



# The Friendly Editor

*The Friendly Editor welcomes letters from others interested in language. Please write to Don Bush, 6609 Hillgrove Drive, San Diego, CA 92120.*

DON BUSH, *Column Editor*

## Farewell

BY DON BUSH, *Fellow*

The time has come for me to stop writing this column. I have been a member of STC since 1962, and have written the column since the first quarter 1981 issue of *Technical Communication*. I have thoroughly enjoyed the writing and the many associations with people in a common cause: the improvement of technical editing and technical writing.

As a column editor, my greatest desire has been to pass along new ideas in language. Perhaps my most prominent idea has been “content” editing. Technical writers are prolix. The profession is notorious for producing wordy, bombastic technical proposals and inaccessible 500-page user manuals. It needs editors with deft excising pencils (or cursors).

Actually, in technical writing, technical editors can be used to advantage. If you deliberately write proposals 50 percent too long and then edit them down to their page limits, you enhance the content while excising the fluff (for more on this, read the *Consultant's Guide to Proposal Writing* by Herman Holtz).

This surgical approach horrifies those who see editing as the gentle pursuit of typos in signed articles. But an emphasis on content editing could add value to technical writing programs.

Current technical writers don't do nearly enough incisive editing. They are busy with keyboarding and formatting, and their efforts to smooth out programmers' awkward prose often make the copy even longer. They are not incompetent, but they are underpaid and overconcerned with enforcing rigid taboos. Technical editors could indeed serve the industry by teaching bright students how to cut copy.

The second goal of my editing career has been to promote the *theme-rheme concept*, which recasts sentences to put the important point (rheme) at the end. “John was slow, painstaking, and meticulous” is a compliment; “John was meticulous, painstaking, and slow” will get John fired. Rei Noguchi, a professor at California State University–Northridge, spoke on this neat device at a San Diego State University seminar, and I wrote about it in *Technical Communication* in 1981.

My third idea has been *deductive organization*—promoting “first things first” ahead of the inductive (step-by-step) scientific method used for discovering new ideas.

My fourth editing concept has been the use of *descriptive grammar*. This is old stuff to academics, but brand new to technical writers, because, sadly, the more they learn about software, the less they know about language. Language includes linguistics, semantics, and the new ideas of Joseph Williams, professor of English at the University of Chicago.

Ironically, some evaluators claim that I—an ardent descriptivist—overemphasize grammar. What they really mean is that I stress organization, sentence structure, diction, and the disparate processes required for writing (1) reports, (2) manuals, and (3) proposals. I'd hate to drop such nitty-gritty elements of written communication to hold classes involving coruscating computer screens.

I do love computers. Besides relishing them for word processing, I use them to play Scrabble and search the Web for book prices, stock quotes, and research tidbits. But too many people today equate the value of communication with video and multimedia.

I urge technical editors not to fall into that trap. A modern technical editor should be exploiting a unique expertise: how to write. Our tech writing tools, such as *FrameMaker*, *RoboHelp*, and *PowerPoint*, do not impress users of C++, *AutoCAD*, or *FreeHand*.

That's why, in my columns, I have tried to stress the nuts and bolts of language. It may seem like heavy going, but I do have a personal enthusiasm for the joy of writing. In classes that I conduct in technical editing I emphasize writing—with plenty of discussion, slide shows, exercises, group meetings, and student reports. And I encourage arguments—during which nobody falls asleep. Just contrast my syllabus with the dullness of some technicolor business video, and you will note the difference in learning content. I'm pleased to say, too, that in my classes attendance holds up.

I often recount personal stories from my long experience. I note that the whole room gets quiet when I do. These tales are mostly directed at career seekers, but last fall I related the trials of Jim, an engineer friend who recently lost circulation in his left foot. Doctors amputated, but that didn't work. So they tried again, above the knee, but that didn't work either, and Jim lost his life (he was once a smoker). In a class on technical editing, is this story about an engineer irrelevant?

### Grammar

Too often, we center our study of grammar on individual words rather than the meaning of an entire sentence. Four currently popular target words are *data* as a singular, *none* as a plural, *hopefully*, and the restrictive *which*. I discussed all

of these briefly in the first quarter 1994 issue of *Technical Communication*.

*Data* is a collective noun generally used in the singular. *None* comes not from *one*, but from the Old English *nan*, which was often used as a plural. *Hopefully* is generally used in a disjunctive sense and has a grammatical function rather than a descriptive one. *Which* is often used by good grammarians in the restrictive sense instead of *that*.

### Language

As our technical writing profession focuses more and more on software, our writing gets even worse. (I have evidence.) But technical editors can help writers write. Students can practice and learn to construct Web sites that are clear, true, and meaningful.

Web pages, like TV ads, compete for attention. But technical writing is not measured by color or movement, but by reader involvement. Too often, stu-

dents create eye-catching sites that may only draw attention to how poorly they write.

### "The Friendly Editor"

I abandon this column with a great deal of regret. But as I grow older, even the simple activities of retirement seem to become ever more demanding, and my capabilities become less and less (I am slower than I once was).

Also, my reference book collection is now gone—donated to San Diego State University, near my house, where it will find a good and more permanent home. The empty shelves in my study are a sign that it is time for me to quit. But I am keeping one book indefinitely: *A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage*, by Bergen and Cornelia Evans.

When I first started, I thought about naming the column something clever like "The Black and Blue Pencil." But then I decided it would be better to

reinforce the humanness of the profession by calling it "The Friendly Editor." I believe that, through the years, this title has reflected my professional attitude and has been a good name. ❶

### SUGGESTED READINGS

Evans, Bergen and Cornelia. *A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage*. New York: Random House, 1957.

Holtz, Herman. *Consultant's Guide to Proposal Writing*. New York: Wiley, 1986.

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