

# “A Love of Having Things Right”: Thoughts from a Longtime *New Yorker* Copy Editor

### **Q. How would you describe your editorial philosophy?**

**A.** This isn't really a philosophy—just some guidance:

1. Always watch out for grammar problems in everything you read—from the newspaper to all the begging letters that come to your mailbox.
2. Avoid repetitions of nearly every kind.
3. Try to make corrections that are in accord with the author's writing style. (That's what is fun.) Over the years, I think, I have found more and more things that need to be corrected, and I hope I have found more ways of dealing with them.

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[Editor's note: An interview with Eleanor Gould Packard, then “in her 55th year as a nonfiction editor at *The New Yorker*”, recently appeared in print. Below are some excerpts that might interest readers of *Science Editor*.]

Reprinted from Priscilla Taylor's interview with Eleanor Gould Packard in the *Key Reporter*, Summer 1999, with permission from the Phi Beta Kappa Society.

### **Q. How about pet language peeves and favorite reference works?**

**A.** My list of pet language peeves would certainly include writers' use of indirection (i.e., slipping new information into a narrative as if the reader already knew it); confusion between restrictive and nonrestrictive phrases and clauses (*that* goes with restrictive clauses, and, ordinarily, *which* with nonrestrictive); careless repetition; and singular subjects with plural verbs and vice versa. Also, always change *ten times more than* to *ten times as many as*; *he is one of the best writers who is* to *who are*; and *they only did five things* to *they did only five*.

I have a shelf loaded with resources above my office desk and more at home, but among my favorites are *Merriam-Webster's Tenth Collegiate Dictionary* and Ted Bernstein's books, particularly *The Careful Writer*, *Miss Thistlebottom's Hobgoblins*, and *More Language That Needs Watching*. I never met Ted Bernstein, but over several decades, while he was working on the *Times*, we talked on the phone, and from the 1960s until the year of his death he sent me his weekly “Winner and Sinners,” to praise or correct the writers at the *Times*.

One of the books on my shelf—*Line by*

*Line*, by Claire Kehrwald Cook—reminds me of a curious incident. Garrison Keillor, who was on our staff for a while, gave me this wonderful book, which said on the cover “How to Edit Your Own Writing.” I liked it so much that I persuaded Robert Gottlieb, Mr. Shawn's successor, to order a lot of copies to give to our writers. After he received the copies, though, he found that there had been a reprinting, and all those covers now read “How to Improve Your Own Writing.” Because it was hardly the thing for the head of *The New Yorker* to urge his authors to improve their own writing, all the books went back.

### **Q. For young people who might be thinking about an editorial career today, what educational preparation do you advise—lots of reading and a broad education? Or do you think it's all in the genes?**

**A.** Certainly not just in the genes. The most important thing is a love of having things right—from the proper use of commas to the search for perfect clarity. Lots of reading, of course, is what brings about such love: one can't stand to find one's favorite authors not handled properly. 📖