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## THE VALUE OF EDITING

The original title of this book was “How to Edit”—but the word “editing” covers a lot of ground. This book is not just about changing the words on the page. It is a guide for how best to frame the collaborative effort between two people—or between your creative mind and your critical mind—that is undertaken with one simple goal: to make a writer’s work as good as it can possibly be.

There is an important difference between editing—sometimes called big-picture editing, content editing or development editing—and copyediting. The overlap between them is known as line editing. A copyeditor corrects spelling and punctuation, points out repetition, tautology, wordiness or lack of clarity and suggests alternatives, and fact-checks proper names and anything that looks dubious. Line editing improves the writer’s prose style and storytelling, which may involve some rewriting and perhaps moving portions of text; it requires good literary judgment, but basic competency can, like copyediting, be taught. Big-picture editing is exactly what it sounds like: assessing the impact of the book as a whole on the reader, looking for weaknesses and absences (usually very hard to spot) as well as strengths that might be strengthened further.

When the editorial collaboration works at its best, ideas emerge which neither writer nor editor would have come up with on their own. Often it becomes impossible to distinguish which idea was whose.

Editing is an art as well as a skill. It requires sensitivity to both words and narrative, a sense of rhythm in language and storytelling, good general knowledge, the ability to connect emotionally and/or intellectually with the material and, most importantly, the ability to imagine the potential that a written work might achieve. Editing is also personal; what one person loves about a book, a story, a screenplay or a marketing brochure, another may hate. This is why it's so hard to teach, and why publishing courses tend not to try.

The best way to develop your judgment is to read lots of good books, magazine articles, screenplays, grant proposals or annual reports, and ask yourself why the good ones are better than the not-so-good ones. Your judgment will get stronger with experience. This book will help you along the way, by guiding you in what to look for in written work of various kinds.

All good editors follow a few common principles. Whether the writer-editor relationship is an inner dialogue or a collaboration, the same principles apply. This book elucidates those principles, which are based on what I consider to be the two basic rules of how to work with a writer, regardless of the format or subject matter, so as to get the best result from the collaboration.

**Why have an editor at all?** If you're working in a business context, on commission for a magazine or news source, or with a professional publishing house, editorial input is a given. If you are self-publishing, you have the choice to skip this step—as many ill-advised writers do.

Be honest with yourself, and remember that it's hard to be objective about your own work. If you really think there's no room for improvement, fine—get your work printed up and send it out into the world. But before you invest that time and money, why not make sure that it's as good as you can possibly make it?

If you're hoping to be published by a professional house or in a magazine, either printed or online, you will need to impress the agents and editors who are gatekeepers to publication. It's a competitive world out there, and you will only have one chance at each person. Usually they have far more work than the time they've got to do it in, and reading the work of writers who aren't already on their list is a low priority. They're looking for a reason to stop reading. It's foolish to waste precious opportunities with untested work.

How do you test your work in advance? By asking people whose judgment you trust to read it. And how do you identify those people? They like the books and movies you like and can discuss them intelligently, or perhaps they've impressed you with their knowledge of the subject you're writing about. And they don't bulldoze their opinions through the middle of a discussion. In other words, they have tact as well as judgment.

If you are already in an editorial job, or have been asked to read a writer's work, you can assume that your tact and judgment are valued. Congratulations! You are well on your way to being one of the most valuable assets a writer can have.

**Not all writers want to be edited.** Even writers who understand the value of the process may dread it, or approach it with trepidation. As a general rule, the more professional the writer, the more amenable they are to editing—but the more impatient they are with bad editing.

Writing is an undertaking that requires courage. When you face a blank screen or page and put words on it, you're creating something out of nothing. Usually, at least to begin with, it's a pale reflection of what you've imagined. Ann Patchett describes the idea of a novel as a shimmering butterfly and the written work as the butterfly pinned down: less vibrant and less beautiful. For her, as for many writers, the finished work carries a whiff of disappointment: it may be as good as we can make it, but it's never quite as wonderful as it was before it was pinned to the page.

There's something about writing that brings out a feeling of vulnerability in almost everyone. Because we know how to form letters and employ the basic rules of grammar, we feel that it ought to be straightforward to express our thoughts in words. When a reader doesn't find in those words what we hoped we'd put into them, we feel frustrated and inadequate. It's very hard not to take criticism personally.

Bad editorial technique—which emphasizes what's wrong rather than what's strong or might be strengthened—puts the writer on the defensive, which is counter-productive in many ways. Feeling criticized makes a writer hang onto what they've already written, or it makes them lose confidence in their work or their abilities, or it

makes them abandon their imaginative connection with the project and turn out a hack job.

Imagination only comes out to play when it feels safe.

**This book was written** for anyone who will be reading written work with the goal of improving it. Perhaps you are:

■ **A writer**

Reading over your own work can be scary. Approaching the revision process with the techniques of a good editor—in which weaknesses are seen as opportunities for exploration and expansion—defangs the inner critic. You will also be giving your work to early readers for feedback, and you'll get the best results if you follow the guidelines set out in this book. Give it or lend it to your readers before they start reading.

■ **A fellow writer in a writing group or course**

You will be reading and critiquing the work of other writers, and they will be reading and critiquing yours. You can help one another enormously—or cause one another a lot of anguish. Many writers lose belief in themselves under a barrage of friendly fire. You don't want to be on either end of that kind of feedback.

■ **A friend or family member of a writer**

I will refer to you as an informal reader, since you

are not yourself a writer or editor or aspiring to be one. Your reaction is extremely valuable, as it gives the writer a sense of how an “ordinary” reader might respond. But reading the creative work of someone you know can be extremely stressful. The techniques and advice laid out in this book will help you establish easy communication, and maybe even transform a minefield into an enjoyable experience and a great gift. You will find additional advice specifically for you beginning on p. 83.

#### ■ **A professional editor**

You’ll pick up many—though maybe not all—of these skills as you go along, most likely by a sometimes painful process of trial and error. But why subject your authors to your learning process? You may figure out my two basic rules for yourself, though many editors do not, and as a result either the work suffers, or the author suffers, or both. Get a few authors together with a bottle of wine and you’ll hear plenty of editor horror stories.

#### ■ **A film/TV executive**

You have a property and you’ve hired a writer to adapt it. Or perhaps it’s an original screenplay with potential but it’s not there yet. How can you get the best out of your writer, while also fielding the demands of other team members?



■ **A business or nonprofit executive**

All businesses generate documents for both internal and external use: grant proposals, annual reports, marketing communications and so on. It's someone else's job to write this material, and your job to oversee and sign off on it. The principles in this book will give you tools to make those documents more effective.

## **Other kinds of editors**

*The editor-in-chief of a magazine* is more like a curator or a battlefield commander. They set the overall direction, generate ideas, catalyze other people's creativity, lead a team. They may directly edit the work of some contributors or they may leave that task to department editors.

*A senior editor at a publishing house* acquires books to publish, negotiates with agents and coordinates the packaging and marketing of the book. If they have the time and the inclination they may work with an author on the text, but it's not actually integral to the job. If a book requires heavy editing, it will usually be sent out to a freelancer.

*A film/video editor* pieces together the footage that's been shot so as best to tell the story. Film/video editing utilizes many of the same skills as editing written material, but rarely does an editor working with the written word come in at as early a stage as

a film editor does. In the film and TV world, the person filling the editorial role that I describe in this book is the producer or development executive, not the editor.

**Most professional editors learn by doing**, in a kind of apprenticeship. You begin as an editor's assistant. If you're lucky, that editor is good at what they do, able to articulate the principles by which they're working and willing to pass on their knowledge. More often they're working by what's become instinct, so they're unable to teach—and you're left to figure it out for yourself. When I started in publishing, I rummaged through the files to find editorial notes by more experienced editors. I found a copy of notes which an editor had sent to the highly respected British novelist Angela Carter, pointing out repetitions or awkward bits of phrasing and asking, "Are you happy with this?" I saw that authors responded best when they were addressed with questions rather than critical comments. In other words, with respect.

Respect means: this is not about you. This is the writer's work. Their job is to write. Your job is to reflect, query, suggest, brainstorm, focus, clarify and inspire. Not to write.

If you're editing your own work, stay in that mindset. Give your creative mind space to digest the responses of your critical mind. Let the rewriting come later.

A good editor stays out of the writer's way. That doesn't mean you're not important, even vital—but in the end it's the writer running the race, with you coaching