



The Friendly Editor

"The Friendly Editor" welcomes letters from others interested in language. Please write to Don Bush, 6609 Hillgrove Drive, San Diego, CA 92120.

DON BUSH, *Column Editor*

The Professional Editors Network

BY DON BUSH, *Fellow, San Diego Chapter*

In San Diego we are fortunate to have another organization besides our active STC chapter where editors can get together to complain about the decline in literacy. It's the San Diego Professional Editors Network (SD/PEN).

SD/PEN has a membership of about sixty, most of whom hold (or are seeking) jobs as freelance editors. The group publishes a newsletter and a membership directory and hosts a Web site (www.sdpen.com). It meets every two months, drawing an attendance of about forty to a community room in a shopping center.

This idea could be used by STC's Editing SIG for networking in other STC cities. Networking, one SD/PEN member points out, is much more than just trying to find a job. It's exchanging tips, swapping references, telling stories, and making good friends.

Advanced Editing

The SD/PEN organization recently called on four of its early members (dating from its start back in 1985) to present a fascinating program on advanced editing. A fifth member was missing because a major document had suddenly emerged from the press.

All of the speakers were used to dealing with highly educated authors. Jackie Estrada specializes in editing textbooks. Kittie Kuhns retired in 1997 from the Scripps Institute of Oceanography. Phyllis Minick was head of the editorial office of the Scripps Research Institute for nineteen years. Julie Olfe spent seven years

with Theodore Geisel (Dr. Seuss) and his wife and also worked as a freelancer for the University of California at San Diego.

The Importance of Content Editing

What impressed me most was that all of the speakers were firmly dedicated to editing the content of the document, beyond checking grammar and consistency. Following are some of their comments:

- "It used to be that you couldn't be hired to edit scientific material unless you had a degree in the subject. Now, scientists recognize that a person with a good background can often take a fresh look and pick up something a technical person might miss."
- "An editor is often qualified to say, 'Your statistics are not correct.'"
- "To get some Ph.D. to change the text, you do have to know something about the subject. You may be stepping on some very sensitive toes."
- "With a prestigious author, an editor is not allowed to do much. But with post-docs [post-doctoral students], you can get away with a lot."
- "I like the scientists who say, 'Don't just agree with us. Argue!'"

These editors were obviously seriously involved in editing the content.

Working with Authors

All of the speakers emphasized the need to learn to work with authors. Panel members suggested various ways of softening editorial criticism. Above all, they

agreed, an editor must avoid hostility, even if it means conceding a point, although it is always devastating for a conscientious editor to see a document go to press with technical errors!

Adding to the problem is that some authors are indeed prima donnas. One panelist told about a scientist who had decided he could edit his own tutorial material. It didn't quite fit the space, so he had simply printed part of it in smaller type. He also left captions off the illustrations. When an editor pointed out that some of the facts were wrong, he retorted, "But the kids don't know that."

Julie added, "I was always grateful for my relationship with authors. It gave me valuable experience in handling my children, who often acted the same way."

Job Tips

The panel was asked about getting a job. Placing want ads doesn't often work, but one speaker had gotten some nibbles by advertising as a "letter writer." Another suggested not waiting for a job opening, but going to the Yellow Pages and calling up scientific companies in one's field of editorial expertise. Still another had attained success in soliciting other professional editing groups for their surplus work.

What can one do to prepare to be an editor? Nowadays, Jackie pointed out, an editor must know not only about language, but also about printing, design, illustration, typography, and current software, such as *PowerPoint*. In the panel, of

course, there were a few laments about the old days, when publishers were more likely to enlist experts in design and illustration rather than depend on whatever design talent happened to reside in an editor.

Phyllis pointed out that an editor who freelances must also know about office administration. Another subject she recommended was statistics. Statistics is used in a wide range of fields to measure content.

The entire panel strongly endorsed “education by reading.” For instance, Jackie had just finished a *New Yorker* review of a somewhat deflating biography of the lexicographer (and moralizing rule-maker) H. W. Fowler. And Julie felt that her greatest asset was a wide education in liberal arts. “The more you know about the world around you,” she said, “the better editing you can do.”

What Was Not Mentioned

This was an unusual conclave of editors in that there was no mention of “pet peeves” or “grammar that sets my teeth on edge.” To this distinguished group, helping the authors was more important. In fact, one panelist said, “You don’t just want to be a member of the language police. You need to know what’s going on in the document.” In other words, you need to understand the content and make it clear for the reader.

To illustrate the importance of content editing, I’d like to repeat an Irish Bull from this column last December (an Irish Bull, according to Marshall Brown’s *Bulls and Blunders* [Griggs, 1893], is “a sentence that is always comprehensible, even when it is most confused”): “Editors are not responsible for accuracy, but accuracy is our greatest responsibility”

To continue, “Nothing can hurt a document more than technical mistakes, especially those that are detectable by a casual reader. Such errors might include incorrect addition or subtraction, poor enumeration, missing steps, wrong labels (in 36-point type), miscaptioned figures, and countless other examples. These are the very errors that can be caught by English-major editors and are easy for harried engineers to overlook.”

As a friendly liberal arts editor, I feel strongly that, if we can enlarge our purview beyond “consistency” to include technical accuracy and semantic clarity, we can discover more challenging jobs, boost our salaries, and increase the prestige of the editing profession.

That’s why I was so pleased to have attended this meeting in San Diego. 📍

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