The Craft of Editing

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The Craft of Editing

A Guide for Managers, Scientists, and Engineers

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Cover illustrations: The space shuttle *Discovery* on July 13, 1995. On this flight, the main engine was supplied by high-pressure, liquid-oxygen turbopumps developed by Pratt & Whitney. Pictured in the upper right frame is the hydrogen-fuel turbopump (still to be flown), pictured in the lower right frame is the oxidizer turbopump, and pictured in the middle right frame is the shuttle's thrust chamber. Photos courtesy of Pratt & Whitney, Liquid Space Propulsion, a United Technologies company. In this book, discussions about editing illustrations occur on pages 59 and 109.

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For my brother and sister

Preface

You are a hired gun of sorts: a manager, scientist, or engineer called upon to edit a document. Perhaps you are overseeing a long report or thesis, reviewing a journal article, or providing comments on a proposal. For the document before you, what changes do you suggest? How do you clearly and efficiently communicate those changes to the author? How do you convince the author and the other editors that those changes are needed? The answers to these questions define how you edit someone's writing.

In business, engineering, and science, the process of editing causes much strife. In fact, my experience in teaching professional writing over the past fifteen years has been that editing is the number one complaint that professionals have about the process of documenting their work. Many professionals complain that this editing seems to arise more from whim than from logic—that what flies in one document is often shot down in another. Others complain that editors change too much, essentially inserting their own individual styles. Still others complain that the sign-off process is so inefficient and taxing that they sometimes do not document work they know should

be documented. While in many cases these complaints are unfounded, in many others they are legitimate. This book addresses those complaints that are legitimate by showing managers, scientists, and engineers how to make their editing both more effective and more efficient.

So what exactly does this book provide? First, when you sit down to edit someone's writing, your goal is to work with that author to strengthen the writing as much as possible. To be an effective and efficient editor, you have to understand what within the document you should change and what you should not. This book provides you with that understanding.

Once you understand what to change in the writing, you have to assess the level to which you should change it. To help you determine this level, this book analyzes the three types of editorial changes made on documents: changes in content, changes in style, and changes in form. In doing so, the book helps you gauge how far in each category to go. Moreover, to show you how to communicate your changes to authors, this book works through four editing situations in which managers, scientists, and engineers often find themselves: reviewing, copyediting on paper, copyediting on a computer, and proofreading.

Yet another topic that the book discusses is the process of editing from the institution's perspective. In analyzing this topic, this book recommends strategies for making the sign-off process more efficient. In addition to discussing the physical aspects of editing, the book discusses a key psychological aspect of editing: the friction

that often arises between the editor and the author. Finally, the book contains a guide that tackles one hundred problems of style that managers, scientists, and engineers often confront as editors. In presenting this guide, I have assessed not only how much controversy surrounds each problem, but also the relative importance of each problem in the larger context of informing and persuading an audience.

Why choose this book on editing? One reason is that the advice in this book is based on actual editing experiences from business, engineering, and science. Because the advice arises from actual documents, you will find that it is practical, straightforward, and tested. Another reason to choose this book is that it does not try to cover the gamut of editing as experienced by professional editors. Rather, the book focuses on the kind of editing that you as a manager, scientist, or engineer experience. That focus is you, your pencil (or computer), and someone else's writing.

I wish that I could tell you that this book will make your editing easy. No book could honestly make such a claim. Your editing will be a struggle for precision—fraught with language conundrums and harrowed by deadlines. Nonetheless, a well-edited document is a worthy goal. Such a document benefits your institution, your author, and you.

In writing this book, I owe much to the following individuals at Springer-Verlag: Dr. Thomas von Foerster, my editor; David Kramer, my copy editor; and Lesley Poliner,

my production editor. In addition, I received valuable input from several colleagues: Harry Robertshaw, from Virginia Tech; Rea Dahm, from RMT; Harold Bradley, from Enron; and Brad Hughes and Frank Siciliano, from the University of Wisconsin. Also advising me were three members of my family: my wife, who is on the mechanical engineering faculty at Virginia Tech; my mother, a retired chemistry professor; and my father, who for five years served as plant manager of the Mason-Hanger Pantex Plant. Finally, I am indebted to those individuals who participated in my writing courses over the past fifteen years. Their comments, criticisms, and suggestions have served to edit my work.

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Chapter 1

Editing: Where Do You Begin?

There is no greater desire in the world than to change someone else's writing.

Robert Louis Stevenson

The pilot has removed the *fasten seat belt* sign, the man in the aisle seat beside you has stopped his nervous chatter, and you are ready to begin editing Calloway's report. Before the flight attendants even begin the beverage service, the report has you rattled. The problems you see are certainly not insurmountable, but they are distracting. First is the text typeface, a large sans serif font that would be appropriate perhaps for an elementary school reader, but not for a technical report, especially not for one with national distribution. Another distraction is Calloway's penchant for pretentious words: *prioritization, facilitation,* and *manufacturability.* These words make the document read like something written by a bureaucrat, not by an engineer. Still another distraction is Calloway's confusion between *affect* and *effect.* How could an engineer who reads even the minimum amount of literature in his or her field make that mistake?

You try to focus on larger issues of content such as whether Calloway is divulging proprietary information, but the word choices and *Romper Room* typeface distract you. Like a poison ivy itch, they prick and needle you from Atlanta to the Great Smoky Mountains. By the time the beverage cart arrives, you are bearing down so hard on your pencil that your editing marks leave permanent indentations on the pages beneath. More than once, you have spoken to Calloway about these matters, but he does not share your sensitivity.

In your briefcase are three other documents that you intend to edit on this trip. You consider switching to one of them, but do not. Calloway's has the highest priority, if for no other reason than it is the one furthest behind schedule. The flight attendant asks you what you would like to drink, and you select something cold with bubbles.

Knowing Your Goals

When you sit down to edit someone's document, the goal is straightforward: to improve the document as much as can be expected, given the constraints, such as deadlines, under which the document exists. Although the goal is clear, obtaining the goal poses a challenge because documents can be viewed from such different perspectives.

One perspective is content, or what message the author intends. A second perspective is style, or how well the message is said. Yet a third perspective is form, which encompasses the format,* grammar, punctuation, spell-

*Editing terms are defined in the Glossary.

ing, and usage of the message. As shown in Table 1-1, several issues are associated with each of these perspectives. Note that for each issue we could develop an even more detailed level of subissues. In fact, many professional editors write out that next level. That next level is not universal, though. Rather, it depends on several factors, including the audience, the purpose, and the occasion. Given that, we will stop at this level for now.

Not all of these three perspectives (content, style, and form) hold the same importance. While this book spends much of its ink on style and form, content is essential for successful communication. If the message is incorrect, then the document fails, no matter how well the message is communicated or what form it is in. Consider the case

Table 1-1. Perspectives of Editing.

Perspectives	Key issues
Editing for content	Information correct? Information complete? Information appropriate for the audience? Information appropriate for the purpose? Information acceptable for distribution?
Editing for style	Organization sound? Transitions smooth? Emphasis proper? Language clear? Illustrations clear?
Editing for form	Format consistent? Grammar correct? Punctuation correct? Usage proper? Spelling correct?

of an internal memorandum issued by Dow Corning in 1975. That year, Dow Corning had created a task force to develop a new gel for the silicone breast implants it manufactured. On the task force, concern arose over whether this new gel leaked more than the older gel did. Echoing this concern were reports from salespeople who claimed that the new implants had oily coatings on the envelopes. One task-force member, on his own, responded to the salespeople with a memo stating that these oily coatings arose not from leakage, but from handling, and that the salespeople should continually change the demonstration samples to hide the oily feel. Because the memo ignored the genuine concern that the task force had about the leakage, the memo was "duplicitous" [Angell, 1996]. In later tort suits against Dow Corning, including a San Francisco suit in which the plaintiff won more than $7 million, this memo severely damaged Dow Corning's defense. The duplicity in this memo was clearly an aspect of content that Dow Corning regretted not having had the chance to edit.

Editing for content requires that you consider the accuracy and completeness of the information. After all, if the results are suspect or if conclusions are reached without sufficient data, then embarrassment, or worse, could ensue. In addition to checking for accuracy and completeness, editing for content includes other aspects that depend on the situation. One aspect is whether the information is appropriate for the audience. In other words, is the information too technical, or not technical enough? Interwoven with the question of audience is the question

of purpose: Is the information appropriate for the document's purpose? Not all professional writing has the sole purpose of informing. Many professional documents are written to convince. For that reason, an editor should assess whether the writing achieves that purpose, and if not, then how it might best do so. Still another aspect of content that depends on the situation is whether the information is appropriate for distribution. For instance, does the document contain proprietary information? Or does the document state something that may be accurate, but is unacceptable to release (information classified as top secret, for example).

Besides the perspective of content, a second perspective for editors is style. While editing for content focuses on what is communicated, editing for style focuses on how well that message is presented. Another way to view this difference is that content is the freight train with the goods, and style is the track on which the train delivers the goods to the audience. Style is as necessary as content for successful communication. After all, what good is an idea if the person who conceives the idea does not communicate it effectively to others?

In assessing style, many questions arise. Are the details organized logically? Are transitions made between the details? Are key details emphasized? Is the language clear? Are the illustrations clear? Because so many questions are associated with the perspective of style, you cannot address them all. Rather, you should develop a hierarchy for the questions. A document with logical organi-

zation, smooth transitions, proper emphasis, and clear language and illustrations will succeed in informing the audience. If the language is also concise and fluid, the document will inform more efficiently, but success depends on the characteristics mentioned first.

While the first two perspectives—content and style—ensure that the appropriate message reaches the audience, the third perspective, form, affects the efficiency and authority of that delivery. Form includes the format, grammar, punctuation, usage, and spelling. If the form is inappropriate, the audience becomes distracted and unnecessarily bogged down. How you address this third perspective of form depends on the audience and the occasion. People have different sensitivities for correctness. For instance, American English allows for both *ensure* and *insure* to have the meaning "to make certain." British English, on the other hand, allows only *ensure* to have this meaning. As an editor, assessing the correctness of the writing's form means deciding whether using *insure* to mean "to make certain" distracts the intended audience. If so, then the usage does not serve the document, because it has moved the reader's attention away from the content to the writing itself. In such cases, you as an editor should select *ensure*, which has the intended meaning in both American and British English.

Note that you can become too sensitive to rules of form. Such a hypersensitivity to the rules can keep you from noticing other, more egregious, errors. Although many aspects of form such as splitting infinitives, using

"impact" as a verb, and choosing a typeface such as Geneva for the text of a formal report might grate on readers, focusing too much of your editing attention on such aspects can cause you to miss factual errors and ambiguities—two aspects that are much more likely to upset and confuse the audience.

Knowing Your Constraints

In revising your own work, if you see a change that will improve the work, you usually just make it. In editing, though, if you see a change that will improve the work, you assess the effect of that change on the author, the other editors who will follow you, and the remainder of the writing. That is not to say that you lower your standards and allow clear-cut mistakes to pass through. What it means is that you weigh the variables shown in Figure 1-1 before advocating the change.

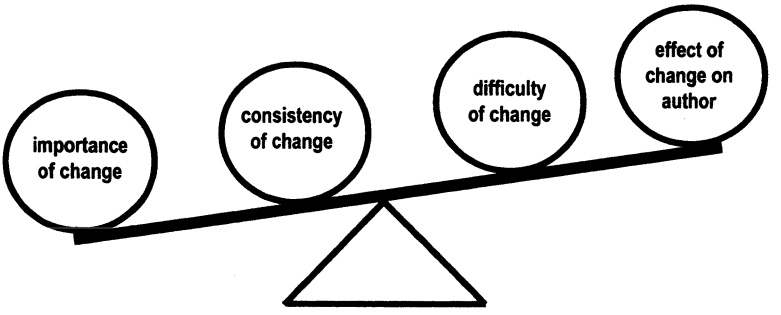

Figure 1-1. Variables balanced by an editor of a professional document.

One variable is the importance of the change. If the change is truly important with regard to content, style, or form, then you advocate it. As far as assessing whether a content change is important, you in your role as manager, scientist, or engineer draw upon your experience and education. As far as assessing whether changes in style or form are important, you draw upon your writing experience and education. For many managers, scientists, and engineers that second pool of knowledge from which to draw is not as deep as the first. This book, particularly Chapter 3 and the Appendix, attempts to deepen this second pool of knowledge.

Another variable to weigh in deciding whether to advocate an editorial change is whether the change is consistent with other aspects of content, style, and form in the document. For a content change such as expressing a measurement with more accuracy, a consistency question arises over whether other measurements in the document have been expressed to that number of significant digits. If not, then the accuracy of that measurement will be suspect. For a stylistic change such as using the first person ("I" or "we") in a particular sentence, a consistency question arises over whether first person has been used in similar situations throughout the document. If not, the use in that one situation might seem out of place. For a form change such as dropping the series comma from a list of three or more items, a consistency question arises over whether the series comma has been used in all lists

throughout the document. If so, dropping it from the one list might unsettle the reader who has come to expect it.

A third variable is the difficulty of the change. For instance, when a hard deadline draws near, you have to challenge edits that will entail the author making major changes. Otherwise, you could end up with a document at the piecemeal stage when the document should be at the polishing stage. Such was the case several years ago at Garrett Turbine. On a multimillion dollar proposal to the Department of Energy, Garrett Turbine was clearly the front-runner for the contract, but Garrett attempted some major editing just a few days before the deadline. To allow time for this major editing, Garrett banked on an employee flying to Washington, D.C., on the due date and hand-delivering the proposal. Unfortunately, a thunderstorm in St. Louis delayed the employee on the final leg of the journey. What resulted was that the employee was late arriving at the Department of Energy and that the proposal was not accepted for consideration. In the end, Rolls-Royce garnered the contract.

A fourth variable in editing a professional document is the effect of the change on the author. For instance, a change that might seem small to you, who have just read the document for the first time, might appear huge to the author, who has struggled with the document for the past two months. In other words, your energy for the document might be much higher than that of the author, who will have to make the changes. How do you motivate the