

The Editor's Style

Introduction

At a time when there is much talk of the capability of electronic publishing to hasten (and cheapen) the flow of academic thought from writer to reader it is helpful to look at, at least part of, the value which publishers add to the product.

Ed.

This paper explores the roles of an editor and urges all those who employ editors to define their roles carefully.

Being asked to present a talk on our in-house editorial style manual to an ALPSP seminar set me thinking about 'style' in a broader sense, and the introduction of the word 'editor' set me thinking about the different types of editor as well. Many an editor begins life with a learned society underlining the italics, changing -ize to -ise, and putting the references in order. All good, important work — but the 'editor's style' can mean so much more.

I entered publishing in 1970 and spent eight years at The Institute of Physics, mostly editing *Journal of Physics D: Applied Physics*. In 1979 I switched to educational publishing, working in turn for Stanley Thornes, Basil Blackwell and (since 1989) Oxford University Press, where I now edit school mathematics texts. I owe a great debt to all four publishing houses in helping me to see editing from many angles, but I must emphasise that the views expressed in this paper are very much my own.

No two publishing houses work in quite the same way. The editor and her (sometimes his!) employer ought to define a map of possibilities. This is particularly desirable now that there is a move to provide more systematic training for editors in further and higher education.

The different editors

Here are some of the titles given to editors

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in the four publishing houses for which I have worked, in some sort of order of seniority.

Editorial assistant/Desk editor/Copy editor/Assistant editor. This is the person who marks the script: (a) to make it intelligible to the typesetter and (b) to make it intelligible to the reader. (a) is of course subsumed by (b). A typical '(a)' job would be underlining a letter to denote an italic; a typical (b) job would be rewriting a sentence to remove the hanging principle.

Production editor. This person may undertake copy-editing. He or she often acts as the crucial link between the publisher and the designer or typesetter. The production editor 'puts it all together'.

Commissioning editor/sponsoring editing. Few publishers (even learned societies) can simply wait for the scripts to roll in and then publish them, although anyone working on a long-established, prestigious research journal may not need to be active in finding authors. The commissioning editor finds the authors, negotiates contracts, liaises with the author and with all publishing departments (editorial, production, design, marketing, and sales). Commissioning editors are king— or queen— pins; they have (and need) company cars; they wine and dine.

Editorial manager/Managing editor. (Note as before, the nice switching between noun and adjective — which sometimes betokens subtle differences.) The EM or ME is a senior bod who may well be managing other editors as well as commissioning or editing him — or herself. Very often this person is focused more on the publishing concerns of the company as a whole than the commissioning editors.

Editorial director/Publisher. Many at this level will have gone through the ranks editorial assistantship, but many will not have. Concerns are with budgets and overall publishing strategy. Bigger cars: business in Frankfurt at this level, not -ise/-ize.

The other players

The author. When the authors can be taken for granted (offering ready fodder for research papers) they can be regarded (sadly) as a nuisance. They can't write; they can't spell; they make life difficult. Life isn't always like that outside learned societies. Ask a maths teacher in 1992 to write a maths text— you (the editor) will need him more than he needs you. (Yes, for maths it will still probably be a 'him'.)

Colleagues. Most editors think that they should be left to do the editing. They accept (often reluctantly) that an author wants ownership of the script, and there is plenty of scope for tension there. But others may want to chip in too — design work, for example, has editorial implications. The words and illustrations may *look* nice on the page — but do they hinder the editorial message or help it? Then again, those marketing people will want a say — especially over a book cover. In fact, covers (surely not the most important part of a learned society publication!) can cause the most contention of all. In a commercial publishing house just about everyone thinks they know best, and the editor may find the back-page copy the most fought-over words in the whole book.

And so to style!

It is already clear that the editor is working within a complicated web of relationships. At one level an editor may be doing no more than marking an italic, but any more creative editing will soon impinge on those around — and as yet we have hardly considered the reader.

I'd like to suggest that there are four types

of editing.

Editing for factual accuracy. In a learned society this may be done by the referees. If only five readers worldwide will be able to understand the research paper, then someone (either the desk editor at the publishing house or the society's 'honorary editor') had better find one of them. Outside the world of learned societies, though, editors may be expected to check up facts and figures for themselves. While no educational textbook editor would be wise to take on the detailed checking of an A-level script, it may well be reasonable to expect him or her to check some primary school sums.

Spelling, punctuation, and grammar. On occasions when I have been asked to interview graduate recruits I have given them a 'simple' spelling and punctuation test (see Appendix 1). A disappointing number show what I would regard as a basic aptitude; an even smaller number come close to perfection. I don't pretend that this is the best possible test, but it does offer help when so many interviewees are (i) well up in the subject and (ii) personable. Beyond spelling and punctuation there are the concerns of accurate grammar and good style (see Appendix 2). It is useful to have recruits who are interested in these too, but awareness may grow while they are on the job.

One real problem for all editors is to know 'how far one can go'. Where does 'correcting bad grammar' end and 'restyling' begin?

This really is something that has to be learned with experience. There may be times when a dense piece of text should be rewritten (even if the author's arm has to be twisted); there are times when there are good reasons to leave alone (and the author is rightly up in arms over what has been done to his work); and there are even times when the editor *should* have rewritten that piece for the readers (when the authors couldn't care less). Overzealous editors overedit; underzealous editors underedit;

perfect editors get it right. Many of us fit all three descriptions at different times.

Technical sub-editing. This category could almost be called 'editing according to the style manual'. It's all to do with rules and conventions in matters such as: alternative spelling (e.g. polarise or polarize?) hyphenation (e.g. life-time or life time?) capitalisation (e.g. Newtonian or newtonian?) numbers and units (e.g. 1 m/s or 1 m s⁻¹ — but not of course 1 ms⁻¹) organizing references (numerical system or Harvard? how to lay out reference lists? etc) labelling axes (e.g. T(in K) or T(K) or T/K?)

There are *British Standards*; there is *Hart's Rules*. Even so, few of the external 'rules' are sacrosanct, and a learned society will do well to produce its own style manual or style sheets to suit its own needs. Style may change from publication to publication and it may be prudent for an editor to have his or her own style sheet defining style for that particular book or periodical.

In terms of editing, the great thing is to be consistent. For example, I prefer 'first-order equations' to 'first order equations'. I can live with either, but it jars to see both versions on adjacent lines. Yes, it jars — but, even so, it's not the end of the world. Authors and editors can of course make use of spell checks and other software packages to help with the consistency these days. Get your author to take the chore element out of 'styling editing' if you can!

Editing with style

Editing is a complicated business. To use an analogy from physics: it isn't a two-body, newtonian problem, but a many-body, 'chaotic' problem. The editor has to manage a script which he or she may not fully understand, help the reader to understand it, and at the same time manage to keep happy the author, the typesetter, the artist, the designer, the production people, the marketing people — and (ultimately) the accountant. To produce something that reads well and sells well in this sort of

environment is a triumph. How can it be achieved?

If you employ editors you need to know where you stand, where your editors stand, and where everyone else stands — and you need to make it work for *your* publishing house. Consistency (in terms of getting it right with the style manual) is important, but 'getting it right in print' means so much more than that. And 'getting it right with people' adds another dimension to editing. That is what I mean by editing with style.

Appendix 1

Spelling and punctuation test

Passage A below comes from the *King's English* by H. W. & F. G. Fowler (1906). Eric Partridge in his book on punctuation (*You have a point there*) took out the punctuation; I introduced the spelling mistakes. The interviewee is placed in a quiet, separate room with pen, pencil, eraser and dictionary, and asked to add the punctuation and correct the spelling in 15 minutes. The interviewee should be actively discouraged from 'editing' the passage in any other way.

Partridge's book shows how the 'semi-literate or careless' might edit the passage, then how the Fowlers did it (in their rather old-fashioned way). Finally he shows his own version, 'punctuation as art' (passage B).

A. no sentence is to be condemned for mere length a really skillful writer can fill a page with one and not tire his reader through a succession of long sentences without the relief of short ones interspersed is almost sure to be forbidding but the tiro and even the good writer who is not prepared to take the trouble of reading aloud what he has written should confine himself to the easily manageable the tendency is to allow some part of a sentence to develop unnatural proportions or a half parenthetic insertion to separate too widely the essential parts the cure indispensable for every one who aims at a passable style and infallible for any one who has a good ear is

reading aloud after writing.

B. No sentence is to be condemned for mere length. A really skilful writer can fill a page with one and not tire his reader, though a succession of long sentences without the relief of short ones interspersed is almost sure to be forbidding. But the tiro — and even the good writer who is not prepared to take the trouble of reading aloud what he has written — should confine himself to the easily manageable. The tendency is to allow some part of a sentence to develop unnatural proportions, or a half-parenthetical insertion to separate too widely the essential parts. The cure, indispensable for everyone who aims at a passable style, and infallible for anyone with a good ear, is reading aloud after writing.

Appendix 2

The good, the bad, and the ugly (with acknowledgements of books by Woodford, Barrass, and Kirkpatrick and Breese)

The bad and the ugly

Bad 1 After closing the incision, the animal was placed in a restraining cage.

Bad 2 Coconut fibre dust is a by-product from a coir factory which has no commercial value.

Ugly 3 In no case did any of the seedlings develop lesions.

Ugly 4 In studies pertaining to the identification of phenolic derivatives, drying of the paper gives less satisfactory visualization.

The good

After the incision had been closed, the animal was placed in a restraining cage (*passive*) or After closing the incision, we placed the animal in a restraining cage (*active*).

Coconut fibre dust, which has no commercial value, is a by-product from the coir factory.

None of the seedlings developed lesions.

Phenolic derivatives are more easily seen and identified if the paper is wet.

Ugly 5 Human beings hope to survive, and be comfortable, on this planet for a length of time that far exceeds the duration of all fuel reserves. Physicists therefore are now applying themselves to the question of whether science can possibly harness alternative sources of energy.

We hope to survive in comfort on this planet for longer than fuel reserves will last. This is why physicists are asking: 'Can we harness other sources of energy?'

Recommended bibliography (not in consistent editorial style!)

Oxford encyclopedic English dictionary (OUP) 0198612664 (£18.85)

Modern English usage (OUP) by H. W. Fowler 0192813897 (£5.99)

Hart: Rules for compositors and readers (OUP) 019212983X (£8.95)

Dictionary for writers and editors (OUP) 0192129708 (£8.95)

The complete plain words by Sir Ernest Gowers (Penguin) 014051997 (£4.99)

Copy-editing by Judith Butcher (CUP) 0521 256830 (£27.50)

Editing for everyone by Celia Hall (NEC) 0860823830 (£24.95)

Chicago manual of style (Univ of Chicago Press) 022610390 (£29.95)

You have a point there by Eric Partridge (Routledge) 041215307 (£8.95)

Designing instructional text by James Hartley (Kogan Page) 0850389437 (£19.95)

Basic editing by Nicola Harris (Book House, Spa Books) 0907706 029 (£20.00)

Scientists must write by Robert Barrass (Chapman & Hall) 041215307 (£8.95)

Scientific writing for graduate students ed F. P. Woodford (Macmillan 1968) (out of print)

Better English for technical authors by T. W. Kirkpatrick and M. H. Breese (Leonard Hill 1961) (out of print).