

A Copyeditor's Top-10 List

[*Little Red-Haired Girl drops pencil.*]

Charlie Brown: "She's HUMAN!"

Lucy [*snatching pencil off floor*]:

"Hey kid! Here's your pencil!"

—"It's Your First Kiss, Charlie Brown!"

1977 CBS-TV Special

I have to confess that I'm crazy about top-10 (or -50, or -100) lists. I pounce on them like a duck on a June bug the instant I open the publication or click on the site, and I'm always trying to outguess Letterman's last punch line. I wolf down every one I can find—"Top 10 best bookstores in New York", "Top 10 best doo-wop songs of the fifties", "Top 10 best political slogans of all time". (I'll stop here and wait for those readers to catch up whose minds are now working on answers to the three lists I just dreamed up.)

Why is it that so many people—including me—like them? In my case, I think it might be that I never felt part of the "in" crowd in high school, the crowd that "everybody wanted to be part of"—on the basis of appearance, personality, likes, attitudes, beliefs, choices, where you lived, your parents' occupations and incomes. You looked in the mirror and asked yourself, "How do I measure up? Do I think like 'them'? Am I like 'them' enough to belong?" So I wonder whether guys like me who find top-10 lists mesmerizing are (or were) secretly in doubt of their own "all-rightness" in the world—Charlie Browns always seeking lasting reassurance from Little Red-Haired Girls.

What I didn't understand fully until a couple of decades later is that even the Little Red-Haired Girl often needed some reassurance herself. So now I'm going to pretend that I am the Little Red-Haired Girl (I do have Irish blood—and never mind the sex difference). But this time I'm going to seek reassurance from you, dear reader, that we think alike in at least a few respects by proffering a list of the top 10 things that irritate me as a copyeditor. But have no doubt: Despite my mutterings, I would still rather be a Word Hawk than almost anything or anyone else. (Well, maybe except for George Clooney. . . .) If you have your own top-10 list of copyedit-

ing complaints, quibbles, and crotchets and are willing to share it, I invite you to send it to me—complaints about columnists not allowed.

Criteria. It should come as no surprise that choosing these was the hardest part of writing this column. Should I include only items

- That alter the meaning the most?
- On which I typically spend the most time?
- That seem to tax my editing powers the most?
- That strike me as most frequent and pervasive?
- That are of growing concern in an increasingly digital age?
- That could easily confuse an international audience if overlooked?
- That might encourage a flood tide of bad usage if editors do nothing?
- That include all editing mechanics, including punctuation and formatting, or only words and syntax?
- That just plain irritate me the most and that I think should be blindingly obvious to anyone past kindergarten?

After long consideration, I decided to fold in *all* the above criteria, with a bias toward the first three. So here are my top 10 items, the "elite deletes" in the realm of scientific editing as I have seen it (brow knitting tighter from 10 to 1):

10. E-mail/e-mail/Email/email // Web site/Website/web site/website // Internet/internet. I do not suggest that there is no latitude of word choice here. Some august and carefully edited publications, including *National Geographic*, have adopted *email* and *website* as their style. (*National Geographic* retains the capital in *Internet*.) A preponderance of the editors I talk to favor *e-mail/E-mail*, *Web site*, and *Internet*, but as in the case of hyphens, en dashes, and em dashes, getting authors to agree to follow the house style and remembering to do so correctly over time is an order as tall as a Kansas haystack.

9. **Leaving a word out or putting two identical words in.** Many writers compose so rapidly they don't realize they have a word out. (Hold your fire, manuscript editor!—don't touch that last sentence.) Because grammar-checkers are now on to duplications, you are less likely ever to encounter such cases as in the classic "A bird in the the hand. . . ." (Desist, manuscript editor!—I intended the *the the*.)
8. **Not deleting a "leave-behind" after editing.** An example: *She stepped out into the street, unaware that there was a car was bearing down on her.* Again, this can happen when the writer's mind is racing too fast for the fingers to keep pace.
7. **Spurious capitalization or demotion of nouns to lowercase.** Spell-checkers catch these with greater frequency now than a few years ago, but many authors—especially those who learned English as a second language—still often capitalize common nouns or change correctly capitalized words to lowercase.
6. **Hyphen/en dash/em dash confusion.** Very few authors have a firm hold on this, even highly experienced ones. (Come to think of it, I know some editors. . . .) I have had many earnest discussions (read *arguments*) with authors who learned on typewriters and who insist that a hyphen will do in all situations, doubled or tripled if need be to emulate an en dash or em dash. Fine, point taken, the practice can be clear and effective if consistently applied. However, the trouble often derives from the spaces that *separate* the hyphen or suite of hyphens from each other and from the text. One editor once estimated that if you count the number of ways in which to permute and combine four spaces and one, two, or three hyphens, you arrive at a number over 100!
5. **Improper references—both print and electronic.** Although recent advances in software have helped to simplify the operation, listing references still confounds a great number of authors.

If the list of references is at all long, it is the rare writer who gets at least half of them right half the time. Surname first or given name? Given name or just initials? If initials, with periods or without? And with spaces or without? Article title in quotes or not? In headline case or sentence case? Journal title italicized or not? It can go on and on (I once edited an 18-page article that cited 239 references). Electronic references seem to score especially high on writers' "oops" lists right now. Even if cited correctly, the URL is often out of date and the link dead by the time the material sees print. The most common problem seems to be that authors forget to cite the date when they accessed the link. (Consult CSE's current guidelines for Internet citations in edition 7 of *Scientific Style and Format*, Section 29.3.7.13, pages 556–564.)

4. **Spell-checker miscues/botches/disallowances.** This happens often when an author is rushed or heedless and relies too heavily on software to catch errors. Homophones (for example, *here/hear*) are highly susceptible, as are jargon, coined words, and proper nouns. (In the May–June 2007 column, I noted the erroneous change of the name of Manasseh Ngome, a science-education project leader in Cameroon, to "Massive Gnome".) By "disallowance", I mean a forced change to a formation caused by a spell-checker's refusal to accept the desired orthography. Also, watch carefully for errors caused by the AutoFormat As You Type function in Microsoft Word.
3. **Errors of parallelism.** I think this fits mostly under the "time" criterion. I don't know about other editors, but I have spent an *ungodly* number of hours on this. An example from a bulleted list: Some authors just don't get that there is anything wrong with "Our results included
 - An *n* of 1,024 *R. norvegicus*
 - We also tried the same experiment on 346 *Rattus rattus*."
2. **Undefined condensations of longer expressions.** This is a perennial hour-

eater and ulcer-breeder for all editors. Standard practice is to derive a condensation—acronym, initialism, truncation, abbreviation, other convenient shortening of a long expression—the first time it appears in the text, cite the condensed form (in parentheses) after it, and repeat the derivation every so often after that as dictated by the publisher's style. Many authors remember to do that, but when they don't, their editors have to—guess what?—look the expression up and cite it *for* them. When authors *do* remember to derive the meaning, they then often put the condensed expression *before* its full form and not in parentheses rather than *after* it and with the parentheses around the expression, which is what most style manuals and publishing houses require.

1. **Overlong sentences and paragraphs.** Here is the 41-word *opening clause*—I'll stop at the first comma (how dense must the article have been?)—of the 81-word first sentence of a paper in a physics journal as criticized in the 19 August 1997 *Science*: "The need to obtain adequate ELMy H-mode energy confinement simultaneous with operation near the neoclassical tearing mode beta-limit and at/above the Greenwald density limit suggests that careful optimization of plasma performance will be required to obtain the desired fusion power performance, . . ." ¹ (A period lurks out there somewhere; I can scent its faint pheromone wafting from w-a-a-y out there below the limb of the far eastern horizon.)

Chuckle of the Month. Not a joke or anecdote, a Web site: "Joy of Erasers" says, "We hope to shine the spotlight on the lowly yet powerful eraser in all its wondrous variety." eraserjoy.blogspot.com/2007/04/faber-castell-magic-rub.html

Reference

1. Glanz J. Cut the communications fog, say physicists and editors. *Science*[Internet]. 1977 [cited 2007 November 5];277(5328):895-6. doi: 10.1126/science.277.5328.895.