

Working with Words—Editing and Editage

Abhishek Goel

Co-founder and Chief Customer Officer

Editage, Cactus Communications

AbhishekG@cactusglobal.com

Shreya Baliga

Head of Editing, Scholarly Communications

Editage, Cactus Communications

Abstract

Most people do not write as effectively as they speak, and this makes editing indispensable for good writing. Simply put, editing is the process of refining a document to achieve the best possible presentation of the author's work. The internet revolution has made it possible for authors to avail of editing services from anywhere in the world and find the editor best suited to the content and purpose of their document, their schedules, and even their budgets. Quality and speed are the two obvious hallmarks of a good editing service. Less obvious is the fact that editing needs to have an educational bent to it, so that authors can learn from the process and, in the absence of an edit, can at least survive if not succeed as writers.

ほとんどの人は、会話の時ほど説得力のある文章を書かない。そのため、より品質の高い文書を作成するには、校正が不可欠である。端的に言えば、校正とは筆者の作品を最大限に表現できるよう、文書を磨きあげるプロセスである。インターネット革命によって、筆者は世界中のどこからでも校正サービスを利用できるようになり、文書の内容、目的、スケジュール、更には予算に最も見合ったエディターの選択が可能となった。校正の質と仕上がりの速さが、サービスの良し悪しの決め手である。また、これはあまり良く知られていない事であるが、校正には教育要素が組み込まれているべきであり、それにより筆者自らが学ぶ事ができ、作家として成功するとはいかないうちでも、校正者なしでもどうにかやってくる事が可能になるのである。

In March 2003, as founder and current director of business development, I represented my company, Editage, at the Conference on Research Writing in Japan. To provide a holistic view of the practice of editing, I invited one of our editors, Shreya Baliga, to write the first two sections, offering insights into the nitty-gritty of editing. The third section covers my personal perspective based on the

experience of establishing Editage. Together, we offer a broad view of the art and business of editing.

Writing Right

The kind cruelty of editing

A common first reaction to having one's work edited is, "What happened to my hours of work!?" A closer look, however, usually reveals that editing has only brought out the best in the document and enhanced the author's original ideas. This often involves removing superfluous material and other peripheral matter, reorganizing entire sections, and reworking awkwardly phrased sentences, all of which distract the reader's attention from the matter at hand.

Editing marks the world of difference between 'a solution' and 'the solution.' To even compare it (let alone liken it) to a computerized spell-check would be considered sacrilegious by even the most dispassionate editor. The editor wears multiple hats—fact-checker to content expert, grammarian to rewriter, proofreader to page maker.

Simply put, editing is a quality audit. It is the process of refining a document to achieve the best possible presentation of the author's work.

We don't need no editing!

Yes, we do. A common belief is that people who speak 'good English' can write just as well. The fact is that even our spoken English is far from perfect. A psycholinguistic study by Mackay and Osgood (1959) found that even high-status speakers—in this case professors attending a conference at the University of Illinois—are just as guilty of speech errors as anyone else. These speakers committed a multitude of speech production errors such as unnecessarily pausing in the middle of sentences, leaving sentences unfinished, choosing inappropriate words, and so on. A look at any word-for-word transcription will substantiate this theory.

However, our brains are equipped with psycholinguistic mechanisms that help us comprehend speech despite it being ridden with errors. Listeners also have access to several non-verbal cues such as the speaker's tone of voice, gestures, and lip movements, all of which help them decode language. None of these are available to the reader. Therefore, the writer must recompense the loss of these non-verbal cues by using flawless punctuation and unambiguous sentence construction. A well-written piece is one whose content 'reads well.' There are no errors in spelling and grammar, sentences are unambiguously worded, and ideas flow logically. The professional editor pays attention to all these aspects of writing and then indicates the necessary changes and improvements. Such care is indispensable for good writing.

Editing is particularly crucial for translations, which are usually rather tricky. Most translators will have learned one of the two languages in the pair as a second language, which sometimes leads to a less-than-perfect understanding of the text or less-than-perfect expression. There is really no way around this problem. Translators are grappling with enough issues of their own without having to shoulder the additional burden of delivering a document in perfect English. Specifically, they have to prevent the loss of meaning across two documents (the original and the translation), and this might cause them to settle for a phrase that sounds awkward to a native English speaker.

The hallmark of a well-translated document is for it to be for unrecognizable as a translation, i.e., free from awkward expressions. Thus, it is absolutely critical for translated documents to be edited and for editors to be informed that the document at hand is a translation.

Editing for academics

There is no doubt that getting published in an international journal means instant access to a wider audience, which can bring rich rewards for current research and greater opportunities for future work. The only hitch for non-English speaking scientists is that the journals are almost always in English. Scientists for whom English is a second language can recount personal horror stories of their work being rejected for publication solely on the grounds of readability—or rather, the lack of it. This is where your friendly neighborhood professional language editors come to the rescue.

Huge investments of time and money as well as fragile reputations are at stake. Groundbreaking as a piece of research might be, it may well go unnoticed because of poor articulation. Due to idiosyncratic and unique modes of expression in different languages, people who write in English while thinking in another language are prone to miscommunication. Getting one's work professionally edited is the easiest and most effective way to avoid embarrassment.

Editing provides an audit of linguistic quality and ensures that the language in the document is worthy of an international publication. Brilliant scientists are a rare breed, but editing can add considerable value to a research paper, especially in terms of clarity of expression, and raise the caliber of 'science as usual.'

Ready—steady—edit!

Editing is an art that follows a strict scientific process. The document evolves through two major stages—editing and reviewing (and quite often a third). It is a process of refining the document, in which each step builds upon the previous. The 'level of editing' required for a document refers to both the nature and extent of change needed, which, in turn, depend on the writing abilities of the author. The editing process is scientific in that it makes facts and arguments clear, but the human elements in the process also make it highly personal and idiosyncratic.

Although all editors classify their levels of editing, there is usually considerable overlap between levels. A three-level classification is an easy conceptual framework within which to discuss levels of editing. In the following outline, each level builds upon (i.e., includes) the work done in the previous level.

The first is the Basic Edit, which comprises largely macro-level work such as checking spelling, grammar, and punctuation. The next is the Moderate Edit, in which the editor pays attention to vocabulary, sentence construction, and word usage. The last of the three is the Advanced Edit, which entails an in-depth analysis of the document, correcting organizational flaws and drawing the author's attention to redundancies, inconsistencies, contradictions, and missing information.

Some editors also include a fourth level of editing—the Rewrite. The rewrite is the closest to an original composition. The ideas alone are the author's; it is the editor who voices them. Rewriting is reserved for documents that have either been written in very broken English or for documents that are grammatically correct but might need more eloquent expression. While there is a chance that the editor's own insights will be part of the document, the author is, of course, free to remove them.

The required level of edit usually depends on the quality of the original writing. If the document is written particularly badly, an editor cannot help but perform an advanced edit. Regardless of the level of editing, editors check the spacing, headers and footers, page margins, formatting, and other such seemingly tiny details that are critical in making up the difference between a finished document and a seemingly disorganized one.

Proofreading is often confused with editing, though the two are actually distinct processes. Proofreading is performed after the document has been edited (and

possibly reviewed) and just before it is finalized. It involves reading a printout of the final document and being on the alert for typographical errors. All content-related issues should have been resolved by this stage. The document is usually proofread by a person who has not been involved with the document in any way. This fresh perspective that comes from detachment makes it more likely that errors will be spotted.

If the editor is lucky, the author will be able to recognize and specify the appropriate level of edit. More often than not, however, editors are given vague instructions like "Make the English good" and are left to make a judgment call. How much change is acceptable? What vocabulary should be left untouched? Should British style be used or American? Is formatting required? Will this be published? Who are the likely readers? Editors often need to make significant inferences about the author's needs and sometimes have to strike a balance between "making the English good" and meeting those needs.

Editors vs. peer reviewers

Editors might know something about the subject of a document through personal knowledge or academic experience, but, in all probability, they will not know enough to be the sole source of advice on content. They can often point out content inconsistencies but cannot serve as subject matter experts.

However, as with all forms of communication, content is king. To ensure quality content, authors usually ask friends, academic supervisors, or research colleagues to conduct a peer review of their documents. This can lead to invaluable insights on content-related issues. Peer reviewers offer advice and fresh perspectives and can constructively criticize a text from a purely academic point of view. Peer review is thus an essential step in the process of publishing a scientific paper.

Once the facts and arguments are in place, presentation becomes the main concern. Working with a document that has been peer-reviewed makes things much easier for editors. They can now rest assured that the document is factually and scientifically accurate and that their primary role should be to perfect the language.

Shopping for an Editor

Shop online

Information, Communication, and Entertainment (ICE) are buzzwords of the 21st century. As geographical and national borders vanish in the new ICE age, our global village needs a global language. That language has come to be English. The need for editing services has arisen because though people might very much be citizens of the world, they all do not yet speak its language.

The internet revolution has made it possible to provide

editing services at the shortest notice and turnaround times. It is no longer unthinkable to get a document edited quickly by someone halfway across the globe. Outsourcing to faraway countries is often a source of concern for authors due to the invisibility of the editor. There is no physical establishment with which the editing company can be identified or even a face that can be put to a name. Yet, distance can in fact be made to work in the author's favor.

It is always daylight somewhere in the world. The author in need of an urgent edit can send his work to an editing firm that is in a time zone behind that of his own location. The author can then mail his document out to the editing company, request an urgent service, and wake up the next day to the sounds of "You've Got Mail!" and a quality-audited version of his work. People are slowly getting used to the idea of an ever-shrinking world. Having realized that the next country or continent is only as far away as the nearest computer, they are beginning to explore service options beyond their own backyards.

E-mail has made it possible for authors to constantly track the status of their document and communicate with editors for the smallest query. The fact that their document is with an editor no longer needs to be a cause for concern. The back-and-forth can bring immense psychological comfort to authors who can be sure that their editors can (and will) immediately contact them when clarifications are needed rather than making changes that they are less than sure of.

The editor of your dreams

Conventional wisdom states that getting the best out of any document only requires you to follow one simple rule: Find an expert. In reality, finding an editor whose background exactly matches your subject is rarely possible. Most often, these dream editors remain just dreams.

There aren't as many editors as the subjects one might write about, and finding an expert editor can be difficult if not impossible. But authors can take comfort in the fact that even non-specialist editors can point out content errors and irregularities because of the close attention they give a document. Highly dedicated editors compensate for their lack of knowledge of a subject by looking up facts and doing some investigation on their own, thus adding value to the document far beyond what is usually expected of a non-specialist.

Editing for every budget

Having found the best possible editors, it is important to ensure that they fit your budget. Information technology has made it possible to eliminate costs that might otherwise come in the way of global information exchange. A single research project can stretch on for years and can be a very expensive affair. It makes no sense for a researcher to spend vast sums of money on research and then cut corners

by eliminating the last stage, namely, getting the results professionally edited. But even more than passion, it is money that drives research, and researchers are held accountable for every expense incurred. To keep costs down, they must look for reasonably priced quality editing services that are on par with global standards. Such services are increasingly being offered from countries such as India, the Philippines, and Australia.

Value for money

Having gone through the painstaking process of finding a good editor who is also pocket-friendly, it is now up to the author to get the best out of the service. The easiest tests to study for are those in which you know what the examiner expects. Similarly, for editors, knowing who the audience for a document will be and what the author hopes to accomplish enables them to provide an edit that actually helps the author. The purpose of the document could range from use on a website or in print, to corporate presentations, seminars, and conference reports. Each kind of document has a different set of requirements pertaining to writing style, choice of vocabulary, level of editing, and formatting.

Knowledge of the audience will maximize the efficacy of editing. For example, material intended for use on a website needs to be crisply worded, while material meant for publishing in a journal can be elaborate. Speeches must be phrased with sufficient flair to grab and sustain attention. A paper that might hold a group of professors spellbound could completely bewilder a group of college seniors. A speech that native English speakers might consider eloquent could well be evaluated by a regional audience as bombastic or, worse still, incomprehensible. Editors who are informed along these parameters can tailor their work to suit the document in question. They can more easily make a judgment call on ‘controversial’ issues, thus minimizing or eliminating further work by the author.

Even the best editors can benefit from guidance. While most editors will do reasonably good jobs even without instructions, a little background can help their work go from reasonably to extremely good.

The Editage Story

Eureka!

English editing was the last thing on my mind when I visited a laboratory at the University of Tokyo to discuss the future of environment management around the world. Matsumura-sensei, my host, wanted me to edit his research papers for him. I agreed, and thus began a relationship that was a strange mix of the friendly and professional. This continued for some months and there were no complaints. I inferred from this that I was doing a reasonably good job though there was always the nagging doubt that my friend wasn't entirely satisfied with my work.

Over time, I learned the written and unwritten rules and ways of the academic world. The professor and his colleagues did not know of professional editors and were relying on makeshift editing solutions—friends, colleagues, associate professors from abroad, and even students and passing tourists. Obviously, this was not the best way to get published.

The professors, of course, often had considerable cause for complaint as far as the editing was concerned. There were two major issues—the fact that their documents were not ready in time and that the quality of edits often left much to be desired. The problem of delays arose from the fact that editing a particular document was rarely ever on the editors' list of priorities and was often repeatedly postponed. The professors were not in a position to insist on a quick delivery because it was a favor they were asking of someone. Problems with quality stemmed from the fact that when the document was at long last edited, it was usually squeezed into an already jam-packed schedule and done in a haste to get it out of the way. I recognized this because it was also true of my own situation. Make-do editors like me were neither sufficiently equipped nor qualified to edit the kind of scientific documents these professors produced. With the document being neither returned on time nor well-edited, it was the worst of both worlds.

In this situation, I saw the need for a professional establishment that would provide people with comprehensive editing solutions. It was to be a company that would work according to their demands and around their clock, actively seek their questions, comments, and suggestions, and above all, be unyieldingly committed to quality. This company was to be Editage.

But would anyone rely on an English editing company based in India, offering its services to authors in Japan? I believed they would. There was no question that the large and rapidly growing academic community in Japan would welcome an English editing service. My vision for Editage was of a company that would provide a cost-effective quality editing service.

Wanted—English editors

Quality, of course, had to come from our editors. Each of them was hand picked based on their performance on a series of editing tests. There were several applicants, most of whom had strong English skills. However, such skills were not our only concern. We were also looking for people with good general awareness, people who were familiar with research writing, people who were sensitive to cultural differences, and people with strong comprehension skills who could make intelligent inferences about what the authors were trying to convey even when the meaning was not perfectly clear. A tough combination to find. Building our team was a painstaking and time-consuming process to say the least. However,

once in place, our editors gave us the confidence to market our service.

Teething troubles

We were finally in business! Our infrastructure was established, but we were confronted with issues that had not been anticipated, primarily because we were at a great geographical distance from our clients and were initially unable to inspire a sense of security in them. Our clients were more inclined to trust less qualified people closer to home for the sole reason that they could communicate with such people face-to-face. They couldn't pick up the phone to perform a simple status-check on their document, and this made them a little more reluctant to trust us.

Today, however, we have a list of steady clients who assign regular editing tasks and refer new clients to us. The fact that we deliver before stipulated deadlines has helped cement this relationship of trust. After quality, time is a client's most important consideration. Experience has taught us that it is no longer enough to do a job well. It is also important to do it quickly.

Streamlining the process

The next step was to make it easier for our clients to work with us—in every way possible. We set up a hassle-free payment system in Japan. Our website now allows clients to submit documents online, provide special instructions to editors, maintain a record of past jobs, and event access payment-related information.

Ironing out our submission process was another major concern. We developed a submission form, which lets clients tell us their preferences and provide the most detailed of instructions, eliminating any room for confusion. Being prompted to think according to the categories present in the form helps clients better identify their needs and does away with vague requests like “Make the English good.”

We now have personalized client pages that provide our clients with concise information on their documents that are currently being edited. The web page carries all the information they could possibly need—details of job summaries, pricing and payment, deadlines, and so on. It also allows them to make payments online, provide information on preferences, send us feedback, and even track the status of their document.

English writing—do it yourself

Since we did not always have the luxury of a face-to-face or telephonic dialogue with our clients in moments of doubt, we came up with the concept of Editor's Notes. We began sending our clients notes from our editors for parts of the text for which we were uncertain about our changes—either because major changes were needed or because the meaning was unclear. We would provide

reasons for the confusion and offer various options to choose from, explaining the subtle differences in meaning across the options. This way, we could guard against unwarranted charges, and clients could be assured that we would bring doubts to their notice rather than rely on guesswork.

Over time, editors who were constantly working for specific clients started noticing trends in the kind of errors that were being made. Therefore, along with Editor's Notes, we began sending Editor's Tips. The tips are simple explanations of certain stylistic or grammatical changes made in the document and are a learning option for our client. The response to Editor's Notes and Tips was very encouraging. We were pleasantly surprised to find clients incorporating these learnings into their work and found a considerable improvement in the language in their subsequent work. Editor's Tips has evolved as such a distinct value-add that our clients actually look forward to them.

The tips are also tools that help personalize what can easily become a rather mechanistic process. Through them, clients can gradually recognize each editor's personal style and, for future jobs, can request help from the editor who they believe is most attuned to their needs. This premium service is free of charge, and it gradually helps the author to correct common errors and write better. Over time, a certain level of mutual understanding develops between editors and clients. It is a two-way learning process in which editors understand what their clients typically need and clients are not burdened with having to provide detailed instructions for each job. Editor's Notes and Tips have gone a long way in building trust and acceptance among our clients.

Futurama

The future is looking good for everyone. I am expecting and hoping for an increase in the awareness of and overall demand for editing services. This will come about only if the importance of editing is also impressed upon people who are fluent in English. Editing is not only for speakers of English as a second language.

From a client's perspective, there should be power of choice in every aspect of editing—its nature, extent, supplementary services like formatting, and of course, the deadline. The ability to choose effectively comes from experience and an understanding of what editing services can offer. We are constantly trying to help our clients make more informed decisions by helping them understand the different kinds of work we can do for their documents.

The response to our Editor's Tips is proof that editing does need to be educational. Our experience has taught us that most of our clients want more than just an edit; they want to actually improve their writing so that they can survive as writers if the option of an editing service is closed to them.

Providing clients with learning opportunities is like providing them with a whole new service—it's the ultimate value-add.

By that logic then, the best editing services are ironically those that help clients get to a stage where they don't need editing anymore! This is actually highly ambitious—as long as we human beings are fallible (and there's no danger of that changing), there will always be room for improvement. Picking up the pieces, filling in the blanks, catching you when you fall—choose your metaphor. The fact is that whichever way it is said, editing services exist to help us write right. It's our best shot at perfection.