

# An Editor's Five Rules of Thumb

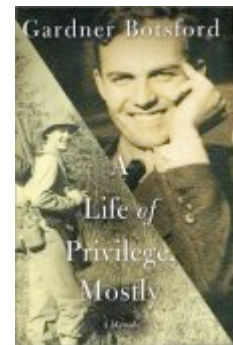
Gardner Botsford on Writing and Editing

By [Richard Nordquist](#), About.com

Some writers called him "The Ripper"; others, "Most Feared." But all admired Gardner Botsford for his ability to improve their prose without imprinting his own style and tone on the copy. Once, after reducing a three-page article from A.J. Liebling to just half a page, he received this note from the often quarrelsome reporter: "Thank you for making me look like a writer."

An editor at *The New Yorker* magazine for almost 40 years, Botsford worked with many notable writers of [creative nonfiction](#), among them Janet Flanner, Richard Rovere, Joseph Mitchell, Roger Angell, and Janet Malcolm (whom he married in 1975).

A year before his death in 2004, Botsford published a memoir, *A Life of Privilege, Mostly* (St. Martin's Press). In it he offered these "conclusions about editing," with a few good lessons for both teachers and students of writing.



"A Life of Privilege, Mostly" by Gardner Botsford  
St. Martin's Press, 2003

**Rule of thumb No. 1.** To be any good at all, a piece of writing requires the investment of a specific amount of time, either by the writer or by the editor. [Joseph] Wechsberg was fast; hence, his editors had to be up all night. [Joseph Mitchell](#) took forever to write a piece, but when he turned [it] in, the editing could be done during one cup of coffee.

**Rule of thumb No. 2.** The less competent the writer, the louder his protests over the editing. The best editing, he feels, is no editing. He does not stop to reflect that such a program would be welcomed by the editor, too, allowing him to lead a richer, fuller life and see more of his children. But he would not be long on the payroll, and neither would the writer. Good writers lean on editors; they would not think of publishing something that no editor had read. Bad writers talk about the inviolable [rhythm](#) of their prose.

**Rule of thumb No. 3.** You can identify a bad writer before you have seen a word of his copy if he uses the expression "we writers."

**Rule of thumb No. 4.** In editing, the first reading of a manuscript is the all-important one. On the second reading, the swampy passages that you noticed in the first reading will seem firmer and less draggy, and on the fourth or fifth reading, they will seem exactly right. That's because you are now attuned to the writer, not to the reader. But the reader, who will read the thing only once, will find it just as swampy and boring as you did the first time around. In short, if something strikes you as wrong on first reading, it is wrong, and a fix is needed, not a second reading.

**Rule of thumb No. 5.** One must never forget that writing and editing are entirely different arts, or crafts. Good editing has saved bad writing more often than bad editing has harmed good writing. This is because a bad editor will not keep his job for long, but a bad writer can, and will, go on forever. Good editing can turn a gumbo of a piece into a tolerable example of good reporting, not of good writing. Good writing exists beyond the ministrations of any editor. That's why a good editor is a mechanic, or craftsman, while a good writer is an artist.