Editing Copy Written By Others

"Writing without revising is the literary equivalent of waltzing gaily out of the house in your underwear."
~ Patricia Fuller

It can be a tricky situation – editing copy written by others. Whether your task is to compile and edit the company newsletter, review the boss's PowerPoint presentation, or prepare the company marketing material, the job of copy editor requires diplomacy and discipline. The diplomacy is necessary to avoid alienating the writer (and losing your editorship); the discipline is required to impose standards and create consistency.

To help with this delicate balancing act, it is useful to have an editor's toolkit – measuring devices that transform your editing from subjective to objective. Here are our favorites.

The Style Sheet

A corporate style sheet is a collection of standards for communication and is the main reference for maintaining consistency of the corporate identity. The style sheet provides logos, guidelines, templates, and instructions for reproducing all elements of a company's identity – from print to web to written communications.

A corporate style sheet can also contain rules for spelling, punctuation, and grammar that result in standard usage in all material published by the business. This section of the corporate style sheet can be the editor's best friend – a reference and a way to settle disputes between you and the writer. Here are some examples from an actual corporate style sheet word list:

Example	Explanation
Email or email	No hyphen
Handheld	Always one word
Internet	Always use a capital "I"
Numbers	Spell out one through nine and use numerals thereafter (*e.g.,* 10, 11, 12)
Punctuation: comma period	Use before conjunctions (apples, oranges, and bananas) Do not use periods in bulleted lists
URLs	Always use lowercase
Web; Web site	Always initial cap for *web*; always two words

The corporate style sheet can also contain the standards for preparing the company's documents (both internal and external). To help writers comply with the standards, the standards can be saved in a word processor as paragraph styles:

Heading 1	Gils Sans; 14 pt, bold
Heading 2	Gils Sans; 13 pt, bold
Heading 3	Gils Sans; 12 pt, bold
Heading 4	Gils Sans; 11 pt, bold
Body text	Goudy, 10 pt
Hint/Note	*Goudy Italic, 10 pt*
Header	*Goudy Italic, 11 pt*
Footer (page numbers)	Goudy, 9 pt
Table of Contents	Goudy, 13 pt

Other guidelines for technical documents might include: when to use formatting such as bold, italics, and underline; how to handle capitalization; and how to handle bullets. For example,

1. For emphasis: use bold, not underline or all capital letters.
2. Avoid over-capitalization. Use lowercase, unless there is a specific reason to capitalize.
3. For bulleted lists, be consistent with punctuation or lack thereof. Use only one style of bullet throughout the document.

What if your company lacks a style sheet? Consider drafting one, especially for technical documents and other situations you are likely to encounter in your role as editor. If you wish, you can adopt the examples we have presented here.

Useful Tips for Editing Content

If you have a company style sheet for reference, you may be able to defuse confrontations with writers over format. However, you still have to edit content – the area where the writer theoretically is the expert. So it may help to have a few guidelines for determining whether the copy is adequate for its stated purpose.

Tip 1: *Know the audience and edit from his or her perspective.*
It doesn't matter whether you are editing sales and marketing copy, an instruction manual, or a technical document. If the copy isn't written with the reader in mind, it may not be as persuasive or well-understood as it should be. Put yourself in the reader's place, and ask whether you understand what is being said. If you don't, edit until you do.

Tip 2: *Make an outline from the copy.*
This is a basic test of organization. If you can outline the main points, then the copy follows a logical sequence that will be easier to follow and more compelling to the reader. If you can't make an outline, then very likely the reader won't be able to grasp the message.

Tip 3: *Look for "25-cent words" and compound sentences, especially when editing for a technical expert.*
Even if a technical audience will read the copy, find a way to convey the message simply. Make sure that all technical terms are the best choice. Be alert for "long" words when "short" ones will do. (For example, substitute *use* for *utilization*.) When necessary, define words within the body of the document.

Tip 4: *Be alert for clichés and overblown superlatives.*
One purpose of any document is to establish trust between the writer and the reader. Clichés and overblown superlatives will not accomplish this task.

Tip 5: *Make sure the copy gets to the point.*
Some writers equate simple writing with simple thoughts, and unintentionally overwrite. This wastes the reader's time and weakens the message. Avoid redundancy, over-worded phrases, and other examples of poor writing. Be sure the writing provides specific, concrete information in a clear and straightforward manner.

Tip 6: *Verify statistics and citations.*
An editor has a responsibility to read statistics critically. If there are mistakes in tables, graphs or charts, the editor must find them. Also, be sure that citations are included and follow conventional format.

If you find yourself feeling a bit overwhelmed by the duties of an editor, give us a call. We can provide editing services or give you a referral to a professional editor.

a vocabulary of the graphic arts

Ascender: The stem of a lower case letter that extends above its x-height.

Bad break: The incorrect or poorly placed splitting of a word, sentence, or paragraph.

Bullet: A dot or symbol used to mark or identify the beginning of a new item in a list of items.

Point: A measurement used to determine the size of a printed character. A point is equal to $1/72^{nd}$ of an inch, so 72-point type is an inch tall and 36-point type is half an inch tall.

Descender: The stem or lower part of a letter that extends below the baseline, as in p and q.

Drop cap: The first letter of an article that is larger than the remainder of the text, placed so that the top of the ascender is level with the top of the ascender of the smaller text.

Font: A set of characters in one typeface design at a specific style and size.

Pica: The basic measurement unit that is used in the graphic arts field. A pica is about .166 of an inch, and this makes six picas per inch. Picas are further broken down into points. There are 12 points per pica; 6 picas per inch; and therefore 72 points per inch.

Running head: A headline that is repeated at the top of each page in a publication.

Sans serif: A font or typeface in which all the characters lack serifs.

Serif: Small lines or protrusions at the ends of the characters of certain fonts. They are designed to make the font more attractive, and in some cases, more readable.

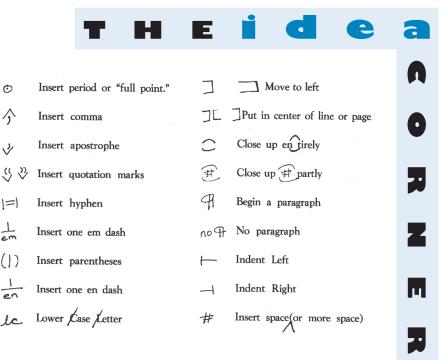**Typeface:** All characters of a single design, in all styles, sizes, and weights.

Typestyle: Variations of a typeface such as bold, italic, black, oblique, roman, condensed, extended, and compressed.

X-height: The height of lowercase letters, based on the size from baseline to meanline of the lowercase letter x in any font.

Proofreaders' Marks

THE idea CORNER

L	Capital letter
cap	SET IN capitals
tr	Transpose (order of letters)
	Delete take out
stet	Let it stand · (all above dots)
ital	Set in italic (or oblique) type
bf	Set in boldface type
2	Indent the number of spaces
2 sp	Check spelling
	Move to right

⊙	Insert period or "full point."
	Insert comma
	Insert apostrophe
	Insert quotation marks
	Insert hyphen
em	Insert one em dash
(|)	Insert parentheses
en	Insert one en dash
lc	Lower Case Letter

	Move to left
	Put in center of line or page
	Close up entirely
#	Close up partly
	Begin a paragraph
no	No paragraph
	Indent Left
	Indent Right
#	Insert space (or more space)

Typestyle Considerations

Selecting typestyles for a corporate style sheet should take several things into consideration. Since typestyles elicit emotion, the primary consideration is how the intended audience will react. Traditional typestyles such as Times Roman, Century Schoolbook, and Helvetica evoke a stable, dependable emotion that is great for companies such as banks, financial institutions, and legal services. A company newsletter, on the other hand, may benefit from a contemporary, modern, or unusual typestyle.

Legibility factors to consider include:

Size of type: 9-12 points is generally a good size for body copy. For headlines, 18, 24, and 36 point are the most common sizes. Size should be adjusted depending on leading (line spacing), line length, and the age of the readers.

Typeface characteristics: Italics slow a reader down, and medium weight type is easier to read than light or bold. Other factors affecting type include the simplicity and complexity of a typeface's outline, stroke, width, and shading. Keep in mind that typestyles with serifs are usually more legible than sans serif.

Line length: The line length in picas should be roughly 1 1/2 to 2 times the point size. So, for 10-point type, use a line length between 15 and 20 picas. (A pica is about one-sixth of an inch.)

Q. I am the editor of our company newsletter. Right now it is four solid pages of text. I want to make it more inviting, but I can't take any information out. What can I do?

A. There are several things you can do to lighten layouts that are type-heavy.

- Use a large headline in a font that matches the tone of your information.
- Create headlines for each new section. (These are called subheads.) Subheads break up the text into manageable portions. They also enable a reader to enter the article at several points.
- Consider using varied column lengths.
- Separate one column from the next by printing a 1 point or 1.5 point line in between.
- Print keywords in a second color.
- Use mug shots to break up text.
- Shade one or more areas of a page to create contrast.
- Center a large attention-getting headline across the top, bottom or center spread of a page.
- Add a piece of line art. If your type jumps over the art, make sure that readability is not affected.
- Use drop caps.
- Place a large graphic in the left column or screen it in back of your text.

Box in one or more articles in a tinted area. A tinted box with a pull quote can add interest to your page, while stressing an important point from your text.