

Checklist for Trimming and Revising a Transcript

- _____ Remove introductory and personal remarks typical of a spoken message: “Yes, folks, it’s great to be here tonight. . . .” (This may seem a bit obvious to you, but many people fail to notice that they have comments addressed as if they were speaking to a group — because they were!)

- _____ Find the “beginning” — the point at which the main topic is introduced — and rewrite it as the beginning to an article or chapter of a book. (The “beginning” may actually occur well into a spoken message; a speaker may preface the message with a review of what was spoken in a previous message, or may discuss something that is tangential to the topic.)

- _____ Do a global search for words such as “you” or “us” as a way of catching “group-speak” — phrasing that addresses a group instead of an individual: “I know that many of you . . .” or “This may be the case for some of us . . .” (Remember that when you write a book or an article, you have an audience of one, because reading is typically a solitary activity; instead of talking to a group of people, it’s just a one-to-one conversation between you and the reader.)

- _____ Break up the transcript into short paragraphs at natural breaking points. (Usually every two to five sentences discuss a single, distinct idea.) If it takes much more than five sentences to state a basic idea, such huge paragraphs are frequently candidates for cutting. On the other hand, if you have strings of single sentences which each express a different idea, it is likely to be a source of confusion for the reader, who has to juggle multiple concepts and find the interconnections between them. Such areas usually require editing and rewriting.

- _____ Once you have it in short paragraphs, “summarize” your transcript. Put a two- or three-word summary of each paragraph in the margin of the text. If a paragraph cannot be summarized easily, it may be too complex and needs to be rewritten, expanded upon or broken into two or three new paragraphs.

- _____ Now take the summaries of each paragraph and “outline” your transcript. Is there a logical flow to the ideas? Can you identify a beginning, a middle and an end? Does it begin strong, cover all the bases, and wrap up to a convincing conclusion? Are there any “rabbit trails” (paragraphs with concepts unrelated to the main point) or leaps of logic? At this point, you may see the need to rearrange the position of different paragraphs or even remove some altogether.

- _____ Finally, look at each paragraph individually. Is there redundancy that can be removed? Is there quoted material that needs to be attributed and its exact wording verified?

If you follow all the steps in this checklist, you should have a good rough draft of an article or book chapter. All it may need is a bit of tweaking and polishing.