

How to Distinguish A Conscientious Editor from An Insensitive Butcher

Anybody can edit, so use this article to help you distinguish an editor who can really help you and your readers from one who can only try.

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We live in a time when the simple act of writing makes a person a writer. Many writers write simply to please themselves. They often wonder what's wrong with readers who do not recognize the merits in their writing. They might also get offended by the suggestion that their writing needs an editor. Even so, the competence of a writer lies in the perception of the reader.

agent for improved communication

If you make changes to another's writing, then that makes you an editor. A conscientious editor acts as an intermediary between writer and reader. The value of an editor, therefore, comes from improving the reader's experience of the writer's work. Yet, many who play the role of an editor do not see it this way. This leads to over-cautious writers and zealous editors.

when an editor is most needed

The work of an editor is particularly important on multi-author documents. Even when they are long-time colleagues, co-authors often differ in their practices regarding grammar, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, style, and level of detail. Sometimes, even single-author documents present these inconsistencies, as when the writer writes in varying moods or other conditions over time. These documents typically require editorial revision so that the reader experience may be uniformly positive.

critical distinction

Unfortunately, many editors edit simply to please themselves. They often wonder why writers do not recognize the changes that they make as improvements. Herein lies the difference between a professional wordsmith intentionally acting as a conscientious editor and a less competent editor unintentionally acting like an insensitive butcher.

of drunken sailors

To some, editing provides an opportunity turn somebody else's writing into their own. For example, some editors replace expressions that do not align with their preferences with expressions that they do prefer. If the editor is aggressive and the writer permissive, then the editor could erase much of the writer's own communication while transplanting his or her own perceptions and biases. Editors who do this go through the writer's work with the grace of a drunken sailor. Serving the reader is at best an afterthought. The document might emerge more accessible and understandable to the editor, but any gains in serving the intended readers arise accidentally.

of well-intentioned bumlbers

Rarely do editors approach the role with malice. Many simply have too little awareness of their actual effect on the documents they edit. "Seems better to me" is their standard of excellence as they remain unaware of how their own subjectivity determines their judgment of a document's merits.

of serving the writer

The chief task of a conscientious editor is to render documents:

- efficient by accurately expressing ideas, sentiments, or facts;
- effective by:
 - informing with objectivity and balance.
 - persuading with clear logic and compelling emotion.
 - instructing with clarity, completeness, and precision.

a principle for efficiency

The shorter a document, the more likely it is to be read. Yet, writing that seems terse often fails readers who need

more help to understand, who want to enjoy reading, or who get offended on the perception of abruptness. Brevity is good and it comes in degrees. A focus on relevance helps to avoid extreme brevity.

examples of effectiveness

To draw in its intended readers, a document must rapidly appeal to their interests. Then, it must deliver on the promise it makes. An editor could act as an agent for the reader, then, in suggesting alternative titles or the inclusion of subtitles. Likewise, when the writer includes sentences, paragraphs, or sections that do not serve the focus of the document – the reader’s purpose in reading it – then the editor must excise these, no matter how satisfying their inclusion may be to the writer. In this way, effectiveness and efficiency are complementary.

of serving the reader

A conscientious editor improves a document’s effectiveness according to standards defined by the reader profile. For example, if the intended readership comprises experts in the subject, then the editor should eliminate unnecessary explanations and help to emphasize the relevance and originality of the main concept. There are often clever ways to do this without the editor becoming a co-author.

of serving the message

Good editing includes analysis that focuses on how to increase the clarity of the writer’s message while attending to the collective needs of the whole readership. For example, a metaphor used to make a point might distract some readers and need replacement with something better fitting the context. Alternatively, the writer might use expressions that reflect a visual bias (e.g. to see is to understand). These could be balanced with kinesthetic terms (e.g. to grasp is to comprehend) or auditory terms (e.g. what sounds right is accepted). The editor should make or suggest the slightest changes possible.

separating wheat from chaff

The simple act of strumming a guitar can make you a guitarist. It takes much more to become a true musician. The simple act of jumping into water can make you a diver. It takes much more to qualify as a diving instructor. To advance from being an editor by the simple act of altering text to being a conscientious wordsmith also takes much more.

of getting value

It can be difficult to find somebody who really makes your writing efficiently, effectively serve your readers. Documents that do this serve the writer, too. Between complete draft and satisfied readership, a conscientious editor can play an essential role. May it now be easier to distinguish a conscientious editor from an insensitive butcher.

– Glenn R Harrington
Articulate Consultants Inc.
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