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### **Edit with Post-its**

**Note:** This idea is adapted from my Drake colleague, assistant professor David Remund, who originated this in a PR writing class.

This exercise could be used to help students find a focus for their writing, tighten leads, write concise headlines and cutlines, identify a key point in their reading, or any other task that requires them to distill an idea to its essential elements.

It's a "quick-and-dirty" exercise, easy to drop into a class one day with little planning or preparation. This works best if students start the exercise not knowing anything about its purpose or direction. Give them plenty of time to work through each step.

1. Start by having students free-write on an 8½ x 11 (or even larger) sheet of paper. Encourage them to be messy: jot down phrases or single words, sketch, doodle, scribble, draw diagrams, draw arrows. You want to encourage creative thinking. (Colored markers or pencils seems to help.) Depending on the class, task or assignment, you could ask them to free-write:

- about a magazine article idea they want to pitch;
- about how to write the opening of a story they've already reported;
- about the main point in a piece of scholarly or media writing;
- about what they think is the most important information in a news story;
- about what they see in a photograph as they prepare to write a caption.

Give them several minutes; if they slow down, encourage them to keep writing. The point at this stage is generative thinking and writing.

2. Give them a new sheet of 8 ½ x 11 paper. Ask them to distill their scribbles, jots, diagrams, etc., into reasonably coherent sentences, filling the paper if they need to.

3. Give them half a sheet of 8 ½ x 11 paper. Ask them to boil down their sentences to fit. (Yes, at this point, many will catch on and begin writing smaller. That's OK.)

4. Give them a few 3x3 Post-it notes. (This is where it gets difficult for many of them; they may need a few tries.) Ask them to make their point (or write their lead, or define their story's focus) in only as many words as can fit on the Post-it.

5. Aannndddd... (you see where this is going, don't you?) Give them a few 2x1½ Post-its and write their story focus, lead, main point from the reading, or headline or cutline on it. (Again, it may take a few tries.) What emerges should be nuggets that students can then polish into a story focus, a lead, a thesis statement, or a headline or cutline.

Summary:

The physicality of the shrinking paper size seems to sharpen students' thinking. It helps them visualize the thinking-writing-revising process, moving it from abstract theory to concrete practice. It's a more graphic and visceral way to help students distill their thinking and write concisely than merely providing them word counts or page counts.

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**Note:** This idea originates from “The Layers of Magazine Editing,” by Michael Robert Evans of Indiana University. I’ve adapted it for the classroom.

My students struggle with story organization, whether it’s their own or a story they’re editing. The struggle becomes more acute the longer the story is. Yet they must learn to see the entire manuscript as a whole, not merely as a collection of paragraphs or sentences.

This is a hands-on, tactile exercise to be used in an editing or a writing class. It does take a fair amount of prep time and can fill a class period. It works well when students work in pairs or trios. (And it won’t work at all if there is a breeze in the room.)

For an editing class, I like to do this exercise first with a well-organized newspaper or magazine article students will be interested in but aren’t likely to have read. It shouldn’t be too complicated a topic, or too long or too short.

Print out enough copies of the article for each group, and tape the sheets of paper together (bottom of page 1 to top of page 2; bottom of page 2 to top of page 3) so you have one long ribbon of text. Cut up the text into individual paragraphs, mix up the paragraphs’ order, stack them, and place them in an envelope. (Evans suggests throwing the stack of paragraphs into the air and letting them fall to the ground, but that can get messy and confusing with several groups in one room!)

Give each group an envelope containing all the now out-of-order paragraphs. Tell them to read each paragraph and write a topic label on each. Any paragraphs that share the same topic label go in the same stack.

Once students have sorted all the paragraphs, they should have several stacks, each its own topic or theme. There will also usually be a number of “strays,” paragraphs that don’t seem to fit in any stack. Ask students if any of the “strays” would work as a lead or a conclusion. If not, ask them if it belongs in the story at all. If it doesn’t belong, place it in a “discard” pile for now.

Now ask students to re-read the paragraphs in one themed stack and arrange them in order. Do the same thing for the other stacks.

Next, ask students to arrange the themes or topics in order. Assemble the paragraphs in order in a “Grand Pile.” Compare the students’ order to the order in the original article. Where does their order disagree with the original? Which is better? Do they see where the paragraphs in the discard pile might fit? Or should the writer have omitted them? Can they identify the writer’s transitions?

I like to start with a well-organized article so students can see how a writer builds the internal structure. You can then bring in a poorly organized article and do the exercise

again, with the goal to help the writer organize the piece, rather than merely identify the structure.

In a writing class, you can vary this exercise by having students bring an early draft of their own article, cut up in paragraphs, to class. They can collaborate on doing the exercise with their own and others' articles. Once students have finished this, they're positioned nicely for a class session on writing smooth transitions.

Summary:

This again is a tactile, concrete way to learn what can be an abstract step in the writing process. The physical act of literally rearranging paragraphs to enhance story organization seems to give students a sense of confidence and control that eludes them when staring at the screen.