



Corrigo

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Newsletter of the STC Technical Editing SIG

March 2001

Effective Onscreen Editing

Part four of a four-part series

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Identifying Additions and Deletions

One of the thornier problems in moving to online editing involves communicating your proposed changes to authors — and I use the words “communicating” and “proposed” advisedly. Few of us have the authority to simply impose changes; most of us must let authors review and perhaps reject our edits. Because whatever corrections you make on-screen will look just like the text the author originally typed (unless you somehow make the comments stand out), how do you identify where you’ve made a change? By making the appearance of what you type differ from that of what the author typed.

Whatever software you use for editing, you will be inserting new text into the file and deleting or modifying existing text. Word processors differ primarily in how the changes appear to the author, but there are two main situations you must deal with:

If you are using incompatible software, you must develop a notification scheme that will preserve your additions, revisions and comments so the author can see them after the files have been converted from one format to the other. If you are using compatible software (e.g., the same program or two programs that can reliably read each other’s formatting), you can use the built-in revision-tracking features in the software.

Partially or Wholly Incompatible Software

If you’re in the unfortunate situation of using different software from what the author is using, the file formats are rarely fully compatible. And that means that you can’t rely entirely on your software’s built-in revision-tracking features. (See the next section for details.) In the worst-case scenario, no formatting information will transfer, and you’ll have to enter your edits without any formatting whatsoever. This happens far less often than it used to, but the problem may still arise if (for example) you have clients who prepare most of their text in a text editor (e.g., programmers working in HTML or working with a UNIX shell account). If that’s the case, you’ll have to identify your edits using only the keys available on the keyboard.

A low-tech approach works just fine in many cases, though it’s more tedious to enter the edits and more time-consuming for the author to review and implement them. In this approach, you select a standard set of paired characters (such as < and > or ## and ##) and use them to bracket your comments and thereby separate them from the original text; your comments go directly between the paired characters. A typical result might resemble the example in Figure 1. If the two word processors are sufficiently compatible that you can change the color of the text

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“Corrigo” Editor’s Corner

The newsletter is almost a year old now and comments we have received indicate that we are publishing a very informative and educational newsletter. This is largely due to the fact that members have submitted articles relating to their experiences. The newsletter staff is hoping that we can repeat and improve the success of the newsletter this year but we are not sure if the newsletter will survive past this issue. The article bank is totally empty; we need your articles and we need them now!

The TE SIG website is now available and can be found at <http://www.stcsig.org/te/index.asp>. Some of the items you will find include information about the TE SIG, resources, and past and present issues of the newsletter. Rebecca Ideus is the Webmaster and we thank her for getting this valuable resource up and running.

The TE SIG Annual Business Meeting will be held Sunday, May 13, 2001 at 5:00 pm at the Hyatt Regency Chicago, East Tower, Skyway Room 268. Diane and I will both be there. Don’t forget the SIG Networking Luncheon will be held on Tuesday, May 15, 2001 at 12:15 to 2:00 pm..

Hope to see you in Chicago. — *John Jaillet*

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SIG Managers’ Column

The STC annual conference is more than excellent time to attend great workshops and meet your fellow technical communicators. It also offers two special opportunities to communicate your interests and contribute your insights to the Technical Editing SIG. At both the SIG business meeting and the SIG Networking Luncheon you can meet other SIG members as well as the SIG leadership.

We look forward to hearing from you about what you would like the SIG to provide and how we can make your membership in the SIG more valuable. You will find details about the meeting and the luncheon elsewhere in this issue. Please try to make room in your conference schedule to attend one or both of these sessions.

We look forward to meeting you! — *Diane Feldman*

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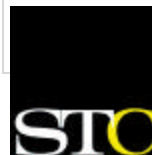
SUBMISSION

Articles and news items should be submitted to the editor two months prior to the month of March, June, September and December. E-mail files in a format Word 2000 can read or .pdf to john.jaillet@home.com.

If you want to become a member of the TE SIG, you can contact the society office at:

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SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

The Editor - More Than a Spell Checker

Deborah Moyal

*Technical Editor and Training Coordinator
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upgrade CAP development. Nortel Networks*

The following article is based on my experience editing procedural documents. Some of the information that I provide here might not apply to other types of documents, although most of it should.

As editors, our role is to do more than correct grammar and spelling. Considering that the minimum requirement to qualify as a technical writer is good knowledge of the written language, editors should not be seen solely as grammar and spell checkers. Our role is much broader and requires that we not only master the English language, but that we also understand the content of the documents that we are reviewing. If the content of a document is foreign to us, how can we provide any useful feedback to the writers?

As editors, we must ensure that the content of the document is logically presented and accurate. The fact that we are not the subject matter experts does not mean that we cannot detect discrepancies and potential errors in the documents that we review. More often than not, I have seen experienced writers and editors find content errors that were missed by the subject matter experts. If we review a document in detail and actually simulate the use of the document, we are able to spot potential errors in the document. The writers can then double-check these potential errors with the subject matter experts to determine if they are actual errors or not. By spotting these errors, we spare our customers frustration or even serious financial losses.

In addition to logic and content, we ensure that the document is complete which implies that it does not contain superfluous information. A usable document is one that contains all the information that the user needs and does not contain any information that the user does not need. The goal of our end-users is to perform a specific task as quickly and as efficiently as possible. They do not have the time to read our documents at leisure. Any superfluous information forces them to read more text than necessary and increases the possibility of confusion and errors. In addition, if the end-users frequently find superfluous information in our documents, they get into the habit of reading only what they think is necessary and skipping the rest. This can lead to costly errors when performing procedures where every single step must be performed to ensure successful completion.

To reduce the risk of confusion and errors, we must also ensure that the language used by the writers is as simple as possible and easy to understand. The fact that, for many of our end-users, English is not their first language means that our documents must be written in very simple language with short words and minimal, or no, variation, in our vocabulary. Although, this may sound dull to writers who like to write long complex sentences, technical writing is not the place for it.

To ensure that a document is easy to understand, we must also check that every sentence in the document is concise and clear. For conciseness a sentence must contain a single, clearly stated, action. For more clarity, sentences should be written in the active voice. The advantages are that the active voice assigns responsibility to the subject, reduces the number of words and, most important, provides a more direct statement. In a procedural document, this reduces the possibility of confusion as to who does what.

As editors, we are also the standards and conventions police. We ensure that all our end-user documents are consistent in their presentation and overall structure and that they respect departmental standards and conventions. Reinforcing standards allows us to improve the usability of our documents by making sure that, for example, a specific type of information always appears in the same font. This helps our end-users to quickly interpret the text that they are reading thereby saving time.

Finally, as editors, we also check for grammar, spelling, and punctuation. I am mentioning this last because I strongly believe that this is the least important role that we have. I agree that good grammar, correct spelling and punctuation are necessary to make our documents usable and reflect professionalism. However, the main purpose of a technical document is to provide end-users with the information that they need to perform a specific task in a timely manner. Therefore, the primary concern is for content, logic and clarity.

Our end-users might not even notice that a comma is missing in a sentence; however, they will notice if information is missing or if the wrong information is provided. When time is limited and error-free procedures are vital, spelling and punctuation become minor concerns.

Documentation that is error-free and complete is not an option for our end-users, it is a necessity. As editors, our responsibility is to ensure that our documentation provides our end-users with a level of quality that they have a right to expect.

you insert and the author's software translates the color information properly, you can instead enter your comments in a different color (e.g., red) to make them easier for the author to see. If several people will review the same document, you can include your initials inside the markers so the author will know whom to contact with questions.

Figure 1. Edits marked using only the keyboard.

This <replace "this" with "the"?> correct <missing word here: method?> of editing online will depend <delete "will" and change "depend" to "depends"?> on the author.

This approach leads to three common problems:

Don't use characters such as * or ? to surround your edits, because many word processors use these characters in the search-and-replace function to let you match patterns rather than exact words. As a result, the author would be unable to search for the characters you used to identify your comments.

Avoid using characters that could legitimately appear in the file itself (such as @ in an article on e-mail addresses), because doing so can complicate the task of separating your comments from the other uses of the special characters. If you've chosen appropriate characters, the author can use the software's search feature to locate every appearance of those characters and address the comments they enclose.

Comments entered in this manner can be easy to miss, and at the end of the production process, someone must do a final check to ensure that no comments have been left unaddressed and that no embarrassments remain behind in the file for your audience to discover.

As Figure 1 shows, embedding your edits in this manner can create sentences that are quite complex for the author to decipher, so it's particularly important to determine what types of changes you can make "silently" (i.e., without having to identify them for the author). For example, if you're certain that you're not erroneously correcting an accepted spelling, it's much more efficient for both you and the author if you simply correct the spelling errors and don't mark those changes. However, if you're unfamiliar with the subject matter, you risk changing words that should have been left as is. If you can contact the author, you should confirm that the proposed change is acceptable; once you've received confirmation, you can go ahead and make the changes. If you can't contact the author, insert a comment that explains the problem and proposes the solution (e.g., "Can we replace all

instances of 'utilize' with 'use'? That's less intimidating to our audience."'). It's not always wise to ask authors to make such changes, because an inexperienced author using a powerful search-and-replace function can do extensive damage to a file, and that damage may not be caught if (as is often the case when you're a freelance editor) you won't see the file again for a final check.

Longer comments and questions complicate the author's review process, because they take up lots of space and break the flow of the text. Worse yet, it's far too easy for authors to accidentally delete both your embedded comments and interspersed chunks of correct, unedited original text. Another solution might be to insert your edits in the form of footnotes, which generally transfer successfully between different word processors. Using a footnote for a long query works well, because the author can see the original problem text and your suggested revision simultaneously. The footnote usually appears in its own window, which authors can resize and reposition to suit their working style. However, if the manuscript already contains footnotes, you'll have to modify this approach so your comments don't disrupt the existing footnote scheme and your edits don't remain behind to become part of the footnotes in the final publication. (Although this problem rarely arises in most technical writing, it can be considerably more serious in fields such as academic editing.) In this case, the solution is to insert a small numbered marker, such as [#1], where the comment should appear and then type the comment in a separate file that you can provide to the author. You'll need to develop a review process that provides a final check to ensure that no comments are left behind; editing on paper is one such approach.

A final alternative is to simply make your corrections without indicating them. This approach works best with word processors that offer a "compare documents" feature, which examines the original and edited manuscripts and highlights the parts of the file that differ between the two (i.e., places where you made changes). Reviewing these differences lets the author see what you've done and provides an opportunity to confirm or reject your changes. This comparison can also provide a safety net for you and the author, because it can indicate where you've inadvertently deleted a large chunk of text or copied a large chunk twice through a careless copy-and-paste operation.

Compatible software

If you anticipate major editorial surgery on a manuscript, marking your changes as I've discussed in the

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previous section can prove prohibitively difficult. In that case, you should use compatible software, because this lets you insert comments using built-in revision-tracking tools designed specifically to improve your editing efficiency and the author's efficiency in reviewing and implementing your edits. Using the same software as your authors use makes the editing considerably easier than if you have to invent your own coding scheme, because you can go right ahead and edit. Modern word processors such as Microsoft Word let you extensively customize how your edits will appear on-screen (e.g., deletions could appear with a strikethrough or in green; additions could be underlined or in red). I learned to edit on paper, with the traditional red pen, so I use red text for insertions and red strikethrough to indicate deletions; a typical edit might look like the example in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Online editing using Microsoft Word's Track Changes function.

~~The This~~ correct method of editing online ~~will~~ depends on the author.

It's helpful to standardize the appearance of insertions and deletions so anyone who reviews your edits must learn only a single system; ideally, you should standardize all forms of editing so authors who aren't yet comfortable with reviewing edited manuscripts will have an easier time learning the system. Even so, there's always room for flexibility; for example, you could use different colors to identify different reviewers, with all other settings the same. Negotiate a solution that works best for you, any additional reviewers and your author.

If you're using revision tracking, many of the strategies and problems are the same as those that arise when you're editing with software that's incompatible with the author's software. For example, any repeated changes that you must make throughout a manuscript will clutter up the screen with countless changes that the author shouldn't have to approve. Rather than asking the author to approve each change from "colour" to "color" (Americanizing British text), ask for approval first, then turn off the revision-tracking feature and make the change. That way, the author can focus on more substantive changes.

This suggests a general rule: Wherever possible, perform strictly mechanical edits (such as removing double spaces and correcting spelling) before you turn on revision tracking. Your goal should be to edit in such a manner that the author must do as little work as possible to review and implement your corrections. For example:

Authors will find it easier to understand your corrections if any words that you insert appear before the deleted text they replace; with this approach, the sentence remains readable up to the point of the deletion, and the author never encounters deleted text without first encountering the replacement words that explain the deletion.

If you must change a sentence almost beyond recognition, insert the entire replacement sentence before the original sentence rather than forcing the author to sort through a maze of midsentence insertions and deletions to reconstruct the final sentence.

If you replace entire words or phrases rather than making several changes within them, your edits will be easier for the author to follow. Moreover, working this way has an additional benefit (Figure 3): The author can accept your replacement in two steps (one to accept the new, inserted text, and a second one to accept the deletion of the text you replaced). In contrast, if you make multiple changes within a single word or phrase, the author must approve each insertion and deletion individually, and this can dramatically increase the amount of work required to accept or reject your changes. Another bonus is that editors who can type quickly often find it faster and easier to retype an entire word or phrase than to move the cursor one letter at a time using the arrow keys to make a series of small corrections.

Figure 3. Sometimes it's easier for both the editor and the author if you replace entire words or phrases rather than fixing a series of errors one at a time. Compare the following two edits:

~~Theires weare~~ several errors in ~~trhjuasa~~ sentence.
There are several ~~Theirs were severl~~ errors in this ~~rjuasentence~~

Substantive Comments and Questions

Editing involves a lot more than simply adding and deleting words; sometimes you identify important substantive issues that the author must resolve. That means you'll have to insert comments such as "I'm not sure what you mean here. ... Do you mean ...?" and "Are you sure this number is correct? According to my physics text, the value should be ..." Substantive comments include questions and any other remarks that ask the author to make a decision: reorder the presentation, check facts, confirm that you've understood and reworded something correctly, or even add or delete whole paragraphs of information. You can also explain why you've made a change (e.g., "There's

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nothing particularly wrong with this word, but the preferred word is ...”), identify missing information (e.g., “A brief description of this item, perhaps even a photo, would help here.”), and indicate places where you’ve reorganized the flow of text (e.g., “House style is to place the Abstract before the Introduction.”).

As with additions and deletions, it’s generally more helpful to insert comments so they appear before what they refer to so the author knows what to focus on after reading your comment; in effect, you establish the context for the problem and your proposed solution before you ask the author to examine the original text. Depending on the software, inserted comments may be marked in the text as yellow Post-It™ notes, footnotes or labeled boxes (Figure 4); the comments themselves appear in a second window or in a popup of some sort when the author double-clicks on the note. It’s a matter of personal preference whether you close such windows and leave more onscreen room for the document itself or leave them open as you edit.

The last step in any online edit is to rigorously scan the file to confirm that you haven’t left any comments embedded in the text. In some cases, the missed comments represent important, unresolved issues; in all cases, it would be embarrassing if they appeared in print or in the final online document.

Figure 4. Inserted comments in Word 97.

This line contains an inserted comment. **Please rewrite this line; it repeats what you’ve already said in the text.**

It’s tremendously convenient to let authors cut and paste your suggested additions and corrections directly from the comments window into the main document window; among other things, this means that they won’t introduce new errors by retyping your text. That’s not to say they won’t introduce additional errors by pasting the text in the wrong place or forgetting to delete the text it’s supposed to replace, but there’s only so much you can do to reduce human error.

If you and the author agree to adopt this approach, make sure you understand how the software handles such insertions. For example, Word 97 uses a paragraph style called “Comment text” to format your comments. If this style doesn’t use the same typographic specifications as the text you’re editing, copying text from the comments and pasting it into the main document will introduce changes in the typeface or type size within the main document, and these may come back to haunt you later during layout and proofreading. For example, the typical default setup for

some software uses smaller or even different fonts for the comments; my default setup originally used 12-point Times Roman for the manuscript and 10-point Times Roman for the comments.

Editing tables composed of words or numbers poses little difficulty, because most word processors treat the tables as editable text. (Adobe’s PageMaker software is a notorious exception; authors or designers often create tables using Adobe’s Table software, which creates the tables as uneditable graphics.) Graphics pose more difficulties, because you can’t edit them directly unless you own the illustration software the author used to create the graphic. The most common solution involves inserting comments in the text, beside the figure or its caption, that explicitly state what corrections the graphic requires. In some cases, it’s simpler to print the graphic and annotate it by hand; in others, it may be worthwhile to use Adobe’s Acrobat and Acrobat Exchange to produce a .pdf file that you can annotate directly. In any event, work with the author to identify a solution that facilitates your work without making the author’s task unduly complicated.

Some Things Stay the Same

In moving from on-paper to online editing, the core competencies of being an editor remain the same, but the ways you apply the tools change. The advantages of online editing, including clearer communication and a more efficient way to implement revisions, nonetheless outweigh any drawbacks. This article should help improve the efficiency of your online editing and the author’s task of responding to and incorporating your revisions. But don’t let my recommendations become your final process. Experiment until you find out what works best for you and your authors — and what doesn’t work — and use some of my suggestions as the starting point for developing your own shortcuts and efficiency enhancers.

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I’d like to thank Andrea Balinson, Shoshanna Green, Jane Lyle and Linda Renshaw for their comments on an earlier version of this manuscript.

Resources

The “Technical Editor’s Eyrie” Web site (www.wrevenge.com.au/index.htm) is a useful resource run by Jean Weber. You can also get her book “Electronic Editing: Editing in the Computer Age” (www.wrevenge.com.au/bookshop/e-edit.htm) by downloading a .pdf version or ordering a printed copy. The book goes into the subject of online editing in far more detail than I can cover here.

Letter-Perfect Grammar Puns

By Richard Lederer

A consonant walks into a bar and sits down next to a vowel girl. "Hi!" he says. "I'll alphabet that you've never been here before."

Of cursive I have," she replies. "I come here, like, all the time. For me, it's parse for the course."

He consonant remains stationary, enveloped by the vowel girl's letter-perfect charm. His initial reaction is so pronounced that he tries to make small talk for the introductory phrase of his come-on: "Here's a cute joke," he states declaratively. "Up at the North Pole, St. Nicholas is the main Claus. His wife is a relative Claus. His children are dependent Clauses. Their Dutch uncle is a restrictive Claus. And Santa's elves are subordinate Clauses. As a group, they're all renoun Clauses."

Then he lays on some more dashes of humor. "Have you heard about the fellow who had half his digestive tract removed? He walked around with a semi-colon."

"Are you, like, prepositioning me?" asks the vowel girl.

"I won't be indirect. You are the object of my preposition. Your beauty phrase my nerves. Won't you come up to my place for a coordinating conjunction?"

"I don't want to be diacritical of you, but you're, like, such a boldfaced character!" replies the vowel girl. "Like, do I have to spell it out for you, or are you just plain comma-tose? You're not my type, if you get my point, so get off my case!"

Despite his past perfect, he is, at present, tense. Feeling a lot of stress, he worries he's going to bee [sic].

"Puhleeze, gag me with a spoonerism!" she objects, deleting an expletive. "As my Grammar and other cor-relatives used to say, your mind is in the guttural. I resent your umlautish behavior. You should know what the wages of syntax are. I nominative absolutely decline to conjugate with you fer sure!"

"You get high quotation marks for that one," he smiles, "even if I think you're being rather subjunctive and moody about all this. I so admire your figure of speech that I would like to predicate my life on yours." So he gets himself into an indicative mood and says, "It would be appreciated by me if you would be married to me."

"Are you being passive aggressive?" she asks interrogatively.

"No, I'm speaking in the active voice. Please don't have a vowel movement about this. I simile want to say to you, 'Metaphors be with you!' I would never want to change you and become a misplaced modifier. It's imperative that you understand that I'm very, very font of you and want us to spend infinitive together."

"That's quite a complement," she blushes -- and gives him appositive response.

At the ceremonies, they exchange wedding vowels about the compound subject of marriage. Finally, they say, "I do," which is actually the longest and most complex of sentences -- a run-on sentence, actually -- one that we all hope won't turn out to be a sentence fragment.

Then the minister diagrams that sentence and says, "I now pronouns you consonant and vowel." They kiss each other on the ellipses and whisper to each other, "I love you, noun forever."

Throughout their marriage, they avoid yeast inflections, their structure is perfectly parallel and their verbs never disagree with their subjects. After many a linking verve, comma splice and interjection, they conceive the perfect parent thesis. Then come some missing periods and powerful contractions, and into the world is born their beautiful little boy. They know it is a boy because of its dangling participle.

Ask The Editor - With Host Geoff Hart

Q: Are there any good online discussion resources for editors other than copyediting-1?

A: A colleague recently pointed me towards "EDline", a discussion group run by the "Electric Editors". I haven't had the time to monitor the group and form a personal opinion, but I've heard good things about this group over the years from colleagues whose opinions I respect. EDline deals with editorial matters, covering everything from spelling and hyphenation queries to business issues of relevance to freelancers. To subscribe Send a blank e-mail to ee_edline-subscribe@listbot.com or send an e-mail to ElectricEds@bigfoot.com with "Subscribe EDline" in the subject line.

As with all mailing lists, turn off your e-mail software's signature feature before sending the message.

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Writing for Audiences Who Are Non-Native English Speakers

Melanie G. Flanders

As technical communicators, many of us face the challenge of communicating effectively to a global audience. A multitude of issues accompany that global audience, including those of language, differences in culture and perspective, and ambiguity and confusion. When writing documentation for global audiences, the language must be clear, clean, and precise, whether or not the documentation will be translated.

The biggest stumbling block for non-native speakers who try to read an English document for comprehension or for translation is poorly constructed writing. A native speaker can often wade through a piece of poor writing and hazard a guess at its intent, but the non-native speaker is often unfamiliar with the idioms, nonstandard usage of words, or strings of words that do not form a recognizable grammatical structure.

Because so many people in technology-related fields speak some amount of English, it has become somewhat of a universal language. Many customers prefer to receive documentation in English because it's easier to understand. Translators often are not technically trained and are not fluent in the nuances of English. Sometimes there are inherent difficulties in translation; for example, when translating to German, the size of the documentation usually doubles. In fact, most languages require 30% more space than English does to say the same message.

Although much of the global audience is accustomed to seeing American English spellings, many non-native speakers of English, especially those in Europe, Africa, and Asia, have learned British English. This means that we need to mind our vocabulary and try to use terms that are not specific to one version of English. For example, we Americans often say check the box when we want someone to make a (check) mark in a box. The British instruct you to tick the box. If you write mark the box, it communicates to all. In both versions of English, check the box could also be an instruction to look into a box and verify that something is or isn't there. American technical writers need to "recognize that American English can be highly idiomatic and therefore potentially confusing in a wider, international context..." (Weiss 421.)

We need to make ourselves aware of the differences between American and British English—not just the spelling variations, but the usage, as well. The American watch your step is mind the gap to British speakers. It's hard to imagine someone who is unfamiliar

with English interpreting these phrases to have the same meaning!

When designing a documentation project, you should consider how global your audience will be. No one is expected to know every potential cultural issue that could arise, but if you know that your target audience is Japanese or Arabic, for example, it would be well worth the time and money spent to research or hire a consultant who is familiar with those cultures to determine whether there are any issues. A software interface could contain icons that are potentially insulting to other cultures. The Japanese will typically translate manuals, and some amusing results can occur when the English source document is poorly written.

When writing for global audiences, concentrate on the principles of good writing. Avoid ambiguity and confusion. Other linguistic features to avoid because they hamper clarity in both comprehension and translation include idioms, acronyms, ambiguous antecedents, the deleted conjunction or relative pronoun "that" (stet that that!), shifts in person, inconsistent use of words (verb in one place and noun in another), use of too many synonyms, adjective phrases -- especially stacked noun-adjective phrases, and gerunds

In my experience, I have learned that many of my non-native English-speaking customers are better grammarians than the average American reader and are quick to point out errors. The primary request is that we be consistent in our presentation and that we define our terms.

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Political correctness for the “naughty aughties”

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“Political correctness is an oxymoron”—Jean-Marie Golsse

Even as we’re moving through the first decade of our new millennium, the “naughty aughties” as some wags have dubbed it,¹ we’re still dragging along plenty of baggage² from the last century. For example, inadvertently using offensive or politically incorrect words remains one of those things that wakes editors, screaming, in the middle of the night. (Other things that wake editors include new releases of Microsoft Word, deadlines, documentation reviews by the Marketing department, and subject-matter experts. Come to think of it, all things considered, it’s a wonder that any of us get a sound night’s sleep.)

Wouldn’t it be nice if we had a convenient list of “dirty” words we could refer to to save us from the perils of carelessly offending some major component of our audience? The good news is that such a word list exists. The bad news? It’s called a “dictionary.” Unfortunately for those of us who still care about such things, a skilled writer can use just about any word offensively with a little skill. Sometimes all it takes is an appropriate adjective. For example: “That Geoff—he’s such a @#%&! editor!” Conversely, words and phrases routinely used to cause offense are easily subverted and turned to perfectly acceptable uses: calling your male puppy a perfect son of a bitch is both complimentary and technically correct.

George Carlin became briefly famous for his stand-up routine on the seven dirty words you can’t use on television; he observed, for example, that nobody would object to someone “pricking their finger,” but inadvertently reversing that innocent phrase in public will get you tarred and feathered in most civilized countries. Speaking of which, language that’s perfectly acceptable at home can get you smirks—if not worse—if you try it abroad. With the Sydney Olympics a recent memory, you have to wonder how many North Americans spent a night in the lockup after innocently inciting their friends to root³ for the home team. It’s a good thing the Australians have a robust collective sense of humor.

1. “Aught” derives from “naught” (zero), thus 2001 expressed as ‘01 becomes “aught one.”
2. The luggage variety, not female dependents.
3. Rooting is only legal for adults who have reached the age of consent and even then, not in public. No wonder Australians develop a good sense of humor.

So what’s an editor to do? John Paul Jones once observed that “a gentleman never unintentionally gives offense,” and we all strive to be gentlemen—unless we’re female, of course. Which leads me, inevitably enough, to the merits of gender political correctness. In Quebec, we commonly refer to a girlfriend as “ma blonde,”⁴ but using such wording in English will earn you (if you’re lucky, and receive no worse punishment) a visit from the PC police. The problem isn’t the inevitable flurry of “dumb blond” jokes that ensues, but rather the objectification of women by making their hair color their most important characteristic. Most of my blond friends, male and female alike, have been known to occasionally apologize for having a “blond moment,” but doing so follows the general rule of thumb that you’re a wit if you mock yourself or your ethnic group, but a bigot or fool if you mock anyone else.

Offense occasionally attains the force of legislation. For instance, the Americans with Disabilities Act avoids the inoffensive word “handicap” (having more difficulty in doing something⁵) because the word was used pejoratively for so long. But a vocal minority of nominally “disabled” folk quite correctly point out that “they’re still able” and that calling them “disabled” perpetuates the problem by drawing attention to the handicaps rather than the person. So as an editor, should you fight to uphold the voice of reason, and defend the dictionary definition, or should you cave in to political correctness and go with the legal definition?

So what’s a sensitive, well-informed technical communicator to do? You’re going to offend someone no matter what you choose to do. That being the case, speak your truths plainly, with head held high, and let the objections fall whither they may. Then, should anyone accuse you of giving offense, relax and ignore them, secure in the knowledge that you’re among the illuminati who use words the way Webster intended them to be used. As Will Shakespeare once remarked, the criticisms of those with unduly thin skins are undoubtedly “a tale told by an idiot,⁶ full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

4. “My pet blond,” sort of.
5. If you don’t believe me, consult a dictionary. Any dictionary. And don’t stop to read the dirty words while you’re doing so; you might inadvertently use one of them in future edits.
6. Skillful use of literary references, particularly ones created by “dead white males,” are always acceptable defenses. Always defuse accusations of political incorrectness—in this case, insensitivity to the needs of idiots—by using the “artistic merit” defense.

Upcoming STC Events

STC 48TH Annual Conference

Planning to attend STC's 48th Annual Conference, May 13-16 in Chicago? If you did not receive a Preliminary Program, you may access information about the conference on the STC Web site at www.stc.org. On the main page, select "Conferences" for general conference information. From there, you can access registration information and deadlines by selecting "To Do" list. This site features the most recent, updated conference information.

We look forward to seeing you in Chicago!

Conference Editing "Streams"

Monday

WE 2Q The Editing Workout: Trimming, Toning, and Tweaking.

Tuesday

WE 6B Editing in a Single-Source Environment.

WE 6M Building Telecommuting Writer/Editor Relationships.

WE 7J Editing Progression

WE 7P Establishing a Style Committee and Implementing its Decisions.

WE 7V When Pedantic Prose Meets Pragmatic Products: Lessons from the Field.

WE 8P Editing On-Screen: Tools, Techniques, and Tips.

Wednesday

WE 9R Disaster Recovery: Documentation Triage for Last-Minute Emergencies.

WE 10R Managing the Company Newsletter

WE 10T Sentence Diagramming for Fun and Profit.

Kudos

"I just wanted to say how much I appreciate Corrigo. The articles are well written (and edited!) and have helped me in my job as Technical Documentation Supervisor. Thanks for your time and effort." - *Dorothy Vanderford*

"Many thanks for this delightful newsletter." - *Catherine Hamilton, Technical Editor, IBM Canada*

WE 10W The Devil Is in the Details: or How to Make a So-So Newsletter a Great Newsletter.

WE 11P Peer Editing Techniques, or What to Do When Your Editor Quits.

WE 11U Using the New Levels of Editing for Technical Documents.

Post Conference

PC 15 Technical Editing: Objectives and Procedures.

Managing Documentation with Humor and Grace

STC will hold a telephone seminar on "Managing Documentation with Humor and Grace," April 18, 2001, 1 - 2:30 PM. Doreen A. Mannion will present the seminar; she is an award-winning author, manager for the management and professional development stem of STC's upcoming annual conference, and has worked as a stand-up comedienne.

For details, including an explanation of how telephone seminars work, please visit www.stc-va.org/managingdoc.html. For information about STC, please visit www.stc-va.org or call (703) 522-4114.

11th Annual STC Region 6 Conference

The 11th Annual STC Region 6 Conference will be held September 30 - October 2, 2001 at the Hilton North in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The conference theme is "Channels of Communication: Sharing the Knowledge;" The conference will focus upon how technical communicators efficiently manage large amounts of information from diverse sources and then synthesize and deliver that information to meet user needs. For more information, please contact:

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