Ten Helpful Editing Practices

The wisest among us learn from the mistakes of others; the rest of us learn from our own.
—Confucius

Over the years, this editor has often benefited from the good advice and assistance of some wise people. Besides piggybacking me over a few rough patches while I was engaged in specific tasks, these kind souls have also passed along general strategies and rules of thumb, advised about reference works, sounded warnings about office politics, and let me in on other insider information that has aided me in many ways. Herewith, I record 10 helpful approaches to editing. These are not rules exactly, but perspectives on editing gleaned from sometimes hard-won experience.

Muzzle your mind. Lightning tends to follow ionized paths through the atmosphere. Beginning at birth, humans discern patterns in their experiences that they burn into their brain as neural pathways for fast future retrieval. This facilitates efficient mental function but can also lead to false interpretation when new information that is close to previously stored information presents itself. Thus, we interpolate a "t" in "It was previously sated [sic]" and read it as "It was previously stated." (And your spellchecker will not catch "sated" because it is spelled correctly; see next section.)

Good editing demands that the editor "unburn" neural pathways and learn to read language with a new chemistry. The key to accurate editing, and especially accurate proofreading, is to train your eye to see what is really there—and, just as important, what is not there—rather than what your neuronal wiring *tells* you is there. As one friend put it, "We do not see things as they are, we see things as *we* are."

Your spellchecker is sometimes a spellwrecker. Microsoft Word (MS) and its related grammar checker and spellchecker sometimes insist on erroneous renditions of grammar, spellings, and usage. I have worked in offices where the house-approved version of MS Word was downright subversive, sometimes "correcting" things improperly and without notice to, or consultation of, the writer.

You can often make MS Word bend to your will by changing its "Tools>AutoCorrect" settings. I have found that the "AutoFormat As You Type" settings deserve especially close scrutiny.

This could be you: The supervisor of an international science-education project in Cameroon once recognized too late that his spellchecker had changed the name of the project's local leader, Manasseh Ngome, to "Massive Gnome".

If you have the least doubt, look it up. You have seen the name "Newcastle" many times and have even visited the city in England. Then someone in your department writes the name of the city in Delaware as "Newcastle" in one of your company's documents. You think for a second, waver, and then say to yourself, "I know how to render that." You let it get into print that way. Then a reader writes to you and tells you that he lives in that city and that the name is two words: "New Castle".

Rules make good servants but bad masters. Another way to state this is, "Know when to make a rule; know when to break a rule." Be prepared to take the lead. If your shop has not agreed on a consistent rendering of a word, phrase, or formation, propose one and solicit its acceptance. If you do this often enough, and tactfully, you will win the admiration of your peers and supervisor for demonstrating initiative.

Take a stand for common sense. Many offices and publishing houses continue to do things the way they have done them from day 1. Don't foist something confusing or ugly on your audience just to comply with some long-departed manager's arbitrary style rule. (*But,* see "Pick Your battles" below.)

Pick your battles. It is possible to be too right. You can sometimes be *so* right that it can cost you your job—or at least your credibility. My insistence on placing a hyphen in "triple-quadrupole mass spec-

trometer" once got me in trouble with a VP of our joint employer, a large public company, who called me angrily to say that I didn't know what I was talking about and that "no self-respecting mass-spec scientist ever writes it that way." (I bent, but I still maintain that I was right.)

I once interviewed for a position at a large Silicon Valley software company. During the meeting, I noted to the interviewer what I regarded as a recurring spelling mistake in the company's press releases. I was told that it was unwise to try to tell that to the CEO, because "If you are rich enough, you can write your own dictionary."

You can never own too many reference books. They are your resources in a time of crisis and a bomb shelter in the face of criticism. Make sure to buy the latest revisions. Your company or department will often pay for them, but if it does not, buy them yourself. (Save the old editions, because sometimes a very helpful rule or particularly felicitous phrasing is not carried forward into the new ones.)

Proofread from back to front, bottom to top. I have found that the last two or three paragraphs or pages of a manuscript often contain a disproportionate number of errors. People begin a piece of writing with fervor and fresh minds. They tire and let their guard down as they approach the end of the piece. They make more mistakes, let facts go unchecked, and omit more words, especially if a weekend or holiday looms. As a proofreader, I have found the same faults in myself. Therefore, I have often found it valuable to begin my final review at the end and go to the beginning.

Editing effort expands geometrically with author and page count. This dictum does not strictly hold true when applied to short documents by one author or two, but the spirit of the statement stands up to experience. When I have had to deal with long documents—say, 15 to 20 pages or more—I have discovered that I have sometimes needed to double, quadruple, or octuple earlier, more naïve time-to-edit estimates

as additional authors and reviewers were added.

For example, I have often found that a 50-page document by four authors requires not 2, but 4 times as many hours as a 25-pager by two authors and that a 100-page document by eight authors requires not 4, but 16 times as many hours as a 25-pager by two authors. I have found this especially true when working with multiple authors who learned English as a second language or with British-educated authors.

Try to have the last look. Changes can occur during a final review cycle that can reflect adversely on you. Reviewers can introduce (or reassert) errors that you have already corrected. Supervisors or content experts are often the last to see a manuscript and are notoriously prone to make last-minute alterations or deletions that can induce errors in page numbers or numbered lists or displace callouts of figures and tables.

Always qualify and quantify a casual "take a look at this" job request. First of all, few job drop-offs are as simple as the "drop-offers" imagine them to be. Many jobs—even nominal one- or two-pagers—involve research and fact-checking that will affect the content substantially and lengthen the time required to complete the task.

Furthermore, many "take a look at this" job requests carry with them a political agenda of which you may not be aware. Sometimes the job-requester will use your opinion regarding the spelling or usage in the piece to establish his or her own credibility at the expense of someone else's, and this might backfire on you. At initial drop-off, it is always wise to ask the question, "Who else will be seeing this?"

Chuckle of the Month. Let's hear it for piscine privacy: "Yellow perch decline to be studied." (*Anguished English* desk calendar entry for 1 December 2006, collected by Richard Lederer.)