The death of copy editing?

Yesterday, Bill Walsh, a copy editor for the *Washington Post* and author of three books on language, died. He was far too young—only 55—and a victim of cancer. He was liked and respected by his colleagues, copy editors everywhere, and by people who appreciate clean, readable copy (myself included). His obituary in the Post is a worthwhile read.

A couple of years ago, I had the good fortune to attend a copy editing workshop that Mr. Walsh was leading. He talked about his pet peeves ("armed gunmen" for example) and talked extensively about comma and hyphen use, among other topics. After the session, somebody asked him why there were so many copy errors in the *Washington Post*. He lamented that the shear quantity of copy (all that digital stuff) made it impossible to keep up. And of course, his department had suffered cuts.

More and more, news outlets have fewer copy editors or even none at all. Writers/reporters are expected to edit their own work, which, as anybody who has written anything, is damn near impossible to do successfully.

Copy editing is not proofreading. Proofreading is about making sure that words are spelled correctly and/or are in the right place. Copy editing is far more than that. Copy editing is about making sure that the work makes sense and that it is accurate. It strives to improve readability and accessibility.

Bill Walsh was a celebrity copy editor (he had a following!). His insight and wit are irreplaceable. I hope that his main skill—copy editing—does not die along with him. He certainly transmitted his knowledge through his books and his workshops. But he couldn't stop the powers that be from making cuts to copy editing staff.

Without copy editors, readers are shortchanged with text that can be mistake-ridden and inaccurate. Copy editors are

valuable and perform necessary work inside news organizations and indeed, any organization that puts out "content."

Rest in peace, Bill Walsh. You and your skills will be be sorely missed.

P.S. I don't have a copy editor, so any mistakes (and I am sure there are a few) are mine and mine alone.

How to show you really don't care

"Your sport is reserved."

That was the headline in an email I got from a marketing agency confirming my attendance at an event it was hosting. Obviously, it should have read "your spot is reserved." Is this an egregious mistake? Not really, but it is careless. It shows nobody bothered to proofread this email. And remember, this is coming from a marketing agency, which presumably creates accurate copy for its clients.

More careless yet was a letter I received from my HOA's management company regarding board elections. The letter stated that the elections would be held on February 7. The accompanying ballot said the elections would take place on February 28. Every homeowner was welcomed to attend (if only we knew which the correct date was).

Mistakes are everywhere

I've been noticing these types of mistakes more and more. Yesterday, a tweet from a leading women's organization talked

about principals instead of principles. Another letter from my HOA referenced the wrong community.

I am sure you've noticed it too because it has become rampant. I am not sure what's causing this but I believe it has to do with the expectations of instant communication and the ongoing rush we are experiencing. We've seen news organizations that rush to be first instead of taking the time to ensure accuracy.

Avoiding mistakes takes a bit of effort

It takes time to proofread documents. It takes time to ensure all information (dates, times, locations) is accurate. It involves an extra step and perhaps another person.

And not making the effort communicates lack of care

Remember, not taking the appropriate steps to make sure your communications are clear and accurate shows that you don't care about your reader.

What do you do to make sure your communications materials are accurate? Do you follow a checklist? Enlist a proofreader? Please let me know in the comments.

The Washington Post needs

copy editors

It seems a daily occurrence at the Washington Post: a headline typo here, and a factual error there. Sometimes, I have had to read a sentence several times to even start understanding it. This is because the Washington Post has few (if any) copy editors. I suspect reporters are being asked to edit their own work, which is never a good idea, especially with quick turnarounds. You can edit your own work, if you can look at it with "fresh eyes" after a day or so. In the fast-paced, 24/7 news cycle, there is little time to look at writing with fresh eyes.

I could not believe the mistake I found in an article in today's Post. It's about the Chesapeake Crab & Beer Festival, which took place on Saturday at National Harbor in Maryland. The story appeared in the Post's Local Living section and had the headline "All smiles on a crab-filled festival day in Inner Harbor."

The Inner Harbor is in Baltimore and the event took place at National Harbor. Then, in the body of the article, the writer says the event took place in Baltimore, except it didn't. See for yourself here:

Washington Post article

Copy editors don't just catch grammatical mistakes and typos, they check for accuracy too. Clearly, this article was not checked at all. A cursory search (and plain common sense) would have told anyone reading this article that the event took place at National Harbor and not in Baltimore.

Shame on the Washington Post! These mistakes make the newspaper look sloppy and careless, and makes me question the accuracy of all reporting.

It's a 2for1 blog post

There's been two blog post ideas floating around in my head, so I thought I would combine them since they are both short.

Details please!

A few weeks ago, I saw a query from a woman to a group we're both in. She was asking about "affordable" meeting space that would allow her to charge for admission. Predictably, the questions starting rolling in: How many people would she be hosting? Would she be serving food? And from me, what did she consider affordable?

Her question was fundamentally flawed because she did not provide enough detail.

Imagine if before asking a vague question, this woman had taken a few minutes to think about what is necessary in booking a meeting space (you know, those pesky details):

- Number of attendees/space needs
- Location
- Budget
- Amount of time needed
- Schedule (date and time)
- Ability to charge attendance
- Catering (needed or not)

She would have saved time (hers and ours): getting better suggestions and fielding fewer questions.

Next time you are looking to get information about anything, take a few minutes to think about the details that may be

relevant. Make it easy for others to provide you with the information you need.

It's all about him!

Saw this on Twitter:

The man stabbed on H Street this afternoon has died from their injuries. on.wusa9.com/1J0nSLa

Although it's become acceptable to use the plural for gender neutrality (I still prefer his/her because plural is plural), if you know the gender (male in this case) it is perfectly OK to use a gendered pronoun (his not their). It's worrisome that people are so intent on being gender neutral (which is good) that they forget that gendered pronouns can be used appropriately.

That's all folks. Catch you soon and let me know if you have any documents that need some copy editing.

Some weekend reading

I share so many articles every day on Twitter, and of those I save my favorites to Pocket (my favorite tool for saving articles). Starting today, I will do a weekly or biweekly round-up of great articles for weekend reading.

Here are three articles on writing and editing:

7 Self-Editing Tips for Reporters Without Copy Editors

Study Shows the Value of Copy Editing

11 easy ways to write more clearly

Here's a couple about websites and social media:

5 Things You Can Learn From a Poorly Designed Website

Is Social Media Actually Helping Your Company's Bottom Line?

Happy reading and have a great weekend!