval process.

About Plain English Foundation

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Allen Palmer is a plain language expert and experienced trainer at Plain English Foundation. The Foundation has trained more than 16,000 public sector staff in plain language and redeveloped thousands of documents and templates. Allen is particularly passionate about writing both more persuasively and more efficiently.

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