

# Why Copy Editors Matter<sup>1</sup>

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*The work of copy or manuscript editors is an integral step in the journal publishing process. The author, a copy editor at a scholarly press since 1998, examines why copy-editing is vital and speculates on the consequences of eliminating this layer of quality control.*

The manuscript editor evaluates and exploits the writer's talents, to the end of helping the writer to mobilize *all* his or her resources, so that the very best book possible can be produced.<sup>2</sup>

Some years ago I came to the conclusion that once an author has attained best-seller status, it is no longer considered cost-effective to copy-edit or proofread his books prior to publication. This, I felt, was the only possible explanation for two separate, but possibly not unrelated, phenomena that I had frequently observed while sitting on planes reading mass-market paperbacks purchased in airports: first, the positive correlation between the number of best-selling books an author has written and the length of the latest one,<sup>3</sup> and, second, the growing frequency and number of typos, inconsistencies, and outright factual and grammatical errors in such books.<sup>4</sup> The idea seems to be this: Anything with, say, 'John Grisham' or 'Tom Clancy' or 'J.K. Rowling' on the cover will be bought by millions of people before any of them notices that the protagonist has four children on page 101 and only three on page 370, that the first eight chapters could easily and fruitfully have been condensed to two,<sup>5</sup> or that the author cannot go two pages without misplacing a modifier. If anyone ever does notice or, more unlikely still, point out such *faux pas*, it will no longer matter, since by that time everyone involved will already have made lots of

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money by selling millions of books, the Spanish-language translation rights, and film and video-game options. Why, then, narrow your profit margin through the costly, labour-intensive processes of copy-editing and proofreading? It's a depressing equation, but it makes a certain amount of sense – at least in the mass-market publishing world, where the mandate is to sell maximum numbers of books at maximum possible profits.

In the university press world, on the other hand, we are supposed to be in the business of disseminating solid, important, painstaking scholarly research, and we are supposed to take the time to do it properly. Journal editors and learned societies enter into partnerships with publishers because of what we can contribute to their work: eye-catching (but not misleading) covers,<sup>6</sup> clear and readable interior design, thoughtful editing, careful proofreading, professional customer relations, efficient distribution. Our workstations may not be shiny, and we may not have the entertainment budgets allotted to our for-profit peers, but at least we are supposed to be able to turn a manuscript into a clear, polished, correct, and professional book or a journal article that communicates the contributors' ideas to the people who are interested in reading them. If we can't do that, what are we here for?

So it was with considerable distress that, some time last fall, shortly after returning from maternity leave, I learned that some scholarly journal publishers in the United States were considering, or had already begun, phasing out the crucial stages between final manuscript submission and typesetting.<sup>7</sup> In other words – neatly defeating all of our own well-reasoned arguments about the value added to research by scholarly publishers – slapping a nice cover on exactly the same text that the author has already posted on her Web site.

This, it seems to me, is a terrible idea – but not for the reasons you might think. For instance, I am not primarily concerned that my editorial colleagues and I will lose our jobs; this possibility exists, of course, but I think it always has and always will, since editorial has never been where publishers make their money – assuming that they do make any. No, what worries me is the possibility of a total breakdown in scholarly communication.

Copy (or manuscript) editors are rarely mentioned on journal mastheads; we seldom make our way into authors' acknowledgement footnotes; we toil in silence, invisible. A lot of us like it that way. The

problem is that when, as a profession, you are not out there shouting about how indispensable you are, people tend to forget about your contribution – not just how important it is but even that it exists at all. I have worked with hundreds of authors. Some write well – some very well – and some write badly. Some are beautifully cooperative, helpful, appreciative, witty, prompt, or all of the above; I keep their comments in a special file folder to look at when I'm having a bad day. A few are impatient, surly, accusatory, sloppy, snide, whiny, or downright rude. Every so often I catch one in an act of plagiarism. But the majority fall at neither extreme; reasonably polite but largely indifferent, they answer my queries, correct their proofs, and neither complain that I have rewritten their 'flawless' prose nor thank me for helping to reduce confusion. Often I am left with the impression that an author sincerely believes he wrote exactly what he sees in his page proofs – except, of course, for the half-dozen typographical errors he has circled in urgent red pen.

Except – if the author is very gracious – in a private e-mail message or phone call, the copy editor's pivotal role in saving countless academics from various degrees of public humiliation (and, occasionally, from legal action) is almost never acknowledged. But ask yourself, would you want to be the published author of any of the following statements?<sup>8</sup>

- In conclusion, the positive influence of the discovery of this disease [BSE, or 'mad cow'] on veterinary medicine education and particularly in the U.S. will be significant and will outweigh the negative impacts.
- A significant part of the construction of the allocation model process is concerned with developing the network environment for the allocation process.
- Ultimately I ask, what are the possibilities/impossibilities, at the turn of the millennium, of popular movements aimed at effecting collective/state practices that support the best interests of 'the people,' set against the logic of a democratic process made peculiar precisely to the same extent as it depends, for its success, on the participation of a largely uninformed or only partially informed, population?<sup>9</sup>
- In fact, it was dangerous to wander out of the proscribed viewing areas.

- The fact that so few provisions remained and that the tent itself may have been destroyed suggests that the camp may have suffered a late spring snowstorm that buried what remained, with no time or energy left to excavate it before escaping eastward.
- 2 of the 3 respondents interrupted the question to mean they interviewed for each program they applied for, not all of the programs available.
- One very vital principle in designing a learning environment is to clearly clarify the roles of the participants.
- An interesting supplement is the low participation results of an author-administered library vendor survey, proving that sometimes agnostic cooperation exists from both sides.
- The central placement of the learning person in the diagram is rooted in a position on learning that asserts that learners take actions of their own guided by a variety of levels of acceptance of their roles as initiators of science learning and by their views concerning the features of the science learning experience that are multi-faceted.

Would you want to be known for misspelling *Escherichia coli* in a health sciences journal? For demonstrating that you can't decide how to spell W.E.B. Du Bois or whether or not 'pan-Africanism' should have a capital *p*? For describing 55 as 55% of 108?

No, I didn't think so. But this is exactly the sort of thing that journal copy editors in the social sciences and humanities find in manuscripts *all the time*.

Very early in my editing career, I worked on an article whose author referred, puzzlingly, to an anecdote about Steven Spielberg sharing the unexpected profits from *Star Wars* with his whole tech crew.<sup>10</sup> I sent the editors a query that went something like this:

*Star Wars* was directed by George Lucas, not Steven Spielberg. Is the author talking about (a) George Lucas and *Star Wars*, (b) Steven Spielberg and some other movie (perhaps *E.T.*?), or (c) something else altogether? Please advise.

The answer, it turned out, was (a). The author, the editors reported, was deeply embarrassed by his error; the editors themselves, both English professors approximately the right age to be my father, were deeply impressed by my brilliant *récupération* of an error that had

slipped under their radar. The truth is, I know that George Lucas directed *Star Wars* (and that Steven Spielberg did not) not because I am unusually clever and well informed but because I was born in North America in the 1970s and my parents owned a television set; any of the editors' students could have picked up that error. Since the journal in question is heavily marketed to university students and practitioners in the performing arts, therefore, getting this incidental fact wrong could have dealt quite a blow to its credibility.

Similarly, some scholars are either very sneaky or stunningly naïve about issues of copyright, fair use, and plagiarism. I've lost count of the number of authors whose response to my matter-of-fact requests for copies of their permission to reproduce someone else's photos, maps, screenshots, drawings, tables, or 600-word chunks of text – something they ought to have realized they needed and of which someone else should have reminded them earlier in the process – was, in essence, 'I have to get *what?!*'<sup>11</sup> People blithely sign contracts warranting that their work is entirely their own, that they have obtained any necessary permissions in writing and will forward same immediately, and that the text in question has not been previously published anywhere else. Days, weeks, or months later it turns out – occasionally because the author has admitted it – that permissions have not in fact been obtained (or even requested); that a number of passages have been copied from the Internet without acknowledgement; or that the entire thing appeared a year ago in a related journal under a subtly different title.

When *do* copy editors get noticed? Well, mostly, of course, when we make (or fail to prevent someone else from making) a catastrophic error. A colleague of mine came in for a deskful of wrath and hot coffee when it was discovered that one of her journals had inadvertently republished, in issue number 2, the editorial from issue number 1. This was not, in fact, her mistake: the typesetter seems to have decided that this issue ought also to have an editorial and 'picked up' the previous one, adding it to the table of contents at the same time. Nobody else who saw the proofs – not the proofreader, not the journal editor – noticed either, but where does the bolt fall? You guessed it. In one of the darker chapters of my own career, an author phoned a journal editor to thank him for the compliment of featuring one of his *bons mots* on the cover and to ask, by the by, what the hell had hap-

pened to the second half of his article? Again, the typesetter (or, to be more accurate, the typesetter's computer) had committed the error, but I made it my own by not picking it up when I should have.

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Academics, learned societies, and scholarly publishers are all in the business of scholarly *communication*. Why bother publishing your thoughts or your findings if they are so poorly conveyed, so ungrammatical or so disorganized, as to be impenetrable to your colleagues?<sup>12</sup> Perhaps there was a time when English-speaking scholars were so well versed in spelling, grammar, and punctuation, so well organized and thorough, so careful and scrupulously honest, such graceful prose stylists, that copy-editing as I and my colleagues practise it was unnecessary.<sup>13</sup> If so, that time is long past. The current reality is that one can get all the way to graduate school without ever being formally taught any English grammar; that a distressing number of academic authors copy their bibliographical entries directly from the first hit they get on Google, without bothering to check that the cited authors' names are spelled correctly; and that one can either take the time to write really well or churn out enough articles to get tenure. Quality control is therefore of the essence, and copy editors are a vital part of that process.

This does not mean that authors need not worry about spelling, grammar, punctuation, or documentation as long as the journal's trusty copy editor is on the job. On the contrary: the more polished and well documented a manuscript the copy editor receives, the less time she has to waste on 'picking up the big pieces' – dangles, egregiously misused words, mutually contradictory text and tables, undocumented block quotes – and the more effort can be directed to fine tuning. *Every* text can benefit from the attention of a good editor.<sup>14</sup>

It has been well said that good editing is invisible. If you crack open a journal issue or an edited collection and read it from cover to cover, you should not come away with the impression that all the contributors write in exactly the same style; this is a sure sign that someone has imposed her own style too heavily at some point in the process. The editor's task is, rather, to impose *just enough* consistency on individual contributions that the reader notices neither stylistic monotony

nor glaring inconsistency.<sup>15</sup> It's a difficult process of negotiation, and you can do it for decades without ever entirely understanding how it works.

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If we stop copy-editing our journals before we publish them (in print or online), sooner or later someone is going to notice. Many readers will notice, of course; even people who don't write good prose themselves usually know it when they see it and miss it when they don't. Most will not react immediately; a few will write cranky letters, and even fewer will threaten to cancel their subscriptions. Librarians may not notice at all, since they are not required to read the journals to which their institutions subscribe. But granting agencies will notice, and they may be disturbed enough to put the brakes on funding for egregious offenders. For a little while, people will be annoyed, and a few outraged, by the sudden outbreak of incomplete and sloppy reference lists, mis-numbered endnotes, bad grammar, inconsistent spelling, and miscellaneous missing information. But – and this is the real threat to scholarly communication – after a while almost everyone will get used to it. Standards will drop; lack of clarity in text and lack of accuracy in documentation will become more and more normal. No one will remember that at one time every sentence of every article published in a reputable academic journal benefited from careful reading, for both form and meaning, by a professional trained to help other professionals communicate better.

The last thing most scholars wrote and published without some kind of professional editorial intervention was their doctoral dissertation.<sup>16</sup> As the classic *The Thesis and the Book* points out, a dissertation is not at all the same thing as a book (and a dissertation chapter or research paper, no matter how major, is not the same thing as an article in a refereed journal). 'Understanding the differences between the two forms,' it says, 'is a crucial part of one's education as a scholar and is equally important in appreciating the endeavours of scholarly publishers.'<sup>17</sup> Without copy editors, how long will that continue to be true?

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sity of Toronto Press Inc. since 1996. She currently copy-edits seven scholarly journals, including *JSP*.

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- 2 Robert Plant Armstrong, 'Revising the Dissertation and Publishing the Book,' in Eleanor Harman, Ian Montagnes, Siobhan McMenemy, and Chris Bucci, eds., *The Thesis and the Book: A Guide for First-Time Academic Authors* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2003): 20–33, 31
- 3 Often, of course, increasing length is perfectly justified by the maturing author's desire to tackle longer narratives and more complex subjects. But it's also, I think, a function of the fact that these authors (or their agents) are in a good position to tell an editor to shove off if he makes unwelcome suggestions as to length, or opines that some manuscripts just aren't 100 per cent publishable and this is one of them. One function of an editor (usually an acquiring editor or a developmental editor) is to tell the writer when to stop. Either the Tom Clancys and Danielle Steels of the world are not being told this, or they are not listening.
- 4 No, I wasn't looking for them – at least, not at first. I just can't help it. One of the reasons I ended up copy-editing scholarly journals for a living is that I am blessed with what Anne Fadiman calls 'the compulsive proof-reading gene': Anne Fadiman, 'Insert a Caret,' in *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1998): 79–86.
- 5 This seems to be the consensus, for example, with respect to *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (Vancouver: Raincoast 2000).
- 6 See Bill Harnum, 'Whose Cover Is It Anyway?' *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 30, 3 (April 1999): 146–52.
- 7 I should admit here, however, that I'm not sure which presses we are talking about, and I'm still hoping that it's just a vicious rumour.
- 8 These are all 100 per cent real, undoctored examples from final manuscripts (i.e., submissions approved by journal editors and referees) submitted by authors. Some are from my personal collection; others were contributed by colleagues. For obvious reasons, I will not identify the authors, except to say that all are contributors to learned journals and, as far as we could tell, native English speakers.
- 9 I love that last comma. The image it calls to my mind is this: as the 18-wheel truck hurtles down the slope following a cataclysmic brake



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failure, the driver sticks his hand out the window and tries to avert catastrophe by hanging onto a tree branch.

- 10 Not puzzled? That's why you need a copy editor!
- 11 But you can bet that when the owner of an uncredited photo, or the originator of a plagiarized footnote, phones the journal editor to complain, the copy editor will be the first person the author seeks to blame for the omission.
- 12 Admittedly, there seem to be scholars who do wish to be impenetrable, on the grounds, I suppose, that if nobody else can understand their work, they will be considered unusually brilliant. But these are the minority, and their writing is impenetrable at a level far beyond mere disorganization and poor grammar. Most writers do genuinely want to communicate something to someone, and their efforts deserve our support.
- 13 But I doubt it. See Trevor Lipscombe, 'The Golden Age of Scholarly Publishing,' *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 30, 3 (April 1999): 138–45, for a discussion of the tendency in our industry to a 'misty-eyed nostalgia for the past.'
- 14 An unskilled, careless, sleepy, or poorly trained editor, on the other hand, can make good writing awkward and bad writing worse; even an excess of enthusiasm can be damaging. Part of being a good editor is knowing when to 'speak' and when to shut up.
- 15 On the other hand, another part of the job is to turn sections written by three or five or eight different authors into an article that sounds as though the same person, or group of people, wrote the whole thing (but not as though that person was you). This is one of those editorial tasks best analogized to herding cats.
- 16 And perhaps not even that. In addition to the assistance of advisors and committee members, many doctoral candidates now hire professional editors to polish their texts before they have to defend them.
- 17 Eleanor Harman, Ian Montagnes, Siobhan McMenemy, and Chris Bucci, eds., *The Thesis and the Book: A Guide for First-Time Academic Authors* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2003): i