

Are Editors Born or Made?

When asked whether creative writing can be taught, Wallace Stegner replied: "1. It can be done. 2. It can't be done to everybody." After 15 years of training editors, I'd say that Stegner's assessment holds true in my field as well.

Teachability is, of course, a bread-and-butter topic for instructors and trainers: What can be taught, to whom, and how? Questions about native talent and teachability also arise when recent graduates and career changers wonder whether they have what it takes to succeed in editing, when interviewers assess applicants for entry-level editorial positions, and when supervisors counsel a struggling junior editor.

No scientist has identified an editorial gene, and we have no documented reports of the muse Redactia visiting babies in their bassinets. Yet some people do seem better suited to editorial work than others. To help these people identify themselves—and to help prospective employers identify them—I offer my profile of the teachable novice.

Prerequisite skills and aptitudes

Newcomers can learn editorial routines and procedures in a classroom or during on-the-job training. But lessons in methods and standards cannot turn every willing soul into a competent editor. Before grabbing a pencil or a mouse, the teachable novice has already acquired, over a period of many years, the following skills and aptitudes:

- A strong command of English grammar, usage, diction, and spelling; attentiveness to different registers of language; and an interest in how English continues to change.
- An untiring and sharp eye, the ability to read at different speeds, and a good visual memory.
- A well-tuned ear—unless the novice's goal is to work only on copy that has no cadence or rhythm: inventories, directories, spec sheets, and technical documentation.
- A solid sense of logic, which includes seeing what is missing from an argument or a series of procedural steps.

- Editorial clairvoyance: the ability to intuit what a writer is trying to say and what the readers are likely to infer.

Computer skills are valuable, but those, unlike the items on my list, can be acquired with a month or two of effort. For scholarly and technical work, editors may also need basic or advanced knowledge of the subject matter.

Temperament

Some editors are cheerful, others are sullen, but successful editors tend to have a measure of the following traits:

- A desire for perfection, tempered by an understanding that schedules, budgets, and other exigencies often preclude perfection.
- A willingness to serve as a behind-the-scenes player.
- Stamina.
- A dash of courage.
- A slightly toughened hide.

The last three of these items require some explanation. Stamina sounds odd to non-editors, who view editing as a sedentary job. But it takes great concentration and effort to edit well day in and day out.

Courage also puzzles noneditors until I tell them about students who excelled on homework exercises but froze when handed their first real manuscript. They couldn't muster the self-confidence to edit in the absence of an instructor who would share her answer key and point out the errors they had missed.

The leathery hide helps when authors, supervisors, or clients forget to be appreciative, constructive, and kind. The thick-skinned editor is not indifferent to criticism but responds with a generous "How can we do this better?" rather than a defensive "My way is best".

"I love to read. Doesn't that count?"

Some would-be editors believe that their strongest qualification is that they love to read, and they wonder why my list doesn't include "a love of reading". What many

people love about reading, however, is losing themselves in a book—a seduction the working editor must resist. Instead of surrendering to the text, the editor must interrogate it: Is the text open to misunderstanding? Are there too many or too few words to get the job done? Does the hyphenation of compound modifiers correspond to house style?

Also, many readers only love to read the kinds of texts they love. Newcomers to publishing, however, are rarely assigned lovable projects. A love of literature, for example, although essential for those who edit literary prose or serious fiction, can frustrate new editors, who are unlikely to find entry-level work that offers aesthetic pleasure.

In contrast, I would welcome aboard a novice who says “I love language in all its plasticity and quirkiness” or “I love books and printed materials—their heft, their feel, their smell.”

“I love to write.”

Good writing skills are a professional advantage for an editor, but many edi-

tors do little or no writing, and novices often get themselves in trouble when they rewrite, rather than edit, manuscripts.

My advice for people who love to write is to seek work as a writer. But an editing career can be quite fulfilling for those who like to write, write well, and can separate their writerly self from their editorial self.

Excalibur

To those who recognize themselves in my profile, I propose a final challenge: Spend a few hours with a style guide or copyediting manual. If reading 15 pages about commas doesn't scare you or bore you, you are a teachable novice.

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