

Manuscript Surprises: A Problem in Copy Editing

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A FRUSTRATING BUT CHALLENGING ASPECT OF COPY EDITING is the occurrence of "manuscript surprises." A manuscript surprise is a problem in a manuscript that requires an editor to go back and revise changes and decisions already made. Manuscript surprises occur because many editing decisions are linked to one another, and the editor—especially in the case of a long manuscript—often cannot anticipate how an editorial decision will be affected by upcoming passages. In this article we discuss the different kinds of manuscript surprises and the ways in which editors can deal with them.

Before we can discuss manuscript surprises, we must first distinguish between "discrete" and "linked" elements in a manuscript. Discrete elements do not bear upon one another. When an editor corrects a grammatical error or clarifies or shortens a vague or wordy passage, the change does not affect any other parts of the manuscript. Linked elements, on the other hand, do bear on one another. A linked element can be linked to one upcoming element or can be part of a whole series of linked elements.

The figure numbers in a manuscript are an example of a series of linked elements. If an editor decides to remove a superfluous figure from a manuscript, then all succeeding figure numbers in the manuscript must be renumbered. Because the existence and nature of the linkage in this example are obvious to the editor, there is no potential for surprise. In other cases, however, the editor has no way of knowing that the element he or she is dealing with is linked to subsequent elements in the manuscript or else may be misled about how the linkage works. These linked elements have a high potential for surprise: the editor may encounter an element later in the manuscript that necessitates a different treatment for the entire series of linked elements.

Incidentally, we should note that manuscript surprises are not the same

as simple oversights. An editor who realizes only toward the end of an editing job that the author has been misspelling a word will of course have to go back through the manuscript to correct this simple oversight. But that is not the same as when the editor has made a reasonable decision in the early part of the manuscript and then encounters new information that makes it necessary to revise the previously edited elements in a linked series.

Elements in a manuscript are linked to each other according to different principles, and so manuscript surprises can be categorized on the basis of these principles. We have found it useful to divide manuscript surprises into the following three categories: surprises related to mechanical consistency, surprises related to content, and surprises related to organization. We now describe and illustrate these three categories of manuscript surprise.

SURPRISES RELATED TO MECHANICAL CONSISTENCY

Every manuscript contains mechanical elements of numerous kinds: abbreviations, hyphenated compounds, numerals, spelled numbers, and so forth. The editor must ensure that throughout the manuscript these recurring elements are treated consistently, that is, in a uniform or else logical and harmonious

way. The human mind has an inherent need for order, and if these elements are not treated consistently, the reader may perceive the document to be disorderly and unprofessional or may be distracted by the inconsistencies. Worse still, in some instances, the inconsistent treatment of mechanical elements can be genuinely confusing, because the reader may assume that two treatments of the same thing indicate some distinction in meaning that the reader has failed to understand. For instance, if the writer carelessly uses two different abbreviations for the same word, the reader may wonder if they represent two different words. Here is an example of a surprise related to mechanical consistency:

Example 1. In the early portion of a manuscript, an editor has been encountering time intervals expressed in the following form: 1-1/2 yr, 1 yr, 1/2 yr, and 2-1/2 yr. Because it appears that the author is rounding off all of the time intervals to full and half years, the editor is content to use the fractions rather than convert all the time intervals to whole numbers (by expressing them as years and months—for instance, 1 yr 6 mo). Halfway through the manuscript, however, the editor receives a surprise. Many of the time intervals begin to appear in difficult fractions and mixed numbers: 5/6 yr, 2-2/3 yr, and 1-11/12 yr. The editor recognizes that time intervals appearing in difficult fractions and mixed numbers can be more clearly expressed as years and months. But to treat the time interval in the second half of the manuscript differently from those in the first half would constitute an inconsistency in the mechanics of the document. To preserve consistency, the editor must return to the first half of the manuscript and locate and change all the time intervals.

SURPRISES RELATED TO CONTENT

An editor is responsible to see that all the ideas necessary for the reader's complete understanding of the document are present and that they are presented clearly. All the places in a manuscript

in which a particular idea is explained or mentioned or else should be explained or mentioned constitute a series of linked elements. One of the many mental processes that make up copy editing is tracing the appearance and development of the ideas in a manuscript to be sure that they are clear at all times to the intended audience. In doing this, the editor may encounter manuscript surprises like the examples below.

Example 2. An editor is pleased to find that the author of a technically difficult manuscript began with a theoretical section that explains the concepts underlying the rest of the manuscript. Later on, however, the editor sees that the explanation of one of these concepts has an emphasis inappropriate to the way the concept is being applied in subsequent parts of the manuscript. The editor must go back to the introductory section and either rewrite the explanation of the concept or instruct the author to rewrite it.

Example 3. An author has been using Word A to express Idea A, but the editor considers Word A slightly inappropriate, and begins substituting Word B for Word A. Later on, however, the author introduces a distinction related to Idea A. This is Idea B and the author chooses to label it with Word B. Surprise! The editor will have to go back and find all instances of Idea A and either restore Word A or find a new Word C.

SURPRISES RELATED TO ORGANIZATION

Organizational problems in a manuscript may be either small-scale, localized problems or large-scale problems that concern how all the parts of a manuscript fit together. Small-scale problems tend to be discrete; for instance, re-organization within one paragraph should not affect or be affected by other parts of the manuscript. The larger parts of a manuscript, however, are linked by the requirement that they make up a coherent and functional whole. An editor may encounter an organizational problem among larger elements that makes it necessary to rearrange large sections of the manuscript, including much previously edited material. Larger organizational elements, therefore, have the potential for manuscript surprises, as in the following example.

Example 4. An editor is working on a long report describing the extensive testing of different lock hopper valves. The report devotes a section to each of the lock hopper valves, and each of these sections contains subsec-

tions describing the outcome of the various tests. The editor gradually realizes that in one of these tests the outcome for each valve was in essence the same. The report, therefore, can be simplified by removing all of the subsections describing this test and adding a statement to the introduction of the report about the similar performance of the valves. This surprise requires the editor to go back and make changes in all sections of the manuscript.

DEALING WITH THE SURPRISE PROBLEM

Manuscript surprises are an inherent part of editing and will always be with us to some extent. Editors, however, do have procedures for reducing the number of surprises they will encounter and for minimizing the difficulty that each surprise creates.

Style Manuals

Although not actually an editing procedure as such, the establishment of a style manual for authors to follow can reduce the number of surprises an editor will encounter. If authors are using a style manual, they will leave fewer inconsistencies—especially mechanical inconsistencies—in the manuscript, which will mean fewer surprises for the editor.

Preliminary Reading

Almost all editors give a manuscript some sort of preliminary reading before they start the actual copy editing. This reading serves several functions, such as determining the kind of work the manuscript will require and the amount of editing time it will need. The preliminary reading is also an excellent opportunity to note the linked elements in a manuscript and thereby reduce the number of surprises the editor encounters in the copy editing.

One procedure is to make a detailed preliminary reading of the manuscript before the actual copy editing begins. This significantly reduces the number of surprises the editor will encounter. Using this method, the editor can make all editing changes with the benefit of a complete knowledge of the manuscript and, in particular, of the linked elements in the manuscript. Even a

thorough preliminary reading will not, however, prevent all manuscript surprises. It is highly unlikely, except perhaps in a very short manuscript, that the editor will notice all the potential problems in the various series of linked elements. In addition, a complete preliminary reading is often prohibitively time consuming.

An alternative procedure is to make a less thorough preliminary reading—reading some parts of the manuscript carefully and skimming the rest. The editor can still look for and note linked elements, but there is a greater potential for manuscript surprises. A trade-off must be made between the time expended in the preliminary examination of the manuscript and the potential reduction in manuscript surprises.

Scouting Ahead

A procedure that can be used during the actual copy editing of the manuscript is scouting ahead to see how a passage being edited will be affected by upcoming passages to which it is linked—to see, in other words, what complications exist. An editor who is deciding whether to add periods to the long, sentence-like entries in a list might scout ahead to see if the other lists in the manuscript consist primarily of long, sentence-like entries or else short words and phrases that would be less likely to take terminal punctuation. Likewise, an editor can scout ahead for linked elements related to content and organization.

Flagging Procedures

If an editor is making a change (or choosing not to make a change) in a passage that is probably linked to others, and suspects that a surprise may lurk ahead, a mark in the margin or a clip or tag on the page will make it easy to find the passage again quickly. Sometimes editors postpone decisions and use these flagging procedures to enable them to go back to the linked elements.

The function of the editor's manuscript style sheet is to enable the editor to keep track of how he or she is treating various series of linked elements. Some editors use their manuscript style sheet

to record as well the page numbers on which these linked elements appear—again, to enable them to go back to these linked elements quickly.

Computerized Editing

Computerized text editing can be used both to help reduce the number of surprises and to minimize the difficulty they create—especially surprises related to mechanical consistency. The computer enables the editor to scout ahead efficiently when contemplating a change. For instance, the editor in Example 1 who was dealing with the time intervals could have asked the computer to list every line in the manuscript with the character string “yr.” The editor could then make a decision knowing that there would be no upcoming surprise. Besides scouting ahead, the computer can also be used to call back the elements in a series of linked elements when a surprise has necessitated an editing change.

CONCLUSION

Manuscript surprises exist because certain elements in a manuscript are linked to one another, and it is difficult and sometimes impossible for the editor to know whether a contemplated

change will have to be revised because of a passage that lies ahead. But even though we cannot totally avoid manuscript surprises, we can take measures to minimize their occurrence and severity. Ω

About the Authors. . .



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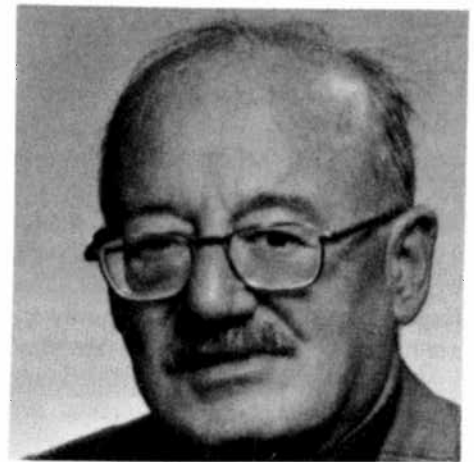
of the examples cited in this article make painfully clear. For another, “regulatory reform” is apparently only in its infancy, especially if the legislation being considered in the Senate should become law. The ripple effect will be felt throughout government, including state, county, and city. Beyond that there is regulation and standards writing in private industry. Your company may be a first drafter of industry regulations and may not know that they need you.

A new horizon for technical communicators? I think so. It’s worth looking into. Ω

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