

Why Every Writer Needs a Copy Editor

Presentation to the Baldwin Writers' Group, November 15, 2003

When I was asked to speak to the Pensters last November, I thought I would try to give advice about writing from the viewpoint of a reader and editor, telling about what I like and dislike in books. Naturally, the subject drifted, and I found I ended up talking a lot about the mistakes I find in my reading, which led to discussion of my work as a copy editor. Since that topic is what seemed to interest that audience the most, I thought it might be worth re-exploring with you.

As I said in that talk, most writers don't like to be edited. Even if they can appreciate the results, the process is almost invariably painful. This is especially true of creative editing, which requires them to actually think. Creative editors may suggest changes that require a lot of rethinking and rewriting. Ben Erickson, for example, tells about having to delete entire chapters in his book *A Parting Gift* and write new ones from scratch. Copy editing, on the other hand, can be a safety net for writers when they're *not* thinking.

So why do you need a copy editor? One reason is that an experienced copy editor by definition probably has experience that you don't have. She's had the opportunity to review many manuscripts and has the techniques of copy editing down to a science. Moreover, over the course of her experience, she has accumulated a library of style manuals and other reference materials that you may not have access to. Also, because this is her work, she's constantly noticing new trends in grammar and diction; everything she reads, she reads with a copy editor's eye.

In addition to their experience and the skills that they have developed, most copy editors have an innate talent or gift that you may not have. While you can certainly train yourself to do a better job of finding mistakes in your own work, most copy editors are blessed (some would say cursed) with the ability to see mistakes—or rather, the inability *not* to see mistakes, which can sometimes make “reading for pleasure” downright painful. This is an inherited trait, as Anne Fadiman pointed out in a brilliant essay on what she calls “compulsive proofreading.” [Aside about the article—show book; read first page of essay.]

One result of being a compulsive proofreader is that you tend to collect specimens (especially amusing ones) of bad writing. I call these “howlers,” and I've prepared some handouts for you with examples of writers who desperately needed copy editors. Most of these come from newspapers, which are prone to some kinds of errors just because of the time pressures involved in their production, but it's possible to find equally awful examples in books.

Now, I don't mean to suggest that you would knowingly make these kinds of mistakes, but even if your spelling and grammar are perfect, your typing may not be. When you're writing, you're thinking about what you want to say and how you want to say it. You may not be paying as much attention to how it actually gets on the page. Maybe you've left out a necessary comma, and that omission changes the sense of your sentence. Or you get so caught up in writing dialog that some of the quotation marks get misplaced or left off. Even when you go back to proofread your work, you may find yourself editing and tweaking instead.

But even if you have a talent for proofreading and experience in copyediting your own work, even if you have a shelf full of references, you still need a copy editor because *you can't find your own mistakes*. That is the bottom line of why every writer needs a copy editor—why even

copy editors need copy editors. As good as I am (and some of my clients have been kind enough to tell me that I'm *very* good), I can't proofread my own work. Invariably, I find the mistakes in my weekly Rotary bulletin *after* I've printed 120 copies (and often after 90 of them have been distributed at the Rotary meeting).

The reason it is impossible to proofread your own work, the reason your eye will skip right over the mistakes, is that *you know what you wrote*. Your brain will supply missing letters and words or overlook typos. To a large extent this is true of sense as well as spelling because *you also know what you mean*. The copy editor, who doesn't know what you wrote or meant, brings a fresh eye to your work and can not only spot typos and grammatical errors but also point out passages that aren't clear, thereby serving as a proxy for your readers.

So what exactly does a copy editor do? In the aforementioned essay on proofreading, Anne Fadiman referred to a friend who was a copy editor, "a profession she compares to walking behind an elephant in a parade and scooping up what it has left on the road." [Quote rest of paragraph.] I would liken it to telling you you have spinach in your teeth.

When I was a teenager and a young woman, one of the most embarrassing things that could happen to you was to be caught with your slip showing. To tip you off, a friend might murmur that "it's snowing down South." I remember my mother advising me, however, that it was not polite to tell a woman that her slip was showing or that she had a run in her stocking because there was little she could do about it, and it would just make her uncomfortable and self-conscious. The only condition it was permissible to alert her to was having lipstick on the teeth, which could easily be remedied discreetly.

It's been a long time since I've worried much about runs in my stockings or my slip showing. Here on the sultry Gulf Coast, we women avoid slips *and* stockings as much as possible. And I don't wear enough lipstick to be liable to get it on my teeth, but I like to think that, if I did, someone would tell me.

And that's what copy editors are all about. They keep you from embarrassing yourself. What this work entails runs the gamut from proofreading to rudimentary creative editing, but it is all intended to keep you from ending up with egg on your face.

There is always an adversarial relationship between writers and editors. Both usually have healthy egos. The writer, who is an artist, may assume that his creative work will suffer if it is altered in any way. The editor, who is a technician, may be convinced that there is only one "correct" way to write, and this attitude indeed often can suck the life out of creative writing. But a healthy balance between the two is necessary to produce the best possible result.

At the most basic level, a copy editor will proofread. She'll make sure that your spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and grammar are correct or at least consistent. A good copy editor understands that you may be capitalizing for effect, or that the grammatical errors in your dialog are intentional, but she will make sure that your usage is consistent. And if she thinks that your diction or grammar is inappropriate, she'll say so.

But a good copy editor will do much more. Just to mention a few of the problems a good copy editor can spot, over and above mere proofreading:

Suppose you have a character named Jane and halfway through your book decide to change her name to Jean. With the global Find and Replace feature in your word processor, this is simple enough, and you probably won't leave any mistakes, but a good copy editor will notice,

even if you did not, that you have a character named Jane on one page and Jean on another. (When Joanne Rains was writing *Looking for the Lights and the Music*, she described her family (father, mother, and brother) very faithfully, and she mentioned some other factual characters by name, but she changed the names of some of the minor characters in her story to protect their privacy. Except that the really minor ones appeared so infrequently that by the time she came to the next reference, she had forgotten what she'd called them. When I was editing the book, I ran across a number of inconsistencies (at least of spelling) that had to be ironed out.)

She'll also notice if you've made Jane (or Jean) 21 years old in the first chapter, and in the next chapter, five years later, she's 28. Or if she has a brother who's older on one page and younger on another. For example, in Amanda Cross's *The Edge of Doom*, where the protagonist is 56 years old, and 11 years younger than her oldest brother, on page 1, but 52 years old (and 15 years younger) on page 15.

I recently read a book in which there were three minor characters Walters, Carter, and Harper. I don't know about you, but as far as I was concerned, those names were all the same—or at least too much alike. A good copy editor might suggest that so much similarity is unwise because readers might get the characters confused. Your copy editor wants to keep readers from getting confused. You want your readers to be interested in your characters and your plot, not trying to puzzle out what in the world you're trying to say, and your copy editor will help by spotting wording that is unclear or ambiguous. For example, consider this passage from Sue Grafton's *Q is for Quarry*:

The woodwork was stained dark; the walls covered with yellowing paper. In places I could see tears that revealed the wall coverings from three lifetimes down; a small floral print covered by a layer of pinstripes that, in turn, covered blowsy bouquets of faded cabbage roses.

The first time I read this, I pounced on its obvious absurdity; it took several more readings for me to understand where Grafton had gone wrong. A misplaced modifier makes nonsense of the sentence.

If your copy editor is research-oriented, she'll probably also do some fact checking for you. For example, when I was copy editing *Looking for the Lights and the Music*, by Joanne Rains, I was intrigued by her description of the Lindbergh plane, the "Spirit of St. Louis," which she described as being in the Jefferson Memorial Building in St. Louis. Since I remembered seeing it in the Smithsonian in Washington and wondered when it had been moved, I did a little Internet research and found that the "Spirit of St. Louis" had been in the Smithsonian since 1928, whereas Joanne and her brother seemed to have seen it in St. Louis between 1939 and 1941. When I asked Joanne about it, she called the Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis and found out that the plane there was and always had been a replica!

This is the sort of thing I like to do. The Internet has made so much information readily available that it is very easy to check the correct spelling of a bygone brand name or get information on a historical figure. For example, in writing about the director of the St. Louis Zoo, Joanne had spelled his name several different ways. When I searched the Web for the correct spelling, I found that it was different from any of the ones she had used! She emailed me, "I'm really glad you caught the zoo director's misspelled name. I'm sure many people (if anyone reads this book) would notice." This goes back to what I said about a copy editor's being a safety net.

At the upper end of the spectrum, a copy editor's work may verge on creative editing. She may ask you about your character's motivation or certain plot elements or suggest improvements in the organization of a nonfiction book. But this is really outside the realm of basic copy editing. So don't embarrass your copy editor by asking her whether she thinks your book is any good. By and large, a copy editor has a hard time seeing the forest for the trees. Because she reads your manuscript line by line, she may not see "the big picture." She's mostly concerned with making sure that each sentence is correct, that the transitions between paragraphs are smooth, that spelling, punctuation, and capitalization are consistent throughout the manuscript. If, despite all these distractions, the copy editor has found your book interesting, educational, or entertaining, she'll usually volunteer this information. But even if she found it deadly dull, you can rest assured that she will have left it better than she found it!