Are Editors Born or Made?

By Amy Einsohn

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When asked whether creative writing can be taught, Wallace Stegner replied: "1. It can be done. 2. It can't be done to everybody." After twenty-five years of teaching copyediting workshops, I'd say that Stegner's assessment holds true in my field as well.

Teachability is, of course, a bread-and-butter topic for instructors and trainers: What can be taught, to whom, and how? Questions about native talent and teachability also arise when recent graduates and career changers wonder whether they have what it takes to succeed in editing, when interviewers assess applicants for entry-level editorial positions, and when supervisors counsel a struggling junior editor.

No scientist has identified an editorial gene, and we have no documented reports of the muse Redactia visiting babies in their bassinets. Yet some people do seem better suited to editorial work than others. To help these people identify themselves—and to help prospective employers identify them—I offer a profile of the teachable novice (part 1) and some advice for helping novices survive the maladies that often beset new editors (part 2).

Part 1. The Teachable Novice

Prerequisite Skills and Aptitudes

Newcomers can learn editorial routines and procedures in a classroom or during on-thejob training. But lessons in methods and standards cannot turn every eager soul into a competent editor. Before grabbing a pencil or a mouse, the teachable novice has already acquired, over a period of many years, the following skills and aptitudes:

A strong command of English grammar, usage, diction, and spelling;
 attentiveness to different registers of language; and an interest in how English continues to change.

- An untiring and sharp eye, the ability to read at different speeds, and a good visual memory.
- A well-tuned ear—unless the novice's goal is to work only on copy that has no cadence or rhythm (inventories, directories, spec sheets, and technical documentation).
- A solid sense of logic, which includes seeing what is missing from an argument or a series of procedural steps.
- Editorial clairvoyance: the ability to intuit what a writer is trying to say and what the readers are likely to infer.

Computer skills are essential, of course, but those, unlike the items on my list, can usually be acquired with a month or two of effort. For some scholarly and technical work, editors may also need basic or advanced knowledge of the subject matter.

Temperament

Some editors are cheerful, others are sullen, but successful editors tend to have a measure of the following traits:

- A desire for perfection, tempered by an understanding that schedules, budgets, and other exigencies preclude perfection.
- A willingness to serve as a behind-the-scenes player.
- Stamina.
- A dash of courage.
- A slightly toughened hide.

The last three of these items require some explanation. "Stamina" sounds odd to non-editors, who view editing as a sedentary job. But it takes great concentration and effort to edit well day in and day out.

"Courage" also puzzles non-editors until I tell them about students who excelled on homework exercises but froze when given their first real manuscript. They couldn't muster the self-confidence to edit in the absence of an instructor who would share her answer key and point out the errors they had missed.

The leathery hide helps when authors, supervisors, or clients forget to be appreciative, constructive, and kind. The well-composed editor is not indifferent to criticism but responds with a generous "How can we do this better?" rather than a defensive "Why don't we just do things my way? My way is best."

"I love to read. Doesn't that count?"

Some would-be editors believe that their strongest qualification is that they love to read, and they wonder why my list doesn't include "a love of reading." What many people love about reading, however, is losing themselves in a book—a seduction the working editor must resist. Instead of surrendering to the text, the manuscript editor must interrogate it: Is this passage open to misunderstanding? Are there too many or too few words to get the job done? Does the hyphenation of compound modifiers correspond to house style?

Also, many readers only love to read the kinds of texts they love. Newcomers to publishing, however, are rarely assigned lovable projects. A love of literature, for example, although essential for those who edit literary prose or serious fiction, can frustrate new editors, who are unlikely to find entry-level work that offers aesthetic pleasure.

Obviously, an editor must like to read and must have well-above-average reading comprehension skills. But professional editors tend to indulge their love for reading only on weekends and vacations.

"I love to write."

Good writing skills are a professional advantage for an editor, but many editors do little or no writing, and novices often get themselves in trouble when they rewrite, rather than edit, manuscripts.

My advice for people who *love* to write is to seek work as a writer. But an editing career can be quite fulfilling for those who like to write, write well, and can separate their writerly self from their editorial self.

Excalibur

To those who recognize themselves in my profile, I propose a final challenge: Spend a few hours with the *Chicago Manual of Style, Words into Type,* or *The Copyeditor's Handbook*. If reading fifteen pages about commas doesn't scare you or bore you, you are a teachable novice.

Part 2. Doctor, Can This Editor Be Saved?

Teachability is also an issue when editors with three or four months of work under their belt are struggling. They are trying hard, but their editing is not quite up to snuff. The weakest of these editors might be happier exploring the many opportunities in publishing and corporate communications that do not require editing skills: careers in production, sales, marketing, publicity, and rights and permissions. But other ailing editors can be saved if their problems are diagnosed and treated.

Overedititis

Some editors try to prove their mettle by editing the heck out of every paragraph, whether the text needs it or not. ("I'll show them. Nothing gets by me.")

My preliminary treatment for overedititis is to help the editor count the ways in which zealousness can doom an editorial career: An overeditor is more likely to overrun the budget or the schedule, introduce new errors, and incur the resentment of authors. Supervisors and clients may perceive the overeditor as a self-righteous tyrant, an obsessive perfectionist who will never be satisfied, or a naïf who does not understand the relationship between effort expended and results achieved.

I also ask the overeditor to perform several experiments:

- Adjust your editorial standards to fit the task. For some projects, "Can we live with this sentence?" is a more appropriate question than "Can I perfect this goodenough sentence?" Or apply a value-added standard: Does the cost of the editing add sufficient value to the final product?
- Imagine a two-inch-tall version of the author (or your supervisor) standing on your left shoulder challenging every change you make: "Why are you doing that?"
- Make a post-edit pass to undo those changes that you cannot justify as indisputable improvements over the unedited copy.
- Analyze your colleagues' editing and notice the kinds of changes they do not
 make. Or obtain an unedited copy of a document that a colleague has edited. Edit
 the document and compare your version to your colleague's.

Oopsosis

Even the best editors miss some mistakes, occasionally misinterpret an author's meaning, and inadvertently introduce the odd error in a flawless paragraph. And accuracy always suffers when the text requires heavy editing or the schedule is tight.

My first piece of advice to editors who miss too many errors is simple: Slow down. Read slowly enough to interrogate the presence or absence of every punctuation mark: "Hey, hyphen, what are you doing there?" "You, nonrestrictive modifier, where are your commas?" Subvocalizing (a euphemism for "muttering") both slows the eye and allows the ear to catch errors that the eye might overlook. As their accuracy improves, editors can gradually increase their speed.

I also ask oopsotic editors to analyze the types of mistakes they make: Are they errors of omission or of commission? Is there a pattern to these errors: punctuation, treatment of numbers, capitalization? Do the errors come in batches—just before or after lunch? Using these analyses, the editors assign themselves some homework and create new personal policies. For example, an editor might decide to read up on subject-verb agreement, to

pay more attention to dangling modifiers, and to query unclear passages rather than try to rewrite them.

Adagiophilia

Some editors are accurate and their level of edit is appropriate, but their tempo is a bit slow. These editors can increase their speed if they

- Learn more-efficient computer procedures and keyboard shortcuts.
- Memorize more style rules, so that they spend less time thumbing through the style manual.
- Limit the time they devote to agonizing over decisions that no reader will notice or care about.
- Refrain from above-the-call-of-duty fact-checking. (Query, don't Google.)
- Write shorter queries.

Square-peg syndrome

Some editors are quite competent but find themselves in a job whose pace, expectations, or assignments do not suit them. Rather than struggling to fit in, these editors might start looking for employment that matches their interests, skills, and temperament.

Insularity

All editors can benefit from learning more about their craft. Some suggestions:

- Join a professional organization or form your own casual editors' group and meet once a month to discuss work-related issues or to organize peer reviews of one another's work.
- Subscribe to Copyediting-L, an international electronic forum for English-language copyeditors. (Details are posted at http://www.copyediting-l.info.)
- Read a lively book about language or editing. In addition to everyone's perennial favorites—Theodore Bernstein, Edward Johnson, and Joseph Williams—try Carol Fisher Saller's *The Subversive Copy Editor*, Constance Hale's *Sin and Syntax*, or Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct*. For more recommendations, see pages 61–65 of *The Copyeditor's Handbook*.

• Follow a few of the many websites and blogs on editing, language, linguistics, the publishing industry, and book agenting. Some perennials are listed on page 66 of *The Copyeditor's Handbook*, and most of these have blogrolls or links to relevant sites. Or work your way through Katharine O'Moore-Klopf's "Copyeditors' Knowledge Base" at http://www.kokedit.com/library.shtml.

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