



# The Importance of Being Edited

by Jean G-Owen © 2026



*On what really makes writing endure*

*I have only made this letter longer because I have not had the time to make it shorter.*

*Lettres provinciales* ['The Provincial Letters', letter 1657], Blaise Pascal

We live in an age obsessed with output. Word counts are worn like medals. Writers are urged to produce daily, publish quickly, remain visible, feed the algorithm, keep the streak alive. Somewhere along the way, quantity has become confused with achievement, as if the sheer number of words on a page or row of books on a shelf were proof of literary worth.

As an editor, I can tell you with absolute conviction: *more is not always better; better is better.*

That doesn't mean quantity has no place in the writing life. Quite the opposite. Drafting often requires abundance. We write beyond the obvious sentence to reach the necessary one. We produce pages of undergrowth in order to discover the single living path through the woods. Excess, in its earliest form, is part of process. Quantity is compost; quality is what grows from it.

The problem begins when writers mistake raw material for finished work. A first draft is a field of possibility, not a verdict on craft. Too often, contemporary writing culture rewards speed over substance: rapid publication, instant response, endless content. But literature is not content and writing worthy of being read twice rarely arrives fully formed. What matters is not how much survives the first outpouring, but what remains after scrutiny.

This is where quality truly begins: in the edit. At Naked Figleaf Press, I've seen manuscripts become themselves only after surrendering whole thickets of language. In one recent edit, nearly a third of the pages fell away: repetitions, explanatory passages, decorative detours, even beautiful sentences that belonged to an earlier version of the work. Nothing essential was lost. On the contrary, the manuscript only found its true shape through the bravery of subtraction. Often it is not bad writing that needs to go, but writing the piece has already outgrown.

Quality lives in structure, rhythm, precision and emotional truth. Anyone can fill pages. The real craft lies in discernment—in recognising what the piece needs and what the writer merely enjoyed producing. I see this distinction every day. In truth, I'd rather read one necessary poem than twenty interchangeable ones; one essay that risks silence before it speaks than five rushed pieces written to meet an imagined demand. The work that lasts is rarely the fastest written. It is the work that has been listened to.

Writers should also be wary of confusing publication with refinement. A manuscript may be printed, bound and sold without ever having been meaningfully challenged on structure, voice or pacing. The result is not always a bad book, but often an unfinished one: work sent into the world before it has fully become itself or even proofread. Quick publishing may satisfy the appetite for output, but it rarely serves the deeper life of the writing.

Sometimes the drive toward quantity is not creative freedom but creative fear. Producing endlessly can become a way of avoiding the stillness that revision demands. To edit is to confront the writing-self more honestly: quantity can hide us; quality asks us to step forward.

The paradox, of course, is that quality often depends upon quantity. We need the overflow, the false starts, the overlong drafts, the pages that will never see the light. But abundance only becomes art through selection.

Write freely, then. Write badly, lavishly, excessively if you must. Spill language across notebooks, margins and midnight documents.

But when it comes time to offer work to the world, choose the sentences that still breathe after the cutting. Those are the ones that last.

## The Economics of Haste

The book is priced by speed now,  
not by the years it took to bake.

Still-wet pages leave the press  
like bread pulled too early from the oven:  
gold at the crust, market-bright,  
but when the knife goes in  
the middle sinks, a pale sag of dough  
where heat never held long enough.

From the shelf it looks finished.  
Stacked high, it even smells convincing.  
But break it open and the crumbs spill  
with all that should have risen.

This is what haste sells:  
the appearance of structure,  
the performance of readiness,  
a shape that cannot bear its own weight,  
some books browned for display,  
their spines crisp as bakery glaze,  
yet folding inward at a single touch.

Better the slow proving in the dark,  
the patience of yeast doing its hidden work,  
than this bright underbaking.  
All surface. The heart still raw.