CADENCE EDITORIAL SERVICES

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Newsletter Challenge Summer 2020:
On the Virtues of Clarity, Concision, and Cadence

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The Prelude

Ari Lewis, host of the Mastering the Attention Economy podcast, recently hired me as a writing coach and to help him with his newsletter. We really enjoyed working together (see Ari's ROI here), and he proposed I take on a newsletter editing challenge. With Ari's help, I compiled a sample of newsletters, and I'm sharing my work here and on Twitter, too.

The Challenge as a Solution

The crux: Demonstrate to newsletter writers like you how I can help grow your platform and boost audience engagement through greater clarity, concision, and cadence.

- **On clarity:** Your readers want to use minimal effort to identify three things straight away: topic, audience, and reason. **They want to know what the article's about, who it's for, and why it's important today.** And they want to understand what you're saying. Once the storyline gets foggy, readers bounce.
- **On concision:** A durable rule from popular music: "Don't bore us, get to the chorus." Sure, long-form newsletters work, as long as they're not longer than they need to be.
- **On cadence:** Readers dig a variety of phrase lengths and sentence lengths. And surprises.

The Method of the Challenge

Editing for Clarity

Three is the magic number. After I read through the essay, I tally the topic, audience, and reason. Then I identify the lead (or lede) and its location. Is the lead clear? Does it appear in the first two paragraphs? If not, why not?

On key players and keywords. Are the key players properly introduced? Are the keywords properly defined? Readers only want to work so hard, especially online, where the latest bits of brilliance at *The New Yorker, The Root,* and *The Onion* are just a click away.

On the author's voice. My aim is to preserve it. If a story demands that I reorder the paragraphs, or reorganize some evidence, I will. Clarity takes priority. Each paragraph needs to drives your reader onward.

On structure. Does the structure of the essay hold the pieces in place? Do the subheads allow your reader to scan different sections and still follow along? Is there enough background information? Is there too much?

On sign posts. Guide your readers. Don't make them guess, or expect them to proceed on faith.

Editing for Concision

With the heavy lifting taken care of, I proceed with a lighter touch.

The virtue of brevity. Your 27-word sentence may be completely brilliant. If it's bookended by two other 27-word sentences, that's ill — as in ill-conceived. In short order, I'll be wielding my scalpel.

Start well, end well. "The beginning is," according to Plato, "the most important part of the work." Let's make certain you're pulling in your reader with a great header, a great lead, and opening paragraphs that are brimming with clarity.

Endings matter, too. As William Zinser notes: "[the ending] has its own virtues which give the reader a lift and which linger when the article is over." In my edit of 500-700 word selections, though, I often don't make it to the end of the work — which is by design. I hope my followers will want to see how the newsletters end and follow the links back to Substack (in most cases).

On metaphors. Humans love analogies and metaphors that work. The right metaphor shifts the frame of reference, so stick with it. Multiple frames of reference can tire your readers. Even if you stretch a metaphor to the edge of absurdity, it can work brilliantly.

Edit for Cadence

On variety and the spice of life. For my purposes, cadence refers to the rhythmic flow of a sequence of sounds or words. To be clear: we're not talking about the rigid beat grids of 80s dance pop. We're talking jazz, and hooky post-punk, and even Bach's dance suites. We're talking about the different methods to organize rhythm into toe-tapping designs.

Yes, SEO matters. Yes, we're always in a hurry. And yes we have 12 tabs open in this window. Still, variety remains the roasted garlic in your marinara. Variety in phrase lengths and sentence lengths spices up your copy. (See diction ninja Gary Provost **here** for details.)

The dogged edit. After a grammar and spellcheck, I print the essay and read it aloud. Just as dogs can hear sounds too soft in volume and too high in frequency, respectively, for human detection, the human ear can detect things the human eye skips over.

The AI edit. I use an app or two to check the readability of each essay and, on occasion, tally before-and-after metrics on clarity, concision, and cadence. Another handful of syllables may be adjusted at this stage, but otherwise it's ready for your adoring public.

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