



Line by Line: How to Edit Your Own Writing

Claire Kehrwald Cook

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The essential guide for all writers. With over 700 examples of original and edited sentences, this book provides information about editing techniques, grammar, and usage for every writer from the student to the published author.

Line by Line: How to Edit Your Own Writing Details

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Who Watches says

Here comes the contrarian review: this book is one of the best on style that you will find--and trust me, I've read many. The only stipulation, which others have rightly pointed out, is that this book is often tough going. The negative reviews are understandable given the difficulty of this "introductory" book, but so long as you have a modicum of grammatical competence, you'll discover Cook's advice to be of greater depth than that found in most other style books. Simply put, this book gets straight to the point and makes no concessions to those uninitiated in, at the very least, high school level grammar. If you've forgotten said grammar or if you want a more accessible but less technical analysis of style, then stick with Joseph M. Williams's book, equally excellent and more widely used than Cook's. If, however, you can handle the constant parsing of sentences, then you might find Line By Line to be well worth a look.

The appendix on usage is also very useful.

Timons Esaias says

Beyond Strunk & White, there are few classic references for the basic copyediting that so many authors are ill-equipped to do. Line by Line is one of the classics, and it's something one should read through every four or five years. (I say that having only poked around in it, previously. This is my first time going cover to cover.) Just as I do, for instance, with Strunk & White.

It addresses the very basics of effective rhetoric at the word and sentence level (alas, it does not rise to the paragraph): how to tighten sentences; how to conjoin parts of a sentence; how to keep parallel parts of a sentence parallel; how to police errors in number and reference; and how to master problems of punctuation. There are two vital appendices, which go beyond dictionaries, but which take up less space than full grammars or usage manuals: one on the parts of a sentence, and how they work; one on problems of usage.

What I admire about this book is that it is based in the practical work of copyediting, and the actual problems that come up. It talks about the debates among experts, and historical trends, and about context. Cook is not too quick to insist on a rule, but isn't afraid to point out that it's better to be safe than shame-faced. Neither a rules-Nazi nor a linguistic anarchist, she.

The book can be dry, but it's darned efficient. 205 pages covers a universe of sins, so it's worth sticking with it. I wouldn't advise reading more than one chapter at a time, though. The brain needs rest.

The reason I'm only giving this four stars has nothing to do with initial quality, but with the passage of time. This book is 32 years old, at this writing, and usage, especially, is a moving target. Note that she relies heavily on the Oxford English Dictionary and Fowler's Modern English Usage, which are both fine works, but which are both about British English. Eighteen years after this book, we finally got a reliable American usage manual, Garner's, and despite its historical gems, Americans should put their Fowler'ses aside.

Which means, I think, that it's time for a Line by Line update.

Jay Cruz says

For a book on editing your own writing, I found it a very difficult read. It can be a useful reference -it has more than enough examples- but its dense pace, again, for a book about editing, is inexcusable. Here's one example so you can see what I mean:

"Although the correlative conjunctions must precede parallel parts of the sentence, the terms that make up these pairs do not invariably function together. Each can operate alone. In particular, you can use *not only* without necessarily going on to *but also* or *but*. *Not only* always promises more to come, but the rules of rhetoric allow alternative ways of keeping that promise"

If those words weren't in italic the paragraph would be incomprehensible, but the book is filled with back to back paragraphs like these. It really was a drag to go through. I felt more like I was reading a book about *How to Edit Your Own Writing Like a Grammarian*

Steven says

As another in a long line of writing advice books, it's simply OK. The aim of this book, as it more or less relates to the writer, is one of phrasing and word choice for the purpose of meaning. If you're writing essays or collegial papers this book will be relevant in the advice that it offers. I would not recommend this for anyone attempting fiction writing, as style and approach are different ball games.

Good enough to hold on to as a reference guide to double check certain issues your grammar check might flag.

Gerard Wilson says

If you think you write well (as I did) I strongly recommend reading this book. I have a number of helpful books on the creative and technical aspects of writing prose, but Claire Kehrwald Cook's book is by far and away the most helpful I have read. Where other books help in curbing the tendency to overwrite, this book puts a scalpel in the writer's hand that enables him to explore and cut deeply. You will be surprised how much the resulting excisions and rearrangements improve your writing. I found the chapters 'Faulty Connections' and 'Il-matched Partners' the most helpful. Without doubt this book has improved my writing. It will continue to do so as I regularly return to it.

Michael Feehly says

Very clear and unobjectionable advice for writers. The instruction is clear, based on examples; the prose is lucid, cleanly polished. However, page after page of perfect and perfectly unremarkable prose can put one to sleep. This isn't so much a problem, except when the examples of good and bad sentences are reversed. I found myself re-reading several negative examples because I was perplexed—how can this be right? It turns out it wasn't right; I had been dozing off, reading without challenging the order of bad example, good

example.

I agree with the author in her introduction that the way to read this book is to skip to the appendices and read then, and then return to the main text and begin. Appendix A is an English grammar for dummies that doesn't dumb itself down. Appendix B is a gem: an index of common mistakes in writing and using words, an A-to-Z of pesky shibboleths (Alternate/Alternative to Who/Whom). The main text covers errors in wordiness, word order, parallelism, agreement between pronouns and antecedents, and punctuation. So—jargon, dangling modifiers, commas, (non)restrictive clauses, double genitives, and semicolons. The usual suspects.

I give this four stars instead of five. Because I had expected this to be an holistic guide to editing one's writing, I am disappointed that this a primer on how to copy-edit one's writing. There is no advice on drafting, organizing, revising, etc. This, plainly and simply, is a guide to line by line textual revision at the sentence level without regard for content.

Meg says

Useful examples and very comprehensive...to a fault at times. I appreciated the level of detail, but I couldn't read more than one or two sections at a time before feeling overwhelmed. Still, it's practical and has plenty of tips on how to make your writing easier to understand.

Consider using it as a tip of the day book that you jump into every morning, though. It's certainly not something you can read cover to cover in a sitting.

Jae Jae says

"Line by Line" teaches you how to (copy)edit your own work--or that of others. It covers tightening wordy sentences, turning weak verbs into strong ones, achieving parallel structure, and making sure subject/verb and pronoun/antecedent match. The book also has a chapter on punctuation, an explanation of sentence parts, and a list of words that are often misused.

It's a good book on copyediting and grammar. Not always easy to read, but it provides plenty of examples, most of them taken from nonfiction books.

Jb says

The topic is dry and so are some passages of this book.

But the benefits are immense for a non-native speaker like myself.

The most important lesson is: Be careful and review a lot.

Chapter on punctuation is hard to read but very valuable nonetheless. First time being told the exact rules governing those pesky semicolons and dashes.

Karen says

I really just skimmed this, so the stars should be taken with a grain of salt. It looks like a fine book, but didn't appear to be adding anything to the collection of copyediting/style books I've been reading, so I'm going to pass. I've mostly just marked it read and assigned middling stars so I'll remember that I did look at this one, and not keep repeatedly adding it to my "to read" list every time I come across the reference.

Quiver says

A good guide to fixing syntactical issues in prose. Sorted according to issue, comes with examples and explanations. Not overly heavy on grammatical terminology, although there is an Appendix that summarises the basics.

A bit too fond of analysing its own writing, that is, of referring to a sentence two lines up as an example of the phenomenon that sentence discusses. It saves space, but feels like molasses on the wings of an agile reader.

Even though useful to read once, I'm not convinced it will be a good reference book. A shame.

Vanessa Ricci-Thode says

I honestly couldn't finish reading this. It's dull and outdated and nitpicky. A lot of the grammar rules in here have changed, and while it's got an abundance of good examples, you're probably better off finding a more recent grammar book, or a new edition of a style guide. For a writer, it's probably not terrible, but as an editor, there was absolutely nothing new here that I haven't learned in much more interesting books.

Jeffrey Fisher says

Valuable but dry at times, as to be expected.

Stacy-Ann says

This book is really great and I will still continue to take my time reading it.

Krystol says

I thought this book was really good. It was easy to understand and I was able to see my own mistakes with writing. I would recommend this book to all writers and college students.
