

I Call Myself an Editor

“Rules make good servants but bad masters.”
—Aesop

“We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.”
—Toni Morrison, *Nobel Acceptance Speech*, 1994

Starting sometime around the first week of January, a fellow member of the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences (BELS) began a discussion on the group’s e-mail forum. The discussion started with hyphenation. Many exchanges later, it had knocked on the doors of en/em dashes, commas, prefixes, Plain Language, pistol-packing pandas, and ultimately paid a visit to love, the meaning of life, the worth of editors, and how-much-corn-could-a-corn-shucker-shuck-if-a-corn-shucker-could-shuck-corn.

In the course of ducking these volleys—I sometimes felt as if I were caught in enfilading fire at the Battle of Fredericksburg—I managed to copy and paste them to a file that I slowly reviewed during the week that followed.

Incidentally, when it comes to corn-shucking, I’d never bet against anyone from Kansas (the location of one of the correspondents).

Anyway, it seems to me in sorting through this considerable dustup (33 printed pages) that there was some self-righteous har-r-rumphing and fist-shaking going on about our dear language.

One member—had to be British from the spelling—commented after a fusillade of messages about hyphens and en rules, “Isn’t it marvellous how people can be so dogmatic about such a grey area?”

1. I cite a har-r-rumph: “Our duty is to conserve and preserve the rules of English.”

2. I cite another: “The use of multi-level structure adds nothing for the reader.”

3. And one last: “We are, indeed, the keepers of the keys.”

4. In a counter-har-r-rumph, someone wrote: “I prefer to err on the side of providing too much clarification. . . .”

5. And someone else wrote: “[A reader’s] immediate reaction comes before thinking and understanding.”

6. And a third person wrote: “Are you editing for the reader with the greatest understanding, or the reader with the least?”

Herewith I feel the need to kaff-kaff and cut loose with a counter-har-r-rumph of my own: I think we are not so much the keepers of the keys, but the keepers of the *meaning*.

When I was hired, the first question my boss-to-be asked me was not whether Lancelot was prepared to seize his sword and carve the cask of any varlet who would despoil the rules of English—although I did have to pass a rigorous test—but how careful I was in detecting and correcting errors of meaning within a bioscientific context, and he made it clear that he interpreted *meaning* broadly.

To illustrate his point, he related the case of the 1991 edition of the *Petit Larousse* dictionary. It seems that that esteemed publisher was forced to recall 180,000 of its 1,700-page tomes owing to an error under one illustration. A black dot (signifying “edible”) beside a picture of an *Amanita phalloides* mushroom should have been a red dot (signifying “poisonous”). The recall cost Les Éditions Larousse 25 million francs, which at the time equaled about 5 million dollars, American.

Besides catching frank errors of the mislabeled-mushroom sort, an editor must also bond that whatever an author has written contains no vaguenesses, no ambiguities, no blind alleys or false scents—in short, nothing to lead a reader astray. Robert Louis Stevenson said, “Don’t write merely to be understood; write so that you cannot possibly be misunderstood.”

For sure, strictly following the rules helps an editor live up to Stevenson’s imperative. But I regard consistency—of spelling, grammar, punctuation, usage, voice, structure—as the master rule of all rules because an editor’s “copyscotching” through a work can distract the reader’s mind from the train of meaning as it streams off the page. Better to be uniformly incorrect on a minor style rule or fine point of grammar than be erratic, for a reader’s sensitivity to variance usually inhabits a higher level of consciousness than does his or her tripwire for minor rule infractions. It often takes another editor to

spot what readers and writers miss—even careful ones. That’s why editors have jobs.

Some further personal har-r-rumphing:

It seems to me that an editor has a couple of primary functions: As I said above, the foremost is to look out for the reader by warranting the author’s meaning. And by “meaning” I intend far more than the mere correct syntacticogrammatical sequence of words on a page. I refer to the fullness of what the author and publisher intend and do not intend to convey—“the meaning of everything”, to use the phrase Simon Winchester chose for the title of his recent book about the writing of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

An editor’s desk is a hopper at the end of a conveyor belt of information. Each day’s submissions bring a gallimaufry of data, reportage, ideas, reasonings, opinions, factoids, speculations, assumptions, deliberations, secondhand accounts—all of which the editor must pore over and, from which, distill the clear spirit of the authors’ intentions. In the course of a day, an editor might have to challenge assertions, investigate histories, trace sources, try facts, sniff out precedents, probe logic, adjudge esthetics, weigh likelihoods, track etymologies, dispute allegations, or vet references. We are judges, but with a dictionary crooked in our elbow instead of a law book. If a statue were ever to be erected to editors and the profession of editing, it might look something like that of the Roman goddess *Justicia* on our courthouses, but it would hold 100 balances instead of one.

An editor must also honor another imperative: to improve on an author’s effort while preserving her or his voice. Editors must sometimes struggle to corral their conceits. In their studies, physicians learn the admonition of the ancient healer Hippocrates: “Primum non nocere”—“First, do no harm.” An editor (word-healer) would do well to observe “Primum non vocem auctoris nocere”, translated literally as “First, do no harm to the author’s voice”, and freely as “Remember, they are the author’s words, not yours.”

We do so yearn to take charge, saviors of the word if not saviors of the world.

If exactly following rules achieves the

goals outlined above, fine, but an editor should treat the rules for what they are—lane markers and route signs on the reader’s high road to comprehension. An editor should not confuse the city-limit sign with Pittsburgh.

Certifying to a document’s meaning is hard, and doing so engagingly and felicitously is harder, but that’s what elevates the superior result above the merely acceptable. *The New York Public Library Writer’s Guide to Style and Usage* puts it this way: “Editing is part science, part art. The science is based on rules of grammar and accepted terminology; the art is based on cadence, euphony, and felicity. ‘The art of editing has most to do with felicity—with making just the right improvement to create light, joy, song, aptness, grace, beauty, or excitement where it wasn’t quite happening.’ (Arthur Plotnik, *The Elements of Editing*.)”

It’s not exactly the Jet Propulsion Laboratory’s *Levels of Edit*, but here are mine. I try to observe a three-step process: (1) See that everything that’s necessary is there. (2) See that everything that’s there is necessary. (3) Polish whatever’s left until it sparkles.

If I’m hassled by half-hour deadlines and people standing on my toes, I warn them beforehand that I will not get beyond step 1; they get what they get. With longer deadlines and lower page-per-hour pressure, I proceed through step 2. After that, given slack, I pull out the Shinola.

To conclude, I don’t call myself an editor merely because I do rules. I call myself an editor because, in the words of Toni Morrison, I do language.

I call myself an editor because I care about my readers and writers. I call myself an editor because I help bring ideas into the world in the form of clean, vigorous, contemporary prose.

I see myself sort of like a midwife—present at the event and having a hand in it, but mainly just adjusting the angle, urging when to push, celebrating the delivery, and then cleaning up afterwards.

Har-r-rumph!

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