

BELS *Letter*

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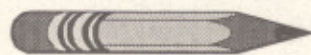
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Why We Edit

Elizabeth Whalen, ELS

The profession of editing is not popularly recognized or understood. Children dream of growing up to be doctors, lawyers, teachers, or firefighters—but some of them end up, quite happily, as editors. Many people outside the world of publishing do not even understand *what* an editor does. To add to the confusion, the word “editor” may refer to several different functions: we have an editor-in-chief and an associate editor (both of whom decide on the worthiness of articles for publication) and the manuscript editors (who prepare the accepted articles for publication). In this article, I focus on the job of manuscript editor and explain our editing goals, reasons, and compulsions. I hope to make clear why we make the changes we do and why, after all, we edit.

Editing Goals



All our editing goals come from one source: the desire to produce a good journal. Because a good journal can only result from the publication of good articles, we strive to print articles that are scientifically correct and clear to the reader. If an article contains valid scientific information that is important to the reader and clearly communicates that information, that article makes a significant contribution to the quality of the journal.

By the time an article is accepted for publication, it should be scientifically correct, because it has been reviewed by specialists and by the editor-in-chief. If, however, inconsistencies in the data or flaws in logic have not been detected, it is the manuscript editor's job to catch them. So we check the information given; we verify that the tables, figures, and text all say the same thing and that the conclusion in the abstract is the same as that at the end of the article. If any sentence is not logical, we question it. If, for example, it seems obvious from the context that the author meant “not” rather than “now,” we will change the word and ask the author to check it in the galley stage. We strive to catch all illogical sentences and inconsistencies in data before they get into print.

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The first digital human—a 38-year-old former death-row inmate scanned from toes to aortic valves and then posted on the World Wide Web—will soon have company. Scientists at the University of Colorado are busy digitizing the body of a 59-year-old woman who died of heart failure. Cut into 0.3-mm-thick sections (compared with the man's 1-mm), her corpse will offer an even more precise map of the human body. Known as the Visible Human Project, it is accessible through <http://www.uchsc.edu>.



Back to School

Write down the past-tense form of each verb. Answers on last page.

- | | | |
|----------|-------------|-----------|
| 1. light | 6. hang | 10. swim |
| 2. tread | 7. shine | 11. dive |
| 3. fly | 8. baby-sit | 12. kneel |
| 4. wake | 9. sneak | 13. weave |
| 5. bore | | |



Ask Ms. Grammar

Q: Should there be a comma in the following sentence?

In the years following this discovery[,] several investigators attempted to replicate Smith's experiments."

A: According to *Words Into Type*, a comma is not necessary after an adverbial phrase that is not independent of the part of the sentence that follows unless confusion of meaning would result from its omission. Your sentence is clear without the comma, as are the following:

In many parts of the world the wind has an important part in soil-making.

By 1919 the flu epidemic was in full swing.

But you should use a comma before a noun if the adverbial phrase ends with a verb or a preposition, to prevent misreading.

When the specimens were re-examined, no traces of arsenic could be found.

Soon after, their first litter was born.

Q: Is there a simple rule regarding the use of *like* and *as*?

A: Not that I know of. Edie Schwager writes that "if *as if* will do, *like* is incorrect" and "*like* is never a conjunction," but the OED gives multiple examples of this usage by 'writers of standing' like Shakespeare and Darwin. Not many editors would be quick to spot the misuse of *like* in the following constructions:

Unfortunately few have observed like you have done.

The waves of China's revolution have risen like the waters of the rivers did last year.

Our great patron saint St. George was a Greek, like a good many of the saints are.

Ms. Grammar's advice is to suspect *like* is used incorrectly if it appears close to a verb or verbal. This method is not infallible, however, and it helps to remember that

Like father, like son.

and

Do as I say, not as I do.

Q: Should there be hyphens in the following sentence?

The well[-]known cardiologist recommended a regimen of vigorous yet easily[-]performed exercises that in the end proved ill[-]advised.

A: Yes, but only one, in *well-known*. Ms. Grammar's favorite source, *Words Into Type*, states unequivocally that "adverbial elements in compound modifiers are not hyphenated when they end in 'ly.'" Schwager offers this exception to the rule: when used to modify other adjectives, words ending in *-ly* do take a hyphen.

*the scholarly-looking man
her pearly-white teeth*

The rationale for omitting the hyphen in the last construction is more difficult to grasp. Here the first element of the compound modifier is an adverb—*ill*, in the sense of "poorly," and the modifier is a predicate modifier although at first glance it would seem to modify *regimen*.

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Even if the article is *perfect* scientifically, it will not make a contribution unless the message is clear to the readers. Clarity is certainly subjective, but often in technical journals such as ours, the author (who may be an expert in the subject matter) may assume that the readers know something that they do not. The manuscript editor watches for these "leaps in logic." If a "therefore" makes no sense because no foundation has been laid for it, we will either try to fill in the gap or point out the problem to the author. Another measure of quality for us is the correctness of references; the reader/researcher should be able to find the references cited.



Besides the quality of the articles we, as editors, are concerned also about the quantity of data we can fit in a limited number of pages. If we can shorten an article without changing its message or eliminating important material, we will do that. Authors often ask why we change "a minority" to "a few" and "demonstrate" to "show." The simple reason is economy of space. We try to use shorter words, eliminate extra words, and take out redundant material. We also realize that, occasionally, changing a long word or phrase to

a shorter one distorts the meaning. For example, if we change "a majority of" to "most," the author may well object if the actual percentage was 50.5% (a small majority). If the author objects, we reinstate the original words. Moreover, we do not use obscure or confusing acronyms to save space; in fact, we often ask authors to spell out acronyms in order to facilitate the reader's understanding of the article. Therefore, although we do look for ways to save space, correctness and clarity always have a higher priority.

Editing Reasons

The most basic function of a manuscript editor is to prepare articles for the typesetter (the person who enters the text and instructions into the printer's computer). The other practical reason that we edit manuscripts is to have a consistent style. In an article about editing, Scroggins [1] said, "Editors are the reader's advocates." We think that consistent usage helps the reader, and we know that inconsistent usage can be confusing. We try to avoid any usage that might confuse a reader or even cause the reader to pause because part of our job is to enable the reader to grasp *quickly* the substance of these technical articles. English is full of pitfalls and double meanings, and we use our knowledge of the language to make the author's meaning as clear as possible. O'Connor [2] cites one such pitfall: Some words have "different meanings in different countries.

'Billion' is one such word: change it, if possible, so that readers know

whether it means a thousand million (10^9), as it does in the United States and France, or a million million (10^{12}), as it usually but not always does in the United Kingdom."



Editing Compulsions

One of the reasons that people become editors is that they love language and enjoy working with manuscripts to make the manuscripts grammatically correct. The rules that guide usage of our language are confusing, at best, but manuscript editors strive to have specific knowledge of the rules and try to apply them consistently to each manuscript. Sometimes guides differ about grammatical rules, and then we make a decision about which guide to use. For example, a frequent problem arises about which form of the verb to use when "none" is the subject of the sentence. Some guides say that "none" means "not one" and that the verb should always be singular ("None of the techniques is..."). However, our guide, *Words into Type* [3], states that if authors mean "not one," they should say "not one"—and that "None of the techniques are..." is correct because "techniques" is really the understood subject. Whatever we do in cases like this, some reader may think we have made an error.

However, if we have the backing of a standard editorial guide and we use that guide's rules consistently, we are doing our best to keep the English correct.

Every manuscript editor whom I have ever met has some rules that he or she believes are sacred. In my first editing job, I was taught the difference between "which" and "that," and "which-hunting" became an important part of my job. I still cling to that distinction, which in a few cases really does make a difference in meaning. After 3 years of teaching English and Latin and 8 years of technical editing, I learned a rule that I had never heard of: that "due to" should be used to modify nouns only (if the phrase modifies a verb, adjective, or adverb, it must be changed to "because of" or "owing to"). Because *this* rule was such a revelation for me, it also has become one that I cannot ignore.

The best way to apply correct grammar, of course, is to use it in the ways that will help the reader understand the text better. This is one reason that we retain the series comma. Often, it does not make any difference whether there is a comma before the "and," but sometimes the comma or lack of a comma determines the meaning of the sentence.

Another reason for correcting wrong grammar is to eliminate sentences that the reader might find funny when they are not intended to be funny at all. Misplaced modifiers are the most common errors of this type. For example, we often find sentences that are

structured like this one: "After turning the patient into the left posterior oblique position, multiple small stones separated along the gallbladder wall." Here the word "turning" requires a subject (who is doing the turning?), and this sentence says that the little stones turned the patient into a new position. (Also, the use of "turning *into*" might bring to mind a phrase such as "turning into a pumpkin.") The editor should rephrase it ("After we turned the patient to the left posterior oblique position, multiple small stones separated along the gallbladder wall") and ask that the author verify the correctness of the change.

Correcting grammar is not a popular task. As Mawyer [4] pointed out: "The word 'grimoire,' meaning a wizard's book of black magic spells, has the same linguistic root as 'grammar.' "

Authors should know that we frequently do concede to jargon or popular usage, when that usage will be more clear to the reader than the strictly "correct" grammar. For example, I struggled with one paper that discussed "endothelial-like cells," an ungrammatical phrase meaning cells like endothelial cells. To make it proper, I would have had to use either that long phrase or two other unacceptable alternatives: "endothelium-like cells" (which is not what the author meant) or "endothelial-cell-like cells" (an editorial abomination). So, I left the phrase as the author had it, because I knew the readers would

understand exactly what was meant.



Conclusion

I have been both a student and a teacher, and I know that sometimes when authors see their edited manuscripts they must feel as they did when they saw their essays marked up in elementary school. Grading or correcting (in the sense of a teacher grading or correcting papers) is *not* one of the purposes of manuscript editing. We seek (1) to improve the articles and thus improve the journal, (2) to make the articles concise to give readers as much current research as possible in each issue, (3) to clarify the typesetting and production instructions for the printer, and (4) to make the articles grammatically correct, within reason and with awareness that sometimes common usage is clearer than strict grammatical correctness.

I know that, at times, authors think that we have destroyed (or at least disrupted) their writing style. I remember a cartoon in which an editor sits at his desk reading the classic opening lines of Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities*, "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." The editor looks up from the manuscript and says thoughtfully, "Some things just cry out for editing." We never deliberately tamper with an author's own style

of expression. Overall, however, we are more concerned with the reader's understanding than with the author's attachment to a certain type of prose.

I hope that authors, when they look at a manuscript that seems to be "overedited," will feel as Bates [5] does: "Sometimes an editor stirs my ire, but often that same editor keeps me from making foolish errors. Even when I disagree with the suggestions, they make me take a second look, and that's good. So I must appreciate editorial advice and counsel even when I'm writing NO!!"

If there is still any doubt about why we edit, perhaps these words from the article by Scroggins [1] will explain more completely the editing passion: "We are obsessed

with readers and their ability to understand printed words and thoughts as effortlessly as possible. We advocate clarity, consistency, correctness, and conciseness...That obsession compels us to weed out wordy constructions, untangle convoluted sentences, unpack noun strings, and the like...We search for words, phrases, and stylistic techniques that allow the reader to understand exactly, not partially, what the author intended." If, by our editing, we improve by one bit the communication between author and reader, then we have done our job well. The final satisfaction of editing is seeing the printed product and knowing that we have contributed to communicating important research to our readers.



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Excerpted from American Journal of Roentgenology 1989;152:647-649; with permission.



The Day the Proofreaders Attacked the Earth

Odds and Ends

1 kilobyte = 1024 bytes, but loosely used to express 1000 bytes

1 megabyte = 1,048,576 bytes, loosely 1 million bytes

1 gigabyte = 1 billion bytes

1 petabyte = 1 quadrillion* bytes

*a quadrillion is the number 1 followed by 15 zeros in the U.S., 24 zeros in the U.K.

Life is a verb.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Answers to Back to School:

1. *Lighted* or *lit*.
2. *Trod* if on ground, *treaded* if in water.
3. *Flew* except in baseball.
4. *Woke* or *waked*. The participle can be either *woken* or *waked*.
5. *Bore* if meaning "made a hole," *bored* if "made weary by being uninteresting."
6. *Hung*, but use *hanged* if by the neck.
7. *Shone* unless it means to polish, in which case it is *shined*.
8. Common usage seems to favor *baby-sat*.
9. *Sneaked* or *snuck*. (Yes, it is acceptable, ugly as it sounds.)
10. *Swam*, and its participle is *swum*, just like shrink-shrank-shrunk.
11. *Dived* is better, but *dove* is okay too.
12. *Knelt* or *kneeled*. The same rule applies to *dreamt* or *dreamed* and *leapt* or *leaped*.
13. *Wove* and *weaved* are interchangeable.

Excerpted from Adventures of a Verbivore, by Richard Lederer, Pocket Books, New York 1994.

At a reception to launch a recent book she had edited, my friend was approached by an enthusiastic older man, a brain surgeon.

He: I think editing is such an exciting profession. When I retire next year, I am going to become an editor.

She: How extraordinary. I have often thought that, when I retired from editing, I would become a brain surgeon.

Expert Prognostications

"Computers in the future may weigh no more than 1.5 tons."—*Popular Mechanics*, forecasting the relentless march of science, 1949.

"I have traveled the length and breadth of this country and talked with the best people, and I can assure you that data processing is a fad that won't last out the year."—The editor in charge of business books for Prentice Hall, 1957.

"There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home."—Ken Olson, president, chairman, and founder of Digital Equipment Corp., 1977.

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