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Letter from Oklahoma

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Letter from Oklahoma

Editing and Writing, Writing and Editing

by Tom Leonhardt (University of Oklahoma) <tleonhardt@ou.edu>



If you think writing for professional journals is a thankless job, you should try editing. Admittedly, it is easier to revise someone else's writing than to fill a blank page or CRT screen with words that say something well. But good writing is nothing unless one has something to say — a point of view, a story, an exposition of practice or theory — that adds to what we already know. But write those stories and ideas badly and you have a communications problem.

In ordinary conversation, you can make your point with a combination of words, gestures, and facial expressions and when your listener seems unsure, you can say, "You know what I mean?" And even then, according to your stress, pitch, and intonation, the meaning is different and your listener can then indicate what response is needed if you aren't being rhetorical. Writers do not have this luxury. If you want your readers to understand what you mean (all writers are not so inclined), you must write clearly and unambiguously. I once had a sign on my desk that said "ES-CHEW OBFUSCATION". A friend, a college graduate, saw it and asked in all seriousness, "What does that mean?" If you don't know the answer, if you have to ask, and you are a writer, then friend, you need an editor.

What should your editor do with your manuscript, assuming that you have something to say but are struggling with how to say it? The editor (sometimes a reader, sometimes a referee, sometimes the editor) should give you credit for good ideas and then suggest ways to make your writing better. If extensive work is needed, an indication of what to do next should be suggested. In the rewrite, you will become your own editor if you want to be a successful writer. More about that later.

First, let's talk about what a good editor will not do. A good editor will not steal your voice. You should have enough confidence in your writing to know when you want something left alone and when a change improves on what you started with. **Maxwell Perkins** may have cut millions of words from **Thomas Wolfe's** manuscripts but he still left enough to supply the nation's nineteen-year-olds with several long, wordy, intoxicating novels, prose poems full of promise for aspiring writers (and what young reader, drunk on literature, has not dreamed of writing something that would secure a place in the pantheon of great and near-great novel-

ists?). There may be many greater novelists but most don't come anywhere near **Thomas Wolfe** and we have him and **Maxwell Perkins** to thank.

While retaining an author's voice, a good editor will look for consistency in spellings, grammar, punctuation, and usage. A good editor will suggest revisions of awkward constructions without being overly fastidious about artificial rules, for example, ending a sentence with a preposition. A good editor will have as sharp an ear as a blue pencil and will recognize a well-turned phrase or sentence for what it is, not for what it is not.

A good editor, unless directed and paid to do so, need not rewrite poorly organized articles. The writer is getting credit for the work so the writer should do the work. The editor and attendant referees, at least in the non-fiction world of library literature, should suggest where work is needed and provide a few good examples, taken from the work in hand. Marking and annotating the manuscript is also in order and is an appropriate way of querying about constructions, usage, statements of fact, and inferences and conclusions drawn from the evidence or analysis thereof.

If the editor is doing all of this, what is left for the author? Plenty if the author is to succeed and to begin to take pride in writing as a craft, for it is a craft that is a lifelong pursuit for most of us. A writer who takes this craft seriously will learn to self-edit, will learn to appreciate good writing by reading good writing, will simplify his approach to language, and will write, write, and write, unconscious of style. The style will come, the style will not be self-evident to the writer, the style will develop with experience and perseverance.

There are no easy ways to good writing as there are no easy ways to anything of lasting value. But there are steps that one can take to create a consciousness about what is good and what needs to be deleted. Chopping off sentences, paragraphs, whole pages is a difficult discipline to acquire. We love our words. They may all be found in the dictionary (let's hope so) but once we write them out, arranging them just so, they become ours. Being an acquisitive society, we are not used to giving up things simply because we don't need them. What is ours is ours. Writers need to learn to recognize passages that do not serve any good purpose and, in fact, detract from the rest of the work. Think of those words and phrases

as clutter in your closet, clutter that you are better off without. Give it to the Salvation Army or toss it in the dumpster, depending on its shape, but get it out of the house.

There are some works that will help you learn this discipline. The obvious one is **Strunk and White's** *The Elements of Style*. When studying German at Berkeley years ago, a fellow student (she was a double major, German and microbiology) in the course on German Composition (taught by **Thomas Mann's** youngest child, **Michael**), revealed that she read **Strunk and White** at least once a year. I decided that if it were good enough for her, it was good enough for me. As you are familiarizing yourself with this classic, an exercise in simplicity, you might want to read it a couple of times and then refer to it often as you write an essay or short expository piece, just for practice. You will be surprised and gratified at how much of their advice is etched into your brain where you will have it always, along with your ability to ride a bicycle and recite your "two times" table.

There are many other books aimed at helping writers with their writing. Not all are equally good, not all are even helpful much less interesting. I will share a few that I have found helpful and that I pick up from time to time.

"Man has found it no easy undertaking to select and adopt the members of his word family. It has always been a difficult and exacting and oftentimes frustrating job for him to discipline and adjust the children of his vocabulary, such as it may or may not be." This is from the "Introduction" to *Mark My Words: A Guide to Modern Usage and Expression*, by **John Baker Opdycke** (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949). The title is misleading because it is really a book about the nuances and connotations of words and a lengthy lesson about how synonyms do not always convey the same meaning (connotation). Example: "He WANTS a job; he DESIRES a home and family; he WISHES for fame and wealth," and "The grass is PARCHED and the leafage WITH-ERED as a result of the DRY weather." By today's standards (or lack of), many of **Opdycke's** distinctions may seem fastidious and artificial and may even be out-

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Publisher Bestsellers

Rutgers University Press

Column editors: **Julia A. Gammon** (Univ. of Akron) <jgammon@UAKRON.EDU>
(NOTE ADDRESS CHANGE) and
Kathleen Ketterman (Univ. of North Carolina Press) <kjketter@email.unc.edu>

Steve Maikowski, Marketing Director, **Rutgers University Press**, provided information for this issue of *ATG* with a list of ten of the press' bestsellers and number of copies sold. Three of the books on the list are in the **American Women Writers' Series** which are reprints of fiction classics — one of the strengths of this press.

For variety, I checked our circulation statistics for the last three years on the books which we had in our collection (we were missing the cartoon book!) and found they varied from a high of eight circulations (*Gender Play*) to a low of zero (*Hope Leslie*).

Founded in 1936, and with a title output of approximately 70 titles per year, **Rutgers University Press** publishes books of general studies, to name a few. The Press also distributes publications of the New Jersey Historical Society.

Rutgers University Press — Top Ten Bestsellers

- 1) McDowell, Deborah, editor. *Quicksand and Passing*, by Nella Larsen. (1986). — 55,000 copies
- 2) Bernal, Martin. *Black Athens: The Afrosiatic Roots of Western Civilization*. Vol.1. (1987) — 43,500 copies.
- 3) Harris, Sidney. *Einstein Simplifies: Cartoons on Science*. (1985). 40,000 copies.
- 4) Moffatt, Michael. *Coming of Age in New Jersey: College and American Culture*. (1989). 27,000 copies.

5) Bernal, Martin. *Black Athens: The Afrosiatic Roots of Western Civilization*. Vol.2 (1991). 18,000 copies.

6) Warhol, Robyn and Diane Prince Herndl, editors. *Feminism: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. (1991). 16,000 copies.

7) Thorne, Barrie. *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School*. (1993). 16,000 copies.

8) Owings, Alison. *Frauen: German Women Recall the Third Reich*. (1993). 16,000 copies.

9) Warren, Joyce, editor. *Ruth Hall*, by Fanny Fern. (1986). 15,000 copies.

10) Kelley, Mary, editor. *Hope Leslie*, by Catharine Maria Sedgwick. (1987). 13,000 copies.



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dated, for usage changes with the times. But by reading this work, you will become curious about the word you selected. Is it the right word? Does it say what I really mean or will it mislead by its ambiguity within the context of my message? A curiosity about words is not a bad thing in a writer so long as you don't freeze up. When in doubt, keep writing and come back later to agonize and edit. If you do it word by word you will not only never finish, you may have to go to the home for dysfunctional writers where your only intellectual stimulation will be reruns of old sitcoms and game shows. Your mind will not be able to handle anything else, alas.

Another book I find helpful and full of sound advice is *The Writer's Art*, by **James J. Kilpatrick** (Kansas City, Mo.: Andrews, McMeel & Parker, 1984). Here is his justification for this book: "My purpose in this book is primarily to venture a few suggestions, based upon a lifetime as a writer, on how good writers can get to be better writers. I want to speculate on some

of the reasons why so much bad writing abounds. Over the years I have acquired a hundred pretty little crotchets, and I propose to trot them out for critical inspection."

This next work is one you are not familiar with, of that I am almost certain, unless you were an officer in the United States Air Force. Don't laugh, this is a good book, one that will almost certainly help you become a better writer. Let me quote from *Guide for Air Force Writing* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Air Force, 1969. AF Pamphlet 10-1). "The basic purpose of all writing is to get a message across to the reader; it must convey exact meaning. To serve this purpose well, it must be capable of being quickly read and easily understood." "There is no set formula for achieving successful writing, but there are guidelines. For example, good writing is logical. It shows a thorough knowledge of its subject, but it never says more than necessary. And it sticks to the subject. Its outstanding characteristic is clarity — clarity obtained through simple, everyday words; short sentences; brief paragraphs; and lack of complicated

expressions and jargon. In other words, it is simple, clear, and direct." Enough said.

Finally, I would like to recommend *The MLA's Line by Line: How to Edit Your Own Writing*, by **Claire Kehrwald Cook** (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985). I recommend reading it straight through from the "Preface" through "A Glossary of Usage" and on through the "Selected Bibliography." After that you will feel comfortable in skimming chapters or paragraphs as needed. This work is thorough, more thorough than you or I will ever be as we edit our own writing, but we will be more thorough than we ever thought possible or necessary had we not read this *vade mecum* for those of us who write for professional journals. I daresay that even those who aspire to the short story or personal essay will find much of value here. And if you are an editor, aside from your *Chicago Manual of Style* and authoritative dictionary, this is the one work you should own and become familiar with.

There you have it, the secrets to success in the world of library literature and possibly beyond. All that is left is for you to write. 