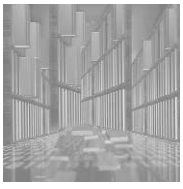
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1

The editor in context

EDITING FOR PUBLICATION is a little-known occupation. The common impression is that it consists of correcting grammar and punctuation, which it does, but the job has many other aspects that make it endlessly absorbing. If you are suited to it, editing is the best fun you can have at a desk.

What makes a good editor? Editors share a defining characteristic: they love ideas and words and books. In a world of increasing specialisation, most are generalists. Reflecting the female domination of the book industry, almost all of them are women.

Two contradictory stereotypes prevail. One is the Jacquie Onassis type, who has languorous lunches with celebrity authors and swans about with the literati at the best parties. The other is the eagle-eyed, anal-retentive, obsessive frump who flays inoffensive manuscripts with her punitive pencil. In fact, editors who fit either of these stereotypes don't get far. Editors have been compared to midwives, surgeons and even chameleons, but the most apt simile is inorganic: 'Good editors may be likened to those crystal-clear prisms which form a vital part of a pair of binoculars. They are not there to alter the view or change the scene, but to make it clearer and closer.'[1]

Editorial skills

The profession of editing rejects all but paragons with an extraordinary array of virtues:

- *Communication skills:* Editors are articulate and communicate lucidly in writing; they can write in various registers and styles and take on the voice of an author.
- *Social skills:* Editors are tactful, patient, flexible, good at negotiating and have respect for others' views.

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- *Cognitive skills:* Editors are good at abstract, inductive, critical thinking; they quickly identify the essence of a piece of writing and grasp underlying concepts and themes.
- *Reading skills:* Editors use many strategies to gain meaning from text, such as skimming, skipping and parsing.
- *Imagination and initiative:* Editors perceive how to transform raw text into an effective publication by imagining the reader's needs. They are resourceful in solving problems and finding information.
- *Concentration, perseverance, attention to detail:* Editors engage with complex written material for days or weeks at a time. They are methodical and meticulous, performing tedious, repetitive tasks with painstaking care.
- *Managerial and administrative skills:* Editors are good at organising, prioritising, and meeting deadlines. They keep track of numerous multi-stage projects over extended periods.
- *Team players:* Editors collaborate well, and they expect the author or the publishing team to take credit for their work.

To some extent editing is a state of mind, poised between attachment and detachment. On the one hand, you care enough about the work to want to do it well. On the other, you usually have little control over the project—purpose, design, resources—so you must let go of it and not feel that any defects or failures diminish you personally. On some jobs, all you can do is turn garbage into mediocrity; to put it another way, you can't polish a turd. The editor's position is summed up in the old saying 'All care and no responsibility': you do your work diligently, but the overall responsibility for the outcome belongs to the publishing team.

Some editors are so self-effacing that they claim their work is invisible. It is true that non-experts might not see how the effect is achieved, but the appeal of a well-edited publication is as evident as that of a well-tended garden or a well-prepared meal.

Applying editorial skills

Editorial practice is not confined to professional editors. Many job descriptions require 'effective written communication skills'. Our highly literate society rewards those who can use language well to explain, instruct, persuade or entertain.

Every writer is to some extent an editor and needs to understand the principles explained here, whether the output is a fantasy novel or a letter to the newspaper. The same applies to communications that are not publications in the traditional sense. Teachers preparing handouts and business people giving presentations must consider structure and language, integrate words with artwork, and tailor their material to the needs of the audience.

Enlightened executives and officials know that errors in details such as spelling will diminish their organisation's credibility and enrage some of their customers. Moreover, clear writing can deliver enormous savings in time and money.

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In Britain, the Campaign for Plain English estimates that 'sloppy letter-writing alone costs . . . about £6000 million a year, as a result of mistakes, inefficiency and lost business'.[2]

The chapters that follow draw most of their examples from books, but the principles can—indeed, should—be applied to any print or screen publication, small or large. Editing adds value by providing clarity and precision in:

- media releases
- newspaper and magazine articles
- pamphlets and brochures
- research papers
- technical reports
- submissions
- tenders
- instruction manuals
- catalogues
- legal documents
- parliamentary statutes
- government regulations
- forms and questionnaires
- publicity and advertising
- product information
- prospectuses
- annual reports
- proposals and evaluations
- business letters and memos
- fact sheets
- menus
- résumés
- learning materials
- family history.

The book industry

Although editors work in many sectors, the book industry is the origin and the core of the profession, so we will survey it briefly.

In Australia today, the publishing world is in a state of commercial and technological upheaval that bewilders those who try to earn their living in it. In circumstances of chaos, the long view is often calming. Hindsight shows us that the trends in publishing that disturb us today—the commercialisation of mass culture, the rat race of galloping technology, the increasing domination of multinational conglomerates—are merely the latest chapters in a long-running thriller.[3] We can confidently say, however, that books are changing and the trade isn't what it used to be.

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The Australian book industry has long been dominated by overseas-owned firms: once British, now multinational. The pattern is for small local houses to emerge and make their mark, and then be taken over by the giants. Mergers and acquisitions follow each other rapidly in a remorseless game of musical chairs. The book world grieved to see the venerable Angus & Robertson fall to HarperCollins and become a blip on the bottom line of News Corporation. But the news is not all bad. Compared to the late 1960s, when wholly Australian-owned publishers were hard to find, there are many small independent houses.

Sydney is home to most of the major commercial and educational publishers, including McGraw–Hill, Simon & Schuster and Hodder Headline, as well as the major independent Australian trade house, Allen & Unwin, and smaller firms like Duffy & Snellgrove and Hale & Iremonger. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Sydney accounts for half of industry turnover.[4] Melbourne is the headquarters for several large houses, including Penguin, Macmillan Education, Harcourt and Pearson, and several university presses, including Melbourne, Oxford and Cambridge. Melbourne also has ABC Books, the publishing arm of the national broadcaster, and many small and specialist publishers, such as Lothian Books, Text Publishing, Scribe Publications, Spinifex Press and Lonely Planet. Melbourne-based publishers produce 40 per cent of turnover, which leaves 10 per cent distributed over the rest of the country. In Brisbane is the University of Queensland Press, which publishes poetry and fiction as well as scholarly books, and John Wiley & Sons. Perth has the University of Western Australia Press and some commercial publishing. Small publishers like Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Wakefield Press (Adelaide), Magabala Books (Broome), Institute of Aboriginal Development Press (Alice Springs) and Aboriginal Studies Press (Canberra), though economically negligible, are culturally significant.

A female industry

Unlike most Australian industries, book publishing is women's business. It employs about 5000 people, of whom almost two-thirds are female. Among editors, the ratio is nearer nine to one. As is usually the case, though, men are over-represented in decision-making positions. The role of women in Australian publishing has been overlooked. As one researcher points out: 'despite some notable exceptions, the history of the book in Australia largely omits women. This has resulted in significant gender biases and distortions in the mainstream history of Australian print culture.'[5]

It is said that the majority of readers, especially of fiction, are female.

The position of authors

Australian authors feel fragile, besieged by the bean counters and neglected by an ignorant public. It is true that publishers have abdicated their role of fostering authors' skills, but there have been compensating developments. Government patronage of writers has increased in recent decades, with the establishment of

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the Australia Council and the Public Lending Right. More than a dozen writers' centres, together with literary competitions, awards, grants and writers' festivals, offer support and exposure, and creative writing courses flourish in adult education, universities and TAFE. Most of our major authors of both fiction and educational books are Australian residents and some of them make a reasonable living from their work, though authors who achieve international success are often lost to local publishers.

Trends

If we take the long view, some trends in publishing are positive. Domination by overseas interests has not impoverished our culture or diminished the national conversation: we are reading a lot more Australian books than we were three decades ago. More than 9000 new titles were published in 2001/02, and the total number of books sold increased by one-quarter over the previous year to 130 million. The proportion of Australian titles has climbed from one in ten in 1969 to well over half. The value of local educational, fiction and non-fiction titles exceeds imports—in the case of non-fiction, by 179 per cent. We lag, however, in children's books: two-thirds (by value) are imported. The global nature of English-language publishing cuts both ways, with some local publishers producing primarily for foreign markets. The value of exports amounted to 14 per cent of total book sales. Publishers' profits have steadied after a plunge in 2000/01, which probably reflected the imposition of the first tax on books.

Although sales of Australian titles have skyrocketed, some see this vigour as unhealthy. They would prefer to see fewer books of better quality, arguing that good books get lost among the dross. Certainly many books are undercooked or even half-baked, but we have to maintain perspective: in the Victorian era, for instance, people read a lot of trash as well as Darwin and Dickens. (You should see the books my grandparents received as school prizes in the 1890s.)

Publishers make about 90 per cent of their profits from book sales rather than sales of rights. Add to this the news that in 2001/02 printed books earned $800 million in contrast to electronic and audio book sales of $12 million, and we can see that the traditional wood-pulp format is far from obsolete. Although electronic publishing is touted as the coming thing, no one seems to have figured out a way to make money from it. Major publishers are reviewing their investments, and problems in the world's largest media corporation, Time Warner (formerly AOL Time Warner), suggest that bigger is not necessarily more profitable. Even apparently secure niche publishers can suffer from global events, as Lonely Planet found when sales of travel books plunged after September 11, 2001.

In a new trend, the Australian publishing industry is becoming reflective and undergoing academic scrutiny. 'A recently completed bibliography itemises sixty-three Australian-originated higher degree theses on book publishing, the book trade and related topics, together with twelve higher degree research projects currently in progress in Australia.'[6]

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There are many pressures on Australian book publishing—changes in intellectual property rights, the digital transformation of knowledge, shifts in reading habits and methods. So far the industry has proved vigorous and resilient. It's encouraging to hear that young readers are keen: 'Many Australian children's publishers say the local industry is basking in a golden age, prompted by "book-hungry kids" and hard-won recognition that children's books are worthy cultural investments.'[7]

Who's who in publishing

The job description 'editor' arose in the book industry, but editorial skills are in demand for all kinds of written communication. Once upon a time, stenographers routinely corrected their bosses' grammar and improved their expression. Now that everyone does their own typing, many corporate and government bodies are employing editors to add value to information and ensure that their communications are literate and effective.

Editors' workplaces are so varied that it is difficult to generalise about the personnel, but it is usually possible to distinguish a triad of editor, author and publisher.[8]

Editor

In many situations the editor manages the publication project, doing everything from drawing up the project plan to organising the launch. Large publishing houses usually split the editorial role, and although the job titles are confusing the division is usually much the same. The commissioning editor (acquisitions editor, managing editor, publisher) takes the management role: developing the concept with the author, negotiating the contract, writing the publishing proposal, drawing up the budget, assembling the publishing team and supervising production. The editor (copyeditor, line editor, desk editor) does the grunt work, as described in the following chapters.

Author

The author of a publication may be one person, or several people, or a committee of some sort. In educational, corporate and government publishing an individual may prepare a draft that is then reworked by others and approved by a committee.

Sometimes the author does very little of the actual writing. Anthologies, collections and reference works may have many contributors, and one or two individuals take overall responsibility for the content. For a historical diary or an edition of a classic literary work, the volume editor (co-ordinating editor, academic editor) plays the role of the author. Books such as celebrity autobiographies are often ghost-written, and well-known academics lend their names to textbooks on which underlings have done the bulk of the work.

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In this book the term 'author' means the person who has the responsibility for authorial decisions during the publication process. However the term is defined, the editor must always respect the author's moral rights and the integrity of the work.

I have referred to the author with feminine pronouns throughout.

Publisher

The publisher is likewise difficult to characterise. The simplest case is that of editors working in house in the book industry, where the publisher is their employer; the publishing decisions are made by the commissioning editor and ratified by senior management. For freelance editors, the publisher is usually the client. In the case of self-published works, of course, the publisher is also the author. In corporate and government publishing, the media unit or the public relations department plays the publisher's role.

In essence, the publisher is the person who controls the budget and schedule, and thus determines the nature and quality of the publication.

Colleagues

The editor's colleagues are designers, typesetters, indexers and proofreaders, and for some publications there may also be picture researchers, permissions editors, photographers, illustrators and cartographers. The job descriptions are slippery: on some projects the editor not only edits but also does the proofreading, page layout and indexing, or a desktop publisher may do both the design and the typesetting. Publishing houses usually outsource most of these tasks, and even in-house editors may regularly work with colleagues they have never laid eyes on.

The reader

Lurking unseen among these various characters is the most important of all, the whole purpose of the publication—the reader. The editor holds the image of the target readers constantly in mind and shapes the content and form of the publication to fit their needs.

I have referred to the reader with masculine pronouns throughout.

Portrait of a profession

The doctrine of economic rationalism has dominated all business enterprises for some time, but publishers are beginning to realise what they have lost in sacrificing editorial standards to the bottom line. Peter Donoughue, managing director of John Wiley & Sons Australia, sounds a warning:

> At a time when celebrities can't write, corporations lie, actors can't sing, journalists run agendas, politicians deceive, and institutions are cowed, we need editors with high standards to produce text readers can trust. At a time of insecurity, a time characterised by the misuse of language, those of us professionally engaged

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> in the business of information need courage to confront misinformation, hype, cant, cliché and spin.
>
> More than ever, we need editors committed to quality and excellence. Such editors have always been underrated in the publishing industry. Large and critically important parts of the editorial function have been outsourced for decades. We publishers have decided we don't own that function, just as we don't own the composition or printing functions. But it has always seemed to me that we are an impoverished industry because of it. Our standards, as publishers, have been lowered. Our regard for quality, for the quality of the text itself, is off our radar screen. The less we pay for editing the better. That's all we care about. The hope for quality therefore rests with editors themselves.[9]

Over the last few years, editors have taken up this challenge.

The Council of Australian Societies of Editors

The editing profession in Australia is organised on a federal basis. Each state and territory has its own independent society of editors, the oldest of which, the Victorian society, was founded in 1970. These societies came together to form the Council of Australian Societies of Editors in 1998. The council consists of the presidents of the societies or their nominees. They meet in person only once a year or so, and the rest of the time the council exists in cyberspace, operating by email and teleconference.

Despite its ethereal nature, CASE has achieved some solid gains, undertaking projects to promote editing and editors on a national basis. A national magazine, *The Australian Editor*, foundered after only two issues. More successful were the development of *Australian Standards for Editing Practice*, described below, and the first national conference of editors in Brisbane in July 2003.[10] Plans for a national accreditation scheme are well advanced.[11]

It is not easy to create a national focus for the profession. Each society has its own peculiarities—in Canberra and Tasmania, for instance, many editors work for government agencies—so there are particular interests to consider. Editors should cultivate the national dimensions of the profession. All the societies except the Northern Territory's have websites (listed at the end of the Appendix), and most of them make their newsletters, with many articles of interest, available online.

Australian Standards for Editing Practice

The *Standards*, which are reproduced in the Appendix, are innovative—in fact, a world first—as a comprehensive statement of the power of editing to add value to information and to clarify communication. By codifying traditional editorial skills, they mark the frontiers of the editor's territory in the flux of the knowledge economy. And the territory needs to be defended. 'After all, no one is pressing graphic designers to improve their proofreading skills or typesetters to brush up on structural editing.'[12]

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I was fortunate to be the Victorian delegate on the working group set up by CASE to draw up the *Standards*. The group, comprising one delegate from each society, had diverse editorial backgrounds, from learned journals to electronic educational publishing. If you can imagine editors editing a document about editing, you will know that this was a thorough job.

The working group convened early in 1999 and agreed that the *Standards* would:

- be completely separate from any accreditation process that may or may not follow
- codify the core capabilities expected of professional editors, both in-house and freelance, in Australia
- cover editing for publication in both print and electronic media
- aim primarily at informing editors, with secondary audiences of editors' clients and educators.

Furthermore, we determined to make the *Standards*:

- generic and timeless: not establishing preferences for specific resources, such as dictionaries, referencing systems or technologies
- universal: not tailored to particular areas of specialisation, such as scientific editing, or roles such as commissioning or managing editors
- applicable at all levels: not graded, for instance, into experienced and junior editing capabilities
- statements about knowledge, not about tasks or who does them—we did not want to produce a checklist for commissioning a particular project.

The decision to call the document 'Standards' has aroused comment. Kathie Stove, convenor of the working group, explains the rationale:

> We used *The Macquarie Dictionary*'s first and most general definition of the noun 'standard': 'anything taken by general consent as a basis of comparison; an approved model'... Australian Standards produced by the organisation Standards Australia have a very specific definition and purpose which is not the same as ours. Standards Australia holds the copyright for the standards its committees develop, and charges for copies. Buying into this system would run counter to our need to disseminate these standards as widely as possible. Standards Australia has said there is no problem with the societies of editors calling their document 'Australian Standards for Editing Practice'.[13]

The working group began with standards prepared by the Editors' Association of Canada and a checklist prepared by Loma Snooks for the Canberra Society of Editors. We followed their traditional distinction of editing into substantive editing, copyediting, proofreading, and tried to subdivide these categories. But the subheadings highlighted the considerable overlaps in editorial tasks: where do you draw the line between copyediting and proofreading, or

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between substantive editing and copyediting, or between substantive editing and ghost writing?

Following this revelation, we changed the categories to:

- A, The Publishing Process, Conventions and Industry Practice
- B, Management and Liaison
- C, Substance and Structure
- D, Language and Illustrations
- E, Completeness and Consistency.

This required us to reconceptualise the editor's role. Suddenly the managerial skills of editors came into focus—monitoring, prioritising, liaising, managing documents, maintaining schedules, foreseeing and preventing problems. We realised that proficiency in these areas is just as essential as knowledge of spelling, grammar and typography.

After receiving comments on the resulting draft from workshops in each state and territory, the working group drew up a final proposal which was put to the members of the societies of editors and received overwhelming support. *Australian Standards for Editing Practice* was officially launched at the national conference of editors and indexers in Canberra in April 2001.

An academic assessment of the *Standards* against comparable documents from Canada and Britain concludes that the Australian approach is 'the most appropriate', given the current changes in reading, publishing and technology:

> [The *Standards*] see the editor as both freelance and in-house, working centrally but not exclusively with language, with a varied, versatile and up-to-date understanding of new technologies and publication forms. . . . The real challenge lies in the receptivity of the profession towards new competences. [The acceptance of the *Standards*] must partially reflect the changing nature of the editor's range of skills: no longer a departmentalised editor following tightly observed work flows and rigid structures but a skill-integrated, unboundaried editor as much at home with a copy of *HTML Web Pages* or *The Elements of Design* as with a style manual.[14]

Trade union

In the 1970s the Australian Journalists' Association negotiated a book editors' award through the Arbitration Commission. The AJA has since become part of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, a union that also covers actors, cinema attendants and circus workers. The organisation probably benefits from economies of scale but does not pay much attention to its book editors.

The current (2001) version of the award applies to editors working in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory. It provides for a 38-hour week, four weeks' annual leave with a 17½ per cent loading, and eight days' sick leave each year; it also covers part-time and casual work.

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