

Cutting Checklist

Use this after the first revision pass — when the structure is right and the argument is clear. Cutting at this stage is finishing work.

1 — THE PURPOSE TEST

Apply this question to every section, paragraph, and sentence: does this serve the piece's purpose for this reader?

- Does it contribute to what the piece is trying to do?

If it's present because it was interesting to research or felt relevant in the draft — not sufficient.

- Is it pitched at the right level for this reader?

Does it say something the reader cannot infer from what surrounds it?

- Does it justify the time it takes to read?
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2 — THE WARM-UP

The beginning of most drafts contains material where the writer was finding their way in. The reader does not need to watch this.

- Where does the piece actually begin?

Find the moment where the thinking arrives. Everything before it is a candidate for cutting.

- Does the opening paragraph earn its place, or is it preparing to begin?
 - Could the piece start at the second or third paragraph without losing anything essential?
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3 — OVER-EXPLANATION

Writing that does not trust the reader produces prose that explains what has already been established.

- Does any section explain what has already been said?
- Does any conclusion state what the reader is fully capable of inferring?

If the reader can see where you're going, you don't need to tell them you've arrived.

- Is any example doing work that a previous example already did?

One well-chosen example is almost always better than two.

4 — TANGENTS

Every draft contains material that was relevant to the thinking but does not belong to the finished piece.

- Is every section doing work that belongs to this piece specifically?

Or could it belong to a different piece entirely?

- Does any section slow the argument without adding to it?
- Is there a point where the piece loses its thread and has to find it again?

The material around that loss is often a tangent.

5 — THE FINAL PASS

Apply this to every sentence that survived the earlier passes.

- Could this sentence be removed without the piece losing anything?

If its absence would not be noticed — it should go.

- Is every word in this sentence doing work?

Remove any word that could be cut without changing the meaning.

- Does the piece end where it should?

Not trailing off, not adding a thought that belongs to a different piece.
