

PROFESSIONAL AND INFORMAL EDITING IN COMPLEX ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Informal editing by managers and their staff members is widely practiced in organizations. It is likely, however, to waste human resources, create unnecessary friction, and produce inferior pieces of writing. Organizations will generally find it preferable to hire professional editors. If professional editors are used, they should be placed not at the end but rather in the early stages of the document-preparation process.

An essential part of a manager's job is to review important pieces of writing prepared by the manager's staff members and to either make or ask for revisions. In addition, managers often ask subordinates to review the managers' own drafts and to point out whatever problems they find. This review of written work by managers and their staff members is certainly valuable.

Very often, however, this review includes matters of expression as well as content and persuasive strategy. The manager or staff member functions as an editor and deals with such language issues as sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, usage, and spelling.

Although important documents do need to be well written, this informal editing, I believe, is often detrimental to organizations. My purpose now is to point out the disadvantages of informal editing by managers and their staff members and to show that in most cases organizations do better by providing professional editors. I will then show that an editor contributes more when, in contrast to the traditional practice, he is placed in the early stages of the document-preparation process.

THE MANAGER AS EDITOR

The first drawback in having a manager (or any other important and highly paid employee) serve as an editor is that the manager's time is too valuable to the organization for her to spend it editing. Unfortunately, the impulse to correct another person's language errors is generally strong, and the better the manager's own language skills, the more problems she will spot.

Instead of actually making corrections, the manager may simply make note of the problems and leave them for the staff member to fix. But this, too, takes time, especially if the manager later re-examines the staff member's revisions.

The second drawback is that the documents may not really be improved. The manager has ultimate responsibility for the documents and presumably has more knowledge, whether technical knowledge or knowledge of the organization, than does the staff member. But there is no guarantee that the manager is actually the better writer. Poor writers as well as good ones often have strong convictions about writing.

The third drawback is the response of the staff member. The staff member may resent the manager's editing, especially if the staff member believes (whether rightly or wrongly) that the manager's changes are not always necessary nor even beneficial. Also, while a staff member with poor language skills may determine to write better, another may simply accept the situation, or take still less trouble with his writing, using the excuse that "Whatever I write, she just likes to change it anyhow."

A study by James Paradis and David Dobrin of the communication habits of a group of Exxon managers and staff members sheds light on the issue of informal versus professional editing (Ref. 1). Paradis and Dobrin found editing to be "an important management tool" that "shaped a person's work into terms and formats useful to the organization." The supervisors' corrections "reflected greater knowledge of the company's objectives and a better feeling for how the document would be used." But Paradis and Dobrin also found that "few people realized this vital role" and that "most staff members believed that the purpose of editing was merely to eliminate factual and grammatical flaws in a manuscript intended to be an accurate and detailed description of their work." Moreover, "staff members often saw the supervisors' corrections as arbitrary and subjective."

These findings seem to support the idea of adding a professional editor to the document-preparation process. If an editor is used, the manager will be making many fewer comments on the staff member's draft--just those pertaining to content. The review will therefore go more quickly and will focus entirely on substantive matters. At the same time, the staff member's language errors will be handled by a nonsupervisory and hence non-threatening person. Thus, the staff member's negative feelings about the review process will diminish, and reviews will become more productive.

THE STAFF MEMBER AS EDITOR

If a staff member possesses good language skills and especially if the staff member's language skills are better than the manager's, the staff member may be expected to edit or make comments on the language as well as on the content of the manager's drafts. But, again, there are drawbacks with this kind of informal editing.

First, although the staff member's time is less valuable to the organization than the manager's, it may still be too valuable to justify him spending it on the manager's language problems. Second, human relations problems may well arise if the staff member takes pains to make changes in the manager's writing and then finds that the manager (rightly or wrongly) has ignored these changes. Third, the documents themselves may suffer. The staff member is very apt to refrain from making desirable changes in the draft so as not to embarrass or annoy the manager. Often a staff member will make only the most necessary changes or only those the staff member believes the manager is apt to accept. Thus, the manager may simply have the illusion that the staff member has found the material satisfactory.

THE PROFESSIONAL EDITOR

Here are the major benefits in using a professional editor:

1. ELIMINATION OR REDUCTION OF FRICTION. Neither the manager nor the staff member corrects the other's writing errors. In addition, the writer's relations with the editor should be positive, since a good editor regards the ability to work tactfully and productively with authors as one of his fundamental professional skills. Finally, even if friction does develop between writer and editor, it is much less damaging than friction between manager and staff member. The writer's dealings with the editor are only occasional and restricted in scope; the potential emotional impact of friction between the writer and the editor is therefore much smaller than that between a direct subordinate and his superior.
2. QUALITY DOCUMENTS. Language, quite simply, is the editor's specialty. And, in contrast to the staff member, a professional editor will not refrain from using his language skills.
3. COST. Not only can the editor do better work, he can probably do more work in far less time. This greater efficiency and the editor's relatively low salary result in much less costly editing. Of still greater importance, the editor is freeing managers and staff members for the work they should be doing. These savings of money and human resources may, of course, be partly offset by the editor's salary. It is also possible, however, that the organization already has a publications department or public relations department with professional communicators whose expertise managers or staff members can draw upon.

There are also problems in using a professional editor. The first is that the editor may not fully understand the subject matter of the document and may therefore make changes that distort the writer's meaning. These distortions may be decoding errors, in which the editor misunderstands the meaning of the

material or else encoding errors, in which the editor does not realize that his emendation signifies something slightly different from what he thinks it does. Managers and staff members, on the other hand, will almost certainly understand fully the material they edit.

The problem of distortion is, of course, less severe if the documents are not highly technical or deal with one general subject area. If the documents deal with one subject area, the organization can either hire an editor with a technical background in that area or give a generalist editor a chance to develop some knowledge of this area. But especially if an organization generates highly technical documents in many different fields, the problem of inadvertent distortion is significant.

Inadvertent distortion can be controlled if the editor queries any emendation that he suspects may be a distortion of the writer's meaning and if the writer (or another subject-matter expert) gives each query careful attention, even if she is normally inclined to accept the editor's work without much review.

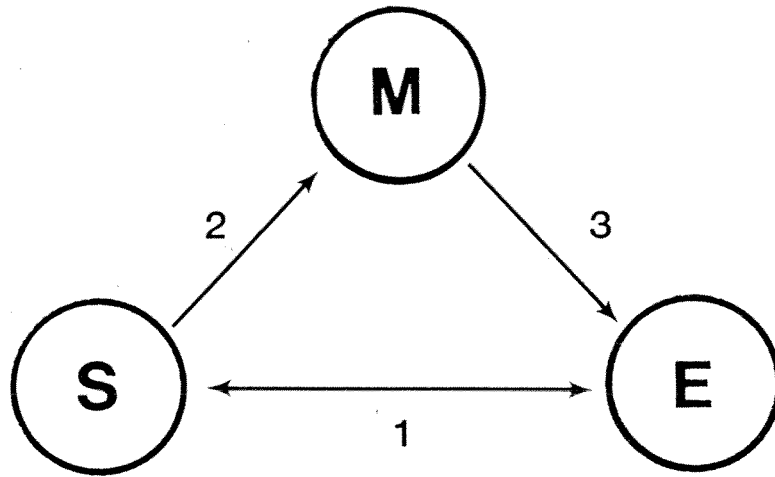
Another problem in using professional editors is increased turnaround time, especially when the editor is not attached directly to a small group of staff members but rather belongs to a centralized editing or publications unit. Turnaround time, however, can be kept down by hiring enough editors and by scheduling their work efficiently.

HOW TO USE A PROFESSIONAL EDITOR

If a professional editor is to be used, when should he get the draft and where should it go after he is done with it? While each organization must make its decisions according to its own circumstances, there are, as described below, several effective configurations for placing an editor in the document-preparation process. These configurations are based largely on two principles: (a) it is desirable to conserve the time of the most highly paid individuals and (b) in order to meet tight deadlines, it is acceptable to expend extra resources. These configurations also break with the tradition of placing the editor at the end of the document-preparation process, when the manager and staff member have finished working on it. As I hope to show below, an editor can contribute more to the organization when placed early in the document-preparation process.

In Figures 1 and 2 a staff member has written documents under relaxed and tight deadlines, respectively. I have assumed that the manager assigned the document clearly and examined an outline and perhaps a rough draft, so that the staff member's completed draft, though not perfect, is not radically misconceived. In Figures 3 and 4 a manager has written documents under relaxed and tight deadlines, respectively. In all of the figures, "M," "S," and "E" stand for manager, staff member, and editor, respectively, and the numbered arrows indicate the stages in which the document moves among these individuals. The two-headed arrows indicate a querying stage, in which the document moves back and forth between the editor and the person handling the queries.

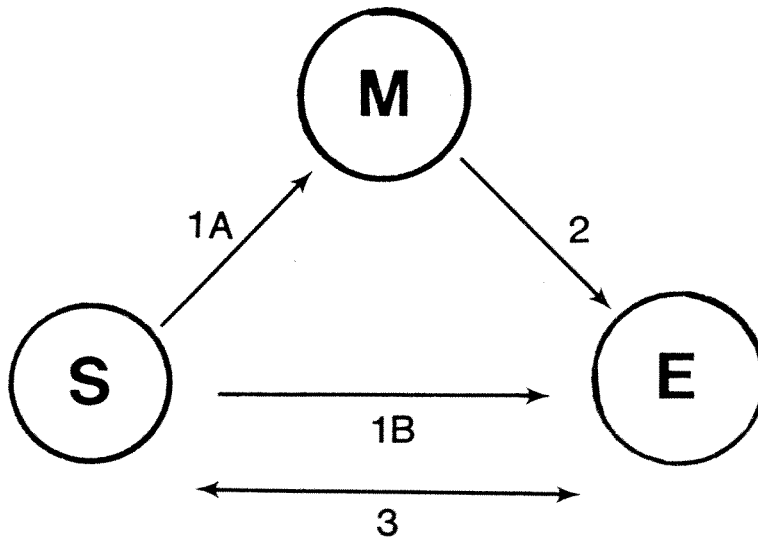
Fig. 1



Staff Member As Writer

Relaxed Deadline

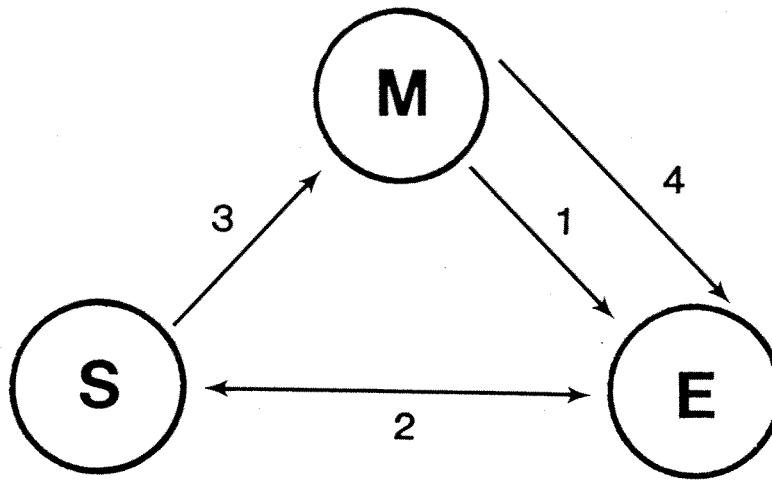
Fig. 2



Staff Member As Writer

Tight Deadline

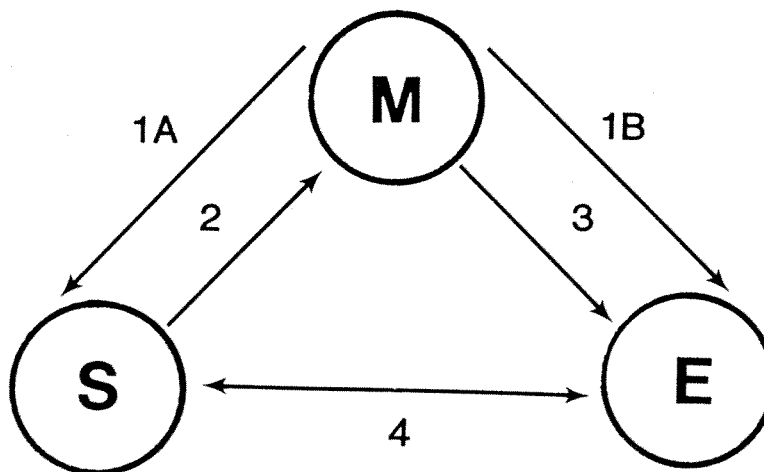
Fig. 3



Manager As Writer

Relaxed Deadline

Fig. 4



Manager As Writer

Tight Deadline

In Figure 1 the staff member gives the completed draft to the editor (1), who edits it and has the staff member respond to his queries. The staff member then sends the draft to the manager (2). The manager saves time in two ways: (a) she reads only edited and hence highly readable material, and (b) she is not tempted to correct errors of expression--there are none. If there are content errors, the manager will make changes and, if she feels the need, send the document back to the editor (3) for him to check these changes. The document then goes to production (which may consist simply of typing). A subsequent responsibility of the editor (in this and the other configurations) is to see the document through production, which may simply entail proofreading a typist's work or else working with such personnel as the graphic designer, photographer, and printer.

In Figure 2 the staff member saves time by giving a copy of his completed draft to both the manager (1A) and the editor (1B). The editor begins editing at once and makes whatever plans are necessary for rapid production. The manager is not looking at perfect copy, but for three reasons is apt to refrain from editing for expression: (a) she is also dealing with the tight deadline, (b) she knows an editor has been added to the document-preparation process expressly to prevent her from wasting time editing for expression, and (c) she knows the document is being edited even as she reviews it. When the manager has made corrections in content, she sends the draft to the editor (2). There is a possible duplication of effort here: the editor may have to re-edit the passages the manager has worked on. But the need to meet a tight deadline easily justifies this extra expenditure of resources. The editor will take his queries to the staff member (3)--or, if necessary, the manager--and then send the document to production.

In Figure 3 a manager has written the document and seeks the staff member's comments. The draft goes initially to the editor (1) and then to the staff member (2). The staff member's time is conserved because he is reading highly readable material and because he is not commenting on the manager's expression. Also, the staff member is spared the problem of deciding whether to point out all of the manager's writing errors. They have already been corrected by an objective outsider, a communication expert who is supposed to be able to find errors in anyone's writing.

The staff member fulfills the manager's request for comments on her draft. In addition, he saves the manager's time by dealing with all (or at least most) of the editor's queries. The staff member then sends the draft back to the manager (3), who incorporates the comments as she desires. The manager, if she feels the need, will then have the editor look over these final changes (4) before the document goes to production.

In Figure 4 the manager saves time by giving copies of the draft to both the staff member (1A) and the editor (1B). The staff member comments on the content (but not on the expression) and sends his copy back to the manager (2), who incorporates whatever changes she pleases. The manager then sends this revised copy to the editor (3), who, in turn, incorporates the manager's changes into the copy of the draft he has been editing, re-editing certain passages if necessary. The editor has the staff member--or, if necessary, the manager--respond to his queries (4) and the document is then sent to production.

CONCLUSION

The communication function requires careful management, just as other organizational functions do. Editing, though it often goes unnoticed, is an important part of the communication function. Organizations will very often find it advantageous to (a) employ professional editors in order to curb informal editing by managers and staff members and (b) place editors in the early stages of the document-preparation process.

REFERENCES

1. Reported by David R. Lampe in The MIT Report, vol. 10, no. 9 (September 1982), pp. 1-2.

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