

## Explain Yourself!

Mentor: *a wise and trusted guide and advisor.*

Mediator: *someone chosen to judge and decide a disputed issue.*

Midwife: *someone skilled in aiding the delivery of babies.*

—*www.VisualThesaurus.com*

“And just what do *you* do for a living?”

I have found that people sometimes blanch and quail (sounds like the successor to “shock and awe”) when I respond “I’m an editor.”

My answer *has* proved to be a nifty cocktail-party chat-starter at times, but as I said, I also see people react timorously. At times they even edge away, as though evading an effluvium of garlic breath. Sometimes they don’t talk to me at all for the whole evening. Could it be that they aren’t too sure, after all, whether it’s “between you and I” or “between you and me”? (This being a cocktail party, the correct expression is, of course, *entre nous*.) Or could it be just the garlic?

Or could their behavior be more simply explained? Perhaps it’s just that they’ve had no experience with an editor—or if they have, perhaps it was unpleasant. Perhaps they view editors as schoolmarms, which *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (11th edition) defines as “a person who exhibits characteristics attributed to schoolteachers (as strict adherence to arbitrary rules)”. (I quarrel with M-W in this definition, both as an editor and as the husband of a schoolteacher; in fairness, the word *sometimes* or the phrase *in the past* should be inserted before *attributed*, or the word *some* before *schoolteachers*.)

In such situations, if I can induce my conversational partners to unglaze their gaze for a few minutes, I often describe what I do by referring to other jobs. Editing draws on skills that are common to many occupations, but I often think of three when I describe my work to others.

**Mentor.** I am a teacher but not in the traditional classroom sense. What I send to people sometimes travels far and wide.

It has ended up correcting or informing the usage of people from Pasco to Patagonia, sometimes even being used to win bets and settle arguments.

It’s dismaying what writers don’t know—sometimes even accomplished ones. In working through a manuscript with its author, I often find myself having to tread lightly in areas that involve some rather basic English, lest I come across as preachy, righteous, or overweening. But I always take time to pass along as constructively as possible what I know about the points in question.

But I’m also a teacher in another sense. It’s been my privilege to teach a few newly minted writers what to expect during an editing cycle. Some have never been seriously edited before their work lands in my in-box. If that’s the case, I take pains not to send them something with more red on it than Enron’s final balance sheet without preparing them. I explain what they’ll see. I describe the differences between mandatory grammatical and usage corrections, arbitrary (but still nonnegotiable) changes that answer to a house style manual, and optional changes that I recommend in the service of euphony and grace. I try to think of it as painting a house: The paint flows on smoother and faster—and stays on longer—after proper priming.

**Mediator.** Or should I say gladiator? Although it’s true that I’ve punched it out (verbally) with a VP or two, I’ve found that a middle furrow can usually be plowed among big egos, small budgets, scant space, and felicitous—or at least reputable—prose. So in the world of the editor, the word *mediator* denotes the function of a conciliator and go-between. But there is also a strictly linguistic connotation.

A comparison has sometimes been proposed between the work of editors and that of translators. Both processes mediate the language—or in the case of a translator, the languages. That is, they reshape and restate what authors are trying to say; in that sense, both translator

and editor interpose themselves between one “audience” and another. The first “audience” is the authors listening to themselves; the second audience is the readers listening to the authors—or trying to.

Although highly specialized technical English can at times seem as strange as a foreign tongue, I would not go *quite* so far as to place what an editor does on a par with the Olympian task that confronts a translator when broad-jumping the chasm between two languages.

An article in *Newsweek* compared two recent Russian-to-English translations of Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, a novel of such breadth and depth that no descriptor exists in the English language that can get its arms around it. Responding to the interviewer’s question “Isn’t the story what’s most important, and not the particulars of its translation?”, translator Richard Pevear weighs in eloquently on the particular difficulty of the process:

You could *tell* people what is portrayed in Rembrandt’s “Return of the Prodigal Son” and move them deeply, but the telling would have little to do with the experience of looking at [it]. It is the same with a work in words. Words have color, shade, tone, texture, rhythm, pacing, disposition, structure; they can quote, echo, parody other words; they can be unexpected, infinitely suggestive, mercurial; they can also beat and repeat like a drum. [Tolstoy’s] “story” comes clothed in all these elements of style as he alone used them, and which alone create the impression he wanted to make. He used them instinctively, and not for the sake of effect. The translator, on the other hand, has to do consciously what the author did instinctively. And yet it must *seem* instinctive. That’s the final test.<sup>1</sup>

Isn’t that also what we do as editors—illuminate and personalize our authors’ intended meaning in such a way as to make it seem that they wrote it exactly that way, without the semblance of another hand’s intervention, for the edification—if not the pleasure—of the reader?

**Midwife.** I submitted the following in “I Call Myself an Editor”, a guest editorial that appeared in the July-August 2004 issue of *Science Editor*:

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.<sup>2</sup>

I still like that description a lot.

**Book to Note.** *A Writer’s Coach: An Editor’s Guide to Words That Work*, by Jack Hart (New York: Pantheon; 2006). I especially like Hart’s treatment of clarity (“Good prose is like a window pane”) in Chapter 6 and the mechanics of spelling in Chapter 11.

**Chuckle of the Month.** From an April 1983 *Reader’s Digest* cartoon by Morrie Brickman (1917-1994): “*It would be political suicide to give that speech,*” an aide said to his boss. “*He’s right, Senator,*” chimed in another aide. “*It’s just one clear-cut statement after another.*”

## References

1. Jones M. Lost in translations. *Newsweek*. 2007;150(16):81-83.
2. Johnson B. I call myself an editor. *Sci Ed*. 2004;27(4):138-139.