



Moonlight Blogger

essays from
The Subversive Copy Editor
blog

Carol Fisher Saller

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Carol Fisher Saller is the author of *The Subversive Copy Editor: Advice from Chicago (or, How to Negotiate Good Relationships with Your Writers, Your Colleagues, and Yourself)* (University of Chicago Press, 2009). Her most recent book is *Eddie's War* (namelos, 2011), a historical novel for readers 10 and up.

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Moonlight Blogger

Um . . . er . . . is this microphone on?

Last night I was lucky enough to sit near a popular public radio host at an awards banquet. (I wasn't supposed to sit at the head table, but I couldn't find a seat and someone there offered me one so I took it without realizing. By the time I figured it out, it was too late.) My book was up for an award, but I wasn't a winner, so I explained this to the radio guy, and then I felt that I had to clarify "Not that I'm *loser*," just to make sure he didn't call security or something about me sitting at the head table.

Anyway, the radio guy (let's call him Steve) asked about my book, which led us to talk about sticklers, and it turns out that in radio, there are plenty of these. Steve says that people phone and e-mail the station all the time to complain that someone speaking on the radio used the wrong verb or mispronounced something. So now I have a whole new appreciation for all those gracious and articulate and *brave* radio announcers who don't have a chance to read over and copyedit their words as they emerge at 150 miles a minute.

Getting Along with Colleagues Tip #1: Share an Interest

Although naturally you already have things in common with your colleagues, good relationships at work shouldn't revolve exclusively around gossip or trashing the boss. Just this week, I found the perfect project to rally my coworkers: pygmy goats. Who could resist? Right away, several of my colleagues agreed that we should buy a few and begin making cheese.

Solving the challenge of where to put the little guys created a bonding experience within my group. Plan A is to ask the building manager to find a place for them in the way he found a place for people to park their bicycles. We will argue that goats should be easier than bicycles, because the goats are smaller and fewer. Plan B is to approach the Chicago Theological Seminary for help. Their new building is going up literally next door, and since the CTS has been boasting about the greenness of their new building (in spite of the fact that they demolished a revered community garden in the process of setting up their construction site), we figure they should be willing to grow grass on the roof and let our small herd graze there.

Whatever the outcome, working with my colleagues on this project has led to a great deal of mutual respect and team-building goodwill. Try it and see!

Who Loves a Book More?

I am so tired of people looking down their noses at my e-reader and explaining that *they* love books. So today I'm going to answer their complaints, one by one.

Book Lover: Because I'm a person of passion and a true intellectual, I love the feel, the smell, the je ne sais quoi of a real book.

Me: Are you kidding? Recently I heard publisher Stephen Roxburgh speak to a group of writers in a bookstore. He held up a 1710 edition of Swift's *Tale of a Tub*, leather-bound with marbled papers, beautifully etched, letter-pressed on vellum. Three hundred years old and looking like new. He said, "If you tell me you love this book, I'm right there with you." He swept his arm toward the bookshelves. "These? Pulp, fit for a landfill." Then he held up his new iPad. "I also love this book," he said, and showed how, like the Swift, it was beautifully designed, a pleasure to examine and hold, and how, unlike the Swift, its content was actually readable and enjoyable.

Book Lover: You can't cuddle up with an e-book.

Me: But you can cuddle up with the latest Dan Brown hard cover? My e-book is smaller, lighter, and easier to read in any cuddling position, I guarantee you. You can turn pages with one hand and the type will turn sideways or upside down, if you ask it to.

Book Lover: I don't want my books to glare at me.

Me: I will grant you that. That's why I prefer an e-ink reader to an LED-lit one. I can read it outdoors in the sun or in the romantic glow of the lamp on my bed table.

Book Lover: I hate change.

Me: Well, you got me there.

When the Privacy You Lose Isn't Even Yours

Some time ago I discovered in Googling myself (no, I'm not ashamed of that) that my phone number is 773-633-671, that I created the website for the *Chicago Manual of Style*, and—most surprising of all—that I am the author of a book about ferrets. Being naive and optimistic, I tried to get the information removed or corrected, which, I'm sure you know, is much more difficult than putting toothpaste back in the tube (which is not that hard).*

The most effective way to deal with misinformation about oneself is not to care. And over time, I truly have come not to care whether people believe that I wrote a book about ferrets. But I do continue to care about accuracy in published media. It's something copyeditors are in a position to support.

*V-e-r-y carefully and slowly squeeze as much air from the tube as you can without letting any more toothpaste out. Then put the mouth of the tube against the escaped toothpaste and stop squeezing. The toothpaste should slurp right on in. Repeat five hundred times.

Dodging Editorial Bullets

Last evening I attended a lovely cello recital in a private home in my neighborhood. Sitting in the parlor listening to Brahms on a 1768 Benjamin Banks, many of us deep in reverie (or snoozing—hard to tell), I was startled to see at the very moment of its toppling a teacup roll off its saucer from the lap of my abstracted neighbor Peggy. I tensed for the crash, but the cup hit the plush Oriental, somersaulted gently onto the wood floor, and miraculously righted itself without a sound. At a suitable moment, I retrieved it from under the settee and handed it back. Peggy inspected it for damage, caught her breath, and whispered “Spode!”

Walking home, I pulled out my cell phone, thinking how lucky Peggy had been not to break the china—and saw that my ringer was on. Full blast. This time the luck was mine, not to have jerked everyone awake with a tinny chorus of “Ain’t Misbehavin’.”

In copyediting, we forget, we overlook, we nod off. Often we catch our errors (or someone else does) before it’s too late, and no doubt we are happily unaware of many errors that make it into print. Copyediting and proofreading the sixteenth edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style*, the team here caught typos and errors in every round, and every time, we felt the relief that comes with escaping shame and embarrassment, along with the naive hope that now it’s perfect.

But inevitably a few goofs are lurking in the pages. (And knowing our readers, we won’t remain unaware of them for long.)

Master the Basics and Feel the Power

Not long ago I watched over a friend's shoulder as she made corrections to a document in MS Word, lumbering along in slow motion with her mouse, and after about two minutes of this, it was all I could do to keep from snarling "Let me drive!" and knocking her out of the chair.

Okay, so I'm working on the patience thing. But meanwhile, I have a feeling that copyeditors everywhere are wasting billions of hours and a lot of carpal tunnel nerves simply because they don't know the most basic moves in word processing.

An example: when my friend wanted to undo an action, she motored her mouse up to the toolbar and clicked on the Undo arrow. About the fifth time she did that, I couldn't stop myself from saying, "You know, Ctrl+Z is easier." Embarrassed, she mumbled something about bad habits.

Here's what I propose, and it's simple, and it will change your life: over the next few days, make note of the computer action you perform most, and if you aren't using a keyboard shortcut for it, find one. Here are two good ways to find a shortcut:*

1. Search online, e.g., "MS Word undo."

2. Within Word, go to Tools, then Customize, then Keyboard. (In Word 2007, start with the Office Button, then Word Options, then Customize, then Keyboard Shortcuts.) I always scroll down in the Categories box and choose All Commands, which provides a list in the Commands box of everything you might want to do. Click on the chore you want to do faster, and you'll see what the keyboard command is for that chore. And (this is the most exciting part), if you don't like it, you can change it. And if there isn't one, you can assign one.

The next part is admittedly more challenging: force yourself to use the shortcut. But I guarantee that after the first awkwardness, you will feel the power! And you'll go back for more.

*You can also try the Help files in MS Word, although older versions tend to recommend clicking on menus and toolbar icons instead of using the keyboard.

English Teacher Bullies?

Recently John McIntyre blogged at the *Baltimore Sun* about “pedagogical malpractice,” inviting readers to submit stories of English teachers run amuck. I read them with mixed feelings of horror and glee. After all, English teachers, not unlike copyeditors, are an easy target. Their job is to teach the rules, and if they sometimes get carried away to the point of inventing a few, why are we surprised?

Sure, as experienced writers, we’ve learned that the rules of English are often just cardboard bullies that blow over in the wind of good prose. But how is a teacher supposed to impart an ease with bending and breaking rules before they’ve pounded the darned things in to begin with?

An elementary school teacher who wrote to the *CMOS* online Q&A shamed me into understanding this struggle. She had written for help with commas, asking, “Is it necessary to use a comma after words like *next*, *then*, *after that*, *last*, and *finally* when they are the beginning of a sentence? I am a lower-school teacher and need to clarify this.” I had replied, “Punctuation is not so simple that you can make a rule that a comma ‘always’ follows a given word or phrase. Commas depend on syntax as well as pacing, tone, and personal preference. . . . Please don’t teach your students punctuation until you understand this.”

Her response was both discouraged and scathing, taking me to task for my smart-assed unhelpfulness. Who, I understood, would teach her kids if she didn’t? Was I volunteering for the job?

From my seat in the ivory tower, it’s easy to forget that teachers have an entirely different slant on things. Rules are the floats young learners cling to while learning to swim. Mind, I won’t excuse a high-school or college teacher-bully who demands that paragraphs consist of exactly five sentences or who ban the use of the word “thing.” The best teachers will figure out how to model flexibility as opposed to laying down the law. But if reducing English grammar and writing to a teachable science results in some overstated rules now and then, maybe we can consider it a valid—and temporary—stage of learning.

Self-Editing: The Cringe Test

My writing group met recently for our monthly critiquing love- and slugfest. We know each other well enough to be pretty brutal and frank, and mostly that's good, because it means that if everyone agrees that something's finished, you can be sure we aren't just being polite.

This month it happens that we're all revising manuscripts, and we're all weighing the pressure to be done with it against the wish for it to be perfect. And we discovered that we've all had the same experience at some point, of trying to ignore a subpar passage that we hoped would escape our editor's/agent's/reader's notice.

When you aren't certain, how do you decide whether a particular chunk is good enough? Some possible cringe tests:

- Imagine you're interviewed on *Fresh Air* and Terry Gross chooses that passage to read out loud.
- Pretend it's the only passage an old lover will read when he or she happens across it.
- Picture it printed in your obituary.

You get the idea—and I'll bet you have some doozies. The point is, although not every passage will turn out to be quote-worthy, none of them should make you cringe.

Best Practices in Copyediting: Paper vs. Plastic

Copyeditors who are allowed to edit on paper are dwindling in number, but judging from my mail, copyeditors who would like to are legion. I don't get it. For short works, sure—I enjoy scribbling with a pencil, and it's easy enough to keep track of style choices. But when a manuscript is more than a few pages long, I get twitchy: without proper tools (i.e., a word processor), I'm simply not confident that my work will be up to par.

Editors who love working on paper may believe that their razor-sharp mental abilities, their long experience, and their diligence in record-keeping guarantee a superior job, but I'm skeptical. A few of the reasons:

—Our style sheets and mental maps are a poor substitute for the ability to search through an e-file (Maybe your memory is better than a computer's, but sometimes I can't even remember where I *put* my computer.)

—Searching a document to undo a bad style decision takes a long time and risks missing a few instances.

—Some nonessential but desirable tasks that could be done in mere seconds electronically are not feasible on paper. Although we could do them, it would seem wrong to waste the time (in other words, our employers' money).

But, weirdly, that brings me to how word processors can contribute to two kinds of bad editing. (Next time.)

Bad Editing and the Word Processor

Two popular types of bad copyediting are (1) editing that didn't need doing in the first place, and (2) needed editing that didn't get done. Both types can be accomplished with or without the aid of a computer, but there are reasons why a copyeditor deploying a word processor is likely to end up committing both.

Put simply, the reason for type 1 is "Because she can," and the reason for type 2 is "Because she can't."

Perfectionists are helpless to resist the tweaking and refining that comes at the peck of a few keys even if it's ultimately unhelpful to the publishing process, even if the original was good enough, even if errors are introduced in the meddling. It's just so darned easy, and it takes only a few seconds. Well, maybe just a few more—oops—that wasn't what I meant to happen, but that's okay, because I can fix it . . . oops—wait, I've got it now! Sorry, where was I? Oh, yes: talking about editing that didn't need doing.

More laid-back types are no better off if they haven't mastered the word processor. Freelancers regularly send me work that isn't properly cleaned and coded. Are they simply blind to all the little e-boogers? Or does it not occur to them that there's an efficient way to fix them? Either way, we get the type 2 problem of editing that goes undone.

The solution doesn't lie in editing on paper any more than the problem lies in the machine. If all the copyeditors in the world throw themselves in front of that train to Technology, it's still going to roll on by.

Might as well get on.

Subversive Tech Tip #8: Coloring Your Copy

If you write or copyedit in Microsoft Word, have you thought about using color as a tool? Here are two ways I use color in editing and word-processing.

(1) You know how sometimes you need to work with different versions of the same document open at the same time, and the first time you go to save your work, you find out you've been editing the wrong version, and you want to kill yourself? To prevent this, in addition to saving compulsively, I color the text of the old version to make it obvious that it's not the working copy. Hit Ctrl+A to highlight the whole thing, then open the Format Font dialog box (Alt+O+F). In the Font tab, find Font Color and open the drop-down menu. Pick your favorite color (I love that soothing olive called dark yellow), hit Enter, and Bob's your uncle. (I'm older than you are, so I get to say things like that.)

(2) If you have to provide typesetting codes or check someone else's, and if they're the kind that are in angle brackets, you can color them in a wildcard search so they'll "pop" when you're viewing the document on screen. Hit Ctrl+H, and expand the box with Alt+M (for "more"). Alt+U will turn on the wildcard feature. In the Find box, type \<*\>, and in the Replace box make sure there's nothing there, not even a space.* Choose a color for the Replace box following the steps in project #1. (I like red for codes.) Let 'er rip. (Replace All.) Everything between angle brackets should now be your favorite color.

When you're finished playing with colors, you can remove them all by repeating the steps in (1) and choosing Automatic as the color.

*If there's a space or any character in the Replace box, there will be unpleasantness when you hit Replace All. But don't worry—that's why God gave us Ctrl+Z.

Meticulous, Compulsive . . . and Liberated?

Copyeditors have a reputation. We're conscientious and task-oriented. We like our little routines. We like things tidy. That's what's good about us—it's why we're useful. We are valued for our tolerance for tedium and our willingness to plug away till the last crumb of typographical trash is off the floor and into the bin. It's a cliché to say that we're compulsive perfectionists; that we're the quiet and unsung heroes of publishing.

Oh, come on.

Doesn't it get up your nose even a little when a fellow copyeditor gets on a high horse about authorial ignorance? Or trumpets a typo in a published work with shock and indignation? Who's she kidding? Let's see everything she's edited: I'll bet you a million bucks you and I could find a few crumbs she missed.

Copyeditors have to rate among the most self-satisfied and superior folks I know, and it's not hard to understand why. A body has to work up some kind of defense under the pressure of that reputation.

But let's liberate ourselves from the stereotype. I'll go first: I admit it. I mess up all the time. It's how I know things.

Hey—that felt great.

Serial Tasking; or, How Not to Floss

I remember when my first son was little and I would be listening to music, and John would amaze me by humming a different tune while he played at my feet. Maybe the ability to “tune out” so profoundly is just one of those stages of child brain development, like unintentional writing in mirror image. Or maybe I’m the only one who can’t hum against the music. Whichever it is, I’ve known for quite a while that my mind is pretty much limited to one track at a time.

Of course, I’m often forced to multitask. In fact I was inspired to write on this topic the other day when, pressed for time, I found myself flossing during my workout. (I’m not making that up. And yes, I did find muscles I never knew I had.) Once again, I learned that when I do two things at once, one of them suffers in quality.

We hear a lot these days about attention deficit and multitasking, and given that multitasking is the very definition of copyediting, how do we cope? I recall a study some time ago suggesting that teenagers study better while listening to music.* But more recent research concludes that “multitasking” is really just “serial tasking,” and that chopping chores into disconnected bits isn’t as efficient as we like to think. Rather, we suffer from “reduced ability to filter out interference from the irrelevant task.”**

But we knew that.

Experience and common sense tell us that when a deadline looms, turning off and tuning out can give us a dose of needed concentration and efficiency. For an hour, say, forget the e-mail, muffle the tweets, and go at it single-mindedly.

(Go on, now—git!)

*Disclaimer: Whenever I mention a study without a citation, it’s possible I’m making it up.

**Eyal Ophir, Clifford Nass, and Anthony D. Wagner, “Cognitive Control in Media Multitaskers,” *PNAS Early Edition*, 1; www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.0903620106.

Random Advice for Copyeditor Newbies

If you're new to copyediting, consider these snippets of advice. (Be sure to check with your supervisor if any of them contradict your usual instructions.)

—Don't query a word or spelling or locution without looking it up. If a writer uses an unfamiliar word or spelling more than once, it's very possibly intended. It's easy to paste "eat one's cake and have it, too" into a search engine and learn that the writer doesn't have it backward.

—Don't waste a writer's time by continually asking for approval. ("Okay? If you don't like this, I can put it back.") Rather, indicate your flexibility in the cover letter. On the manuscript, use queries for giving or asking for information.

—Save grief later by e-mailing the author before you make editing decisions that are hard to undo ("Re romantic/Romantic: do you have a system for capping? Should I meddle?")

—Don't track changes that will be invisible or confusing on a black-and-white printout, such as deletions of hyphens.* If the editing is difficult to read, the writer won't easily see that the results read well.

—Be conservative in editing until you have more experience. You should be ready to explain every mark you put on the page.

—Remember the copyeditor's creed: First, do no harm.

*My workaround is to explain in the cover letter that I have edited common compounds silently in accordance with *CMOS* and *Webster's 11th Collegiate*, and that otherwise I track the opening or closing of compounds respectively like this: right_wing or ~~home-town~~hometown.

It, Them, . . . What's the Diff?

Last year I had a problem with ants in my kitchen, but at the hardware store there were several different kinds of poison and each package said, "Will kill this kind of ant, but not that kind." So I went back home to figure out what kind I had.

The first step was to capture one, which wasn't hard. The second step was to capture one without squishing it, which took a little longer. Once I had one in captivity, I went online to identify it by looking at pictures and descriptions and comparing them to my ant under a magnifying glass. "Does it have a slender waist?" Hmm. Where exactly *was* this guy's waist? (Did we learn in school that ants have *waists*?)

I gave up. Instead, remembering how many times the hardware store employees had given me great household advice, I took the ant in its container back to the store, found the man in insecticides, and asked, "Do you know what kind of ant this is? I want to buy the right poison for it."

Trained to be superhelpful, he said, "Heck, I'll kill it for you right here if you want."

When I was able to speak, I thanked him and explained that there were actually more at home. Unfazed, he showed me what I needed and I went home to slay the ants.

The moral (yes, I'm determined to relate this story to writing and editing) is that a failure to choose our words precisely is not usually a matter of life and death, nor is it usually very funny, although in the rare instance like this one, it could be both. In any case, it's almost always a good idea.

Getting Along with Colleagues Tip #2: Think Before You Send

Last week I handled something badly at work, and I'm still beating myself up about it. Since I don't think that posting the details on the Internet would help (see tip #142), I'll just say that it amounted to embarrassing a colleague by copying others in on an e-mail that implied criticism.

Yes, I know I say in my book not to do this! Sometimes I don't know what gets into me. But in penance, I'll give you the benefit of my experience: I've learned, and continue to learn, that when you have a problem with a colleague, it's best to address the issue directly with that person and only that person. Until you've tried that a couple of times without results, don't go elsewhere (especially not higher) with your complaint.

This isn't merely kindness; it's also a better way to resolve an issue. The private communication allows your colleague to focus on the problem rather than on saving face. It helps forestall that escalation of blaming we so often see in public figures who are publically accused of some misstep.

My own misstep ended well because of the grace and good nature of the person I e-mailed, so it's time for me to let go of it. But I'll keep it in mind; next time I might not be so lucky.

Checking for Squirrels

Chicagoans have a tradition of scavenging stuff from curbs and alleys. It's honorable to set out household debris that you want to disappear, and it's honorable to cart away an object you find abandoned. Sometimes you can hardly believe your luck: last week my son Ben found a leather recliner and hauled it back to his place. He'd wanted to buy one for a long time, but had resisted (even after I pointed out that it would make a credible business expense for his video-games blog).

The catch, of course, is that there's usually a defect in discarded goods, no matter how good they look. In the case of upholstered furniture, everyone knows you have to turn it over and check for squirrels.

Evaluating a new manuscript is like that. On the surface, in the form of a paper printout, it can appear to be beautiful and trouble-free—but look carefully at the electronic files, and any manner of wildlife could be lurking. My favorite example is a manuscript that consisted of over 300 separate Microsoft Word files: the writer had started a new one every time he reached the bottom of a page.

Writers are endlessly creative at formatting. They use hard returns and tabs to create block quotations. They type headers and footers on every page instead of using the floating feature. And they love to thwart the endnote feature of their word processors: rather than let the machine renumber, they insert notes manually between the automated ones and then type over the computer-generated note numbers.

I shouldn't complain: after all, I earn a living making these documents printable. It's just that word processing is not what I came on board for all those years ago. I'm not trained to do it, I don't enjoy doing it, and I don't really know whether what I do is of use to the typesetter. Just once I'd like to receive a perfectly clean and coded manuscript that would allow me to spend all my time copyediting instead of in rodent control.

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