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18 Teaching the Administrative and Policy Aspects of Editing

David K. Farkas

Most courses in editing are very largely devoted--and quite rightly so--to teaching the practices and rhetorical principles that will enable students to perform the fundamental editing function: emending the deficiencies in manuscripts. But some attention, I believe, should be given to such broader issues as budgeting, scheduling, and establishing communication policies for an editing project.

Even as they begin their careers, our students will have to deal to some degree with these issues; and as they advance, they probably will do less line-by-line

editing and more large-scale decision-making and supervising. The case study I will now present is one means of acquainting students with some of the administrative and policy aspects of editing.

The case is most appropriate for the end of a course, when students have learned the fundamental skills and are ready to confront broader issues. I use this case as a course paper topic, but it could also be used as a final exam question or simply as the basis for a class discussion.

CASE STUDY: A FREELANCER EDITS A PROCEEDINGS

You are a freelancer editing a conference proceedings from transcripts that have been prepared from tape recordings of each presentation. As you examine the transcripts, you notice a variety of problems that must be resolved before you can begin making emendations.

In dealing with these problems you can consult with Ms. Janet Henske, who organized the conference, hired you, and knows a great deal about the topics covered in the presentations. Remember, however, that Ms. Henske does not expect you to ask her how to deal with every problem; she expects you to come to her with alternatives and your recommendation. Also, Ms. Henske is not happy with many of the practices established by the editor of the earlier volumes of the proceedings, and she does not want you to simply follow these practices. Finally, she is interested in suggestions she might implement in the future. Here are the problems that must be dealt with in editing the proceedings.

1. Although the speakers were asked to speak from notes, about half read from manuscripts that had been composed as written documents. That is, their presentations read just like journal articles. The other half spoke informally, and their sentence structure is therefore conversational and loose. Also, most of these presentations contain ungrammatical sentences and informal asides to the audience. Some of these asides are pertinent, some not.

2. Two presenters were non-native speakers with a poor command of the English language. Their papers, which were written in a formal style, contain many grammatical errors, archaic and misused words, and passages that are difficult for you to decipher.
3. One presenter gave a slide presentation and has just mailed you the 40 black and white slides he used. You know, however, that Ms. Henske does not want to pay for printing 40 visuals.
4. One presenter has written Ms. Henske asking for the chance to review the edited manuscript. Henske tells you, however, that last year this individual took three months to return her edited manuscript.
5. Another presenter has mailed you an entirely new version of his talk, but the new version is twice as long as any of the other papers.

Discuss in detail how you will deal with each problem, explaining the arguments for each reasonable alternative. Describe the questions and suggestions you will bring to Ms. Henske as well as any communications you will have with the authors. Also provide some sense of the sequence in which you will deal with particular problems and will edit particular groups of papers.

You may want to examine actual published proceedings, especially prefaces that recount how the proceedings were prepared. You may also want to illustrate with sample passages how you would have edited some of the papers. (I can provide unedited proceedings material, including informal passages and passages of severely deficient non-native prose.) There is no stipulated length for this assignment, but I would be surprised to see this case discussed adequately in fewer than 6 or 8 pages.

A case study requires you to use imagination and creativity. You must "flesh out" the particular facts given in the case itself with ideas and inferences drawn from your own background and experiences. With the facts presented in the case as a kind of superstructure, you are creating your own fictional world, similar to but also different from those of your classmates. Your Janet Henske, for instance, will be different in personality and perspective from the other Janet Henskens. You can use this freedom to make the assignment more realistic, interesting, and manageable--for example, by imagining a conference topic or area with which you are familiar.

A key requirement is that your decisions accord with the particular circumstances you imagine. For instance, if you assume a tight deadline, your decisions should reflect that assumption. Finally, remember that while your audience (the instructor) knows the case study itself, your own inferences must be evident in the paper.

STUDENT RESPONSES

Below I comment on the major issues raised in this case study and how my editing students of winter quarter 1984 chose to deal with them.

Problems 1 and 2: Conversational and Non-Native Discourse

The issue raised in Problem 1 is how to edit conversational discourse for print. About half of the students determined that

the conversational presentations should be edited to conform to the formal style of the "journal article" presentations. James Prekeges wrote, "Since this document will present the material in written form, I feel that it is best to edit toward a writing style and tone that is most appropriate for the written word." Likewise, Susan Gale: "Symposium proceedings are published to disseminate scholarly information in the most useful form possible." This policy, noted most of these students, also makes

for stylistic uniformity among all the papers in the proceedings.

An alternative decision was to retain the conversational style of that group of papers, limiting the emendations to outright errors, hard-to-read passages, irrelevancies, and verbal fillers such as "um" and "you know." The position of these students was that a proceedings should be an accurate record of what took place at the conference.

Richard Tada, however, was one of several students who suggested a middle course: "neither leaving a wide gap between the formal presentations and the informal ones, nor editing them so that they all sound alike." Most of these students provided sample passages to demonstrate just how close to written English they would edit the conversational papers.

It was suggested that asides which were both intelligible and pertinent could simply be "written in" as portions of a speaker's presentation. Another idea was to present impromptu exchanges between the speaker and audience members in dialogue form. One student made note of the need to review the paragraph-break decisions made by the transcriber and to add headings and subheadings.

A suggestion with far-reaching implications was that those who spoke conversationally could be asked to prepare written versions of their presentations. Although this plan probably could not be implemented until the following year, it could potentially make the editor's task much easier. But the number of "conversational" speakers who would take the time to prepare written versions would depend (even if they were given transcripts of their presentations) upon the professions of the speakers, the stature of the conference, and other factors.

Problem 2 concerns the severely deficient prose of the non-native speakers. These presentations, all the students agreed, would have to be edited extensively into correct, readable English. The speakers themselves would want and expect this courtesy. Some students, however, considered it permissible or even

desirable to leave vestiges of the non-native English of these speakers.

Another important issue that arises in Problem 1 and 2 is whether the edited versions of the presentations should be sent to all (or only some of) the authors for review. Clearly, doing so will safeguard against the editor's accidental distortion of an author's meaning and will give the author a chance to voice any other objections she might have to the editing. Indeed, except for possible constraints of time and money--which some students did stipulate--one might look hard for good reasons for not offering the authors a chance to review the edited papers.

Problem 3: Printing Visuals

Here the prominent issues are the relationship between text and visuals, working within a budget, and negotiating tactfully with authors. All the students assumed that the production cost entailed in printing 40 visuals would be unreasonable. Many students, therefore, decided to print the visuals only if the author would agree to subsidize the extra production cost. Several individuals, however, recognized that apart from the matter of cost, 40 visuals would, under most circumstances, be too many for a proceedings paper--a point I made when we discussed the case in class.

But how should the number of visuals be reduced? Christina Wohlstetter imagined that the speaker had used numerous title slides: "The speaker used slides almost like subheadings in an article. These organizational devices can easily be translated into text." Other students imagined highly technical slides and chose to ask the author to select a specified number.

Problem 4: Procrastinating Authors

This problem raises the issues of relations with authors and scheduling. Probably, the editor's best course of action--both in regard to this presenter and all of the rest--is to stipulate a date after which no response will be taken as tacit approval of the edited transcript.

Some students stipulated this "default date" when they first mailed the edited version; others did so in messages sent after a reasonable length of time had elapsed without a response from the author.

Here is an example of an unsophisticated way of dealing with the procrastinating author's request to review the edited version of her presentation: "I have no intention of allowing a project for which I am responsible to be 'held hostage' in this manner. I would come up with a credible excuse in response to the author's request: 'It's at the printer's.' 'It's still being edited.'" Even though editing students already will have learned to query tactfully, they will benefit here (as in Problem 3) from the experience of conceptualizing messages to authors concerning logistics and policy.

A good scheduling decision that arises from this problem is to edit this author's paper first, so as to give her extra time to respond. Problem papers, in general, should be dealt with at once, so the editor can work on the routine papers while communicating and perhaps negotiating with the authors of the problem papers.

Another scheduling issue is the medium for communicating with authors. A tight schedule, of course, suggests the use of the telephone for many (though certainly not all) kinds of messages, whereas a tight budget suggests more use of correspondence. A related issue that should appear in the papers is when, how often, for what purposes, and through what means the editor will communicate with Ms. Henske.

Problem 5: Relative Length of Papers

This problem raises serious issues of communication policy and ethics. Is it fair to give a great deal more space in the proceedings to certain speakers? Is it fair to presenters and is it intellectually honest to permit speakers to add to their proceedings papers material that was not in their conference presentations? Still another issue is the limit to free expression--does the speaker or the conference organizer have ultimate control

over what a speaker puts in the proceedings? With these questions, even more so than in the previous problems, there is a limit to the sophistication we can expect in the responses of our students. But it is certainly worthwhile for them to grapple with these questions.

Most of the students rejected the idea of authors adding new material to their conference presentations. Jeffrey Fleming believed it necessary for the proceedings "to properly record what has happened at the conference; otherwise, everyone could send in their 'versions' and the conference would mean nothing."

Several students, however, were troubled less by the inclusion of material not presented at the conference than by the added length of the revised paper. Giovanni Krieger writes, "If the new version were substantially better than the old one, I might consider using it. But I would still have to delete quite a bit of the new one in order to make it closer in length to the other presentations."

An important factor is the nature of the new material. Christina Wohlstetter imagined that this speaker's presentation had been "the subject of sharp attack" at the conference and that the material was added in light of this criticism. She rejects the new material because it gives this speaker an unfair advantage in the ongoing scholarly debate.

POSSIBLE MODIFICATIONS OF THE CASE

This case can be modified in a variety of ways. Among them are the following:

- o stipulating negotiations and re-negotiations with Ms. Henske about the editor's fee
- o adding interactions and difficulties with the printer
- o requiring the students to actually edit sample passages that exhibit some of the problems raised in the case
- o having the students actually write out some of their messages to the authors
- o casting the assignment as a memo or series of memos written to Ms. Henske

One could also raise similar issues by devising a case in which an editor works full time for a company and is editing several of its documents. I chose not to do this in order to keep the case study and the student papers relatively short and uncomplicated.

CONCLUSION

In doing this assignment, the students will learn something about the special problems posed by proceedings and scholarly papers and about the problem of

editing conversational discourse for print. But this learning is secondary. The main purpose of the assignment is to provide an opportunity for creative and yet practical communications reasoning extending beyond line-by-line editing into areas of logistics and policy. If our students did not enjoy working with language, they would not be in an editing course. Through this assignment students may come to appreciate the challenges, intellectual and otherwise, in what they may have regarded previously as "merely the business aspects of editing."