

JUST WHEN YOU THOUGHT YOU WERE DONE—A PRODUCTION PRIMER FOR AUTHORS

Copy-Editor Competence: An Authors' Quest(ionnaire)

Third in a Series/Part 1

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"Let's Kill All Copy Editors!" The headline on William Safire's syndicated column comes as no surprise. I recently polled authors I've worked with, asking them to rate their copy editors (CEs hereinafter) on a scale of (1) "wildly enthusiastic about," (2) "satisfied with," (3) "lukewarm about," and (4) "tempted to assassinate." Modesty prevents my saying whom they rated (1). What's pertinent here is that 80 percent had been "tempted to assassinate" at least one CE.

- Periodicals from *Writers Digest* to *Publishers Weekly* live up their "letters" columns for weeks with author interviews calling CEs "brachycephalic cretins," "gnomes with blue pencils," or "donkey caviars."
- At my Chicago TAA workshop, attendees free-associated "copy editor" with "officious," "know-it-all," and "should be shot." (To the kind soul who wrote "help"—thank you.)
- And now, *et tu*, William Safire.

Are the copy-editor bashers justified? Often, yes. (Though I could tell you some stories about authors . . .) Does it have to be this way? No, though it should be said from the outset that having one's

work "corrected" tends to bring out the latent hostility in everybody.

Back to Second Grade

There's something about being copy edited that transports the most secure of us back to second grade and Miss Thistlebottom's red pencil. (I know; in another life, I'm a writer too.) And, sad to say, *wielding* that red pencil makes too many CEs (and probably, at times, all) think they are *teaching* second grade. Which means there's lots of umbrage lying around waiting for someone to take it. The fact that copy editing is often described, even by people who should know better (such as acquisitions editors) as "diddling with commas" or "correcting your grammar" doesn't help.

As you survey your once-immaculate manuscript, arcanelly chicken-scratched and flapping with "query flags," your steam-escape valve on overload, try to bear in mind that the CE has two major assignments:

1. To convey your and the designer's intentions to the typesetter
2. To serve as an intermediary on behalf of the reader who, in the case of a textbook especially, is far less familiar with the subject than you are (that's why the reader is reading your book)

Many of the marks you see apply to (1) and are not "corrections" at all. For example, the CE marks hyphens that appear at the ends of lines to tell the typesetter whether they are to be retained or the word "closed up" if it appears on a single line in type (if you cancel the hyphenation default so that your word processor wraps on whole words only—and, while you're at it, *please* cancel the justification, too—you won't have to deal with those particular marks and your CE will save time better spent on other tasks.) Lists, equations, and other displayed matter, as well as tables and all subheadings, must be type-coded. In math and chemistry books, mechanical matters (subscript/superscript, italicizing unknowns, etc.) generally account for most of the editor's marks. None of these operations is a correction, yet all contribute to that second-grade sinking feeling, especially in first-time sufferers.

About the responsibilities that pertain to (2), whole books have been written. Larger, substantive matters such as organization and meaning aside, the copy-editing checklist I compiled for my CE students and new Manuscript Doctors takes up six single-spaced pages. I discussed these matters in "An Author's Garden of Editors," first in this series. Here, I want to talk about copy editing in terms of procedures, troubleshooting, and problem prevention.

Who Picks the Copy Editor?

Not the acquisitions editor (AE), though if you have a preference, you should tell the AE early on with timely reminders as final-draft stage nears. These days, most CEs are freelancers, and they are recruited, checked out, and hired by *production editors* (PEs). Your AE hands the book over to the production staff at a ritual called a "launch." Thereafter the AE concerns him- or herself with contract and marketing matters. Find out before launch time who the PE will be. That's where your CE request should go.

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The Aristotelian Copy Edit

Art, Aristotle is said to have said, depicts "life as it can be and ought to be." (AU: Please verify wording and source.) If the following seems more like art than life to you, it's time to have a talk with your publisher. This is what the Manuscript Doctors do.

Before taking an assignment, the CE looks over the book, spots potential problems, and bids the job. (Perennial problem: AEs who airily designate "a light edit" for the Manuscript From Hell.) To get on the PE's roster in the first place, the CE has qualified somehow. In technical fields, nothing beats word of mouth. If your ms. is late, though, desperation sometimes sets in. Here, let's assume CE and PE have worked in tandem for years and leave the vexed question of qualifications for later.

Once CE and PE have agreed on price and schedule, the PE will inform you by phone or letter who will be copy-editing your book. ASK FOR AT LEAST A RESUME!

You should also get a letter from the CE, introducing herself (all Mss. Drs. are she's), enclosing a resume, naming books in your discipline she has edited, and perhaps reiterating procedural guidelines (#1: DON'T WRITE DIRECTLY ON THE MANUSCRIPT. PLEASE!) She will follow up with a phone call. At this time she will talk about your preferences, pet CE peeves, and any general issues she has seen during her initial review. Example: The author of a developmental psych had used "sex" and "gender" interchangeably. I knew that some writers in the field limit "sex" to biological issues (that is, maleness and femaleness) and use "gender" for psychosocial matters (that is, masculinity and femininity). I asked whether the author would care to observe this distinction too.

This initial phone contact is your chance to mention your preferences, concerns, and reservations. The more specific you can be, the better. If your prior CE experience has left you bruised and battered, explain how. If you are a first-timer and no one has explained pro-

cedure to you, ask! The most important aspect of this conversation, and often the object of the exercise, is getting to know your CE as a person instead of an anonymous red pencil.

If your CE doesn't write or call: Call her! (Some publishers, though few textbook publishers, discourage author/editor contact. Insist.)

Now you will know who your CE is, where to reach her, what her qualifications are (her questions should tell you a lot), and what the chemistry is likely to be.

The Manuscript Doctors also request, even if the publisher does not require it, that the author see at least one edited chapter ASAP. Two chapters are better because introductory chapters are often not typical in organization. When

you've reviewed those chapters, get on the phone if the CE does not.

Thereafter, the frequency of phone calls varies with the complexity of the project. Competent CEs group their questions and won't pester you unnecessarily.

What is "House Style"?

CEs are obligated to follow "house style." What's that? Generally, house style tries to ensure consistency about certain matters that can be done "correctly" in a number of different ways (see box). Sometimes, though, it's a copy-editor copout for "I like it better that way." The suggested readings will help you distinguish one from

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HOUSE STYLE MATTERS: WELCOME TO THE MAGIC KINGDOM

Your CE will use a "style sheet" to record decisions about such things as:

- Spelling
 - Brand names (Jello? Jell-O?)
 - People's names (Dostoevski or Dostoevsky?)
 - Technical terms: bronchioloalveolar lavage or
brochioalveolar lavage
 - Geographical names and abbreviations (PA, Pa., Penna.)
- Hyphenation (copy editor? copy-editor? copyeditor?)
 - But--don't get me started on this one.
- Abbreviations
 - AM, a.m., A.M. (small caps)?
 - U.S., U. S., US?
 - Spelled out at first use in every chapter?
- Numbers
 - Spell all? Spell none? Spell some? Which?
 - Greek letters/symbols marked for typesetter?
 - In lists: 1), 2), 3) or (1), (2), (3) or 1. 2. 3.
- Citation style: (Fig. 2.1) (Fig 2-1) (fig 2.1)
- Exceptions to any and all of the above

And if any of this seems self-evident, just compare the leading style manuals and dictionaries.

another and to weed out word-wasters ("in order to" for "to," "period of time" for "time") yourself, lowering the red-pencil quotient.

Most publishers issue some kind of printed instructions about which dictionary (usually *Webster's Ninth*) and which style manual you should use in preparing the final ms. Sometimes both you and the CE are told somewhat blithely to "follow *Chicago*," although in fact the *Chicago Manual of Style* offers several options for such things as references and even (oh, woe) grammar and punctuation. Textbook houses may also specify the style manuals of certain professional associations—for example, the American Psychological Association manual (APA style) for many social sciences. Unfortunately, style bibles hand down conflicting commandments.

"House style" is not sacrosanct. We'll follow your preferred style if (1) we know what it is early on and (2) the publisher will let us. In regard to (1), the author of my first ms. (20 years ago) used "Viet Nam" for the first half of the ms. and "Vietnam" for the second half. The book was *about* Vietnam. The dictionary at that time gave both alternatives. Thinking "Viet Nam" was the author's preference, I followed it. By the time I got to the "Vietnam" half it was too late.

Authors often use whatever spelling or hyphenation is in the work they are citing at the moment. Consequently, the CE may not be able to determine your preference and will go with house style. This is especially true of multiauthor projects, in which the manuscript's style may differ from chapter to chapter.

In regard to (2), most publishers will allow a CE to follow author preference. My partner, Nancy Hopkins, just edited a basic geology text whose author *consistently* capitalized such terms as "era" or "age" in conflict with the sacred "Chicago." She asked about this in her first phone call. Finding the author had a firm preference, she followed it, noted "AU pref" on her "style sheet" for self-protection.

- It's not always possible to forestall such problems, since you may not realize you have a preference until someone changes your usage. Please—try to think about it.
- If you do think about it, and you do have a list or letter about preferences, don't assume the CE got it. When you find out who the CE will be: SEND IT!

Six Thousand Flags Over Your Manuscript

Once you've seen the sample-edit chapter(s) and you and the CE have discussed them you'll get edited manuscript from the CE in batches (some publishers have the CE send photocopies, which are hard to read but protect the master ms.). If your publisher lets you see the edit only in galleys—or worse, in page proof—consider finding a different publisher or getting tough on your next contract.

CEs make some changes routinely. Other matters, including obscure meaning, are "queried." These queries, traditionally addressed to "AU:" (author) may be written on the manuscript but are better called to your attention with gummed "flags" on which you can write your response. No CE will query every change, so try to remember that rewording, *even if not queried*, is the CE's best try at making your meaning clear to your audience. A competent CE will query (1) often, (2) politely, and (3) helpfully, remembering always that second grade was long ago. Perhaps this is a good time to quote the major maxims I instill in my CE students:

1. It's the AUTHOR'S book.
 2. Context is everything.
 3. It's better to retain an error than to insert one.
- I believe that with first editions especially, lots of queries mean a careful CE. If the author/editor relationship is a good one, though, once the CE feels in synch with your way of thinking

and writing, she will query fewer of her changes, relying on you to sense what she is about.

- CEs who write "Unclear!" "Too cutesy, what?" and similar remarks are neither polite, helpful, nor likely to smooth relations. (AUs who write "Stupid!!!!!" on the query flag are none of the foregoing either.)
- Good copy editors try to phrase queries to save your time (and theirs). Clear queries also make it easier for whoever has to "clean up" the ms. (See later).

For example, "AU: Please clarify" is not helpful. You thought the text was clear before. Or, looking at the sentence again, see a different ambiguity from what the CE had in mind. Suppose the mss. read, "The experiment failed." That's a pretty simple sentence, and "Please clarify" just *might* make you think the CE *is* a cretin. But

AU: Do you mean "the experiment did not substantiate the hypothesis"

or

"we could not complete the experiment because ..."

allows you to check off one or the other and write (ON THE QUERY FLAG AND NEVER, NEVER, NEVER ON THE MSS.) a third alternative or additional information.

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