

## 22 Q's and 66 A's

Language is not an algebra,  
and there is no single right answer  
to any given predicament with words.

— Jacques Barzun

Conceding that Jacques Barzun's statement in the epigraph is true in a large sense, can we not also say that many "language predicaments" would profit nonetheless from an exchange of questions and answers between originator(s) and editor?

Let's consider one of the most familiar predicaments in the field of professional editing. Say you edit for a publishing center—whether as an employee, contractor, or freelance really doesn't matter—that generates research-based technical prose, and every so often someone in the group drops a job in your in-basket with a "Can you take a look at this?"

As I noted in an earlier column, that should not be the end of a conversation but rather the beginning. There often seems to be an element of hit-and-run about such a drop-off. You need to whistle down and collar such drop-offers before they disappear around the next corner. Obviously, your first question to them should be "How soon do you need it?" I have found that it is often prudent *not to give an immediate estimate* when you've heard their proposed timeline.

You should be prepared to back up your statement about why such a deadline is optimistic, if it is (and it often is), with some of or all the following 22 questions for your interlocutor. (These are *my* 22 and are predicated on the use of American English; your list might well be longer or shorter, depending on your own experience and English-language variant.) Understand that you are conducting something like the intake interview that a physician performs with a new patient.

In a, b, and c order, the 66 responses (or your ferretings-out—which are often kept concealed when you get the job) are ranked in ascending order according to how much work you'll have to do and how long it will take you. Your estimate—and your response to the co-worker—will probably be in the range of "tomorrow", "next

week", or "next month", depending on whether the responses (or your findings) average out around "a", "b", or "c".

1. How well organized is it?
  - a. Research finished; manuscript generally complete, unified, coherent.
  - b. Small research details unfinished; some writing incomplete; parts of manuscript still somewhat unrefined and of poorer overall stature than the work described in "a".
  - c. Some essential research unfinished; sections poorly organized and in different stages of refinement; manuscript less ready for publication than that in "b".
2. Who wrote it?
  - a. Single author who learned US (not British) English as primary language.
  - b. Single author who did *not* learn US English as primary language, *or* two or more authors, even if all learned US English as primary language.
  - c. Two or more authors, one or more of whom did *not* learn US English as primary language.
3. How accessible is the corresponding author?
  - a. Corresponding author easily available; one or two meetings plus a few weekly phone conversations between author and editor required during the course of editing to clarify meanings or resolve details; most contact by e-mail.
  - b. Corresponding author sometimes unavailable for a day; more exchanges or meetings required to clarify meanings or solidify details; more frequent e-mail and phone traffic; very little or no courier or express delivery service required.
  - c. Corresponding author often unavailable for a day or more; constant clarifications required; frequent meetings, phone calls, e-mail traffic required; courier or express delivery service often unavoidable during production.
4. How familiar is the subject to the audience and the editor?

- a. Uncomplicated or familiar to audience and editor.
  - b. Relatively esoteric or unfamiliar to audience and editor.
  - c. Very esoteric; sparsely researched; confidential (editor bound to observe secrecy).
5. What is the manuscript's history?
- a. Manuscript researched and written during recent, sequential weeks or months.
  - b. Parts of manuscript not researched or written recently or sequentially; document integrated sporadically over long or disparate periods.
  - c. Most of manuscript generated haphazardly over long periods by various authors and researchers, some of whom are not primary.
6. What style rules govern the manuscript?
- a. Specified and supplied.
  - b. Specified but not supplied and sometimes ignored.
  - c. Unknown or unspecified or contradictory; if known, routinely ignored.
7. Is any rewriting or substantive editing required?
- a. Almost no rewriting needed.
  - b. Spotty rewriting or substantive editing needed.
  - c. Rewriting or substantive editing of sections or paragraphs needed several times per section.
8. How do the grammar, spelling, and punctuation rate?
- a. Scattered errors or inconsistencies; work conforms substantially to the rules of standard English used in the United States.
  - b. Grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors more common or troubling; most proper names correct.
  - c. Serious grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors present throughout; spellings of proper names often inaccurate or inconsistent.
9. How good are the usage, syntax, and wording?
- a. Vocabulary choices and word order essentially accurate, consistent, appropriate to topic.
  - b. Language problems more troubling; some colloquialisms or jargon encountered; word order occasionally incorrect; vocabulary choices sometimes questionable or inconsistent.
  - c. Pervasive language problems; inconsistent, inaccurate, inappropriate, or impoverished word choice; frequent recourse to slang, jargon, or colloquial usage, especially varying among multiple authors.
10. Do sentences or paragraphs require restructuring or unification of voice?
- a. Almost always properly structured and voiced.
  - b. Sometimes faulty; spotty restructuring or revoicing needed.
  - c. Frequently faulty; restructuring or revoicing often required.
11. How diligent was the fact checking?
- a. Little or no fact checking necessary.
  - b. Fact checking occasionally necessary on scattered pages.
  - c. Fact checking demanded on almost every page, sometimes once per paragraph.
12. Are internal references incorrect? (For example, "as stated on p. 2", but the item is on p. 3.)
- a. Uncommon.
  - b. More widespread and troubling.
  - c. Many problematic internal references that must be researched or resolved.
13. Is the formatting correct and consistent?
- a. Essentially standardized section to section within the manuscript; agrees with style source.
  - b. Some sections of the manuscript inconsistent; some deviation from style source.
  - c. Erratic within and among sections; section names, heads, and subheads missing, illogical; frequent, wide deviation from style source.
14. Are meanings of abbreviated terms, acronyms, and initialisms supplied?
- a. Most acronyms, initialisms, and abbreviations defined; term expansions correctly placed.
  - b. Some terms unresolved or incorrect; a few terms and their expansions transposed.
  - c. Terms regularly unresolved or incorrect; many terms and their expansions transposed.
15. Does the discussion involve difficult or specialized terms or concepts?
- a. If so, glossary provided.
  - b. Some definitions or an incomplete glossary provided.
  - c. No glossary; definitions lacking, sparse, or unreliable.
16. Is there a table of contents or list of displays and, if so, how reliable is it?
- a. Reasonably complete; pagination accurate.
  - b. Incomplete, unsubordinated, or inaccurate; pagination off.
  - c. Sketchy or lacking; no pagination.
17. Are there any handwritten interlineations or marginal notes?
- a. Few or no handwritten interlineations or marginal notes; those used are clear, legible.
  - b. More interlineations or marginal notes, sometimes hard to read.
  - c. Frequent interlineations or marginal notes, often hard to read.
18. How accurate are proper names, addresses, other contact data?
- a. Almost all required proper names, postal or e-mail addresses complete, correct.
  - b. Some required names, postal or e-mail addresses missing, incomplete, incorrect.
  - c. Majority of required names, postal or e-mail addresses missing, incomplete, incorrect.
19. Does the manuscript include displays and graphics?
- a. Material complete, correct; text references ("callouts") accurate, properly placed; software entirely compatible with editor's.

b. Material sometimes incomplete or incorrect; callouts sometimes absent, inaccurate, or misplaced; software mostly compatible with editor's.

c. Material often lacking, incomplete, or incorrect; callouts frequently absent, inaccurate, or misplaced; software incompatible with editor's.

20. Do the URLs or other electronic citations all work?

a. Electronic references or in-text URL links verified; validated access dates supplied.

b. Electronic links sometimes unverified, dead, improperly formatted; access dates sometimes lacking or inaccurate.

c. Electronic references or URLs often unverified; access dates lacking or incorrect.

21. If used, how accurate are callouts to footnotes, endnotes, bibliography, literature citations?

a. Callouts almost always present, correctly placed and enumerated; footnotes, endnotes, literature citations usually congruent with callouts.

b. Callouts occasionally missing, incorrect, wrongly styled or misnumbered; footnotes, endnotes, literature citations sometimes incongruent with callouts.

c. Callouts highly unreliable; footnotes, endnotes, literature citations often incongruent with callouts.

22. If used, do footnotes, endnotes, bibliography, literature citations contain required information?

a. Substantially complete, accurate; authors' names correctly spelled; titles, page spans, publishers' names, years, places

of publication provided.

b. Mostly complete and consistent; some authors' names misspelled; some titles, page spans, publishers' names, years, places of publication lacking or incorrect.

c. Frequently lacking, incomplete, inconsistent, wrongly styled; numerous author or title misspellings; publishers' data incorrect or lacking; page spans unsupplied or unreliable.

### **Chuckle of the Month**

One astronomer to another, peering through a powerful telescope at the night sky under a domed observatory: "What I like is the way they *twinkle!*" (Cartoon in 3 September 1966 *New Yorker* magazine.)



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