Mining for gems

Getting the message across in a corporate setting while maintaining the relationship with non-professional writers

By Lisa Morrison

When I first learned to read, I was shocked to discover that once one *could* read, it was impossible *not* to read. Signs leapt out: forcing me to decipher them. I couldn't pass them as before. I couldn't *not* read. And when I began years later to edit, I found it was just the same. One cannot turn one's brain off and *not* edit. It is the editor's burden, and it separates us in significant ways from most others.

Editors are the kind of people who take pride in seeing the problems, inconsistencies and difficulties of a document. Let's face it: We tend towards the perfectionistic side of things. In workplaces we're the people who cringe when everyone around us calls almost any abbreviation an *acronym*, or when they mix up *infer* and *imply*, or confuse *uninterested* and *disinterested*.

These mistakes tend to irritate us more than is perhaps sensible for our mental health. I've even been in a meeting where a manager started calling my job 'edification' and asked fellow managers to send documents to me for 'edification'. There wasn't anything edifying for me in most of them, but I didn't complain!

So we cannot help but share these infuriating, yet amusing, mistakes with a fellow editor or sympathetic spouse. Many people just don't care about this stuff or don't see the relevance. We hope to be seen as helpful, knowledgeable professionals, but if we are honest we are probably also viewed as punctuation perverts, obsessed with something considered of little relevance these days. So we have to laugh at them too a little and reaffirm for ourselves that—even among people who view reading for pleasure as deviant behaviour—it all *does matter*!

As editors, we tend to like fine details as much as the big picture, and seeing both aspects coming together is intensely satisfying. But we often work with and for people who feel very differently and who just don't see words and documents the way we do.

In the corporate communication field, including the government and not-for-profit sectors I've been employed in, communication professionals are often called to edit the work of non-professional writers. These could be people submitting articles for a company newsletter, staff creating a manual or brochure for the public, or volunteers with a news story for their local media. While these authors may be experts on their subject, they usually don't have formal training or experience in professional writing. They lack an intuitive feel for language and crisp communication too.

As the amount of editing required of documents written by non-professional writers tends to be much greater, it also calls for a different type of relationship between editor and writer than with a skilled author. It requires extra-special empathy, diplomacy, tenacity and patience to achieve a professional document that meets the needs of the organisation and public but also leaves the writer feeling valued and involved.

I have unintentionally hurt the feelings of people whose writing I have worked on at times. It doesn't feel good. I hate doing it and certainly strive to edit in such a way that achieves the goals of my organisation and has the writer feeling I have improved and clarified their message or story. It doesn't always happen, but I'm certainly trying.

A respectful metaphor I sometimes use to explain the editing process is 'mining for gems', and it works particularly well with people unfamiliar with editing and public relations.

I explain that editing is a bit like mining. While there are gems in their work, at this point some are buried under rubble and cannot be seen clearly. Their message would gleam if we chipped away a little and then polished the best bits. I explain that the news media and public expect jewels to be packaged in a certain way and that I can help with this.

Headings become decorative features to draw the eye, over-long sentences and excess words the debris to wash away so people can more clearly see and admire the stone. The process of removing redundant or awkward words is the grinding required to make the gem shine. A simple, elegant template becomes the bed on which the finished jewellery is placed.

Editors find their own ways to sensitively work with writers, and it is certainly an area I am still learning about. However, when you need to strike a balance between building or maintaining a working relationship with a fellow staff member and delivering a professional product for your employer and audience, I find 'mining' a useful starting point in the writer–editor relationship.

I also find that while the 'track changes' function in Microsoft Word is awfully helpful, it can be harmful to your relationship with a writer. Replace those double spaces between sentences with single ones, restructure but a few lines and add some punctuation, and it can begin to make a person's document look as messy as the back of a tapestry.

Remember back to school days and how much a teacher's red marks on your story or essay hurt! Lots of marking-up can sting, even when badly needed for any chance at consistency or to make an incomprehensible message accessible. So how can we make our red pens *less* mighty than the sword?

Thinking from the writer's perspective takes time, often time you don't feel you have. But it is crucial in a government setting, where ongoing relationships are so important, to make this time. Even people who know they aren't great writers may take your corrections hard, and this can make working with them in the future difficult.

Some people come to me because they genuinely want help to prepare their work for publication, but more often they come because their manager has said they *have* to go through my department. They don't necessarily see the need for my services. So I have to be persuasive and nice to work with.

In the government sector, communication professionals move fast, juggling many projects at once for various internal clients. It can appear that there just isn't time for such pleasantries, yet they are very much needed.

So I often find it more helpful to not use 'track changes' for everything. Simply going through and making many of the small but necessary changes (such as inserting or deleting commas, removing extra spaces, tidying up incorrect capitalisation, etc.) can be completed invisibly. Then, 'track changes' can be used simply to show where you suggest that sentences be rewritten, headings added or altered, or paragraphs transposed.

If you are the person who ultimately distributes the news release, sends the copy and job brief to your graphic design department or ad agency, or even just on to a manager for approval, it isn't necessary for the writer to see and acknowledge every error and style problem in their original document. It can be more tactful to just show them the polished version to ensure they're still happy with the message.

However, this must be done judiciously. You don't want the person thinking you are editing behind their back. In some cases, depending on the person and their interest in the job, it may be better to politely explain why you have recommended or made certain changes.

In either case, it is important to be encouraging. As an editor, it's easier to focus on what's wrong with a document that what's right. An encouraging comment can always be found and may be the only positive feedback the writer gets about their work. "I like the passion with which you write about this topic," or "Thanks for letting me know about this lovely human interest story," are good ways to get the relationship started.

Giving feedback from the perspective of the reader can also be helpful in maintaining the relationship. If my note to the writer says: "Changing the word *trauma* to *injury* will make it easier for the general public to understand what you mean here", it may be received better than if I just write "Jargon. Change *trauma* to *injury*". It takes more time and words but suggests I am a collaborator in the quest to make the message understood. Carolyn Rude (2002) calls this *goal-oriented language*, and it's very useful.

This idea is similar to a suggestion by Australian editors Marsha Durham and Jean Hollis Weber (1991) to emphasise improvements not corrections. *Trauma* is a common term in the ambulance field, so *injury* is simply an improvement that increases clarity when communicating in a non-medical context.

I also find it helpful to use different editing styles depending on the job. If I am editing someone else's work and they are solely responsible for the finished product, I am likely to give lots of well-explained suggestions using goal-oriented language and leave it to them. They are going to be the ones deciding on the finished text and it's their project.

However, when I'm editing something where I am the project manager and will be taking responsibility for the finished product I tend to be more active in my editing role. While I still try to use all the points I've discussed before, I am more likely to explain why I've made certain decisions, rather than merely giving suggestions. It's important to decide what your role is in a certain job: that of consultant or project manager and act accordingly.

Top 5 tips:

1. Find a respectful metaphor for editing.

2. Use 'track changes' judiciously.

3. Be encouraging and positive.

4. Give feedback from the reader's perspective.

5. Decide on your role and edit accordingly.

References

- Durham, M & Weber, JH 1991, 'Beyond copy-editing: the editor-writer relationship', *Proceedings of the technical communication seminar*, October 1991, NSW Society for Technical Communication, pp. 47-50.

- Rude, CD 2002, *Technical editing*, Allyn & Bacon, New York.