

When I first began my career as a writer and editor, I didn't have any work samples. So I created some, using a paragraph from the nearest paperback novel at hand. The novel happened to be The Hotel New Hampshire by John Irving.

This improvised editing sample and attached critique opened more than one door.

Paragraph as written by John Irving:

A car took the corner at Seventh Avenue and Central Park South a little too fast; it was after midnight and this fast-moving car was the only car I could see moving on either street. A lot of people were in the car; they were singing along with a song on the radio. The radio was so loud that I could hear a very clear snatch of the song, even with the windows closed against the winter night. The song was not a Christmas carol, and it struck me as inappropriate to the decorations all over the city of New York, but Christmas decorations are seasonal and the song I heard just a snatch of was one of those universally bleeding-heart kind of Country and Western songs. Some trite-but-true thing was being tritely but truthfully expressed. I have been listening, for the rest of my life, for that song, but whenever I think I'm hearing it again, something strikes me as not quite the same. Franny teases me by telling me that I must have heard the Country and Western song called "Heaven's Just a Sin Away." And indeed, that one would do; almost any song like that would suffice.

Edited paragraph:

It was after midnight. A lone car took the corner at Seventh Avenue and Central Park South a little too fast. A lot of people were in the car, all singing along with a song on the radio; the music blared through the closed windows out into the winter night. I heard a snatch of the song very clearly. It was not a Christmas carol, as I had expected, but one of those bleeding-heart Country and Western numbers, loudly at odds with the Christmas decorations all over New York. But Christmas decorations are seasonal, and that song was universal. Some trite-but-true thing was being tritely but truthfully expressed. I have been listening for that song ever since, but whenever I think I'm hearing it, something strikes me as not quite the same. To tease me, Franny says its name must have been "Heaven's Just a Sin Away." That one would do; that one would be just about right.

Why I made the changes I did:

Like much of *The Hotel New Hampshire*, this paragraph is slackly written and wretchedly edited. The worst flaw is the unnecessary repetition: for example, the word “car” is used three times in the first two sentences. Irving also over-relies on forms of the verb “to be”; this makes the writing colorless. The sentence beginning “The song was a Christmas carol . . .” blunders on too long; needlessly compound, its ideas are jumbled. In the same sentence, the phrase “one of those universally bleeding-heart kind of County and Western songs” needs trimming (“kind of” is deadwood). The word “universally” also makes no sense as an adverbial modifier for “bleeding-heart.” (What Irving means to say, I think, is that the sadness in much C&W music touches a universal chord in people’s hearts. But that’s not what he says.) The last sentence in the paragraph trails off vaguely; it delivers neither idea nor image. In addition, the sentence is marred by the deadwood word “indeed” and by an awkward shift in tone caused by the rather formal word “suffice”—at odds with the primer-variety prose in the rest of the paragraph.

I revised the paragraph to highlight its basic ideas and images. What happens is this: the song comes to the narrator out of nowhere, under poignant circumstances, and makes an emotional impression on him in spite of its triteness. The song title “Heaven’s Just a Sin Away” makes sense in the larger context of the novel. Therefore, I altered the paragraph’s ending slightly to emphasize the rightness of the title for the narrator’s situation.