

Technical Editing To Boldly Go Beyond Copy Editing

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STC–Montréal
March 29, 2011

“The heart of good editing is a concern for the readers of documents, a **concern that goes far beyond a mere adherence to the rules of standard English**. It involves the overall organization of information in a document, helping writers to convey their ideas and information in the most efficient way possible for a specific set of readers; this concern also involves formatting documents so that they support rather than distract readers.”

- Nikki Kelvin

What is “technical”?

“Submarines that scrape the ocean floor need technical writers (and editors). Pilots who touch the top of the sky need technical writers (and editors). New technologies that are still being sketched out on bar napkins need technical writers (and editors). The world’s largest manufacturing plants need technical writers (and editors). ”

“Almost anything and everything, from aviation to zoology.”

Nuclear reactors

Aircraft

Trains

Automobiles

Your cell phone

Your DVD player

Knitting patterns

Cookbooks

...

Research shows that complexity causes 50% of product returns.

Half of all malfunctioning products returned to stores by consumers are in full working order, but **customers can't figure out how to operate the devices** [...]

The average consumer in the United States will struggle for 20 minutes to get a device working, before giving up, the study found.

Don't blame it on customer incompetence. When product managers from electronics giant Philips were given new gadgets to test over a weekend, they came back to work unable to get the unfamiliar items to work too.

Based on research by Elke Den Ouden
Eindhoven University of Technology, Eindhoven, Netherlands

“One of these days I'm going to buy something that needs to be put together and I will open up the instruction manual and fall back amazed as Moses by the burning bush.”

“...there is a special place in hell for engineers who spend their lives designing things that cannot be used the way non-engineers use them.”

“Product developers, brought in to witness the struggles of average consumers, were astounded by the havoc they created.”

Lance Mannion (blog)

http://lancemannion.typepad.com/lance_mannion/2006/03/are_you_kidding.html

What is technical editing for knitting?

- Checking all math.
- Checking all sizing/grading.
- Ensuring all stitch counts are correct.
- Ensuring stitch multiples are set up accurately.
- Checking that the dimensions are accurate based on gauge and instructions.
- Checking the pattern numbers against the schematic measurements.
- Checking the schematic for accuracy.
- Checking chart(s) for accuracy.
- Checking the pattern against the chart(s).
- Ensuring all conversions are correct (ex. inches to centimeters).
- Measurements are rounded appropriately and consistently.
- Checking yarn requirements for different sizes.
- Ensuring any tutorials and/or special instructions are logical and easy to follow.

From: [The knitting blog by StephCat
http://www.sunsetcat.com/technical-editing/](http://www.sunsetcat.com/technical-editing/)

What does it take to be a good technical editor?

- Exceptional linguistic/writing skills
- An eye for detail
(while keeping the big picture always in mind)
- Aptitude for learning quickly
- Ability to see the forest AND the trees
(often **almost** at the same time!)
- Analytical thinker (vs. creative)
- Education?

What, exactly,
does/should a
technical editor do?

The short answer is:

Everything that is required.

The reality is:

Everything that there is time for.

Editors' Association of Canada

Developmental / Project Editing

- Co-ordinating and editing a project from proposal or rough manuscript to final manuscript, incorporating input from authors, consultants and reviewers. May include budgeting, hiring, design supervision and project co-ordination.

Substantive or Structural Editing

- Clarifying and/or reorganizing a manuscript for content and structure. Changes may be suggested to or drafted for the author. May include negotiating changes with author.

Stylistic Editing

- Clarifying meaning, eliminating jargon, smoothing language and other non-mechanical line-by-line editing. May include checking or correcting reading level; creating or recasting tables and/or figures; negotiating changes with author.

<http://www.editors.ca/hire/definitions.html>

Editors' Association of Canada

Copy Editing

- Editing for grammar, spelling, punctuation and other mechanics of style; checking for consistency of mechanics and internal consistency of facts; marking head levels and approximate placement of art; notifying designer of any unusual production requirements. May include Canadianizing; metrication; providing or changing system of citations; writing or editing captions and/or credit lines; writing running heads; listing permissions needed and/or obtaining them; providing or editing prelims, back matter, cover copy and/or CIP data. May also include negotiating changes with author.
- N.B. "Copy editing" is often loosely used to include stylistic and even structural editing, fact checking and mark-up. It is not so used by the Editors' Association of Canada.

<http://www.editors.ca/hire/definitions.html>

Do you have to be a technical expert to be a good technical editor?

Do editors sometimes focus on the wrong things?

“... a document can be correctly spelled and punctuated, grammatically correct, and use only approved terminology selected for the target audience, and yet not serve that audience’s needs.”

“We need to make sure that we know how to add value through substantive editing, if we’re going to put ourselves forward to do it. That often means we need to learn a lot more about technical topics, not just writing and editing issues. Indeed, we may need to know almost as much about the topic as do the writers we edit. The main difference is that we should come from the audience’s point of view more than from the technical side.”

Jean Hollis Weber

http://www.jeanweber.com/newsite/?page_id=103

Descriptive vs. Prescriptive Grammar

Descriptive grammar has as its goal to *describe* what the native speakers of a language do (verbally) when they speak their language (the meaning of the word “grammar” as used in this course).

Prescriptive grammar categorizes certain language uses as acceptable or unacceptable according to a standard form of the language (the meaning of “grammar” normally intended in English classes).

What is considered grammatically proper depends on historical circumstances that have nothing to do with purely linguistic or logical considerations.

Example: The Serial Comma

Which is correct? Which is incorrect?

We came here to network, eat and socialize.

We came here to network, eat, and socialize.

“I would like to thank my parents, Ayn Rand and God.”

The most costly piece of punctuation in Canada

Aug. 06, 2006

A grammatical blunder may force **Rogers Communications Inc.** to pay an extra \$2.13-million to use utility poles in the Maritimes after the placement of a comma in a contract permitted the deal's cancellation.

Rogers thought it had a five-year deal with **Aliant Inc.** to string Rogers' cable lines across thousands of utility poles in the Maritimes for an annual fee of \$9.60 per pole.”

Language buffs take note — Page 7 of the contract states: The agreement **“shall continue in force for a period of five years from the date it is made, and thereafter for successive five year terms, unless and until terminated by one year prior notice in writing by either party.”**

- <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/article838561.ece>

The agreement “shall continue in force for a period of five years from the date it is made, **and thereafter for successive five year terms**, unless and until terminated by one year prior notice in writing by either party.”

Meaning:

The agreement “shall continue in force for a period of five years from the date it is made, unless and until terminated by one year prior notice in writing by either party.”

The agreement “shall continue in force for a period of five years from the date it is made, **and thereafter for successive five year terms unless and until terminated by one year prior notice in writing by either party.**”

(restrictive or non-restrictive?)

Tails

A TAIL, Inc. Magazine
celebrating the relationship between pets and their people

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FOODNETWORKHUMOR



What happened to the Mars Climate Orbiter?

“Human error occurs all the time. But even so we have a tremendous success rate because we have systems that detect and correct the errors. The problem here is that our system failed to do that.”

Carl Pilcher, science director for solar system exploration at NASA headquarters

“A single error should not bring down a \$125 million mission.”

Thomas Gavin, deputy director for space and earth science at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory

CFIT (controlled flight into terrain)

In 1999 NASA lost the \$125 million Mars Climate Orbiter because one engineering team used metric units while another used US customary units for a calculation.

Conversion Errors

- According to the National Transportation Safety Board, the confusion between pounds and kilograms means that aircraft are sometimes overloaded.
- The Institute for Safe Medication Practices has reported that confusion between grains and grams is sometimes the reason for medical errors. One example given is a case where a patient received phenobarbital 0.5 grams instead of 0.5 grains (0.03 grams) after the prescriber misread the prescription.
- The Canadian “Gimli Glider” accident in 1983, when a Boeing 767 jet ran out of fuel in mid-flight because of two mistakes in figuring the fuel supply of Air Canada's first aircraft to use metric measurements.
- NASA's 1999 loss of the \$125 million Mars Climate Orbiter because one engineering team used metric units while another used US customary units for a calculation.

Training the editorial eye to recognize the obvious errors as well as the perils introduced by modern technology and current work practices:

Impediments to perfection

Time

Outsourcing (without proper QA)

Conversion/OCR Errors

- Beware of alphanumeric part numbers in particular.

1 vs. l vs. i

O vs. 0

S vs. 5

S vs. 8

3 vs. 8

- Also be on the lookout for real words, correctly spelled, which are not the right words.

pilot vs. pitot

harm vs. ham

click vs. _____