

# Secrets of Style 2

A practical guide for today's

Jewish writer

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"I was born to be an editor, I always edit everything. I edit my room at least once a week. Hotels are made for me. I can change a hotel room so thoroughly that even its proprietor doesn't recognize it... I edit people's clothes, dressing them infallibly in the right lines... I change everyone's coiffure—except those that please me—and these I gaze at with such satisfaction that I become suspect. I edit people's tones of voice, their laughter, their words. I change their gestures, their photographs. I change the books I read, the music I hear... It's this incessant, unavoidable observation, this need to distinguish and impose, that has made me an editor..."

—Margaret Anderson, editor and founder of  
*The Little Review*

## CONFESSION: IT'S TRUE. EDITORS LOVE

to fix things. After all, if they didn't, they wouldn't be very good editors.

Writers, on the other hand, enjoy creating more than revising, and the editor's penchant to fix things can be difficult to handle. Especially when the thing the editor wants to fix is your manuscript.

But here's an important secret. One I think you already know. A good writer not only knows how to create, she also knows how to revise. In fact, for many writers, this is where the real work of writing happens, and a writer can spend as much time editing as writing. Here is where the writer exchanges pen for scalpel and the unnecessary gets cut, painful as it is (I recommend a good anesthetic, like chocolate, before you start).

Here are a few tips to help you get through this stage of writing. I know it's hard. I've been there, too. But it's worth it! (By the way, editors are very good hand holders, and many editors will help you with this process. You may even come to like it!)





## 4 RULES YOU DON'T HAVE TO FOLLOW (REALLY!)

Somewhere along the way certain rules have taken on the aura of the Ten Commandments, and you either bend into a pretzel to avoid breaking them (and sound awkward and stilted as a result), or you feel terribly guilty or rebellious for breaking them. These rules really were made to be broken. So ditch the guilt. You were right all along.

1. **Thou shalt not split infinitives.** Infinitives have been split since time immemorial, and nobody made a protest until fairly recently—somewhere around the 19th century. This happened because grammarians were applying Latin grammar rules to English. In Latin, you can't split infinitives, but English is not Latin. So it's okay, go ahead. Go crazy. Split an infinitive.
2. **Thou shalt not end a sentence with a preposition.** There's a famous story about Winston Churchill, who got annoyed when a clerk tortuously reworded a sentence to avoid ending a sentence with a preposition. The prime minister sprawled across the page: "This is nonsense up with which I will not put." Again, it seems those Latin grammarians are the culprit. If you are writing in Latin, never end a sentence in a preposition. But if you write English, yes, you can! (That doesn't mean you shouldn't end a sentence strongly, but do it because it sounds better, not because you want to avoid breaking this "rule.")
3. **Thou shalt not start a sentence with a conjunction.** Doesn't it feel good to know that all those times that you started sentences with "and" or "but," you weren't really breaking any rules? There is actually no basis in this rule, and it's only English teachers who really insist on it. You're not in school anymore; you won't get points taken off for starting a sentence with a conjunction. If it sounds better to write it that way, then do it.
4. **Thou shalt not use the passive voice.** Passive voice (where the "ball was thrown" rather than "someone threw the ball") is a perfectly acceptable construction. It exists to be used, when needed. True, sometimes passive voice is a sign of sloppy writing, but other times only the passive voice will do. When the subject of the sentence isn't known or important, you can write it in passive voice. It's also useful in breaking up the tedium of a paragraph (see "Vary sentence structure below").

On the other hand, here are a few things a writer should try to avoid.

## 3 COMMON MISTAKES WRITERS MAKE

1. **Don't rely on the same old, same old. We all do it.** There are certain words we like to use or are a longtime part of our vocabulary treasure-house, and we end up turning to those same words over and over again. Words like observe, great, shudder, grin. Allow yourself to expand and find alternatives. Overuse of the same words, as great as those words are, will just make your writing tedious. Don't worry about this in the writing stage when you want to let your writing flow. When you reach the editing stage, do a Find and replace these words with new, more interesting ones (keep a thesaurus handy if you can't think of any) and see how much more colorful your writing becomes!
2. **Vary your sentence structure.** If even you find it boring, then your readers will,

too. One easy solution is to vary the sentence structure. English provides so many kinds (especially now that you're ending them with prepositions, starting them with conjunctions, and using the passive). Make them long, make them short, move the clauses around. Don't let yourself fall into a sentence-structure rut. This too can easily be done in the editing stage.

**3. Cut the clichés.** One writer I know went through his entire manuscript with a highlighter seeking out the clichés and changing them. What a difference it made! A cliché can be changed just by adding a twist to it, changing the metaphor to something new, or simply deleting it (got your scalpel?). So instead of "She was as happy as a lark" why not let her be "as happy as a bookworm in the world's biggest library" or "as happy as a chocolate lover in Hershey's chocolate factory"? (I would definitely be happy as a lark in a chocolate factory.)

## SOME GREAT ONLINE RESOURCES

The field of publishing sure has changed in 20 years. When I first started editing, only the typesetter and the secretary had a computer. The rest of us sat around a table editing on hard copy. E-mail hadn't yet been invented, so communication between editors and authors were conducted by phone or face-to-face meetings.

Here's another confession: Sometimes I miss those days. There was something so peaceful about sitting in the office with just me, a manuscript, and a red pen. No frantic checking of e-mails. No dealing with formatting or tracking. And only doctors and the president were expected to be on call 24/7.

But I also have to confess that working on the computer has made a lot of things easier. One of those is the treasure of online resources at my fingertips. Here are a few that I like. You might find them useful too:

**thesaurus.com** Each word provided has a link to another entry, so you can search for words as much as you like in no time at all.

**merriam-webster.com** Here is Merriam-Webster's dictionary online. Though I still like to use my old battered dictionary, I know a lot of editors and writers like being able to search for a word online.

**chabad.org** has the entire Tanach in vowelized Hebrew and English. A great resource, especially if you don't have an English Tanach on hand.

**mechon-mamre.org** provides the entire Tanach both in vowelized Hebrew and not; this is useful if you need to type in a pasuk in Hebrew—you can just copy and paste—or do a search for a pasuk that you need to find.

**Babylon.com** provides translations of Hebrew (and many other languages), as well as a dictionary and thesaurus. It's a great resource when I don't want to haul out my old *milon* and flip through pages.

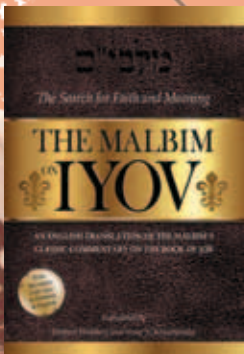
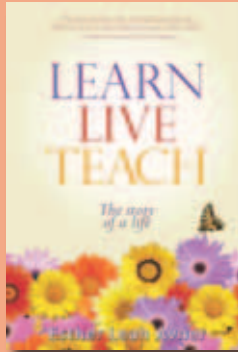
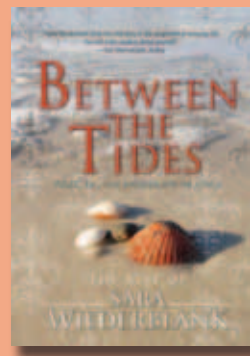
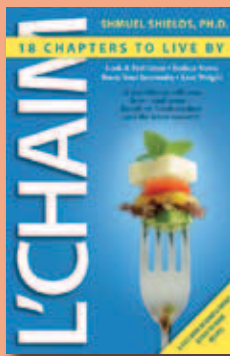
**hebc.com** will convert your Hebrew dates to English and vice versa. Historical fiction and nonfiction writers and editors take note.

If you want to learn more, come join my copyediting course or inquire about manuscript development and editing. For information, contact me at [editor@brandname-publishing.com](mailto:editor@brandname-publishing.com).

*Good luck!*  
*Suri Brand*







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