



Many Authors, One Voice

Editing multi-author projects

Red Pencil Conference 2019

Laura Cameron

Editor

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Office of the
Washington
State Auditor
Pat McCarthy



Laura Cameron

Eh-ditor (not aw-ditor)



I'm from the government

I'm here to help...



Herding authors: Better or worse than cats? (Discuss)

- Wrangling the gig
- Wrangling the authors
- Wrangling the document itself

Where are such projects in the wild?



Journals

- Academic
- Scientific
- Social sciences

Textbooks, chapter books
(possibly including fiction
by two authors)

Sales brochures
and catalogs



Where are such projects in the wild?



State and local governments

- Reports to peers
- Outreach to constituents

Corporate and business

- Annual, quarterly reports
- Magazines
- Websites – especially for companies with many divisions or departments

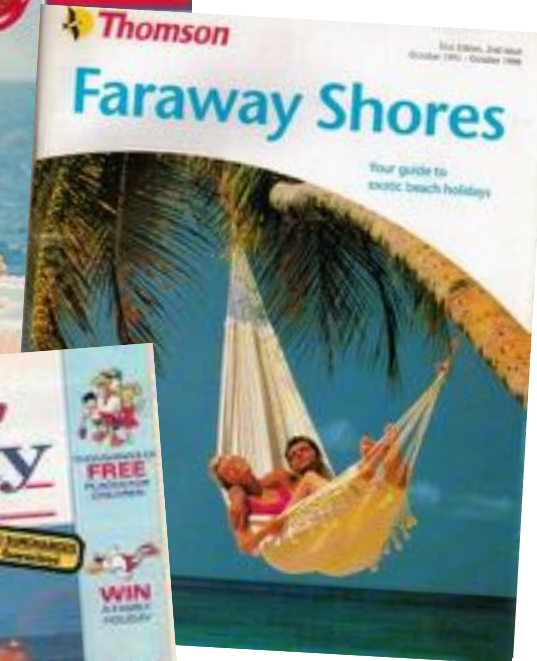


My own clowers and kindles



Thomson Holidays

- 22 products
 - 14+ editors, some seasonal
 - 12-20 copywriters (freelance)
 - 8 photographers (freelance)
 - 100+ resort managers worldwide
- Tight, rigid production schedule
 - Tone specific to each product, general corporate voice

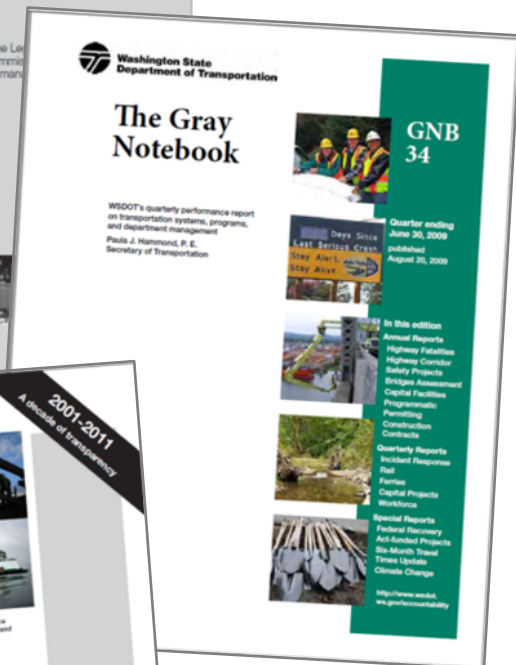
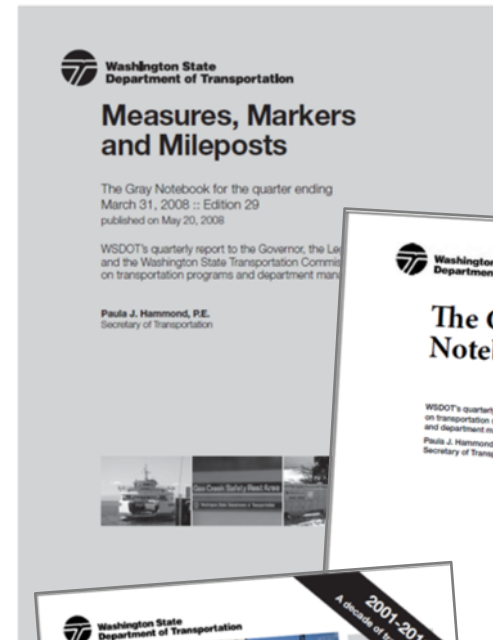


My own clowers and kindles



WSDOT's Gray Notebook (GNB)

- Quarterly report to Governor and Legislature
 - 4 editors, production editor
 - 3 part-time graphic designers
 - 20+ authors
 - Rotating quarterly, semi-annual, annual topics
- Rigid production schedule
 - Tone: OneDoT

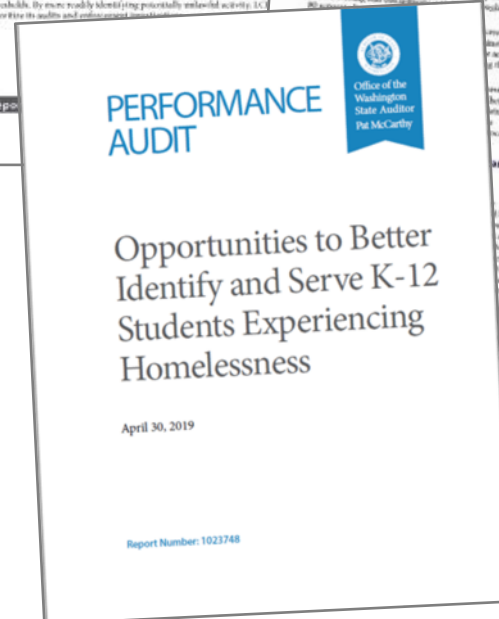
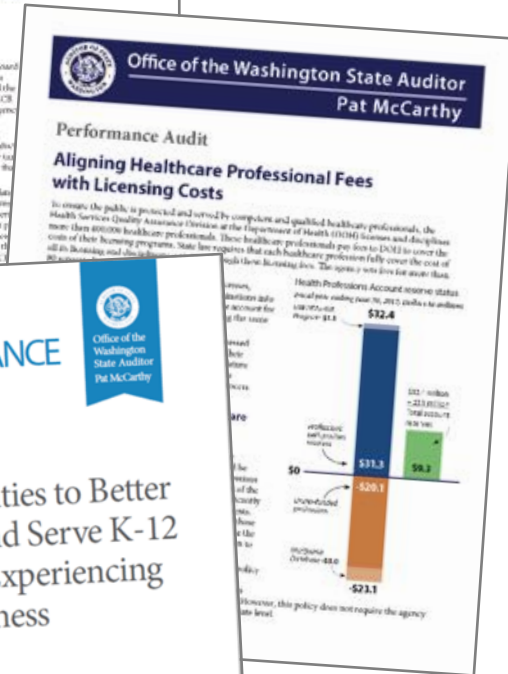
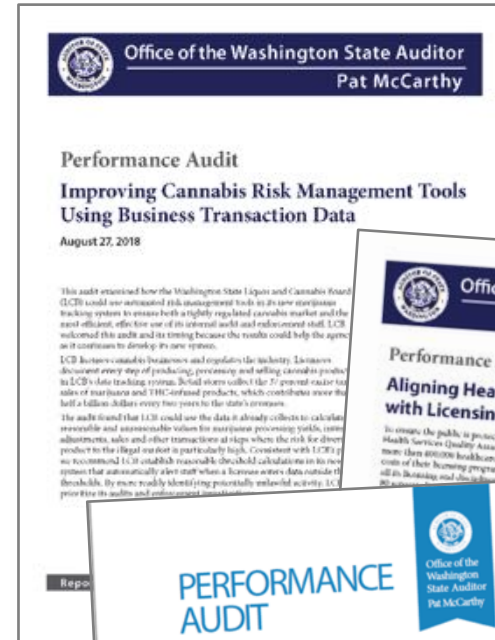


My own clowders and kindles



State Auditor's Office performance audits

- Individual reports, published on sao.wa.gov
- 1 editor, with back up
- Multiple report authors drawn from audit team
- 6-9 months work, 1 month to write, 2 months of review
- Publication scheduled to coincide with hearing dates
- Tone: Individual (due to subject matter) but must meet SAO standards



Where not?



Any journalism setting where the individual voice of the author is prized

- Newspapers
- Magazines
- Web media

They are the copy desk's problem...

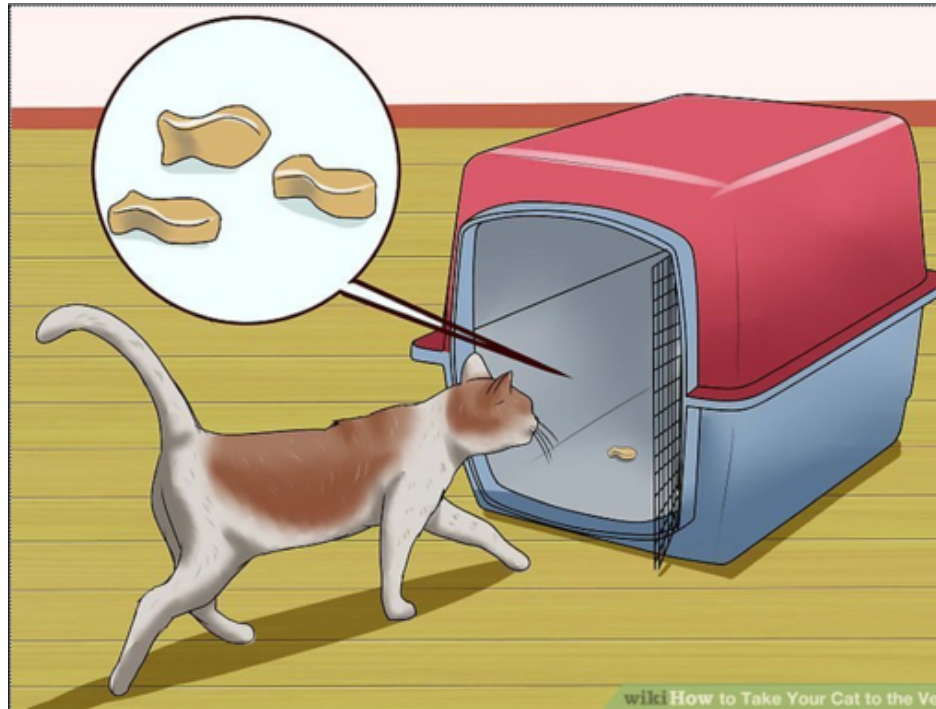


The mix is what makes all multi-author publications unique

- Personalities
- Complexity
- Deadlines
- Destinations

But many tools in the cat-herder's toolkit
will work in many positions

First, you must catch your cat



The publisher or editor-in-chief, the Boss

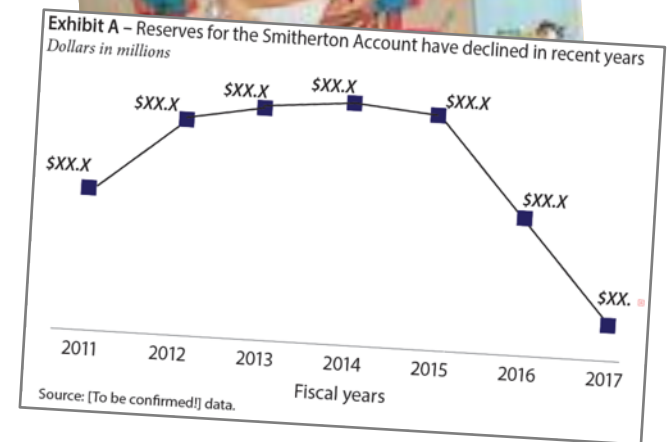


Aside from treats, what are the publisher's goals for this document?

- Maintain the brand
- Be trustworthy
- Demonstrate high quality
- Serve their customer-readers:
“No distraction from the call to action!”

What keeps them up at night?

- Inappropriate messages confuse my audience
- Incomplete information loses a sale
- Inaccurate content diminishes my reputation for quality
- Inconsistency makes me look amateur
- Wrong voice means I could be mistaken for my competitor





Ask the right questions (to reassure and gather intel)

- Do you have a “gold standard” example of a similar project produced by multiple authors?
- Does this document toe the line or break the mold?
- Does it talk to the same readership?
- Whichever it does, does it follow an existing tone or voice?
- Do you follow a common style manual (AP, CMoS, APA)?
- Whether you do or don’t, do you have a house style manual?*

*Bonus points if they don’t but love what you’ve done so much, they ask you for one.



More right questions

- How do I fit into your org' chart for this project?
- Where does my role come in the review chain?
- Am I responsible for setting the schedule?
Enforcing someone else's?
- How much authority do I have when I hold the pen?

And *how many* authors did you say I was working with??

Wrangling the authors





Sniffing them out

When and how do you meet them in the workflow?

- Early: commissioning or story development
- First draft, first authors
- Copy edit, polishing, layout

How will you interact?

- Only ever one at a time?
- In a group Slack call or Skype meeting
- Telephone conference calls or group email
- In person over milkshakes?



More considerations about authors

What is their natural voice?

- Background and native language
- Education and expertise in the topic

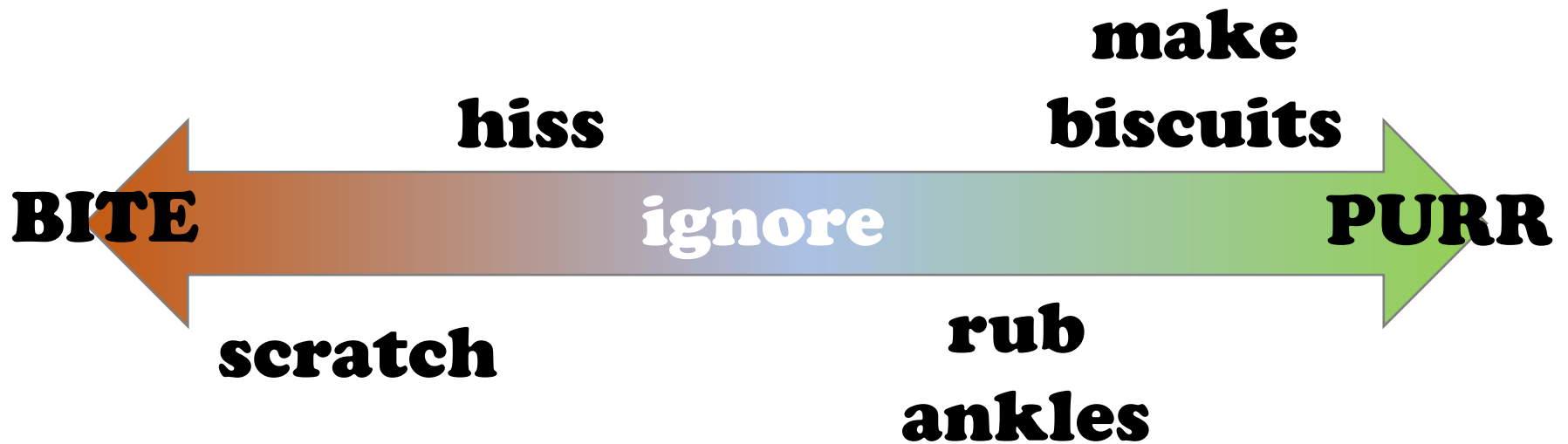
Their experience as authors

- Novice – first or second piece in a group setting
- Confident – written for this publication before
- Skill-set to requirements (actual, not imaginary)

Their experience being edited



And where do they fall on the
“Editor-Friendly” Scale





Setting authors up for success

Help them sing on the same hymn sheet with:

- Guidelines for the project
- Style handbook relevant to the project
- Templates, again tailored to the project



Guidelines

Sent or handed to all authors, they include:

- Schedule and deadlines, with consequences
- How and how often we'll communicate
- How we'll handle edit rounds
- Who has the final say about what

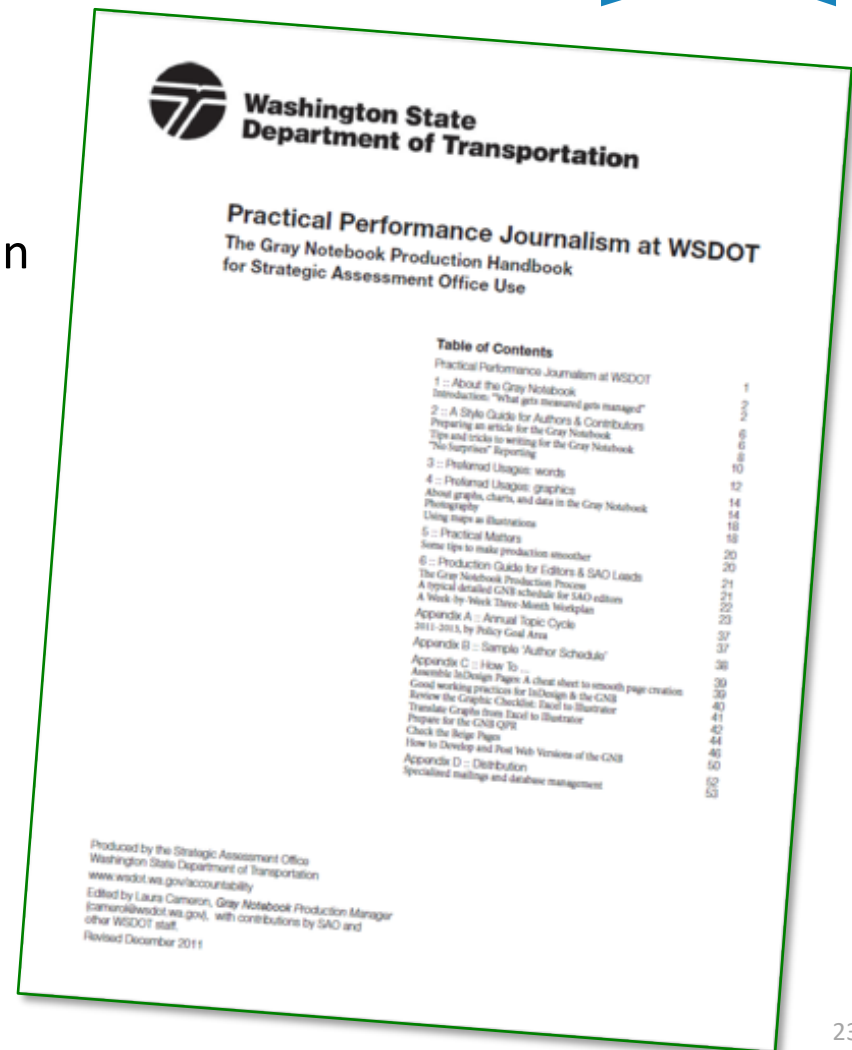


Handbooks & style guides

How much detail? It depends...

WSDOT's Gray Notebook handbook ran 54 pages when I was there:

- Section for authors (only 20)
- Section for editors
- Addressed story development, reader needs, word choice, graphing, and staying on schedule





Handbooks & style guides

Preparing an article for the Gray Notebook

It would be an impossible task for the GNB staff in the Strategic Assessment Office to produce a quality document every quarter without your help. It is a team effort, whose members include:

- Program staff
- Headquarters staff
- Transportation Center (TRAC)
- Secretary of Transportation
- Graphics Office
- Regional staff
- WSDOT executives
- Partner agencies

Getting ready to write

Perhaps the most important preparation you as an author can do before beginning your *Gray Notebook* article is to be aware of your topic, both locally and nationally. Ask yourself:

- What are the current issues?
- How are other states dealing with the issues?
- Has the topic received media attention recently?
- Is the subject/topic under scrutiny within the Legislature or other government body?
- What is the level of controversy around my topic?
- Read other articles Be prepared. Know how your topic fits within the wider scope of your department's programs. How does it fit with your departmental responsibilities? ... deliverables? ... objectives?

Look for opportunities to collaborate with other offices. Don't assume your department is the only source of information, but take the initiative to speak with other people that may have unique or intimate knowledge of some aspect of your topic.

Wear a different hat

Think like an investigative reporter when you sit down to file a GNB project highlight or Watch List item.

What... is the project, what are its benefits to the public, what is the potential problem.

Where... is the project or problem.

Why... is WSDOT doing the project, why is it important, why should it (whether the project or its problem) interest the reader.

Who... is involved in the project, problem or solution, who might be affected by the problem or the proposed solution – and are they likely to be among your readers.

Writing is a learning process: Expect revisions

Every author's work is subject to multiple revisions – it is expected. Chances are good that you'll be asked some follow up questions that will lead to revising your story. Remember, the GNB staff is here to lend guidance and help you with your submittal.

- Begin with what you have and build upon it.
- Expect multiple iterations and revisions.
- Data accuracy is critical.

Measurement Selection

Selecting "what" to measure can be accomplished by asking a few basic questions:

- What are we responsible for as an agency?
- What is important for us to know about ourselves?
- What is important for the public to know about us?
- How do we know if we are doing what we said we'd do?
- What is the most complete data available?
- Do we have baseline data to compare our reporting period data to?

Data development pointers

Developing the performance measures for the *Gray Notebook* requires a certain rigor and discipline. There's no single "right way" to produce a GNB article, but these pointers may help you frame and construct your story.

- ▶ Clearly state the strategies, activities and products you



Handbooks & style guides

Preferred usage: numbers/dates	Exceptions and examples
Spell out numbers [in body copy] ten and under, write as numerals 11 and over. Years may start a sentence in numerals.	Spell out at the start of a sentence; if it is a large number, consider recasting the sentence. Numbers titling a graphic always written as numerals: 125 projects completed this quarter. 2011 was a busy year.
% or percent [in body copy]; % [in tables]	Always use the symbol % in tables/data and with numerals, unless the number would be written out ordinarily: Only five percent of cars are electric. WSDOT has completed 98% of its projects.
Write dates as AP style: no st, nd, rd, th. Month-year combos can be written without a comma; month-day-year must off-set the year with commas.	January 2012. January 1, 2012, was New Year's Day. But: The first of June was a Wednesday.
Write spans of years solid, no apostrophe.	The 1990s saw a decrease in funding.
Lowercase seasons unless part of a formal name.	In spring 2010, WSDOT broke ground. In autumn, WSDOT has trouble with heavy rains. But: Winter Olympics.
Use the full four-digit year in date ranges.	The current biennium is 2011-2013.
Preferred usage: acronyms/abbreviations	Exceptions and examples
Write out first uses of any term you intend to later abbreviate or refer to by its acronym more than five times in the article. Following CMS (rather than AP), insert the acronym in parens immediately after the first occurrence.	Treat stories as you would a news article with subheads and do not repeat the written out form unless the rhythm of the sentence seems to call for it. Washington State Ferries (WSF) commissioned a new boat. WSDOT intends to buy two.
* Special note on lowercase words with uppercase acronyms.	When the same phrase must reappear repeatedly in an article, it may be appropriate to use an all-caps acronym: hot mix asphalt (HMA) or Portland cement concrete (PCC). While not proprietary brands, they're space-consuming to repeat.
Allow generic uses to revert to lowercase written out forms.	Workers painted two Safety Rest Area (SRA) parking lots. Many people use rest areas to walk their dogs.
Write highway identifiers (State Route) solid, uppercase, except when starting a sentence.	SR 23, but U.S. 101.; Interstate 5 has several flood-prone points. The IR driver took I-5 northbound.

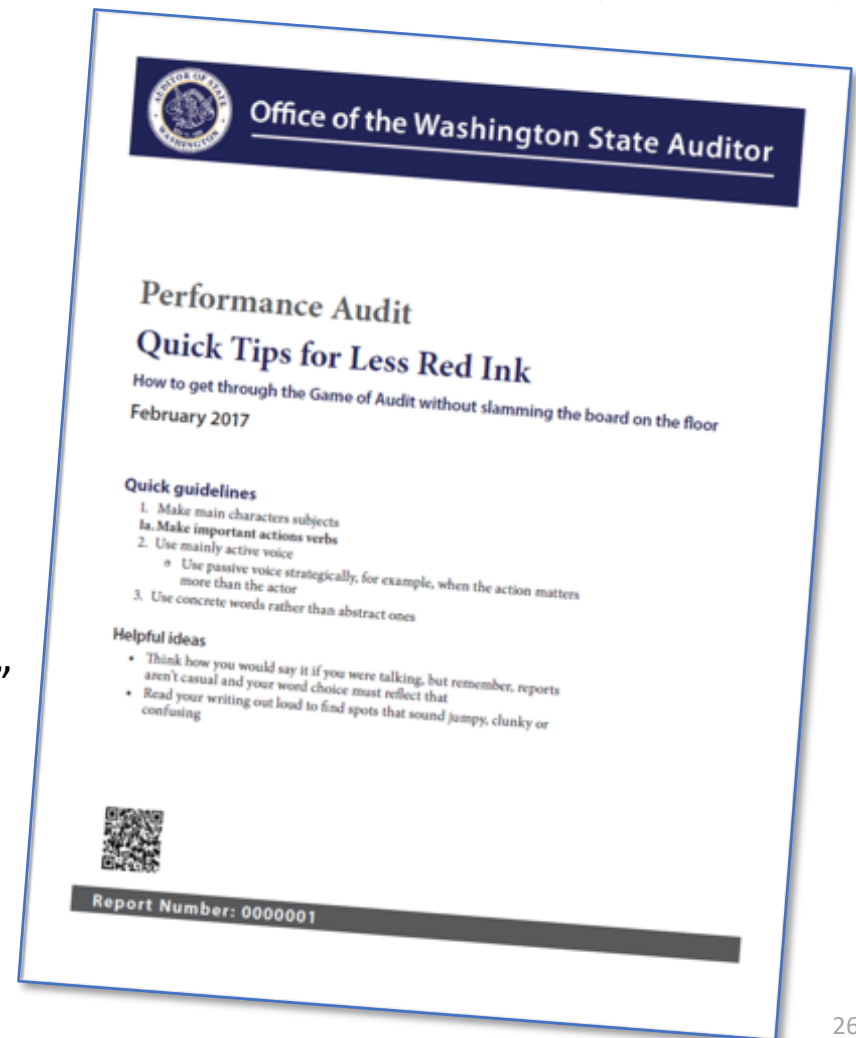


Handbooks & style guides

Play to their strengths

SAO's Quick Tips for Less Red Ink:

- Only 11 pages
- Uses real data to illustrate the common nature of authorial issues
- Made a part of staff development, in addition to being “required reading” for teams ready to write





Handbooks & style guides

Watch out for Wordiness

Writers often use more words than they need. This is not “wrong” in a grammatical sense. But ~~too many~~ unnecessary words could ~~potentially~~ slow readers ~~down~~ and ~~make them more easily distracted~~ distract them.

It lurks in modifiers

- *The baby cried loudly*
- *Large, opulent house*

How to fix it

Condense multiple adjectives, compound modifiers or “adverb + verb” construction into a single, more expressive word.

- *The baby cried loudly* → the baby **wailed**
- *Large, opulent house* → **mansion**
- *Loudly cheering fans* → **screaming fans**
- *Exceedingly large bear* → **immense bear**

Avoid weak modifiers:

- “very,” “really,” “actually,” “basically,” “definitely”

Wordiness also lurks in relative clauses, prepositional phrases and participial phrases

- *Voters who are undecided* → **undecided voters**
- *Residents of the city* → **city residents**
- *People who dine in the restaurant frequently* → **frequent diners**
- *Due to the fact that* → **because**

How to fix it

Again, fix by condensing (this time, turning longer phrases and clauses into shorter ones).

More examples

“The program provides families with the opportunity to negotiate ...”

- **“The program allows families to negotiate ...”**

“The U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2012 survey of states on their criminal history record information systems reported that all states had some criminal history records missing from their systems.”

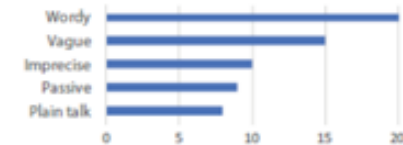
- **“A 2012 survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, found that all states reported that some criminal history records were missing from their systems.”**

Quick takeaway

Look for modifiers and prepositions; condense the modifiers and reduce the number of prepositional phrases.

Exhibit 2: Wordiness was the most frequent editing mark

Average number of marks per report





Handbooks & style guides

Use Plain Talk

Like wordiness, jargon or bureaucrat-ese isn't wrong in a grammatical sense, but it can put off or confuse readers. Technical terminology may be necessary, but make sure it's explained in plain English. Government, business, education, the military and law enforcement are particularly prone to jargon.

Remember: Just because someone "says it that way" doesn't mean we have to write it that way.

Too many abbreviations and unexplained terms can hinder understanding:

- *The analysis found that LEP and ESL students were far more likely to be diagnosed with a learning disability, which requires student-centered mechanisms including resource specialists and IEPs in order to help the school maintain AYP on state assessment tests.*

How to fix it

Break it up, get rid of "alphabet soup"

- *The analysis found that students whose native language was not English were far more likely to be diagnosed with a learning disability. These students require individual learning plans and specialized teachers, which are intended to help schools increase test scores.*

More examples

"Because it would be cost prohibitive ..."

- *"Because it would be expensive ..."*

"state and local entities"

- *"state and local governments"*

"e.g."

- *"for example"*

Quick takeaway

Watch out for alphabet soup, in-group jargon and buzzwords. It can help to note any terms that you needed explained to you early in the process; your reader likely will also need those explained.

Bonus benefits:

- It helps us identify and agree word choices for tricky topics in advance
- We agree no 3-D pie charts are allowed
- Team leads agree coaching opportunities based on staff development plans

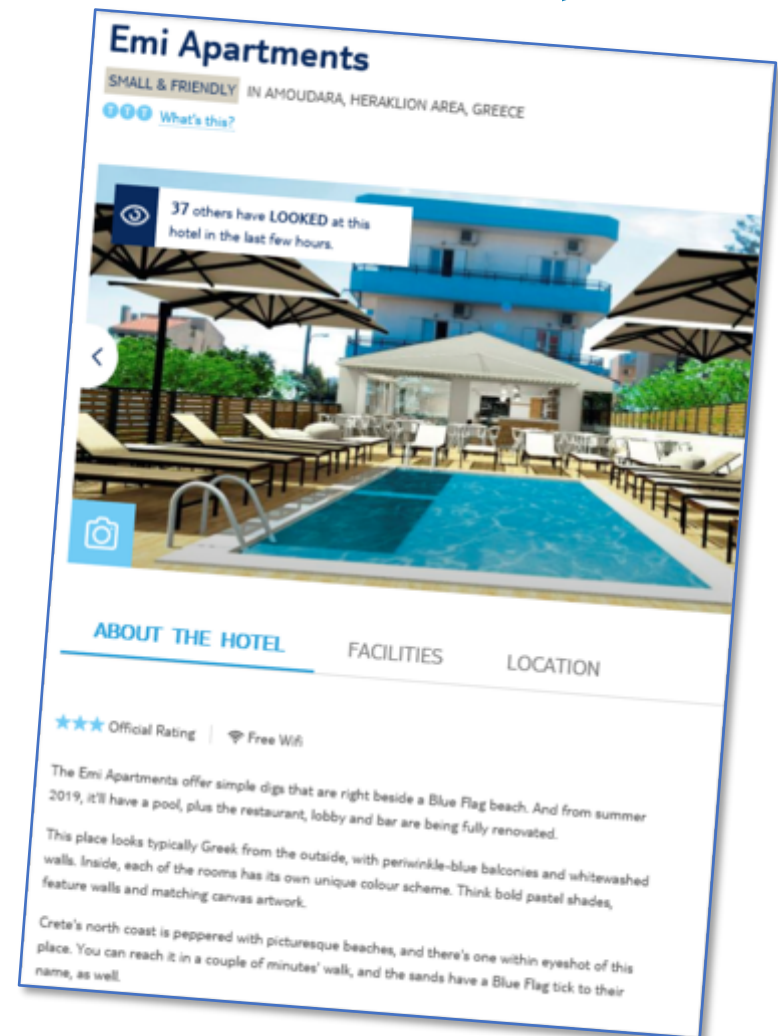


Templates

Fill in the blanks _____

Thomson Holidays

- Checklists for resort staff who supplied basic information
- Strict order of information for every hotel or resort description
- Checklists and guidelines for photography



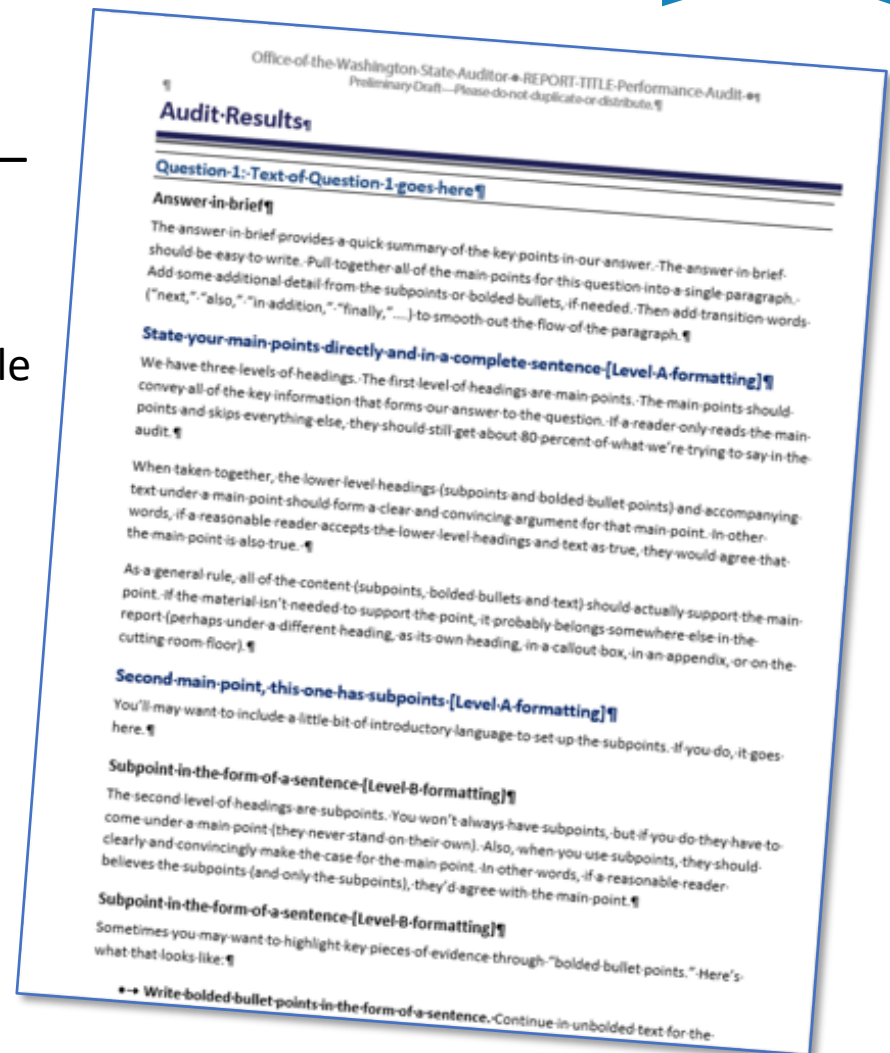


Templates

Fill in the blanks _____

Performance audit

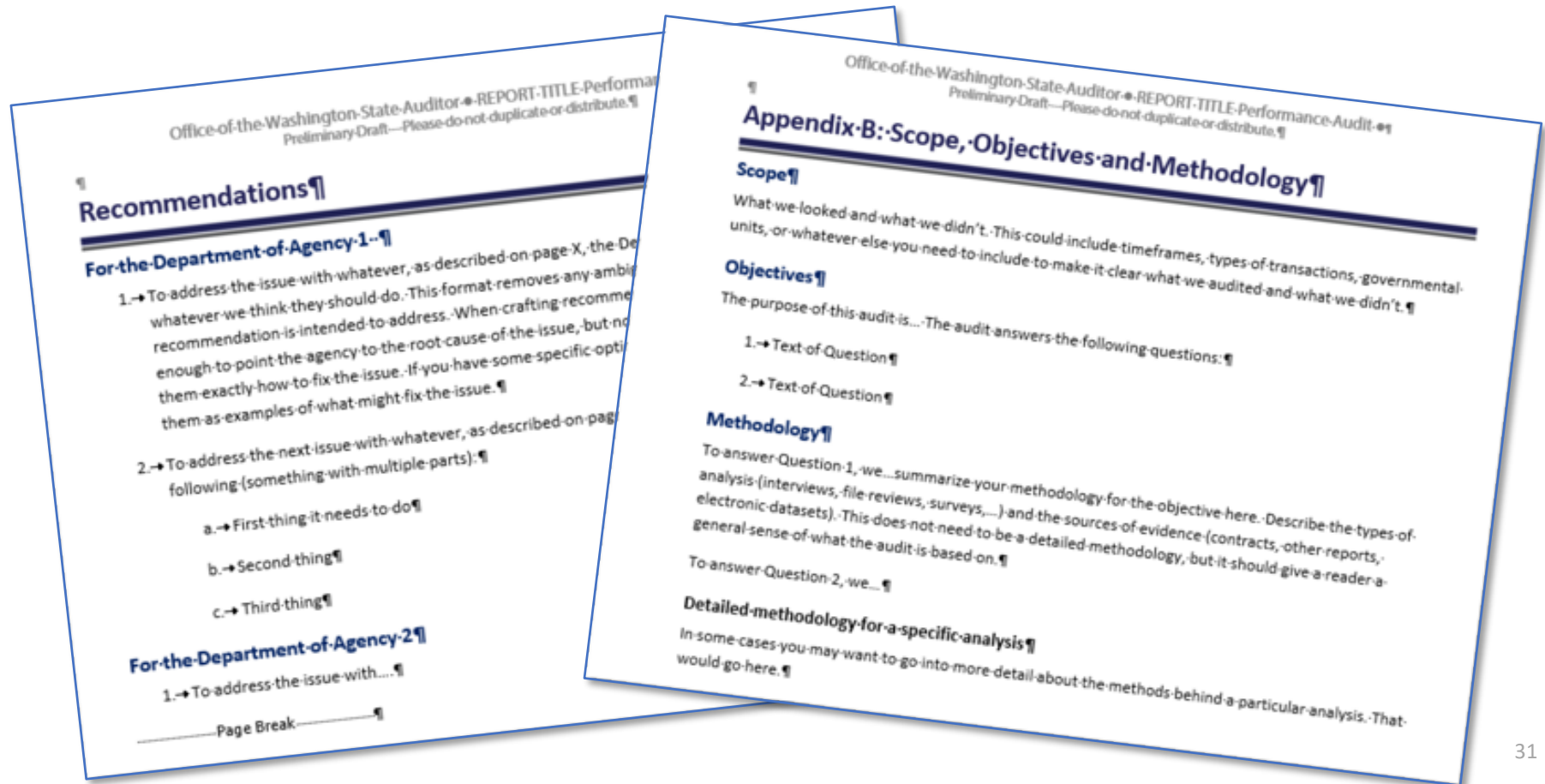
- Template in Word styled to resemble final report
- Detailed guidance for content in every section
- Tips on formatting in Word





Templates

Filling in the blanks means smooth(er) sailing through review



Wrangling the document





While they are busy writing...

Assemble your toolkit:

- Checklist of elements in the product
- Notes of conversations with authors, including what you agreed (tricky words, data set, etc)
- The Gold Standard copy and, if a series document, the most recent edition

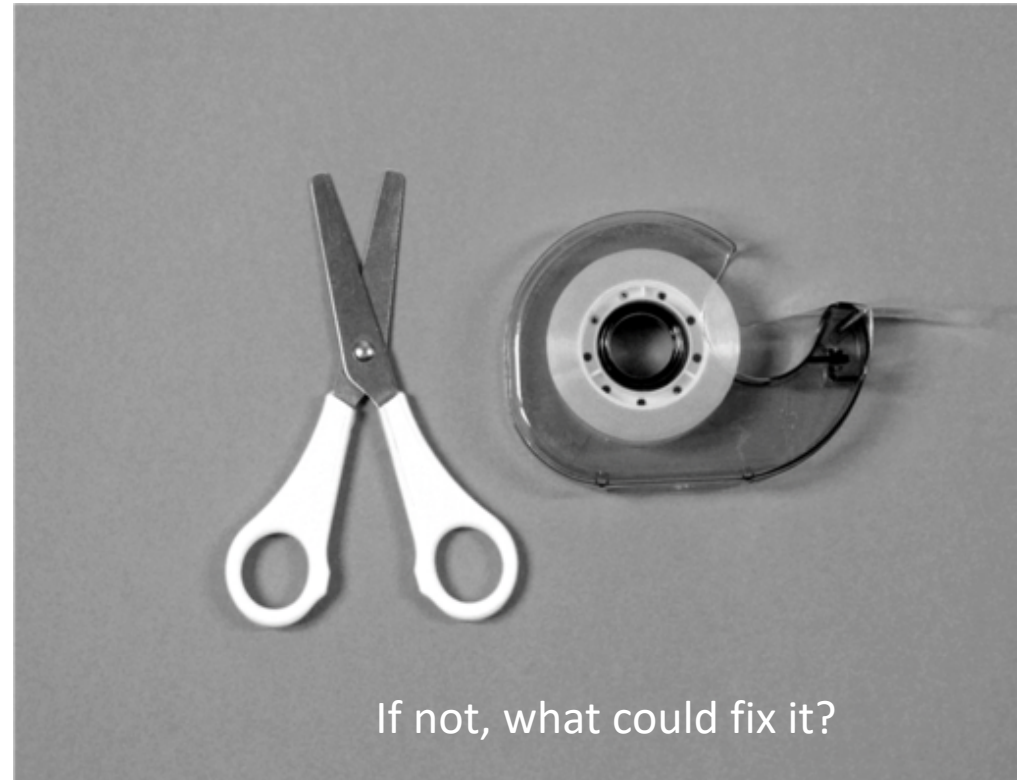


Once you have the files

Scan them for a new gold standard

Compare them side-by-side

- Assembled the same way?
- Use same terms and data?
- Balanced internally and to each other?





Once you have the files

Look for places most likely to feel the strain:

- Bridges
- Subheads
- Wherever two authors meet

Consider what needs the most attention:

- Structural work, to meet the brief
- Wordsmithing, to unite the story

Read deep. If you can hear individual author voices, you probably need your ... **red** pen.

A word about wrangling fellow editors



Because sometimes we have to



When you're not alone any more

Understanding your role and responsibilities is even more important

- Exactly the same?
- Upstream/downstream activities
- Reporting channels
- Who holds the pen when (and does it affect your authors?)



Do your bit for harmony

- ✓ Don't tweak your authors' schedules if it will affect deliverables and downstream deadlines
- ✓ Don't make unilateral decisions that should affect all authors in isolation
- ✓ No gossip (but use your judgment on the grapevine)

Six things I've learned about multi-author projects



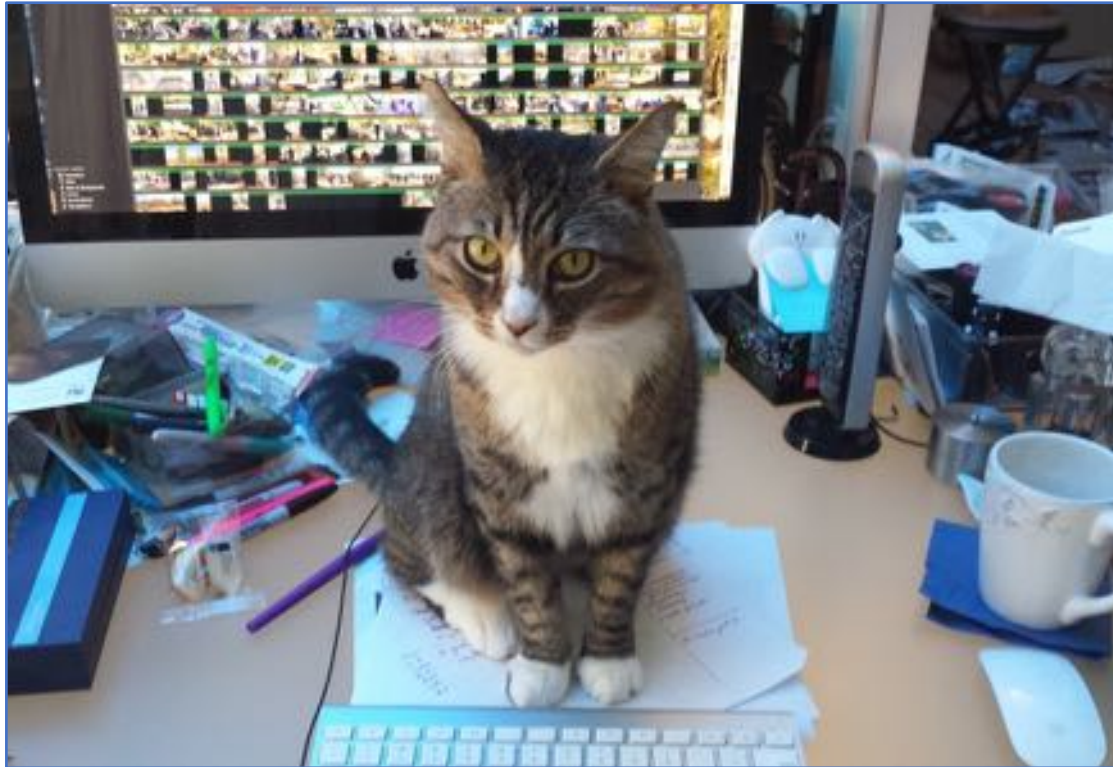
1. Be clear about the publisher's goals and fears for *this* project
2. Be clear about *this* project's rules of the road: Style, tone, hot potatoes
3. Be clear about your role and deliverables

Six things I've learned about multi-author projects



4. Give the authors as much help as you can by passing out (detailed) hymnals early on
5. Look first for structure and harmony between authors' submissions, then clarity and tone, and then where you put your red pencil down

6. Patience, patience, patience



(Well, it works for me!)

Any questions?



Contact Laura Cameron,

Laura.Cameron@sao.wa.gov

(360) 725-5575
[@AuditorsEditor](#)

Website: www.sao.wa.gov

Twitter: www.twitter.com/WaStateAuditor

Facebook: www.facebook.com/WaStateAuditorsOffice