

3. Copyediting

In this chapter, we'll look at copyediting under five headings: 'house style', spelling, syntax and idiom, punctuation and correct usage. Checking for consistency, which is also an aspect of copyediting, will be considered separately, in Chapter 7.

3.1 Rules

Copyediting may be defined as checking and correcting a document to bring it into conformance with pre-set rules. The second last word of the sentence you are now reading must be 'says', not 'say', because there is a rule in the grammar of standard written English that says so. (Several forms of spoken English omit this –s.) In the case of correct usage, the rules to be enforced are controversial, and involve matters of authority, ideology and tradition. In the case of punctuation, the rules are often not clear-cut. The sections dealing with these two topics are therefore rather lengthy.

Copyediting requires close attention to small details; you can't do it properly if your mind is on other things. Sometimes you may find it a relief from the more demanding (less clear-cut) aspects of writing and translating work, and sometimes you may get satisfaction from those copyediting decisions that do require some thought. But unless you derive pleasure from correcting other people's errors, or creating 'order' out of untidiness, you may find this necessary task somewhat unattractive.

Ultimately, you may discover that you can combine copyediting with stylistic, structural and content editing, but at this stage, while you are still learning, you should do it separately. Perhaps try thinking of it as a game: How many mistakes can I find? Can I score better than last time?

Copyediting is line-by-line, 'micro-level' work. It is therefore done after the author and editor have completed 'macro-level' changes to the content and structure of the text. There is no point copyediting a paragraph which will later be deleted.

Copyeditors also check certain typographical and layout features, especially for consistency: Are all paragraphs indented? Are all headings bolded? However, some of these features are really a matter of stylistic editing or structural editing. For example, italics are commonly used to indicate to the reader that mental stress should be placed on a particular word. This is a matter of readability, and more specifically, smoothing – a style matter which is dealt with in Chapter 4. Similarly, headings may be underlined and indented as a way of signalling the structure of an argument to readers – a subject discussed in Chapter 5.

Terminology notes: The term *copyediting* is used by some editors to include stylistic editing in the sense of Chapter 4. Indeed, some editors use *copyediting* to include fact-checking (see Chapter 6) as well as any other tasks which are performed on a 'line-by-line' basis. These are all 'micro-

editing' tasks, as opposed to such 'macro-editing' tasks as rearranging the order of presentation of topics in a document.

Where British and US terminology differ, this book uses the US term: 'period' instead of 'full stop'; 'parenthesis' instead of 'bracket'; 'typo' instead of 'literal'.

3.2 House style

Editors sometimes provide writers with a one- or two-page set of instructions known as a style sheet. The word 'style' is unfortunate in that style sheets deal with mechanical matters, whereas 'stylistic editing', to be discussed in the next chapter, refers to matters which are very far from mechanical.

Here are some of the instructions from the style sheet that can be found at the website of St. Jerome Publishing (<https://www.stjerome.co.uk/about/authors>), the publisher of this book:

- Use -ize rather than -ise except for standard spellings such as 'advertise' and 'televise'.
- Quotations longer than forty words should be taken out of the text and indented, with an extra space above and one below the quotation. Do not use quotation marks with indented quotations.
- Number all illustrations consecutively, using Arabic numerals. In the body of the text, refer to illustrations by their number (for example: Figure 1; Table 2); do not use expressions such as 'the following table'.

In addition to (or instead of) a style sheet, editors will often direct writers to follow a particular style manual or guide, which may be hundreds of pages long. A style manual gives instructions on a wide variety of matters, including spelling (advertise or advertize?), capitalization, hyphenation, numerals (eight days or 8 days?), Latin or English plurals (fungi or funguses?), acronyms, use of italicization and bolding, presentation of quotations, footnotes and reference works, treatment of place names (Montreal or Montréal?), transliteration of names from languages that use a different script, what if anything to do about non-gender-neutral language, and much more. Sometimes style manuals give a choice of approach, and simply demand consistency (e.g. spell numbers up to nine, then use figures from 10; or spell up to ninety-nine, then use figures from 100). Note, by the way, that if you follow the first of these two rules about numbers blindly, you may end up writing sentences like:

There was one case of 11 people in a car and 12 cases of nine in a car.

where form does not match meaning: the number of people should be either '11...9' or 'eleven...nine'.

Style manuals are published by governments, newspapers, university presses and editors' associations. A few are listed at the end of the chapter. You may find

it useful to compare manuals for English with manuals for your other languages, noting differences in matters such as comma use or hyphenation.

Style manuals and style sheets help create a distinctive institutional voice and visual image for a publication – a ‘house style’. They also create consistency among all the texts produced by a given publisher. This is especially important in journals, magazines and collections of articles, where several different authors are contributing to a single issue or book. Once the contribution arrives, it is up to the copyeditor to check that the instructions have been followed.

3.3 Spelling and typographical errors

Why should a text be correctly spelled and be free of typographical errors? Even asking this question may seem odd. The need for correct spelling was drummed into us at elementary school, and we may never have given a moment’s thought to its rationale.

Spelling errors are bad because of the effect on the reader. Misspellings and typographical errors produce a very bad impression. They suggest that the author and editor are sloppy thinkers, and that the publisher tolerates carelessness. As a result, readers may lose confidence in the actual content of the work. Of course, it does not follow logically that if there are spelling errors, there must also be errors in the facts or arguments presented, but subconsciously at least, that is what readers will suspect. Misspellings and typos are also distracting, and therefore they slow down the reading process. Finally, typos can directly affect meaning, both when keys get pressed in the wrong order (have you read about the artist who fearlessly attacked scared cows?) and when the wrong word is transmitted from the mind to the fingers: there is a big difference between adopting a plan and adapting one, between having an aptitude and having an attitude.

The work of searching for misspellings and typos is greatly facilitated by the Spellcheck utilities included with word processing software. If you are not already in the habit of using Spellcheck, then get into the habit immediately. There can be no excuse for this type of mistake. Run Spellcheck after all other changes have been made.

Spellcheckers do have weaknesses and pitfalls, which are discussed in Chapter 8. One of the most notable weaknesses is proper names; you will need to independently verify that the names of people and places are properly spelled. Consider this sentence from a funding proposal:

Our health centre is working in partnership with Merck Frost.

Since ‘frost’ is a correctly spelled English word, it would be easy to let this sentence slip by unchecked. In fact, the correct spelling of the name of this pharmaceutical corporation is Merck Frosst. You could easily find this spelling by entering ‘Merck’ in your web search engine and then consulting one of the documents you find.

One aspect of English spelling is highly variable. Which is correct: life style,

life-style or lifestyle? The answer is: all three, depending on which dictionary you consult. Also, usage may vary with the field; for example, the Canadian Government's terminology bank Termium says that 'caseworker' (one word) is correct in the field of social services but 'case worker' (two words) is correct for the person who works with inmates in a penitentiary. If you are doing freelance editing for a corporation or government ministry, documents on the subject of your text may reveal your client's practices regarding common compounds.

If your style sheet prescribes a particular dictionary, then the compounding problem will most often be solved. However compounding is a highly productive process in English; that is, writers can make up new compounds at the drop of a hat, and these will not appear in your prescribed dictionary. The easiest principle to follow here is consistency: make your choice for each compound, and then make sure you stick to it throughout the text. You can also try using Google to investigate the relative frequency of the two-word versus one-word treatment of a compound. See Chapter 8 for a discussion of problems in the use of Google for such purposes.

In general, there is a progression over time from open spelling (two words) when a compound is first introduced, through hyphenation, to solid spelling (one word) as a compound becomes established in the language. The Americans tend to move through this progression more quickly than the British. Hyphens are less common in US English; words written with a hyphen in Britain will tend to be written solid in the United States or (less often) as two words. (There is also a trend, more advanced in the US, toward omitting the hyphen in prefixed words like 'coordinate', 'cooperate' and 'preeminent'.)

A final point, concerning another use of hyphens: if your style sheet calls for breaking long words at the ends of lines, note that American practice is to break at phonetically natural points ('trium-phant') whereas British practice tends to draw on morphological considerations ('triumph-ant'). Check to see which principle the automatic hyphenator in your word processor follows. Note that some automatic hyphenating utilities may produce wrong or even bizarre results (bat-hroom).

3.4 Syntax and idiom

If the text you are editing is written by a reasonably well educated native speaker of English, and is not a translation, there is a good chance that it will be syntactically correct and idiomatic. That is, it will not contain sentences like

He washes frequently his teeth, sometimes after every dining.

in which the adverb 'frequently' is in a position it cannot occupy, the word combination 'wash teeth' is unidiomatic, and the word 'dining' is used in a meaning it does not have. These are errors of a kind which native speakers normally do not make. However there are several exceptions:

1. People attempting to write in fields with which they are not familiar may have problems with the specialized phraseology of that field. Similarly, if you are just beginning to edit in a field with which you are not yet familiar, you must be careful not to replace the customary phrasings of that field with more universal ones. For example, when editing a work in the field of meteorology, you might come across the term ‘summer severe weather’ and you might be tempted to normalize the word order to ‘severe summer weather’. That would be a mistake; the phrase is correct as it stands, ‘severe weather’ being a defined concept in this field. When a severe weather event occurs in summer, it is ‘summer severe winter’; when it occurs in winter, it is ‘winter severe weather’.
2. Since the advent of word processors, mechanical slips during composition often create serious errors in sentence structure.
 - (a) There may be word missing (or an unwanted extra word) if during self-editing the writer pressed the delete key once too often (or not often enough). Did you notice the missing word in the previous sentence?
 - (b) Cut-and-paste or click-and-drag operations, during which a passage is moved within a document or pasted in from another document, often produce imperfect transitions between the pasted passage and what surrounds it. The structure of the pasted portion may not fit into the sentence properly, or there may be a word missing at the boundary of the pasted portion, or there may be an extra word – commonly a double double word. (Spellcheckers catch double words, but be careful not to automatically delete the sequence ‘had had’; ‘he had had a bad time’ may be an incorrect doubling, or it may be correct if the sentence calls for the pluperfect tense of ‘have’.)
 - (c) Partly amended sentences such as the following are now common:

It would be appropriate for computational terminology researchers would do well to investigate the potential usefulness of existing knowledge-engineering technology.

The writer decided to add ‘would do well’ but forgot to delete ‘it would be appropriate for’. In the days of typewriters, such sentences were hardly ever produced. Changing the structure of a sentence once it was down was a very time-consuming (and messy) operation. As a result, people either spent more timing planning their sentences, or else they made changes in handwriting during a separate self-editing phase, at which time their attention would be on the sentence as a whole. (Then someone else – a typist – would prepare an entirely fresh copy.) Nowadays, it is very easy to make changes as you write, and there is a tendency to focus only on the bit you are changing.

3. There is a tendency to make present-tense verbs agree in number with the nearest noun whose combination with the verb makes sense:

The legacy of the social service cutbacks of previous governments remain with us.

4. The mind sometimes retrieves the wrong word or phrase from the mental store:

Bank machines, photocopiers and central heating are a few examples from an almost infinite list of technologies and products that are an indelible component of modern life.

Here 'indelible' was retrieved instead of 'permanent' or some such word. Another possibility is that the mind will retrieve two expressions at once:

Beyond a question of a doubt, this enhanced our cynicism in parliament as an effective instrument of government.

Here 'beyond any question' and 'beyond a shadow of a doubt' have been retrieved together.

5. When people are translating into their native language, they often write ungrammatical and especially unidiomatic sentences, under the influence of the source text. When the source language is one whose vocabulary includes many cognates of words in their native language (e.g. any Romance or Germanic language in the case of translation into English), translators may use words in meanings they do not have ('he was invited to give a conference' for French 'conférence', which often means 'lecture' or 'talk'). Such unidiomatic usages may also appear in the original writing of people who work in a multilingual environment. If the readers also operate in such an environment, there may be no problem. But if they do not, then the editor must take action.

These then are the syntax and idiom problems found in the work of well educated native speakers. But you may also find yourself having to edit writing by people who are not well educated or not native speakers. The problems found in the work of non-native speakers were discussed in Chapter 2.4. A syntax-related problem in the writing of less well educated people is discussed briefly in connection with punctuation in Chapter 3.5.

Terminology note: The word *idiomatic* is used in this book to cover a variety of phenomena which are sometimes distinguished: collocations such as 'brush one's teeth', prepositional idioms such as 'depend on' and phrasal verbs such as 'put up with'; set phrases such as 'not on your life'; or clichés such as 'please be advised that'. Similarly, expressions like 'wash one's teeth' or 'depend from' are all described as *unidiomatic*. The term *idiomatic* is also sometimes used in a broader sense to refer to 'the

way we say things in our language', that is, to refer to stylistic/rhetorical preferences such as the English preference for the plural rather than the singular in generic statements ('students must have obtained a mark of C in order to pass' rather than 'the student must...'). Here copyediting shades into stylistic editing.

Syntactic change and variability

Syntax and idiom are not eternal; they change as the generations pass. As a result, what older editors see as a clear error may be perfectly acceptable to educated younger speakers. Once innovations have begun to spread, editors have to decide whether they are now acceptable or still have to be edited out. A common type of innovation in English is the conversion of adjectives and nouns to verbs: 'pockets of downtown that are *resurging* as fashionable addresses'; 'an escaped convict *upheaves* the lives of a businessman and his wife'. These are probably one-off innovations by the writer, but you may want to check the most recent edition of your dictionary. Some publications insist on removing anything that is not recognized in an authoritative dictionary (unless it's in a quotation); others take a more relaxed attitude and allow considerable room for authors to innovate.

Bear in mind that syntax and idiom vary somewhat from person to person. The syntactic structures and word combinations felt to be natural by other speakers may not coincide exactly with those which you find natural. As a result, a writer may have used a structure or word combination which you find odd or impossible; but that does not mean it is wrong. I once discovered, through a Google search, that one can say 'underhand deal'; previously I thought it had to be 'underhanded', though the two forms do seem to vary with geography, with most hits for 'underhand' coming from the UK, Africa, India and Pakistan, and most hits for 'underhanded' coming from the U.S. and Canada.

A further danger with using yourself as an authority is that you may end up introducing your own personal linguistic idiosyncrasies into a text. A few years ago, I discovered to my surprise that the expression 'she favours her right arm' does not at all mean 'she tends to use her right arm rather than her left' but rather the exact opposite: 'she avoids putting too much strain on her right arm, by using her left arm instead'; her right arm is 'favoured' by being given a rest! A further discovery: I had always thought that 'fulsome praise' means abundant praise, but recently I discovered that for many people it means excessive praise.

Acceptable syntax also varies with genre. For example, in cook books, ellipsis of articles and pronouns is common: 'Slice onions. Then saute on high heat' rather than 'Slice the onions. Then saute them on high heat'. Such ellipsis is also often accepted in lists of points, which may diverge in other ways as well from the rules that apply to full sentences (e.g. no capital letter at the beginning or period at the end).

To check idiomaticity, consult the combinatory dictionaries listed at the end of this chapter. For example, if the text you are editing has the phrase 'sorry

choice', and you are uncertain whether this is an idiomatic word combination, the Benson dictionary will confirm that it is (you will learn that a choice can be bad, sorry, wrong, careful, difficult, good, happy, intelligent, judicious, wise, random or wide). The dictionaries by Wood and by Cowie and Mackin are entirely devoted to prepositional idioms, which often pose problems even for educated native speakers (report *to* or *for* work? compared *to* or *with* Paris?). To check the syntactic structure used with a word, try the *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*, which always gives a full-sentence example for each sense of a word. To check whether a word has a particular sense, or can be used in a certain syntactic structure, or in combination with a certain other word, you can also try on-line concordances, some of which are free or have free versions, such as the American National Corpus at www.anc.org or the British National Corpus and Corpus of Contemporary American English at corpus.byu.edu. Be aware however that a corpus does not tell you what is 'correct', only what is actually in use by native speakers and writers. On concordances and on grammar-checking software, see Chapter 8.

A final type of variability that may be important for editors in some geographical areas is dialect differences. Standard languages are historically based in certain local forms of speech as opposed to other local forms, which are deemed 'non-standard'. As a result, some people's natural syntax and idiom may be unacceptable in writing, and children are taught to avoid using them. Thus, to many native speakers of English in Ireland, the following are all perfectly natural sentences, inherent in their language: 'Is this car belonging to you?', 'They were after leaving a gym across the street', 'It does be colder at nights'. Such syntax is not currently acceptable in formal writing, but that could change. In a given geographical area, it may happen that people who use a non-standard dialect in their everyday speech decide they want to start using that dialect in books and newspapers (and not just in quotations for 'local colour'). At that point, editors have to decide what to do.

3.5 Punctuation

Punctuation, in a narrow sense, includes the familiar marks: the comma, the period, the quotation mark, the dash and so on. In a broader sense, punctuation includes a variety of other indicators that provide guidance to readers: the linespace or indentation between paragraphs, the capital letter that begins a sentence. A few aspects of punctuation (paragraph divisions, some uses of the comma) are really stylistic or structural matters, and will be considered in the next two chapters.

Some very common errors are opening a parenthetical remark but forgetting the closing parenthesis, and inconsistent punctuation in point-form presentation.

The rules governing punctuation are not as clear-cut as those governing spelling. Also, the British and US rules differ somewhat, for example in the positioning of closing quotation marks. With respect to point form, it is worth noting that while sentences inside paragraphs have a highly standardized punctuation regime

(initial capital; period or question mark or exclamation mark at the end), words in other parts of texts do not. Section headings, points in lists, captions of graphics and column titles on tables may take a wide variety of regimes: all keywords capitalized, first word capitalized or no words capitalized; various punctuation marks or no punctuation mark at the end.

Most uses of the English comma are not bound by rules at all. Using commas well calls for thought. There are two main types of variation:

- Some writers use many commas, some few.
- Some writers use commas to mark speech features such as pauses and emphasis, others to mark the boundaries of syntactic structures.

Regarding the second of these differences, it seems that there are three principles upon which comma use in English has historically been based:

- (A) When writing a sentence, use commas to indicate where someone should pause when reading the text aloud.
- (B) Place commas at the boundaries of the syntactic constituents of the sentence.
- (C) Imagine the sentence being spoken, then place commas to reflect your mental pauses or emphases (which may or may not occur at syntactic boundaries).

Approach (A) was historically first. Until a couple of hundred years ago, most literate people did not read silently. Aside from documents such as records (tax lists, property titles and so on), writing was a sort of script for reading aloud, either to oneself or to others. Punctuation indicated places to breathe, or to pause for rhetorical effect. Commas, colons and periods seem to have indicated increasing lengths of pause.

During the late 18th century and throughout the 19th century, approach (B) was widely advocated, though the older rhetorical tradition never died out. In this approach, thought to be suited to silent reading at great speed, commas help the eye by picking out syntactic structure, and thus clarify meaning. Finally, during the 20th century, approach (C) grew in importance, though it has not yet displaced the syntactic principle. The upshot is that people often use a combination of approaches (B) and (C).

Here's a very simple example of the difference between the two approaches:

approach (B):

Marilyn was the best translator available and, as soon as she returned from holiday, she was chosen to head up the prestigious project.

approach (C):

Marilyn was the best translator available, and as soon as she returned from holiday she was chosen to head up a prestigious project.

In the first sentence, the commas visually mark off ‘as soon as she returned from holiday’ as a clause interrupting the conjoined structure ‘Mary was...and...she was...’. In the second sentence, the comma reflects how someone might have mentally imagined speaking the sentence. A further point of interest here: if you ever had occasion to read the first of these two sentences aloud, you might revert to approach (A) and use the commas as indicators of when to pause, or perhaps lower the voice. However this would be a case of ‘pronouncing the commas’, as opposed to using them to reflect a prior imagined speaking, for the position after ‘and’ is just not a natural place to pause during speech.

An important point about approach (C) is that sometimes the addition of a comma to indicate a mental pause has the effect of adding attitudinal meaning. Consider:

He was apparently willing to support you.

He was, apparently, willing to support you.

The second sentence expresses a bit of surprise, or casts doubt either on ‘his’ motive for supporting ‘you’ or on whether ‘he’ really was willing, as ‘you’ have alleged.

More generally, the choice of a comma rather than some other punctuation mark (or no mark) can be used to reflect varying degrees of some attitudinal feature:

I went to his house and I found him there.

I went to his house, and I found him there.

I went to his house. And I found him there.

As we move from the first sentence to the third, an increasing degree of surprise at ‘his’ presence ‘there’ is expressed. Now, according to some versions of punctuation rules (perhaps those you learned at school), the last two of the above sentences are impermissible. However if you rigidly exclude sentences beginning with ‘and’, you will not be able to obtain the effect achieved in the third sentence. Indeed you will often find that if you follow the most rigid version of rules, in any area of language, you will reduce the number of semantic options open to you. Worse than that, if you try to implement rigid rules with word processor tools, you may create a disaster. One editor decided that the word ‘however’ must always be followed by a comma, and implemented this decision using the Search & Replace All function. The result, in one passage, was a sentence which began ‘However, much you enjoy translating...’.

A final important point about the two conflicting principles (B) and (C): some uses of the comma to reflect mental pauses are still quite strictly prohibited despite the rise of approach (C). If you are editing the work of people with relatively poor education in the standard written language, you may find such sentences as the following, from a report written by a health and safety officer:

The beeping of the alarm at an interval of thirty seconds or a minute, is a warning you should attend to. It means the batteries are dying, you need to replace them with fresh batteries.

The first sentence has a comma functioning to separate the subject of the sentence from the predicate. Although people do often pause at the subject-predicate boundary in speech, this use of commas ceased to be permissible in the written language during the 19th century. The second sentence has a comma where there should be a period or semi-colon. This usage is particularly common in the writing of less well educated people. The sentence is not a natural unit corresponding to a segment of the spoken language, and as a result it takes children some time to learn where to place periods. Some people never succeed and you may find yourself having to correct their errors.

Turning now to the second type of variation in comma use, let's look briefly at heavy versus light punctuation. The heavy punctuation of the 19th century was associated with the use of commas to mark grammatical boundaries. Over the course of the 20th century, punctuation became lighter, especially in the US. This was partly because sentences became shorter; obviously, shorter sentences don't need as many internal boundary markers. But in addition, commas became optional at many boundaries. In the lightest use, a comma will only appear when absolutely necessary to avoid misunderstanding. Four of the six commas in this paragraph you are now reading could be eliminated.

When you are not sure whether to use a comma, do not agonize. Avoid the situation Oscar Wilde describes: "I was working on the proof of one of my poems all morning, and took out a comma. In the afternoon, I put it back." Instead, follow this handy rule of thumb: *If in doubt, take it out.*

3.6 Usage

Copyeditors are widely expected to make texts conform to something variously called 'correct usage', 'good grammar', 'correct English' or 'proper English'. This is something quite different from the problems of Syntax and Idiom discussed earlier. There, the task was to make sure the text conforms to rules which are inherent in the spoken language, and don't need to be stated or taught to children (e.g. the possible positions in a sentence of an adverb like 'frequently'). Occasionally people fail to observe these rules (for example in long sentences with complicated structures, or when translating) but there is no debate about them; as soon as an error is pointed out, people immediately recognize it as an error. No native speaker, of any educational level, thinks 'he washes frequently his teeth' is acceptable English.

Correct usage, on the contrary, is a matter of debate. It is overtly prescribed in publications by various 'authorities' as well as in angry letters to the editor by private individuals. These prescriptivists, as I will call them, condemn certain usages as wrong, but many people do not agree and simply ignore the various prescriptions in their own writing.

Webster's Dictionary of English Usage defines usage as 'a collection of opinions about what English grammar is or should be, about the propriety of using certain words and phrases, and about the social status of those who use certain words and constructions'. These opinions are voiced with a view to standardization, that is, the elimination of variants. If some people write 'it's me' and others write 'it's I', only one – in this approach – can be right; the other must be proscribed. It's worth noting that this idea – there is only one right way – is not as widely accepted in the English-speaking world as it is in some other language communities. A common view among English-speaking writers is that one should certainly consider all opinions regarding a point of usage, but each person should then decide for themselves what is best.

Now in every speech community, variants are constantly appearing in the spoken language. People in one geographical area start to pronounce a word differently; members of the younger generation start to give a word a slightly changed meaning. Obviously there are limits to such variation if communication is to be maintained. As a result, every language community has a process, operating below the level of consciousness, whereby some variant usages are rejected and others accepted. However, greater variation can be tolerated in speech than in writing. Written language needs a higher level of standardization so that texts written at one time and place will be understandable at other times and places, possibly by readers not known to the author.

The question is: what degree of standardization should be enforced and on what principle should a proposed standard be accepted or rejected? More specifically for our concerns in this book: what should be the attitude of editors to matters of correct usage?

Consider the following sentences and ask yourself whether you would make any corrections in them:

- (1) If everybody minded their own business, the world would go round a good deal faster than it does.
- (2) A flock of birds were alighting here and there around the field.
- (3) Hopefully this text will be translated by tomorrow.
- (4) The volume can be increased by turning the blue knob.
- (5) Their mission is to boldly translate what no one has translated before.

There is nothing in any of these sentences that violates any syntactic rule inherent in the English language. Yet they all contain features that continue to be condemned in angry letters to the editor. According to some people:

In (1), *their* is wrong because *everybody* is singular; it has to be *his*.

In (2), *were* is wrong because *flock* is singular; it has to be *was*.

In (3), *hopefully* cannot be used as a disjunctive adverb; it's always a manner adverb, as in 'he looked at me hopefully'; the sentence should read 'it is to be hoped that this text...'

In (4) the subject of *turning* must be the same as the subject of *can*, but it is not the volume that will be turning the knob; the sentence must be reworded to ‘You can increase the volume by turning...’ or ‘The volume can be increased if you turn...’.

In (5) *boldly* must be moved because it is ‘splitting’ the infinitive ‘to translate’.

For an editor, the first thing to notice about all these complaints is that they have little to do with successful communication. None of these sentences are hard to read and none will be misunderstood.

A second point worth noticing is that prescriptions sometimes mask ideological agendas. Consider sentence (1). Those who demand ‘everybody minded *his* own business’ instead of ‘*their* own business’ claim that this is a matter of grammar (‘everybody’ is grammatically singular), but there is obviously an ideological agenda at work as well – a resistance to gender-neutral language. In fact, the use of *their* as a gender-neutral pronoun that can have a singular antecedent goes back many hundreds of years in English. It was not proscribed until the 18th century. You may have noticed that ‘they’ and ‘their’ are used with singular antecedents throughout this book.

The 18th century was a time when many notions of correct usage were first formulated, and Latin was often used as the model for what proper English should be. This is the origin for example of the rule prohibiting so-called split infinitives (see sentence 5 above). If a Latin sentence containing an infinitive is turned into English:

Nec quicquam est philosophia, si *interpretari* velis, quam studium sapientiae. (Cicero)

Philosophy is nothing other – if you wanted *to translate* – than the study of wisdom.

the part of the English corresponding to the italicized Latin infinitive has two words (*to translate*). Grammarians therefore decided, taking Latin as a universally valid model, that in English the infinitive is two words long (‘to X’). Since obviously no adverb can be placed in the middle of the Latin infinitive, it ‘followed’ that no adverb should be placed between the two parts of the English infinitive. Expressions like ‘to boldly go’ were proscribed, even though they had been in use for centuries. Split infinitives have in fact never ceased to be in widespread use; most people simply ignore the proscription, probably because it has no bearing whatsoever on the successful communication of ideas. Moreover, many sentences read awkwardly if the adverb is moved from its position between *to* and the verb: ‘You can choose to cooperate always with colleagues inside and also outside your work unit’ (‘you can always choose to cooperate...’ is not awkward, but it has a different meaning). Overly zealous avoidance of split infinitives can even create ambiguity: ‘He asked us clearly to underline the main points’; this could mean either ‘ask clearly’ or ‘underline clearly’.

Prescriptions sometimes actually create ‘incorrect’ usage through a process known as hypercorrection. This occurs in particular when they are taught in primary and secondary school classrooms, but not fully understood. You may recall being told not to write ‘Gwendolyn and me translated this text together’; it should be ‘Gwendolyn and I...’ because ‘I’ is the proper form for the subject of a finite verb. Many people have taken in the injunction itself (don’t use ‘Gwendolyn and me’) but not the explanation. As a result, one now frequently comes across sentences such as ‘This text was translated by Gwendolyn and I’. The ‘correct’ usage is in fact ‘Gwendolyn and me’ because ‘me’ is the correct form for the object of a preposition; you wouldn’t say ‘...translated by I’.

Not only do prescriptions sometimes create error, and not only do they have next to nothing to do with effective communication, but also they may actually hinder communication, by reducing the semantic options available to writers. Consider the rule that requires present-tense verbs to agree in number with their subject. Purveyors of correctness insist on a very rigid application of this rule. They prescribe ‘A flock of birds *was* alighting’ and rule out ‘*were* alighting’. This makes it impossible (without expanding the sentence) to distinguish two different situations: the ducks all alighted together at one spot (‘flock...was alighting’) as opposed to the situation where some alighted here and others there, at different times (‘birds were alighting’). If as editor you change ‘were alighting’ to ‘was alighting’, you may well be preventing the writer from saying what they want to say. More generally, usage ‘rules’ can become a crutch for editors. It is so much easier to mechanically apply pseudo-rules like ‘never start a sentence with a conjunction’ than to ask whether starting a particular sentence with ‘but’ is communicatively effective.

Another criticism one can make of the prescriptivists is their arbitrariness. For example, they rule out the use of ‘hopefully’ as a disjunctive adverb – see sentence (3) above – but they do not criticize other such adverbs. They have nothing to say about a sentence like ‘Frankly, this text will not be translated by tomorrow’. Yet the sentences are exactly parallel in meaning: I tell you hopefully/frankly that this text...

The prescriptivists also distinguish themselves by not being there when you need them. They complain about usages which do not impede effective communication, but fail to complain about usages which do impede it. For example they do not draw attention to a use of ‘may’ which is often ambiguous, even in context: ‘Helicopters may be used to fly heart attack victims to hospital’ can mean either that it is permitted to so use the helicopters or that it is possible that they will be so used.

A final criticism is that sometimes prescriptivists do manage to pick out a point that really can lead to misunderstanding, but their recommendations are not helpful. An example is the position of the word ‘only’. The written sentence ‘His condition can only be alleviated by surgery’ is ambiguous; it can mean either that his condition can be alleviated but not cured by surgery, or it can mean that the alleviation can be accomplished through surgery but not by any other means. In speech, this distinction is made by placing stress on *alleviated* for the former

meaning and on *surgery* for the latter. The prescriptivists correctly say that in writing, ambiguity can be avoided if 'only' is always placed directly before the expression it modifies: 'only be alleviated' for the first meaning, 'only by surgery' for the second. The problem is that if we followed this rule all the time, we would be forced to write awkward and unnatural sentences; instead of 'I only wanted to talk to her', we would have to write 'I wanted only to talk to her'. There is simply no easy way to avoid ambiguity with 'only'; you need to think about the possibility of misinterpretation every time.

Now prescriptivists often say that a certain usage should be followed because it was observed by the best writers of the past. Such references to writers of the past lend a patina of objectivity to their claims, but in reality, the prescriptivists do not do any research to determine the usage of 'the best writers'. Sentence (1), for example, is by Lewis Carroll – surely a good writer – and many usages condemned by prescriptivists can be found in Milton and Shakespeare. In practice, the 'best writers' turn out to be those who follow the critic's prescriptions.

Why do some people get angry about what they perceive as incorrect usage? For some, the motivation is social liberalism; they believe that if the children of poorly educated parents, or parents educated outside the English-speaking world, could learn a certain version of Standard English usage, this would help pave the way for their social advancement. Indeed, it may have been a political concern to eliminate differences among immigrants and among social classes that originally led to a much greater interest in prescriptive grammar in the United States than in Britain. There continues to be much greater resistance in the US to the idea that dictionaries and grammars simply describe the language. There is a demand – both from the linguistically insecure and from the self-appointed saviours of the language – that such publications serve as sources of authority, that they prescribe what is right. Quite different are British authorities such as Henry Fowler and Ernest Gowers, who tend to take a relatively moderate and reasoned approach; they do not rule out split infinitives, for example. They tend to be more focused on effective communication than on correctness.

American linguistic conservatives like John Simon, on the other hand, tend to ban certain usages outright and fail to give reasons for their prescriptions; such and such a usage is just wrong, indeed barbaric, and shame on you for not knowing so! There is often a strong moralizing tone in their writings, suggesting that incorrect usage is on a par with sexual permissiveness and other conservative bugbears. English, in this view, is not merely changing; it is in decline and needs to be saved. Linguistic conservatives are motivated by various combinations of snobbery (any cultured person would know that you don't start a sentence with 'but') and despair that the younger generation is not emulating the older.

All these criticisms of the prescriptivists are not meant to suggest that there are no problems standing in the way of effective communication. Of course such problems exist; indeed, that is why editors are needed. As we saw in Chapter 1, writing lends itself much more than speech to misunderstanding. The problem with the prescriptivists is that they generally do not draw attention to the problems that hinder effective communication. In the next chapter, we'll be looking at

features of writing which really do cause readers problems, features which prescriptivists practically never mention, such as poor inter-sentence connections.

Does all this mean that editors can ignore the prescriptivists? Definitely not. The reason is that many people think 'correct' usage is important and they expect editors to serve as sources of authority, defending the language against 'incorrect' usage. Also, many readers of your edited text will be displeased by 'incorrect' usages. They may very well make the condemned errors themselves, in their own writing, but they believe in the idea of maintaining the standard.

How far should you go, as an editor, in enforcing 'correct' usage? Since the various published authorities often do not agree on particular points of usage, you will need to adopt an approach to each contentious point. Sometimes your employer's style guide, or a senior editor, will decide the matter for you, but more often you will have to decide yourself. You must bear in mind that if you adopt a conservative position, you risk being branded as out of touch with the younger generation, with current social movements, and other sources of linguistic innovation; on the other hand, if you adopt a more liberal position, you risk annoying conservative readers and being branded as an agent of declining standards. You won't be able to satisfy everyone.

A point to bear in mind in this regard is that translators and editors, by virtue of their self-image as 'servants', or by virtue of demands made on them to be 'language guardians', probably have a tendency to lean unconsciously toward a conservative approach to usage. A special effort will be needed if you want to counteract this and take a more liberal or even innovating approach to language when appropriate.

One possibly comforting thought is that as the number of people who write in English as their second language increases, editors may become less fussy about correctness because these writers, being members of other cultures, will not have any particular allegiance to traditions of correctness; they will be concerned only with communicative effectiveness. This will of course also be true of the constantly increasing number of *readers* of English who are not native speakers. They will in all likelihood never have heard of split infinitives, and be blissfully unaware of their incorrectness. On the other hand, the situation may be quite different with those non-native users of English who have spent long years studying the language and have achieved a very high level of mastery. They may have been taught a rather rigid and conservative version of English, and may be shocked at the 'laxness' of many native users. As a result, they may provide added support for native-speaker traditionalists.

To make usage decisions, rely on sources whose judgments are based on actual investigations of what appears to be acceptable and what not. If you are wondering, for example, whether 'they substituted x with y' is acceptable, Webster's Dictionary of English Usage will tell you that 'substitute with' is standard but that one may wish to avoid it because of the potential for negative reaction. The Canadian Oxford Dictionary is somewhat more negative, saying that this is a disputed usage and should be avoided in standard English: use 'they substituted y for x' or 'they replaced x with y'. The New Oxford Dictionary of English, on the

other hand, says that despite the potential for confusion, ‘substitute with’ is well established, especially in some scientific contexts, and though still disapproved of by traditionalists, is now generally regarded as part of normal standard English. This suggests that an editor who wishes to appeal to either a traditionalist or a Canadian audience will avoid ‘substitute with’, but that otherwise a writer’s ‘substitute with’ need not be altered.

Practice

In copyediting, there are a great many different kinds of error to catch, and you may find it difficult to attend to them all at once. In particular, you may find it hard to pay attention to errors that affect word-level units and at the same time to pay attention to errors that affect larger units. For example, if you are attending to individual words, you may not notice that a lengthy parenthetical expression has no closing parenthesis, or that some paragraphs in the text are indented whereas others are not. Sometimes your attention may be so focused on individual words that you do not even notice errors such as ‘funds to assist towns rebuild their sewers’, where ‘help’ was changed to ‘assist’ but the needed accompanying syntax change was not made (‘to rebuild’ or ‘in rebuilding’). This problem – ‘micro-attention’ versus ‘macro-attention’ – affects all types of editing (and revision), not just copyediting.

You may find it easier, at first, to work through a text twice: once paying attention to micro-level problems and once to macro-level problems. Some of the exercises suggested below go even further: you will be asked to copyedit for just one feature, such as specific punctuation marks, ignoring all other problems.

Later, when you are practising ‘full’ copyediting (that is, for all types of error), count the number of problems of each type which you missed: typos, inconsistency of format, closing parentheses and so on. It may be that mere awareness of your problem will correct it; subconsciously, you will start paying more attention to that type of problem. If this does not help, and you continue to miss a significant number of errors, you should make a practice of going through a text more than once.

Regarding the speed with which you move through the text, your instructor will give you some time-limited exercises to do in class. However, you may also find it useful to experiment with speed at home. For example, before you prepare the final version of an assignment, work very quickly through the first half of a text and much more slowly through the second half. Then, when the class goes over the text, see whether you caught more errors when working slowly.

A tip on micro-editing: you may find it useful to place a ruler or sheet of paper under the line you are working on. This will direct your attention to the words on that line, and ensure that your eye does not skip lines. By the way, it is much easier for the eye to miss problems if you work on screen (see Chapter 8), so for now, do all your copyediting work on paper.

Exercises can be speeded up if you simply underline places in the text where a change is needed, without actually making the change. Remember that the

difficult thing in editing is finding the problems. Correcting copyediting problems, once you have found them, is usually fairly easy.

Exercise 1. *Following style sheets*

Using the style sheet your instructor gives you, find (but don't correct) the places in the practice text that deviate from the style sheet.

Exercise 2. *Punctuation – commas*

Your instructor will give you a text from which all the commas have been stripped. Add just those commas which are necessary for clarity.

You will then receive a text that does contain commas. Remove all those not necessary for clarity. If necessary, reword sentences to reduce the number of commas if you feel there are too many.

Exercise 3. *Punctuation – paired marks*

Your instructor will give you a text containing many paired punctuation marks (parentheses, quotation marks, dashes, delimiting commas). Be sure the closing mark is not omitted, that the paired marks are not overused, and that there is some principle behind the use of, say, a dash as opposed to a parenthesis.

Exercise 4. *Spelling – spotting the errors*

Your instructor will give you a text containing spelling and typographical errors that would not be detected by Spellcheck. Find them but don't correct them.

Exercise 5. *Spelling – frequently confused words*

Some of the following sentences contain the wrong word; for example, sentence (a) should read 'dispersed the crowd', not 'disbursed the crowd'. First find and correct the errors. Then, regardless of whether a sentence contains an erroneous word, identify the frequently confused pair, and state the meaning of each of the words. (Note that this is a type of error which Spellcheck will not detect. Grammar checkers have a 'confused words' option, but they do not include all common confusions.)

- (a) The police disbursed the crowd.
- (b) You should be more discreet about what you say.
- (c) Her grandmother gave her a broach for Christmas.
- (d) His tie doesn't compliment his suit.
- (e) City councillors voted 5-3 against the motion.
- (f) She was censored for failing to report a conflict of interest
- (g) ... (Your instructor will provide further examples.)

Exercise 6. *Syntax – word-processing errors*

Read through several articles in a newspaper and try to find some examples of syntactic errors arising from word-processing slips (deletions not made; too many words deleted, etc).

Exercise 7. Syntax – structure and meaning

Consider this sentence:

While few would argue that nuclear weapons are a great evil, one can't help but wonder about the state of the world had Hitler or the Soviets acquired such weapons and the US not.

Clearly, 'argue' here is intended to mean 'dispute' in the sense of 'disagree with the proposition that' (as opposed to 'engage in an argument about' or 'give reasons for something'). Consult a variety of sources to determine whether 'argue' can have this meaning when it appears in this particular syntactic structure (i.e. followed by a *that*-clause).

Exercise 8. Usage

Between about 1970 and 1985, social conservatives battled unsuccessfully to prevent 'sexually attracted to members of the same sex' from becoming an accepted meaning of the word 'gay' in standard written English. They claimed that there was already a perfectly acceptable word, namely 'homosexual'. Their opponents said that 'homosexual' was a medical label imposed by those who thought same-sex attraction was a sickness, and that the self-description 'gay', which had a long history in spoken English, should be used instead. Imagine you are an editor in the late 1970s. Will you replace 'homosexual' with 'gay'? Or will you replace 'gay' with 'homosexual'? If the latter, what will you do with proper names such as 'Gay Liberation League'? How will the following factors bear on your decision: the publication? its readers? the writer whose work you are editing? style sheets? dictionary entries? your own views on sexual orientation? Try to find some documents from the period (dictionaries, style manuals published by newspapers, letters to the editor) that bear on the question.

Exercise 9. Usage

What policy would you as an editor adopt toward a writer's use of 'he' to refer to any human being, as opposed to 'he or she' (i.e. overtly non-sexist), or 'they'. (For the purpose of this exercise 'they' covers all such neutral solutions to the problem of avoiding either 'he' or 'he or she'.)

Would you (i) always leave whatever the writer uses? (ii) always replace 'he' with 'he or she'? (iii) always replace 'he' with 'they' but leave 'he or she' (iv) always replace both 'he' and 'he or she' (whichever the writer uses) with 'they'? If you would sometimes use one approach, sometimes another, state the circumstances.

Find out what two or three of the guides listed at the end of this chapter have to say on the subject.

If you would always use the neutralizing strategy (iv), how would you respond to the argument that you are engaging in censorship, that is, preventing the writer from expressing the message (whatever that may be) which is conveyed by using 'he' or 'he or she'?

Suppose you are editing a translation into English, and you find that the translator has not used an ‘equivalent’ strategy (i.e. has changed the ‘degree of gender neutrality’ in one direction or the other). What would you do: create ‘equivalence’ with the source text? adopt one of the above strategies (ii) to (iv) regardless of what is in the source text? sometimes adopt one approach, sometimes another?

Exercise 10. Usage

Many usage authorities require the so-called ‘serial comma’ (use of a comma before the final ‘and’ or ‘or’ of a list, as in “height, width, or depth”). Others disapprove of it, while still others allow or recommend it under certain circumstances. Read the Wikipedia article ‘Serial comma’, which lists the views of a considerable number of style guides. What is your opinion?

Further reading

(See the References list near the end of the book for details on these publications.)

Copyediting guides: Butcher (2009); Judd (2001); O’Connor (1986); Rude and Eaton (2011 Part 3).

About style sheets and manuals: Samson (1993: ch. 7).

Style manuals:

The Chicago Manual of Style, 16th edition, 2011. University of Chicago Press.

Wikipedia Manual of Style

Scientific Style and Format: the CSE Manual for Authors, Editors, and Publishers, 7th edition, 2006. Council of Science Editors.

European Commission Directorate General for Translation English Style Guide. 7th edition, June 2011. http://ec.europa.eu/translation/english/guidelines/documents/styleguide_english_dgt_en.pdf

European Union *Interinstitutional Style Guide*, 2011 edition: <http://publications.europa.eu/code/en/en-000100.htm> (From this page you can select English or any of 23 other EU languages.)

United Nations Editorial Manual: <http://dd.dgacm.org/editorialmanual/>

The Canadian Style: <http://www.btb.termiumplus.gc.ca/tpv2guides/guides/tcdnstyl/index-eng.html?lang=eng>

List of dictionaries, grammars, style manuals and usage guides: Dragga and Gong (1989: 101-106).

Both native and non-native speakers will benefit from the *Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner’s English Dictionary* (5th edition 2006), which is available in paper and as an e-dictionary.

Combinatory dictionaries: Benson *et al* (2010); Cowie and Mackin (1975); Rodale (1947); Wood (1967). Or enter “combinatory dictionary” or “collocation finder” in your search engine.

Usage: Milroy and Milroy (1999); Bodine (1974); Hirsch (1977: ch. 2); Crystal (2007).

Diversity of English, Standard English: McArthur (1998); Greenbaum (1996: ch. 1).
Punctuation: Baron (2000: ch. 6); Halliday (1989: 32-39); Gowers (1987: ch. 14);
Samson (1993: ch. 12); Greenbaum (1996: ch. 11).
Spelling: Greenbaum (1996: ch. 12); Baron (2000: ch. 4).
Copyediting at newspapers: Westley (1972: ch. 3).