

Las Vegas Quill Keepers Lesson 10: Editors: Foes or Fortune Tellers?
By Cathe Jones, (cathejones.com)

It never seems to make sense to some that you aren't supposed to end sentences with prepositions. Sometimes the word works well, just where it's at. (Get it? Yeah, I know, cheesy.) Turns out some rules of grammar that were drilled into our heads in elementary school, and in Journalism 101, are non-existent. Grammar myths exist not only in every day conversation, but in every day editorial boards. What is the answer? Let's see if we can figure it out together.

Looking at my desk, smothered at the moment in research for a book I'm working ON, I see the AP Style Manual, Strunk and White's Elements of Style, Word Myths, and The Chicago Style Manual. On my PC desktop is a shortcut to Random House Dictionary and Thesaurus. In my shortcuts menu, I have set up key commands to open up three different encyclopedias, four separate thesaurus', and language dictionaries. The Latin Grammar books I've used since grade school reside on my literary library shelves, and below them, Descriptionary. By all means, I should be well versed in grammar. Sometimes, I just can't find the one thing I'm thinking OF.

My first editorial meeting happened when I was only ten years old. The Boston Herald American selected one of my essays and drawings, done to represent what it was like living on Food Stamps while in a middle-class neighborhood. I had no concept of their need to push for stories that revealed the other side of Boston. But I did know, as a frequent contributor, that I could just write the way I wanted, and they would fix all errors. Even at ten, I didn't always agree with their choices, but this was the first time I was invited to talk to the Editor of Living.

The phone call was short, as I look back. At the time, I felt it had been an eternity. According to my diaries, I missed half of the Flintstones, and that just irked me to no end. I can't remember the woman's name, but she was very upbeat, nearly overly so, and she wanted to ask me why I chose the words I had. She was, I'm sure, trying to explain why the word choices weren't powerful enough. Instead, I felt as if she thought it was just excrement. She spent time trying to explain that commas weren't needed in a listing of three items, ("Food, Clothing and Shelter"), despite my teacher's objections. Even then, my fight for justice led me to tell her "Page 26 of the Elements of Style shows that a comma is required." In the end, the "decade kid" won the argument.

Flash forward twenty years, and I found myself in a similar situation. At thirty, I wrote a book called "Token White Chick Writes Great American Novel". The novella followed a woman running away from the discovery of her first grey hair, and running towards searching for a perfect bagel. The story followed her ride on an eighteen wheeler, carrying caskets and driven by a former child star, and as you would suspect, was based on real events. The big computer available at the time was an Amiga 500, and possibly a Mac SE. Software for grammar and spelling wasn't readily available. [As a side note, I still own the 5.25 floppy that held the original outline. I'm sure it will end up in the Museum of Weirdoes and Whack-jobs sooner or later.]

Several publishers read the manuscript, and at the time, sent back hand written letters letting me know why they were or weren't interested. One editor, nameless and male, red penciled nearly all paragraphs. In the margins, I found scribbles of personal distaste. "Oh", he wrote, "I suppose everyone is going to have to buy that child stars are broke? HA!" The kids from Different Strokes and The Partridge Family hadn't made the news yet. In my 2500 word chapter samples, there were over 6000

edits, corrections, and commentaries. For someone who ended the comments with, "This book is going nowhere except the trash", he certainly spent an inordinate amount of time on it.

My first reaction, as anyone's would be, was to be completely irate at his audacity, pomposity, and arrogance. After a day or so, my reaction was that of a confused puppy trying to understand why the newspapers were in my corner. The editor wasn't trying to say that this book was worthless. He was trying to say WHY the book wasn't working to his satisfaction. My anger set aside, I now focused on what the lessons were. Some were completely off base, and some were valid. He didn't like the choices of locations, or mode of travel. Keeping to the facts of my own history, he was unaware that these places exist. But, rather than research, which he certainly had no reason to do for a proposal, he dismissed the concepts. Other comments were misogynistic, and easily a matter of his personal prejudices.

There were, however, some well-stated comments which gave me pause to seek out the assistance of a peer professor. She had edited books for the first twenty-five years of her career, and I trusted her judgment implicitly. It took her less than an hour to go through the extraneous rants and underscore notes that struck her eye as not only correct, but well-worth considering. This woman only found four instances to rework passages. "I think, dear, that you may want to consider expanding on the story by showing, rather than telling." Any of you reading this has certainly heard that at least once.

The first editor served as a catalyst. He gave me enough aggravation to play the "I'll show YOU" game. I submitted the novella to his attention, and got the word back, "Much better, but we have to pass on it right now." Terrific.

An editor isn't a demon out to gobble your creativity. Most editors are working under deadlines, just as you are. The offices are filled with those who are often underpaid and overworked. The book industry has changed so much that publishing houses spend far less attention to one project. In recent years, turnover in this specialty has been so high that a book arriving on the desk of Jane may go through revisions from four to five other sets of eyes before Derek's approval of the galley.

I was fortunate to learn from an that editor who was out for my blood and ink! There is another industry available to you, designed to keep your words appropriate, interesting, and motivating. Editors from publishing houses, disturbed by the changes in the profession, are found in the field of Book Doctoring. Copy Editors, who once worked for daily presses, now gobbled up by syndicates, offer services privately. For every genre, and editor exists outside of the Lit. Agents, publishing houses, and periodicals. What can they do for you?

Remember that I mentioned all of the editing materials sitting on my desk? My copy editor helps me decide which works best for my scribing skills. I have a woman reading through my *Grief* book who has experience as an editor for one of the two publishing houses now bidding on it. Another editor is helping me revise an older project based on the Chicago Manual, since this is what an agent requested. An editor can help shape your raw material into a crafted vision. Since I am the one paying them, I don't feel as though their eyes are led by any ulterior motives.

One of my copy editors handed me a recent issue of a writing craft magazine, showing me, in black and white, that using a preposition at the end of a sentence is just fine in many instances. After I got up from fainting, and grabbed smelling salts to read the rest of his points, I felt

completely vindicated. Now I never have to worry about what mood my character is IN. I don't have to think too much about what the phrases are made OF. I was about to do a happy-tappy dance, when she said, "We're using AP, kiddo, you're coloring in the lines if you want me to edit."

Before I close for this week's lesson, let me tell you a secret. I revised this only once. That is, I only went back, reread, and edited the selections one time. Had I a need for a specific word count, a specific reading level, or a specific style to follow, I would certainly have gone over this peace to or there thymes. But sense I ewes spell Czech, three was not any knead.

{Lesson note: Revisions based solely on the word processing software for spell check and grammar are not always the way to go.}

For more information about editors, and hiring personal editors, I recommend the following links:

Society of Editors: What Editors Do And Why to Hire One

<http://www.tas-editors.org.au/what-editors-do.html>

An essay on The Book Editor Contract

<http://www.ivanhoffman.com/editor.html>

Freelance Marketing: What Editors Do for You

<http://www.seo-writer.net/freelance/copy-editor.html>

Thinking of BEING an editor?

<http://www.absolutewrite.com/Markets.htm>