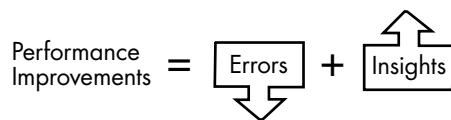# Errors and Insights

By Patrick Barry

In *Seeing What Others Don't: The Remarkable Ways We Gain Insights*, the psychologist Gary Klein suggests that two things are required to improve performance: reducing errors and increasing insights.[1] He offers the following equation as a helpful visual:[2]

Klein's book doesn't specifically link this equation to performance improvements in writing and editing, but its general framework seems to apply, as does his concern that people sometimes focus too much on reducing errors and too little on increasing insights. "We tend to look for ways to eliminate errors," he explains. "That's the down arrow….But when we put too much energy into eliminating mistakes, we're less *likely* to gain insights. Having insights is a different matter from preventing mistakes."[3]

Anyone hoping to become a better writer and editor might do well to heed Klein's advice and reserve time not just for spotting errors but also for accumulating insights. Eliminating mistakes will get us only so far. To really excel, we need to develop some insights—a new, more advanced set of compositional skills, strategies, and intuitions. The sections below are designed to help you

do that, while also maintaining the still-crucial task of reflecting on and learning from persistent errors.

Errors

Think about things you have written in the past year, whether for a client, a judge, a colleague, or any other audience. What are some of the most common errors you make?

- Do you have trouble with commas?
- Do you struggle with transitions?
- Do you overload your sentences with unnecessary words?
- Are your professional emails too informal?
- Are your personal emails too stuffy?
- And how about the time you give yourself to edit: do you finish drafts when you say you will, or are you constantly missing out on chances to calmly and carefully raise the quality of your work?

Make a list of three to five of your most common errors and keep it in an easily accessible place, so that you can regularly add to it. A small journal or diary will work well. So will a file on your computer or note app on your phone.

Your storage mechanism doesn't have to be fancy. It doesn't have to be expensive. It just needs to be something that you can

consistently use to collect and evaluate the things you most need to improve.

I recommend that you divide your errors into two categories: mechanics and process.

- **The mechanics category** should be filled with errors like being too wordy and improperly using semicolons.
- **The process category** should be filled with errors like failing to protect yourself from interruptions when writing[4] and not reading your work aloud before submitting it.

To help generate your list, consider doing at least two of the short tasks below:

(1) Read "Top Twenty Errors in Undergraduate Writing by the Hume Center at Stanford University." Based on research by Andrea Lungsford and Karen Lungsford, the collection can be useful even if you graduated from college a long time ago.[5]

(2) Ask one of your current supervisors or peers for one or two things they would like to see *less* of in the written material you submit.

(3) Ask one of your current supervisors or peers for one or two things they would like to see *more* of in the written material you submit.

(4) Take a look at "The Habits of Highly Productive Writers" by Rachel Toor.[6] Which of these don't you do?

> Eliminating mistakes will get us only so far. To really excel, we need to develop some insights….

The nice thing about writing is that you are not the first to do it. . . . An insight can be as simple as finding out that something that somebody else does works well for you, too.

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(5) Review three or four pieces you've written in the past year. These can be briefs, business memos, contracts, blog posts, important emails—anything, really. But try to find at least two on which you have received feedback. What errors stand out? What did people consistently suggest that you change?

Insights

In a separate section of your journal or diary, start writing down some insights. As with your errors, shoot for three to five. These can be pithy observations you've gathered from other lawyers. They can be individual concepts or principles you've been taught by former teachers. They can even be ideas you've come up with yourself—about structure, about word choice, about anything related to writing, including where and when you seem to produce your best work.

To the extent that your errors list may sound like warnings and admonitions, your insights list should sound more like epiphanies. Here's an insight from Brooks Landon, who has taught creative writing for many years at the University of Iowa:

Bad sentences are often long, but long sentences aren't necessarily bad.[7]

Here's another, by Verlyn Klinkenborg, the author of the delightfully quirky book *Several Short Sentences About Writing* and a former member of the editorial board at the *New York Times*:

Sit back from the keyboard or notepad.
Sit back, and continue to think.
That's where the writing gets done.[8]

Finally, here's a third, by ZZ Packer. Her book *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* was a finalist for the Pen/Faulkner Award in 2004[9] and also selected by John Updike for the official book club of the *Today* show.[10]

The big issue was cutting. I finally cut as much as I could, about a fourth of the story, and actually liked it.[11]

Other good places to look include these:

(1) A list of Zadie Smith's "Rules for Writers" published in 2010 in *The Guardian*.[12]

(2) A set of "How I Write" essays published in *The Scribes Journal of Legal Writing* in 1993. The collection includes pieces by Judge Richard Posner, Judge Patricia Wald, Judge Edith Jones, and Judge Tom Gee.[13]

(3) Your notes from the best writing course you took.

(4) A friend's notes from the best writing course they took. (Maybe your friend took a different writing course from yours, or maybe they just took different notes. Either way, the additional perspective could lead to some helpful insights.)

(5) A post called "Timeless Advice on Writing" by Maria Popova.[14] The advice comes from writers as different as Ernest Hemingway, Stephen King, Jennifer Egan, Isabel Allende, Michael Lewis, Kurt Vonnegut, E. B. White, Susan Sontag, George Orwell, and Jorge Luis Borges.

The nice thing about writing is that you are not the first to do it. Plenty of people have taken on the enterprise, and many have discovered useful tips and techniques to try. An insight can be as simple as finding out that something that somebody else does works well for you, too. ■

ENDNOTES

1. Klein, *Seeing What Others Don't: The Remarkable Ways We Gain Insights* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015), p 4.
2. *Id.* I am grateful to Gary Klein for giving me permission to use this image.
3. *Seeing What Others Don't*, p 5.
4. For the effects of interruptions on the quality of written work, see Draheim et al, *Combining Reaction Time and Accuracy: The Relationship Between Working Memory Capacity and Task Switching as a Case Example*, 11(1) Perspectives on Psychological Science 133–155 (2016).
5. *Top Twenty Errors in Undergraduate Writing*, Hume Center for Writing and Speaking, Stanford University <https://undergrad.stanford.edu/tutoring-support/hume-center/resources/student-resources/grammar-resources-writers/top-twenty-errors-undergraduate-writing> [https://perma.cc/HJ6D-K8B5]. All websites cited in this article were accessed August 27, 2020.
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8. Klinkenborg, *Several Short Sentences About Writing* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2012), p 105.
9. *Past Winners and Finalists*, Pen/Faulkner Fdn <http://www.penfaulkner.org/award-for-fiction/past-award-winners-finalists> [https://perma.cc/59UD-MN2Y].
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13. *"How I Write" Essays*, 4 Scribes J Legal Writing 1 (1993) <http://www.scribes.org/copy-of-volume-16-3> [https://perma.cc/S4SR-R382].
14. Popova, *Timeless Advice on Writing: The Collected Wisdom of Great Writers*, brainpickings <https://www.brainpickings.org/2013/05/03/advice-on-writing> [https://perma.cc/D4C6-TNZG].