

The Write Word's

Easy Editing and Spiffy Style Guide



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The Write Word
Copywriting and Editing Services



Only ambitious nonentities and hearty mediocrities exhibit their rough drafts. It is like passing around samples of their own sputum.

– Vladimir Nabokov

Introduction

(A Little Editing Music, Please...)





Introduction

A Little Editing Music, Please

Say you're new to the mysteries of the editing trade, whether you're a marketing writer in a 1,000-person corporation or a freelance copyeditor just building your chops in the business. Or maybe you're a writer that simply likes to clean up her own messes. Perhaps you're a seasoned old hand who just wants a refresher course before being asked to proof the A–F entries of Wikipedia. This guide is intended to acquaint you with editing/proofreading fundamentals and then some. We'll start by explaining the purposes of editing, move into noting some editorial tools, dance over to reviewing the various approaches to and methods of editing, and finally, to demonstrate the glories of editing in action, we'll supply some mesmerizing “before and after” examples of unedited and edited documents.

But wait, that's not all! There's also a style guide that covers zany subjects like apostrophe appropriateness, capitalization for capitalists (I made that part up), words frequently misspelled, misused or otherwise abused, general usage tips (active and passive voice and all) and how to avoid other language sand traps that might ensnare the unwary. Being rather taken with Karen Gordon's works (*The Transitive Vampire*, for instance), I give free rein to the horses of absurdly crafted—but correctly constructed—example sentences.

It's funny (at least to me) about grammar books—I'm one of those *dweebosauri* that really enjoys reading them. At least the amusing ones, like Gordon's, and *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* and *Woe Is I*. And listening to the Grammar Girl podcasts is fun and informative.

And if you think those opening paragraphs above need editing, read on. As H.G. Wells said, “No passion in the world is equal to the passion to alter someone's draft.”

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Why Edit?

Because with a sharply edited document (and \$1.50), you can get a cup of house coffee at Starbucks. Besides that, editing is an invaluable asset to communication: if you give your reader information that is hidden in a tangled jungle of leafy, branching sentences of endless twist and turn, that information is less likely to reach its destination. If your message is clothed in sloppy spelling and uncouth grammar, it's less likely to be looked at with any respect. If you're trying to use language to motivate a buyer to buy or a reader to cry, writing that doesn't sing has no zing. Information presented with clarity has more power of persuasion and the polish of professionalism—even if the soap you're selling couldn't clean Mother Teresa's conscience, you'll have more buyers if you deftly substantiate your lies.

Improved Communication

This guide can help both independent and in-house writers, of whatever scope, in two basic ways:

1) Improved communication with those outside of your company. And, if you are the company, you'll get techniques and stern admonitions that will keep your clients from thinking that you had a little nip at mid-day. Properly edited documents project a competent, professional image to readers, if you are representing a firm or just your firm handshake. We've all snickered at those résumés that come in with typos and those letters that don't make sense. It goes both ways. From emails to product manuals, any document that leaves your company with typos or incomprehensible sentences provokes those same snickers in our business partners and customers.

2) If you work in an office, improved communication within the company. As any company grows, more people check important documents for content; more documents have to meet the approval of more people. That means the company will face such blessings as ten different people using ten different editing approaches or formats, suggesting ten different ways to change a sentence. Equally amusing are demands for major structural changes after the document is in layout, whether destined for the screen or the page. If we can all agree on what to look for, when to look for it, and how to communicate it, then all our work will be better and our jobs will be easier. (And I may be raising azaleas rather than editing for a living.)

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In these tormented times of assigning blame to others for our own on-paper commission of dark deeds, I believe that it is empowering—by Jove!—to take head-on the awesome responsibility of words committed to that paper. Or, more and more, committed to that screen. Perhaps a useful way to look at it is by thinking of those times when you might have participated in passing notes in your grammar school class—what was so riotously funny when shared with your friends became sordid and unclean when you were forced by the teacher to read it aloud in class. It's easy to see that good editing might save you some embarrassment, both in your class notes and your speeches to the board of directors. You may send away for my DVD, "Editing and the Inner Child," after you finish reading.

Pitfalls and Enemies of Editing

Overediting

Before I outline some approaches to editing, it's necessary to consider some of the things that can inhibit or mar its effective practice. The first one is equally as treacherous as not editing a document, and that is to over-edit a document. This harkens back to one of the first concerns you as an editor should have: what is the purpose of this piece of communication? There are vast differences in complexity, scope and intent between a memo to the sales team and a company financial report, and the differences in the composition of such documents has a great relevance to their editorial decomposition.

Therefore, to spend a great deal of deliberative time in considering whether to use "implement" or "execute" in a two-sentence message about positioning the microwave in the lunchroom is time wasted. (Besides, those are both weenie words anyway.) Just as you don't time your eggs with an atomic clock, it is overkill to use a fine-tooth comb on writing that has no hair to be combed. Speaking of no hair, I will use Seth Godin's phrase: "Ship, as in get it out the door." A piece of writing that is endlessly niggled over is a piece of writing that goes unshipped and unread.

Overformatting

A closely related foible is one that addresses one of the joys of the computer age—the ability to change the appearance of your document in myriad ways. This "boon" has hidden costs: you can spend twenty minutes writing a simple

report and forty minutes formatting it. Certainly an acute eye for which fonts are complementary and whether a half-point rule is better under a subhead than a one-point rule are valid concerns—for a graphic artist preparing a publication with wide circulation. However, in many instances, flashy graphics and pretty typography are poor, if not misleading, substitutes for the substance of your message. Simplicity has an elegance that commands attention.

This of course matters less for electronic documents, which thankfully can't express all the fripperies of exotic typography without hard-coding complications. And if you have a client waiting for a two-paragraph blurb on their "About" page, they really aren't going to give a hoot whether you dress your text in a tux—they just want the words, not their foundation garments.

Speaking of spending endless time aligning decimal points (that's a little joke—you should align your decimals, dammit!), time itself can be either an ally or an enemy when putting together a publication. You actually can edit a document to needless "perfection" if you have the time. It is my experience that a piece of writing can pass my desk ten times, and even if it's just a two-page sell sheet, I can always find something else "wrong" or needful of change. The possibilities of how a sentence can be constructed are virtually limitless, but you have to consider whether the results are worth the effort. If you're writing on a deadline, it's often better to be "almost right" than "absolutely, unquestionably, the very rightest right."

Style and Inconsistency

Another issue of "rightness" is that of editing styles. William Safire might have sent a letter bomb to John Simon over whether to use "which" or "that" after a relative clause. The Associated Press might declare that you must eliminate the final comma in a comma series, e.g., "I dressed my cat in leather stockings, boots and miniskirt," while Fowler's *Modern English Usage* implies that you will be flogged if you don't put a comma after "boots." For many of these so-called controversies, it is actually the privilege of the author to decide. A sentence's rhythm might skip a beat with the inclusion or exclusion of a single comma, but don't let mold grow in your coffee with debating it. Language is remarkably dynamic—though there are many staunch defenders of "whom," its employment may fall by the same wayside where "shan't" is quietly rotting.

Don't get me wrong—grammar and punctuation are by no means merely subjective. There are some authorities to consult. *Pinckert's Practical Grammar* is my source for a number of editing attitudes, a book that miraculously enough makes reading about grammar both informative and amusing. For those thorny issues of syntax and semantics, I fall back upon *The Chicago Manual of Style* (16th edition) and *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th Edition as my arbiters of what's right and true, and though other authorities might contest certain usage practices of theirs, I wouldn't veer from their road. Unless, of course, a proposed correction was presented in a compelling way; flexibility is as good in an editor as in an acrobat, you know. (There are electronic versions of many of these venerable tomes these days, and they can be a quick fix for sticky grammar kerfuffles, but if I have the time, I still like to peruse on paper.) Check the Style Guide section below for elaboration on electronic aids to good grammar and its worthy pursuit.

As I say in that Style Guide section, my choices and articulations there aren't the end-all and be-all—they are suggestions and encouragements for paying attention to your writing.

Consistency is one of the keys for issues of style. You might arbitrarily decide that you will always use lowercase letters to introduce entries, e.g.,

a) a tisket

b) a tasket

so it would seem obviously confounding to have

A) a triscuit

B) a tasmanian devil

two pages later. But sometimes the obvious just ain't so—you have to be vigilant to be consistent, and sharply conscious of such distinctions if their instances are scattered throughout a long document.

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