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Sympathy for the Devil: Editing Alterate Style

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Elements of Alternate Style

essays on
writing and
revision

edited by WENDY BISHOP

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Sympathy for the Devil
Editing Alternate Style

Michael Spooner

> Does “anal retentive” take a hyphen?
>
> Anon.

Let me tell you how bad it is. Yesterday, on the listserv of editors that I read, there was a posting that included this thought.

> Style and rules are the basis of editorial craft; the way these are used is the basis of the art of editing. <bogren>

It’s a bit ambiguous on “craft” and “art”—and defining oneself in rules leaves little room for either one—but I was glad this person gave editors credit for any creativity at all. Still, can it be true? Style and Rules are the basis for what editors do? This implies a very straightlaced view of language change and variety in style. Is this just another crank, I wondered, railing against the use of slang or the creation of new words, the loss of the good old days when only those who could write the language properly were allowed to publish?

Today came seven comments in reply. Good, I thought; someone else is concerned about this. Maybe they’ll argue for a more generous stance toward unorthodox discourse, alternate style, or the like. Guess again. They worried only about the first guy’s grammar. (Isn’t “style and rules” a compound subject, so wouldn’t it require “bas<u>e</u>s” instead of “bas<u>i</u>s” in the predicate?) I enjoy irony as much as the next person, but this is a little depressing. After all, this

is my profession; these are my colleagues totally missing the point: Pharisees squabbling, while Salome murders John.

On the other hand, I love to read the curmudgeon journalists like James Kilpatrick and George Will, who labor so thanklessly on behalf of the bromides of Good Writing: maxims like "avoid passive voice" or "use a topic sentence in every paragraph." I get an uncharitable pleasure out of their posturing, because in my field (English), journalists as a group are sometimes parodied as some of the worst of all criminals against language. They invented the tabloid, after all, not to mention the headline and the sound bite. Once, in college, I heard a student asking in the English office for directions to the Department of Journalism. "Sorry," quipped one of my profs. "You just can't get to Journalism from English."

But what the Good-Style columnists are selling seems harmless, doesn't it? Traditional grammar, accessible structure, directness, and focus. Many of my editor friends would find nothing to criticize in these. The corny old "Five Ws" (who, what, when, where, why) don't seem all that bad as a heuristic for writing students, or even as a thumbnail stylebook for working writers. How can cheap shots at all this be warranted? Well, it depends.

For me, the Good-Style Guys and that comment about Style and Rules as the basis of editing raise a number of alarms. For example, I'm concerned about the condescending attitude they encourage toward writing done in professional registers, where things aren't always direct and accessible (like the writing of scientists, police, medical folks, or lawyers). I'm also worried about the stance toward writers with experimental aims (thank heaven Stein and Gass and others didn't take this kind of advice). And fundamentally, I'm concerned about what a focus on Rules does to the relation between any editor and any author.

Editing and Surgical Intervention

This is an exercise from a popular textbook on technical editing. By any standard, it is a garbled bit of text, though you'll agree it's far from unconventional. How would you edit it?

> It is imperative in such cases that we obtain documentation that either clearly shows that the pathological process worsened, thus expediting the need for surgical intervention or determine if the planned surgery was performed after entering the study simply because the patient was on a waiting list, or although the indication for the surgery may have been clear to the treating physician before the patient entered the study, the patient did not agree to surgery until after starting the study. The latter two examples demonstrate situations that disqualify a case as reportable and if follow-up reveals either of these situations, the report should be a candidate for deletion. (Eisenberg, 145)[1]

I once went through this exercise with some editing students, and they found it very difficult. In fact, some were even indignant about how dense and

complex it seemed, as if density and complexity themselves were marks of poor writing. They're not, but I admit that even I wondered about the appropriateness of this dense passage for a student exercise.

In editing the passage, the students felt their primary task was to simplify it. Straighten out those wandering sentences, shorten them, clarify the logic, make it more concise. (Editors always talk about "clarity" and "concision.") Almost no one really understood the passage, but they "edited" anyway.

Some students rewrote the entire passage in language they felt was more accessible—approximately as easy to read as the newspaper.

> We must document every case that shows the process of disease, and show that surgery was necessary.

Some left much of the original language, but shortened all the sentences.

> It is imperative in such cases that we obtain documentation. This should clearly show that that the process worsened.

Some tried to turn it into a list.

> It is imperative that we obtain documentation to show:
>
> a. that the pathological process worsened
>
> b. that the planned surgery was performed after the study began

Everyone found it frustrating, and no one did a very good job with it.

But the real problem is not within the passage itself; a few tweaks is all it really needs. The problem here—especially for novice editors—is in understanding the context in which this style of writing is acceptable—and how to make it more effective within its own context. Just to be fair, I'll show you what I did with the passage, myself, though I don't claim this is the only way to make it work.

> It is imperative in such cases that we obtain documentation to show clearly that the pathological process worsened during the study, expediting the need for surgical intervention. Otherwise, we must determine whether the planned surgery was performed after entering the study simply because the patient was on a waiting list, or whether—even though the indication for the surgery may have been clear to the treating physician before the patient entered the study—the patient simply did not agree to surgery until after starting the study. The latter two examples demonstrate situations that would disqualify a case as reportable, and if follow-up reveals either of these, the report should be a candidate for deletion.

The reason I like this approach better is that it is closer to the author's original style and tone. My sense of the rhetorical situation here (the author, the audience, the subject matter, the occasion, and/or the relations among them) is that the passage was taken from an in-house memo from one medical researcher to a group of others on a team. In that case, there is no need to simplify the

author's grammar or vocabulary—researchers always write this way. We just need to be sure of the meaning.

I don't mean to pick on the students. This was a tough exercise. Through no fault of their own, most of the students simply did not have a feel for this "researcher style" of writing—it was a matter of inexperience. However, unfortunately compounding their inexperience was their belief that an editor's job is to make a text stylistically Correct—in this case, make it conform to a common-sense model of "clarity" and "concision." And, in their hands, even the clarity/concision model was truncated, since the students all favored style choices toward the "Hemingway end" of traditional style. Again, I'm not faulting them; their preferences were valid reflections of their editorial training to that point. But I do mean to illustrate a mistake they made. None of the students asked about audience, and they missed the cues within the document that would have helped them to identify it. Instead, they were content to rewrite the text as if it were actually intended for them as the primary readers. They believed the essence of their job was a sort of editorial surgery; to cut a text down to the one size that fits all. To their own size.

Ask a child from the city whether the language of school will work for "doing the dozens" on the street, or how trash-talking goes down in church. If you're a middle-class American, are you aware that the directness, informality, and openness of your native communication style (the style of the newspaper, the style generally encouraged in American universities, the style I'm using now) is considered immature, even rude, in many cultures? Getting directly to the point is a big deal to Americans, but "indirection" is the way most of the world prefers to communicate (Fox). It is considered more courteous, more refined, and more interesting.

I'm making a simple point: it won't work for editors to enforce one style and one set of rules, because these things change with the context of writing. I don't need to go abroad to illustrate this, either. In college composition programs that have a writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) dimension, this point is made clear to students early on. The standard for style in the College of Law is different from the standard in the College of Education, and different from what is required in the College of Science. Technical writing is stylistically different from literary writing, which is different from journalism. What you learn in a WAC program is that it is part of your job as a professional-in-training to conquer the standard in your own field. And these examples, different as they are, are all well within orthodox style, when compared to the work of many creative writers—and even certain gifted but loony academics like some in this volume.

However, when editors talk about editing, we tend to assume that there is one Correctness, and that it is fully described in handbooks on Standard English, in style manuals, in authoritative works for writers like *Elements of Style*, and so on. And where a text does not conform to the traditional conventions of style, an editor will normally recommend—you guessed it—surgical intervention.

Barbarians at the Gate

There's a tacit agreement among editors to pick nits wherever they see them. To be fair, it's an editor's practical obligation to see any miscue in grammar or violation of standard style as an attack on the language. An editor—at least to some extent—lives and moves within an enterprise whose essence is defensive and corrective. And "correction," of course, depends on a standard. (Should I have put that comma outside the quotation marks, instead of inside?) Here's another bit I picked up from the net recently.

> WARNING TO ALL EDITORS AND THOSE WHO CARE ABOUT THE LANGUAGE: you may not want to read what follows. <lovegrove>

Isn't that a silly attitude? Editors think it's their job to care about and protect the language, because they think the language belongs to them. What they really care about is the set of language conventions they learned in school and on the job—the standard, in other words. And since they devote their lives to service of the standard, you can expect them to be defensive when it comes to variation. After all, it's their job to know these things, and if you allow too much messing about with style and rules—departure from the standard, don't you see—well, how will they know what to correct? How will they protect the orthodoxy?

> . . . in an editorial vein, I do know more and better than my authors. . . . Ever notice that "technical editors" are paid more than "technical writers"? <ngrossbl>

> I have no compunction editing the hell out of a [writer's]copy. . . . Copy is always better when I get through with it, but then copy is always better when an editor gets through with it, right? <dtallman>

In this connection, editors are not alone. We need to understand something about the culture in which they work. In an effort to justify the fact that they make money from the work of others—particularly from writers—publishers long ago settled on the "added value" argument. That is, as a publisher, I take your manuscript, and create from it a physical product—a printed and bound book—that you do not have the resources to create on your own. I also provide marketing and distribution for the book, which you could not do yourself. In short, without the services of a publisher, your manuscript will never reach a public; the value I add is indispensable.

Now. Since there is practically an infinite number of manuscripts available, and since publishers have finite resources, someone has to decide which

manuscripts are going to become books and which are not. And guess who gets to decide: the publishers. Especially among scholarly presses, we publishers are fond of seeing our role in terms of "gatekeeping." We have convinced ourselves that an important service we provide the world is to protect the high standards of scholarly publishing by allowing only the best books into print. (Commercial presses have different standards to protect: salability or "what the public wants.") And we have always been able to make this work, because of our unique station at the gateway to print. (With electronic networks and such, the means of publication is now widely available without going through a publisher. It will be interesting to see what happens to publishing, but I can tell you already that publishers are worried about losing control of the gate.)

This guardian-at-the-gate self-concept has deep roots in the traditions and culture of publishing. Editors, of course, work for publishers; therefore, they have a natural stake in preserving this tradition. And because editors work so closely with the texts to be published, they sometimes feel the gatekeeping duty more keenly than anyone.

Sympathy for the Text

H. G. Wells said, "No passion in the world is equal to the passion to alter someone else's draft."

But look at it from the writer's point of view. A friend of mine and I once tried to achieve an eccentric style in something we wrote for an academic audience (Spooner and Yancey). We were aiming for the sound of e-mail, in a sense, so we did it as a dialogue. We also wanted to interrupt ourselves frequently with asides from other writers—just as it happens on e-mail. We wanted it to become a conversation among many. Nice idea, but how do you show this on the page? To heighten the sense of many voices talking at once, we used three different typefaces in the article—one for her, one for me, and one for the writers we quoted. Finally, unlike traditional cowritten articles, we disagreed all the way through and ended the piece without coming to a unified conclusion. In effect—though I don't think we did it utterly—we trampled some readers' expectations of things like thesis, unity, and continuity. You may see this kind of thing in other chapters in this volume. In short, we violated the standard, and we did it on purpose. Here's a brief excerpt:

> I don't think we have an argument with each other so much, even though we do have more than a single point of view. But we write in different voices, and this is a problem if one insists on proper genres. Can't we just call it a text?
>
> What is the difference between an article and an essay? A dialogue and a paper? Between hard copy and e-mail? Between what we are submitting and what certain readers expect? Those questions

> **One thing we do agree about is that e-mail offers new ways of representing intellectual life. This is one way.**
>
> all center on genre—a central thread woven here. The essay genre becomes a place where genre itself is the topic of inquiry, even of dispute.
>
> > :) This post has been smiley-captioned for the irony-impaired. :) <skeevers>
>
> **The Digitized Word**
> E-mail is a floating signifier of the worst sort—whether it's called E-discourse, or VAX conferences, or whatever. So the first task is to narrow the focus. Let's look at these few dimensions . . .

This isn't too wild, but it is an example of what Weathers calls "double-voice" writing (1978). It asks you to read two or three voices at once, and these voices do not agree with each other. The result is a battle for the reader's attention—both visually and rhetorically—which makes the reader feel like a referee. And behind it all, of course, is what you might call the meta-argument: the authors want you to let go of your bias toward conventional "unity" in writing. (Why? is not the point here, but I can imagine several good reasons.)

For an editor who has no experience with—or sympathy for—alternate styles of writing like this example, they can be a real annoyance. And it's not just the funny margins and different typefaces. Good writing, we are taught here in America, has a unified purpose and a single voice. It is communicated in a straightforward argument, with a linear syllogistic progression from beginning to end. These things go to the heart of clarity and concision, which are, after all, the heart of American communication.

But look. If human communication were as straightforward as telecommunication, things would be different. That is, when it comes to the electronic transfer of data, it is very easy to see that inflexible rules are an advantage; machines—even the fanciest computers—are excruciatingly literal-minded. This means they cannot make any mistakes of judgment: Like good soldiers, they only follow orders. That's why the nerd theorem "garbage in, garbage out" makes sense, and it's also why the corollary of this theorem must make sense, too: "garbage out, garbage in." When an error is output from the transfer of data, it makes sense to look for a flaw in the input. There's no misunderstanding in the mind of the machine, and no magic to it, in spite of how it seems sometimes.

Human communication, however, depends a great deal on judgment—specifically on understanding—not just on mechanics; it involves an attempt to match the meanings in my head with the meanings in your head. Since meanings are infinitely idiosyncratic, there are infinite opportunities for you to misunderstand me. Therefore, when we have a misunderstanding (aside from

me deceiving you), it is not because I'm talking garbage, but because what I'm able to say doesn't match what you're able to hear.

If an editor operates from the information transfer model, then the common sense idea that meanings are fixed and consistent will work, and it makes sense to correct the text until it conforms to the Standard for style, voice, grammar, mechanics, and the other conventions of "clarity and concision." The trouble with this is that it doesn't always match what the writer wanted to say. So, an editor might change "surgical intervention" in the text above to plain old "surgery," and think a blow has been struck for clarity and concision. Unfortunately, in a text like that, journalist English won't work. You can't just say that "surgical intervention" is wordy, and change it. The writer used that phrase because the nuance of intervening in a process was important to the way she or he thought about the research being conducted. The word "surgery" doesn't carry the same nuance at all.

By the same token, an editor would often be wrong to "simplify" the language of a legal brief or contract, written by a professional in that field. Such documents are quite often dense, redundant, and semantically convoluted; as a genre, they're often the objects of ridicule. However, when it comes to editing any particular legal document, we may only assume that it has been carefully conceived in light of important judicial precedents, and that to edit it by a commonsense standard of clarity and concision might well eliminate some legally crucial elements. We need to work carefully within in the plane of legal writing, and that means first of all that we need to know what is conventional there.

Finally, when it comes to a work written in a radical style, it is a mistake for the editor to intervene with surgery or to beat back that devil from the gate. The style of a work carries an important dimension of the meaning, and a hasty or inflexible editor risks damaging the effectiveness of the piece as a whole. Very likely, the author chose the alternate style as a way to loosen readers from the conventions that editors are trained to enforce.

Common sense isn't good enough; we need a more specific kind of sense. A valid edit, like any valid response to writing, is one that begins from an impulse of sympathy for the text—not from one of correction. What I'm advocating, then, is essentially an ethics of editing—or you could even say of reading—that asks the editor/reader to engage the text first of all on its own terms, and then commits them to helping the text become more effective—again, on its own terms. And this requires the editor/reader to understand the writerly context in which the text is composed and the stylistic conventions that are considered acceptable within that context. It may even mean treating as acceptable many sins against convention, where they contribute to the writer's evident purpose. Editors need a flexible repertoire approach to responding to texts, not unlike Weathers' approach to creating texts. If style for an author is "the choosing between alternatives," then editing for style is, more than anything else, honoring the author's choice.

Developing the Editorial Eye

An editor is just a reader who has been asked for help before publication. Peers can be editors, tutors can be editors, teachers can be editors. Whenever we respond to the writing of someone else before it is in final form, we're functioning as an editor. Because so often in college we find ourselves serving as someone's editor, some of the most convenient places to develop a working ethics of editing ought to be the various sites of the college writing program where writers frequently read, respond to, and edit each other's work: the writing classroom, the writing center or lab, the editing classroom, the WAC program, and so forth. A sympathy for the text presupposes a transactional approach, so it should be most comfortable in workshop-oriented situations, where writers are free to comment on their own intentions, where others are free to elicit those intentions and to comment on the effectiveness of the writer's many choices. Peer-to-peer situations, small group work, collaborative projects all offer frequent opportunities to develop the sympathetic editorial eye and hand. But in any editing or responding situation, we need to keep certain basic orientations in mind. These are obvious, I suppose, but they are worth mentioning.

1. We need to be clear on *who the audience is*. Normally, this is quickly established, but it's important not to make easy assumptions. And one assumption we need to clear away is that the audience is us or someone just like us. An effective editor is one who understands that nothing is ever written for the editor, and who has therefore developed a repertoire of reading personae that they can inhabit as the occasion demands.

   By "who the audience is," I mean a fairly rich description, too—not just, oh, the prof in my business class. The prof as him/herself? Or is it the prof, adopting the stance of a fictional personnel director at a fictional business you're pretending to apply to, for a job? Sometimes the audience is quite narrow, as in the example about surgery above. From the writer's use of "we" and other clues, it's clear that the audience for that piece is a small group, perhaps only one or two readers, and they're involved with the writer in a research project. Sometimes the audience is quite broad, and we need to know that, too. How would you edit my writing here, if you knew it was intended—in the words of Wendy Bishop when she assigned it to me—for an audience of "student writers with ghost teachers . . ." "Ghost" audience of teachers is quite a provocative description, when you think about it. It puts the student in the foreground, but it gives the teacher-reader an important presence, too, haunting the use that the student will make of the piece. How would you help me reach that "ghost" audience?

2. Knowing the audience will tell us *which stylistic conventions the audience expects*. I would wager that the business-prof-as-fictional-personnel-director is more conservative an audience than a real personnel director. Therefore,

I'd think a quite conservative, formal style of business letter would be what the prof is after, to show that we're thinking of IBM and not some freelance software developer in Scuffknuckle, Montana. What does knowing the audience tell us about the medical research memo? It tells us syntactical density and complexity are just fine; focus on meaning. What about editing this paper for students and "ghost" teachers? Well, it's a problem. If you edit me strictly for the student audience, you may make me useless to the teacher. If you pitch it to the teacher, the students will skip it altogether. I'd suggest a direct, linear, friendly style—on the theory that a student will have little patience for fun and games in a piece like this—but allow a few jump-cuts and minor stylistic jokes to amuse the teacher.

3. Knowing what the audience can handle will tell us *whether the author's stylistic choices are likely to be effective*. As the editor's repertoire grows, their instincts in this regard become more accurate. But even the most experienced editors resort regularly to the author for guidance. This is why a classroom setting is so convenient for developing editorial instincts: easy access to the author.

A sympathy for the text would require that editorial remarks are first of all supportive, and that suggestions for change are going to take the form of a question more often than not. "I like the friendly tone you're using here. I'm wondering, though, if you think Professor Markup as an audience will be more conservative than a real personnel director? Should you be a little more formal in the first paragraph?" If I had access to the writer of the medical study memo above, I'd probably say something like "Am I right that what would disqualify a case for the study is the fact that the need for surgery was already apparent when the study began? So one importance of the documentation is in showing just when it became apparent—before or after the study started? This was a little difficult for me to sort out; what would you think about recasting some of that middle sentence, just to give this criterion more prominence?" Finally, a good editorial question to ask me about this article would be "I'm wondering why you decided not to put this in a rad style. The topic is slightly controversial, and it might help to make your point, don't you think, to cast it in a controversial style? Have you considered using crots, or maybe double-voicing it? What do you think the audience would make of that?"

Writers are bound to be defensive; that's why the sympathetic question is a stock editorial technique. But don't get the idea that I think editors should never directly advocate changes in the text. I do think they should; I just don't think they need encouragement from me.

An ethics of editing, then, is largely a matter of allowing the author to own the text. It is enhanced when the editor develops a friendship with the writer—and the trust that friendship entails. It requires an editor to detach from the rule-bound gatekeeper mentality and to imagine the text as the author sees it. The

editor's function is to make a repertoire of knowledge available to the author—knowledge of language, of audience, of voice, and of style. When advising an author on editorial matters, the editor should encourage choices that are consistent with the author's voice and vision for the text, not simply enforce traditional rules. Fundamentally, it asks an editor to give up childish claims to moral or professional superiority and to redefine editing as a collaborative and consultant activity. We need to understand that sometimes we can best serve the language by detaching a bit from the defensiveness of orthodoxy; sometimes we need to show some sympathy for the devil.

Note

Eisenberg's original includes one or two (intentional) errors of punctuation, which I have eliminated on the theory that they would only distract us in this discussion.

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