

► TALKING WITH ...

Wendalyn Nichols

The new editor of *Copy Editor*

In mid-February I opened an e-mail from my friend Charles Harrington Elster. Barbara Wallraff was about to resign from the editorship of *Copy Editor*, and she'd asked him if he could recommend a replacement. Would I be interested? I was (was I ever!), and now here I am, begging your indulgence as I use this column to introduce myself.

It took me quite a while to decide how to approach this introduction. I didn't want to start off with a list of my credentials—it'd be hard to

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THE QUIZ

How many mistakes does the following paragraph contain?

When Samantha's husband Jimmy showed up two hours late for a 12 noon lunch date, Samantha began angrily to shout. Jimmy tried to explain that he had been bitten by a poisonous snake while collecting a bouquet of wild flowers for Samantha. Samantha only calmed down when Jimmy showed her the emergency room receipt, the empty antivenom vile and the withered flowers.

See page 5 for the answer.

Copy Editor

► IN DEPTH

The care and handling of authors and editors

by Judith West

In the last issue of *Copy Editor*, Sarah Schmelling wrote in this column about the sometimes embattled relations between copy editors and other editors, particularly when all are members of an editorial team. In this issue, Judith West offers more advice about handling a notoriously sticky relationship triangle: that between the copy editor, the editor, and the author.

CAUTION
AUTHORIZED
PERSONNEL ONLY

For years, veteran editor and *Copy Editor* board member Anita Wolff has kept a comment from an author pinned to her office wall: "The insight of the editor in charge is perfectly exemplified by his pedantic, uninspired, unintelligent, uneducated, and unjustified change from 'since' to 'because.'" The writer's outrage reminds Wolff how complex and delicate the relationship between copy editor and author is.

Then there's the editor, the gatekeeper between the author and you—the person whose favorite proofreading mark is *stet*, or so we'd swear. Some of us consider every relationship of the triangle—copy editor–editor, editor–author, author–copy editor—to be inherently adversarial. And few of us receive training that broaches the subject of these relationships in any systematic way, if at all.

So how should a copy editor deal with the interpersonal dynamics of copyediting an author's beloved prose? *Copy Editor* put this question to several seasoned writers and copy editors who've mastered the art of establishing and maintaining good working relationships. The following pointers, gleaned from these professionals' answers, are ones you might want to tack onto your own office wall.

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In Style

An historical discussion

► TK

In the June–July issue:

Norm Goldstein gives us an inside look at the changes to *The Associated Press Stylebook* for 2005.

by Allan Reeder

An enormity of errors

The South Asian tsunami of last December wreaked havoc in an untold number of communities in several countries. It also, according to a journalism student at the University of Texas at Austin, exposed a tragic misunderstanding of the difference between *enormity* and *enormousness*. “These are the times that try men’s grammar,” wrote Clint Rainey, leading off his article in *The Daily Texan* (“Errors Abound in Tsunami’s Wake”). Rainey explained that *enormity* “refers to something ‘morally reprehensible’ or ‘morally evil,’” while *enormousness* is “much more innocuous; it simply means ‘huge’ or ‘very great in size.’”

Rainey performed a search for the words *tsunami* and *enormity* in articles on CNN’s Web site; of the nine pairings returned, only one demonstrated the proper use of *enormity*. When he searched for *enormousness* with *tsunami*, he came up empty-handed, and specu-

lated that speakers and writers tend to avoid *enormousness* “because it seems fictitious—like ‘irregardless,’ the impostor spawn of ‘regardless.’”

In his *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, H. W. Fowler admitted that *enormousness* “is not a pretty word.” But it is a word—and one whose distinct meaning is sometimes vitally important. A *USA Today* article from March 2 described a ceremony at the U.S. Capitol posthumously honoring Brooklyn Dodger Jackie Robinson for his courage in breaking professional baseball’s racial barrier. Writer Kathy Kiely paraphrased remarks by Tommy Lasorda, a former manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers: “Lasorda said players on today’s segregated baseball teams don’t appreciate the enormity of what Robinson did by becoming the first African American to play in the majors.”

A hunt for the right word

On the same day that *USA Today* committed the above enormity, Dave Sher-

wood, a writer for the *Kennebec Journal* in Augusta, Maine, presented a story about his own deliberations over the mot juste. In an article he had written about a Maine moose hunt during his debut week on staff, he had described the first day’s moose tally as a *harvest*, not a *kill*. Promptly arrived an e-mail from a local English professor. “Forgive a small rant ... on the matter of word choice,” the professor wrote. “Moose and other wild creatures are not ... agricultural products, made deliberately for our purposes. We hunt moose and the others, we kill them, not always for food or with noble motives.”

Sherwood had followed the usage of the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, which refers to a hunt’s yield as a *harvest*. Furthermore, he felt he would be “doing the sport an injustice by referring to the hunt as mere ‘killing’”—as he informed his new correspondent. The professor’s second missive reemphasized the writer’s responsibility to accuracy: “The word ‘harvest,’ in connection with hunting and shooting deer and bear[,] is the wrong word because it is a misleading word. ... [I]t makes the deer and bear just another crop.”

The professor’s point sent *Copy Editor* to *The American Heritage Dictionary*,

CURRENTS

Too possessive?

by Linda Lowenthal

This past February the Minnesota *Star Tribune* reported a heated debate over a new architectural feature at the University of Minnesota: should it be called the Scholars Walk or the Scholars’ Walk?

“We’re honoring Nobel laureates and Pulitzer Prize winners and Academy Award winners and great scholars,” one partisan told the paper. “It’s their walk, in a sense ... I just thought it was a good use of the apostrophe.” Another disagreed: “The Scholars Walk honors the scholars; it doesn’t belong to the scholars. It’s not possessive.” Dozens of readers weighed in.

Who was right? Let’s get one thing out of the way: it makes no difference whether the walk belongs to the scholars.

That notion greatly oversimplifies the role of the possessive, or genitive, case. Everyone agrees, after all, that writing “my brother’s friend” does not accuse my brother of slave trafficking.

But that’s as far as the agreement goes. It’s true that many similar proper nouns are written without an apostrophe—*Citizens Bank*, *Publishers Weekly*—and some authorities consider such constructions correct. *The Associated Press Stylebook*, for one: “Do not add an apostrophe to a word ending in *s* when it is used primarily in a descriptive sense: *citizens band radio*, *a Cincinnati Reds infielder*, *a teachers college*, *a Teamsters request*, *a writers guide*. Memory Aid: the apostrophe usually is not used if *for* or *by* rather than *of* would be appropriate in the longer form.” Amy Einsohn offers similar advice in *The Copyeditor’s Handbook*. And the 14th edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style* accepted constructions such as *carpenters union*

and *environmentalists association* on the grounds that “this might just as properly be said to constitute an attributive rather than a possessive use of nouns” (that is, the plural noun functions as an adjective).

The question is whether all these words *are* being used in an attributive role. Asking whether *of*, *for*, or *by* best expresses the relationship between the nouns is not that useful in practice, these flexible little words being so subject to the vagaries of idiom. True, it’s a union *for* carpenters and a guide *for* writers. But it’s an association *of* environmentalists at least as much as one *for* them. An *enemies list* is definitely a list *of* enemies. *Arms control* is control *of* arms, though an *arms race* is a race *for* them. And a *blues guitarist* is ... see how this system breaks down?

What’s more, as a columnist for this newsletter has pointed out (see Q&A, April–May 1999), the “for” relationship itself can describe a type of genitive—the

Fourth Edition. The definition for ‘harvest’ used as a transitive verb offers support for Sherwood’s word choice: “1a. To gather (a crop). b. To take or kill (fish or deer, for example) for food, sport, or population control.” But Sherwood’s argument ultimately did not depend on a dictionary definition.

“When you read any newspaper column, you do it through the writer’s eyes,” he wrote. “A writer born and raised in New York City would write from a very different perspective than one brought up on the North Slope of Alaska, for example.” Sherwood accepted that *harvest* was not the best word, but “I couldn’t bring myself to simply write ‘kill.’ It’s not that I’m trying to hide the gory details from readers who might be more sensitive. Rather, it’s that I don’t want people who don’t hunt to misunderstand. . . . I’ve killed a deer in a car collision. But there’s so much more to a hunt.”

One who always knew the right word

On February 15, the obituary page of *The New York Times* carried news that Eleanor Gould Packard, who as *The New Yorker’s* “grammarian” had scrutinized and scrubbed the nonfiction pieces in

“genitive of purpose,” as Bergen and Cornelia Evans call it in *A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage*, which is seen in *women’s college*, *boys’ team*, and *copy editor’s handbook*.

Admittedly, it can be hard to tell whether some words are attributive nouns or genitives of purpose. But a plural noun is not likely to be used in an attributive sense unless it has no equivalent singular form (as in *blues guitarist* or *electronics engineer*) or is a proper noun (as in *a Cincinnati Reds infielder*). As Steven Pinker explains in *Words and Rules*, plurals resist forming compounds in most circumstances—that’s why we brush our *teeth* with a *toothbrush*—and regular plurals resist it even more.

The difference is clearer if you compare *women doctors* and *women’s doctors*; in fact, *The Gregg Reference Manual* advises writers to “try substituting an irregular plural like *women*” when deciding wheth-

the magazine for more than half a century, had died. The next issue of *The New Yorker* included a tribute to “Miss Gould,” as she was called, by the editor, David Remnick. “Her effect on a piece of writing could be like that of a master tailor on a suit; what had once seemed slovenly and overwrought was suddenly trig and handsome,” Remnick wrote. “The wearer stood taller in his shoes.”

Miss Gould never missed a day of work after she joined the magazine’s staff in 1945. A woman who would pass time by factoring four-digit numbers, she “shaped the language of the magazine,” Remnick explained, “always striving for

er to use an apostrophe. To Einsohn and the AP, the impossibility of saying *women college* or *men club* is presumably just another aspect of these plurals’ irregularity. But Theodore M. Bernstein, in *The Careful Writer*, feels that such examples reveal forms like *boys club* to be “not logical.” As for *Chicago*, the 15th edition reverses the position of the 14th, specifying *a consumers’ group*, *taxpayers’ associations*, and the like.

Of course, the *Scholars[?] Walk* isn’t for scholars the way a *women’s college* is for women. It’s for the rest of us, who are supposed to honor the scholars. In that sense it’s more comparable to Veterans Day or . . . Presidents’ Day. Maybe the veterans, presidents, and scholars should get together and hammer this out—or maybe they should leave it to the copy editors. What do you think? To vote, come visit the Subscribers Only section of www.copyeditor.com by April 18. Comments explaining

LETTERS

I usually miss a few of the intended mistakes in the Copy Editor quiz, but this time [in the February–March 2005 issue] I think you may have missed one. I’m pretty sure that for Mary’s business to become three times as profitable, she would have to do better than tripling her sales (\$1,200 to \$3,600). In most businesses, any increase in sales involves some increase in expenses. Pet sitting is probably a low-expense business, but at the very least we know that during this

time period Mary started advertising on the radio, so a one-to-one correspondence between sales and profits seems unlikely. Don’t you think?

Robin Dreyer
Communications Director
Penland School of Crafts
Penland, NC

Yes, Robin, we do think so. Several readers wrote to point out this oversight.

a kind of Euclidean clarity—transparent, precise, muscular. It was an ideal that seemed to have not only syntactical but moral dimensions.”

Indeed, judging from the responses to her death by writers and readers alike, the effect of her unmatched precision extended far beyond the efficacy and efficiency achieved by accurate expression. “No mere proofreader or pedant,” wrote a reader of the *Times* in a letter to the editor published February 21, “Eleanor Gould Packard . . . upheld standards and imposed discipline, which in turn taught discipline in one’s thought, and ultimately in one’s actions as well.” ■

and elaborating on your views will be gratefully received—and possibly published.

Editor’s note: *This topic was also discussed in the Hot Button column of Copy Editor in October 1993.*

In February and March, *Copy Editor* asked what you would be most likely to do with the sentence *He is the best hitter of any American League shortstop*.

Three-fourths of respondents were unhappy with the *best . . . of any* construction, but they didn’t agree on what to do about it. Of all those who answered, 36 percent would change the sentence to “He is a better hitter than any other American League shortstop,” 24 percent preferred “He is the best hitter of all American League shortstops,” and 16 percent would edit the sentence some other way. The option of trading the shortstop for Nomar Garciaparra was not offered.



ASK COPY EDITOR

by Wendalyn Nichols

Barbara Wallraff's farewell note begins this column.

If you sent me e-mail in the past few months, I'm sorry to say I probably didn't reply. You may have thought I was falling down on the job—and that's the conclusion I've come to as well. I've been overcommitted for some time now, and the deadline for my third book is looming. I hope you will see my byline in *Copy Editor* in the future; I'm looking forward to writing for this newsletter—for you—as often as I can. But it is time to turn *Copy Editor* over to a new editor—to someone who has a fresh perspective and fresh enthusiasm but who also shares my abiding love for the written language.

I'm very pleased to introduce Wendalyn Nichols as my successor. Wendi has a wealth of experience that will stand her in good stead at *Copy Editor*. Please bid Wendi welcome and ask her your language questions at wendalynn@mcmurry.com.

—Barbara Wallraff

I hope you can help me with a question about a proposed headline:

Prepare your child for school success

A colleague says it must be changed thus:

Prepare your child for success in school

I think "school success" seems a correct alternative for "success in school." If I'm wrong, then I would say it falls under creative license for advertising, and everyone understands what is meant.

What's your opinion, please?

Christine LaFortune

Knowledge Learning Corporation

I'm with you. While I wish advertisers would draw the line at outright violations of grammar (two-thirds less carbs, anyone?), you're asking about a style point rather than a grammatical error. Your colleague's suggestion very likely arises from a piece of general advice that

English teachers often give: avoid using a noun attributively (as an adjective before a noun) because the resulting compound can be ambiguous. In his *Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, Bryan Garner gives *invalid statute* as an example of such a compound.

In English, of course, we make compounds this way all the time, from *school bus* and *school lunch* to *school play* and *school sports*. In the real world, we depend on context to help us determine meanings: everyone knows that a *school crossing* is not a place where a school crosses the street, even though the more exact phrase would be "crossing for schoolchildren." The fact that *school success* is not common enough to be a fixed compound does not make it an error, nor is it ambiguous in its context—although except in headlines, where space constraints justify the shorter form, I'd still spell out "success in school." Why? Because in general, it's still a good policy to watch out for ambiguity in these types of compounds. If you were asking about the expression "school failure," for instance, it could mean a child's failure in school, or (more commonly) a school's failure to meet minimum educational standards.

A lot of people in our office use the word *persons* as a plural for *person*. I cannot find this usage in *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate*, but if you look up *personnel*, the definition refers to "persons." Is *persons* an acceptable plural for *person*?

Nancy Kuehl
Senior Editor,
AORN, Inc.

Not only is *persons* an acceptable plural, but it is a regular plural, which is why you didn't find it listed in *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. Like most dictionaries, this one does not give the plural of a noun if it is formed simply by adding *s*.

Now, your colleagues may be using the correct form, but if you still want to catch them out, you can monitor how often they use *persons* instead of *people*.

The use of *persons* should be restricted to certain fixed phrases (such as "persons unknown" and "missing persons") and to specific numbers in restricted contexts—for example, in statements that require specificity for legal reasons ("Capacity: 120 persons"). *Persons* can also be used in official references to small numbers ("The death toll stands at nine persons") or precise numbers ("The number of persons who held more than one job increased to 7.7 million"), but even these uses are often considered overly formal outside of official documents. I'd advise avoiding the use of *persons* in general prose.

Please comment on the use of the word *arguably*. It seems to be the modifier of choice these days. My dictionary defines it 'as can be supported by argument', but the sense I get from many using the word is that they don't want to argue the point. They want to present something as fact: "arguably the best hitter in baseball"; "arguably the best cheesecake in the city." Is it time to retire this word?

Jim Carper
Editor,
Home Décor Buyer magazine

Hmm. A forced retirement for a newer use, but presumably not for the original one? I'm afraid we're out of luck. This is, after all, how language changes, willy-nilly.

Now there's a good example right there: The original meaning of *willy-nilly* is 'whether one wills it or not', which is how I've just used it. The more common meaning now, though, is 'in a disorganized or unplanned way'. Another example is the word *celibate*. I'll bet the first meaning you think of is equivalent to *chaste*. But that's not what *celibate* originally meant. It referred not to abstinence from sexual activity but to marital status: a *celibate* person remained unmarried (usually for religious reasons), but not necessarily *chaste*.

We see the same forces of change at work in the case of *arguably*, which is shifting, subtly but distinctly, in meaning. I wouldn't say it's being used to mean "Don't argue with me," but rather "I'm going to hedge my bets and allow that it might not be the best cheesecake, but you'd have to prove it to me."

If your dictionary gives only one definition of *arguable* (the adjective, not the adverb, which is simply listed as a derivative form in every dictionary I checked), you might want to buy a bigger one.

There are two meanings of *arguable*: The first definition that most dictionaries give (which usually means it's the most central or frequent use) is along the lines of 'open to argument or dispute'. Using the adverb *arguably* in this way would mean "It's debatable whether this is the best cheesecake." The second definition is the one you give. *The American Heritage Dictionary, Fourth Edition* puts it succinctly: 'That can be argued plausibly'. In other words, "It can be argued that this is the best cheesecake because there is good evidence to support the assertion."

Now we can begin to see what is going on. I'd wager that the rise of this distinct use of *arguably* parallels a decline in precision in the use of the second sense of *arguable*. In careful usage, "It is arguable that X is the case" means "There is evidence to support X." However, current usage has weakened the connection with the idea of requiring substantial evidence, conflating "It is arguable that" with "I would argue that" or "It could be

THE QUIZ ANSWER

The Quiz is on page 1.

Our Quiz paragraph contains seven mistakes.

- (1) If Samantha has just one husband, there should be commas around the appositive *Jimmy*.
- (2) *12 noon* is redundant at best—*noon* will suffice.
- (3) *Angrily to shout* is an overcorrection, an error resulting from an effort to avoid the splitting of *to shout*. *To shout angrily* is better here, and will still pass muster with those who cling to the non-splitting "rule."
- (4) *Wildflowers* is one word.
- (5) *Only* should be placed nearest the words it limits—in this case, *Samantha calmed down only when* is correct.
- (6) The name for an antitoxin for snake venom is *antivenin*.
- (7) The word we're looking for is *vial*, not *vile*.

Care and handling

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The business of building relationships

Some of the best advice comes from those whose livelihood depends on good business relationships: freelance copy editors. They know how important it is to recognize that we *are* talking about business relationships, and that the long-term relationships are with people, not with any given text. The methods freelancers use to ensure satisfied clients and repeat business are instructive for in-house editors and copy departments as well.

► *Clarify the expectations.* Vague or unarticulated expectations and faulty assumptions lie at the heart of many acrimonious exchanges between copy editors and editors. A manuscript needs to come with a set of instructions every bit as detailed as those of a model airplane. So (as Sarah Schmelling noted), it's important to clarify what's required of you.

Usually, the best way to do this is to ask for a specific, written description of your responsibilities, authority, and assignment from the editor. Freelancers use such documents to spell out the terms of their working relationships; in-house editors and departments also benefit from using a standard docu-

ment for both employees and contracted editors.

Typically, the document includes a general description of house style and a form for outlining the specific expectations for individual projects. As a starting point, try the useful description of the three levels of copyediting on the Bay Area Editors' Forum Web site. (Go to the home page, www.editorsforum.org, then click on "What do editors do?")

► *Communicate directly and frequently with the client.* Whether you're a freelancer or an in-house copy editor, your clients are the editor *and* the author. There's no substitute for taking the time to get to know them personally in order to facilitate your working partnership with them. Chicago-based writer-editor Kathleen Kuiper told *Copy Editor* that she rates "cordiality and professional collegiality" second only to a copy editor's technical skills as assets for a strong working relationship.

Start with the editor, who is the one who grants access to the author whose work you're handling. If you're an in-house copy editor, take advantage of your proximity: invite an editor to join you on an afternoon coffee break. Participate in casual gatherings that encourage colleagues to get to know each other. If you're a freelancer, take the

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argued that." Thus "*Arguably* (= I would argue that) this is the best cheesecake." An adverbial use has arisen that has kept the idea of arguing a point but has lost the idea of requiring evidence to support the point.

I checked Google News to look for some examples, and most of them retain a sense of the original meaning—something more like "You could make a case for saying X." I think that's how *arguably* is being used in the baseball example you give. But I also see evidence of what you mean about using *arguably* to assert that a statement is indisputable: I can't see how "Arguably the highest open office is that of mayor" can mean anything other than that the office of mayor is in fact the highest one that citizens of a city can be elected to. And the cheesecake? That's just somebody's opinion.

I would argue that it is better to stick to the two traditional uses of *arguably* in carefully edited prose, mainly because the other uses are imprecise. Given the current trend, however, it's far more likely that the original meaning of *arguably* will check into the retirement home first. In the meantime, dictionary editors should consider creating a separate entry for the adverb, with a nice usage note to match. ■

Ask Copy Editor welcomes your questions. Please send questions in writing (see "How to reach Copy Editor" in the masthead, on page 8) and let us know whether we may publish your name, company, town, and state or whether you'd prefer to ask anonymously. Questions may be edited and become the property of Ask Copy Editor.

Wendalyn Nichols

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beat Barbara's résumé, and I wouldn't presume to try. I've worn many hats: English teacher, lexicographer, editor. How should I tell you the story of how I got here?

Begin at the beginning, as the King said to the White Rabbit.

Some of you may remember a series of workbooks called *Keys to Good Language* from elementary school. (How's that for the beginning?) Among the exercises in those workbooks were long, completely unpunctuated passages for students to punctuate. Every time we got a new workbook, I found all those passages and put in the punctuation, because it was *fun*.

Fast-forward to college: in my freshman year, I started teaching remedial writing skills in the "writing laboratory" at my university. After I graduated with a double major in linguistics and something called "European studies," I made the obvious career move of becoming a waitress and bartender for a catering company. For the money. I also taught

French in a Montessori preschool, for the love of it, and I convinced a local YMCA branch to let me teach a writing course as part of its adult education offerings.

I used my waitressing money to get to Europe as often as I could, studying and traveling until the money ran out, then coming home to earn money again. During that time, I did contracted writing and research for Parenting Press, and started up a short-lived literary magazine with a group of friends.

Having finally landed a scholarship, I went to Oxford University for graduate school, emerging with a Master of Philosophy degree in French and English poetry and literary theory. I also had to earn money while I was at Oxford, so I signed up for a training course and got a qualification in teaching English as a Second Language. I spent a summer teaching bored European teenagers who were hung over from clubbing in London.

After a year back in the U.S., this time working in a restaurant, I returned to England and began teaching English in London to European businesspeople whose companies paid top dollar for personalized instruction. Well, they paid it to

the school. I got seven pounds an hour. Understandably, I scoured the media job section of *The Guardian* every week. One day, I saw an ad that effectively said "ESL lexicographers wanted: will train."

That's how I started working for Longman. At the time, I felt I'd found my calling. I was surrounded by fellow "word nerds" at a time when ESL lexicography was being transformed by corpus-based research into language use—a subject that became a passion of mine. I became a senior editor, then what they called the "editorial manager." I made some extra cash on the side Americanizing ESL textbooks. And I traveled to the U.S. frequently, giving presentations to large audiences at ESL conferences and conducting teacher-training workshops in teaching dictionary skills.

In early 1997, I moved to San Francisco to set up a new U.S. lexicography unit for Longman, which by then had become part of Pearson Education. In October of that year, I got a call from a man with a strong Brooklyn accent. He was a headhunter, hired by Random House Reference to find a replacement for Sol Steinmetz, who had recently retired as

Care and handling

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time to speak on the phone rather than conducting all your business in writing. If you live in the same city as the editor, or are planning a trip there, arrange to meet the editor in person.

Once you have established a relationship with the editor, ask him or her to allow direct contact between you and the author. Campaign (gently) for it, if necessary! Remind the editor that it will help you gauge the author's communication style so that you can tailor your way of asking questions and raising concerns accordingly.

Even if an editor insists upon being an intermediary in the copyediting process, her or she will usually see the value of allowing some introductory communication between you and the person behind the manuscript. Respect a reluctant editor's need to be in the loop: suggest a conference call that includes the editor, or offer to copy him or her on e-mails and other correspondence between you and the author.

► *Work from a position of respect and empathy.* In the same way that creating a collaborative environment is the key to success for a team of editors, approaching your relationship with an author as a collaboration can make the difference between a strained editorial process and an enjoyable one.

In *The Fine Art of Copyediting* (2nd edition, 2001), Elsie Myers Stainton reminds us that the writer's endeavor entails "revealing an important part of himself or herself to the public." When we copyedit with that risky venture in mind, we can more readily appreciate the author's perspective and develop a helpful rather than a critical habit of mind, which in turn fosters mutual respect. Acquiring an appreciation for authors as a breed, and for the pitfalls of their enterprise, beats maintaining a state of seething resentment and cynicism as a standard work mode.

► *Pay attention.* We rightly pride ourselves on our attention to detail. But that ideally extends further than finding mistakes and ambiguities in copy. Cultivating

your listening skills on as many levels as possible will increase your value to your clients or employer; it will also make your work more multidimensional and rewarding for you. Listen to the author's requests. Listen for the author's voice and intention, not just to the words. Develop your ear for the rhythm, tone, and other musical qualities of language and good writing. And listen as the reader's surrogate and advocate.

The artful query

When the editorial task allows for direct communication between the copy editor and the author, one of the most effective tools is the well-wrought query. It should be lucid and (if necessary) substantiated with supporting information, and it must be polite—no thinly veiled scorn, no schoolmarmish tone. Here are some recommendations for formulating persuasive, well-received, and useful queries:

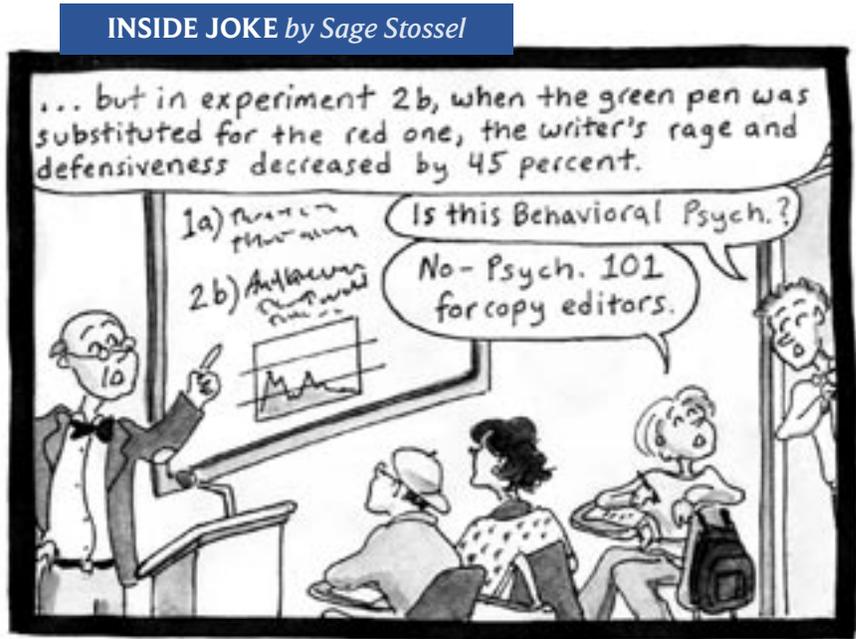
► *Ask, don't tell.* Copy editors often meet with good results when they tacitly acknowledge the author's choice in a given matter. Even annotating a manu-

the editorial director. I found myself in New York three months later.

There was great collegiality among the staff of that now-dissolved department. We acquired *Verbal Advantage* (by Charles Harrington Elster) and *Home-Grown English* (by Jeffrey McQuain). I lobbied Mary Beth Protomastro (unsuccessfully) to let us continue to supply the Dictionary Update for *Copy Editor* from Random House files after Jesse Sheidlower left to join the staff of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Jesse left us the gift of his Word of the Day Web site, which we renamed The Mavens' Word of the Day so that the editors and I could share the fun of posting answers to people's questions about word origins and usage. I appeared as a language expert on many radio and television programs, including *The Today Show*, CNN, and NPR's *Talk of the Nation*.

Then, as most of you know, the sky fell in. Dictionary publishing as it was practiced at Random House did not fit the business model of Bertelsmann, the parent company. The entire dictionary staff was fired. What was I going to do next?

No, not waitressing. Freelance lexicography, of course. But I'd also dis-



covered, from working on trade books at Random House, that I had a gift for editing—perhaps honed way back when I was correcting eighty essays a week in college. I could take dry, academic prose and make it sing. I could copyedit to a fare-thee-well. (And yes, I spelled that verb as “copyedit.” From now on, so will

this newsletter.) I could fix really, really bad novels. I could make it as a freelancer.

Now, here I am, a little more than three years later, feeling once again that serendipity has brought me a new place to thrive in. I hope we will learn from each other. I hope to meet many of you at conferences and workshops. Above all, I hope you will not hold back in telling me what you'd like to see more of or less of in these pages.

You'll have noticed that I've filled this column without expounding my theories about language use. That's because I'd rather let you form your own opinions, based on what I write. I will say that I'm a prescriptivist by nature but a descriptivist by training, which is not the same as saying that I will defend to the death your right to say “is comprised of” even though I despise that usage. It means I will do my damndest to make sure my daughter learns to use *lie* and *lay* correctly, but that I've given up trying to get my husband to do so.

Rest assured that I'm not going to charge in and try to make my mark by dismantling what Barbara, Jeff, and Mary Beth have built. I do have some ideas, of course! For instance, I'd like to add more coverage of the business of being a copy editor, and I'd like to find some experts who can speak to the challenges that new publishing technology poses for us. I'll be finding my way over the first few issues, but please don't hesitate to call me out on any mistakes. I'd do it to you.

And please, call me Wendi. ■

script change with “OK?” injects a note of courtesy.

► *Offer suggestions.* Rather than trying to describe a problem or solution at length, provide a couple of alternatives to make your point more quickly, clearly, and helpfully. This also reinforces your role as the author's ally.

► *Don't be funny.* Copy editors definitely need a sense of humor, but queries are not the place to display your comic gifts. Not only is the occasion inappropriate, but jokey comments usually fall flat and are easily misinterpreted.

► *Be brief and articulate.* Economical, pointed queries serve everyone's interest. But realize too that elliptical writing can be misread. Whenever possible, take the time to reread your queries before sending the manuscript back

► *Provide backup.* Copy editors lobbying for a textual change—especially one that might meet with resistance—must supply clear reasoning and specific authoritative references to support their viewpoint. If you combine this with a

courteous tone and a sincere desire to solve a problem, most authors are open to discussing the point.

► *Don't abuse e-mail.* The immediacy of communication that e-mail provides can tempt you to shoot a message to an editor or author to resolve a query quickly. Resist the temptation. It makes tracking editorial changes difficult, whether you send the odd query or a barrage; and since people generally feel they must answer right away, it can be an annoying interruption for the recipient.

► *Get on the phone.* Some issues are better addressed in a conversation than in a written query. The more reticent among us often avoid this option. But rather than reject a valuable avenue of approach, we can productively use the tactics recommended above in a phone call. Make it clear—to the author and yourself—that your overarching purpose is to benefit the author, text, and reader.

Judith West is a writer, editor, and audiobook producer in Chicago.

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DICTIONARY UPDATE

by Jesse Sheidlower

baby tee, *noun*. A tight-fitting, esp. cropped T-shirt, intended to be worn by adult women. Also *baby T*.

The two girls bought the label and joined forces with designer Linda Meltzer, who invented the classic baby T. —*Vanity Fair*, September 2004

Instead of squeezing into yet another baby tee that spelled out “Cradle Robbed,” we put on well-tailored jackets. —*Los Angeles Times*, January 20, 2005

krumping, *noun*. A form of fast dancing associated with hip-hop culture, usually performed competitively.

Photographer David LaChapelle’s *Rize* is a visual

miracle; he hits the L.A. ghettos to film the krumping dance phenom and scores an unexpected knockout as social history. —*Rolling Stone*, February 24, 2005

— **krump**, *attributive noun*.
— **krumper**, *noun*.

Curious about krumping? Five members of the Shake City All-Stars, a young group of L.A. krumpers, will teach you all about this hip-hop dance style that grew from clowning and popping. Take a tour of the emerging krump scene and see a lot of the moves in use, including a glimpse of frenetic-paced krump battles. —*Dance Spirit*, October 2004

vlog, *noun*. A blog that incorporates video clips.

“Text doesn’t get across all

I want to communicate,” says Lenn Pryor, who runs Channel 9, a vlog that Microsoft Corporation set up in April to communicate more effectively with software developers. —*Business Week*, January 10, 2005

— **vlogger**, *noun*.

Garfield belongs to a small but growing legion of video bloggers, or vloggers, who are turning the Web into a medium in which someday anyone could conceivably mount original programming, bypassing the usual broadcast networks and cable outlets. —*Time*, April 19, 2004

Note: vlog is a shortening of *video blog*. This full form is sometimes found, but no other shortenings (e.g. *v-log*) seem to have any significant currency. ■

These new entries were derived from the Oxford English Dictionary files.

IN STYLE

An historical discussion

by Paul R. Martin

In a February 25 story, *The Washington Post* said, “However, despite ongoing rotations to Iraq, the Army’s suicides in that country fell back closer to historic levels last year, officials said.”

Without making judgments about the value of human lives, were those levels historic or historical?

The Wall Street Journal of February 2 said, “The company’s sales have actually crept up a bit in recent years amid a push to make its clocks available to corporations and the general public, although they remain far below historic levels.”

Were those levels historic or historical?

Both references should have been to *historical* levels, meaning ‘related to past

records or occurrences’. To be *historic*, an event must stand out singularly in history—say, the attack on Pearl Harbor or the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Next question: Was the Emancipation Proclamation *a* historic document or *an* historic document?

As Henry Higgins would say, we have a humble hypothesis: If the *h* is sounded, or aspirated, as it is (except by Cockneys) in *historic* and *humble*, use *a*, not *an*: *A historic event, a humble opinion, a heroic decision*. No one would say *an history lesson*, of course. The defenders of *an historical event* contend that the *h* is rendered weak when the accent is on the second syllable, thus calling for *an*. But they are defensive defenders these days, eating ‘umble pie, so to speak. Wherever the accent lies, most agree today, if the *h* is sounded, use *a*.

Paul R. Martin is the editor of The Wall Street Journal Guide to Business Style and Usage and a member of Copy Editor’s editorial advisory board.