

# Editing makes everything better!

Over the weekend, I went on walking tour of Georgetown history. In case you don't know it, Georgetown is a historic neighborhood in Washington, D.C. and home to Georgetown University. Georgetown has been around for a long time—it even predates the city of Washington—since it was founded as a port on the Potomac River in 1751. As you can imagine, there's a lot of history there. A lot.

(Check out this photo tour from the Georgetown website)

## **Lots of stuff has happened in and around here**

The tour started on the Georgetown Waterfront, right on the banks of the Potomac River, not far from the Key Bridge. The guide pointed out the Kennedy Center and the Watergate Hotel (both of which are NOT in Georgetown, but are also on the banks of the Potomac). And he started talking about the scandals associated with both those buildings. Then he gave an anecdote about John Quincy Adams and how he nearly drowned in the Potomac River. Then we walked on, and the tour guide told us a story about a family that had traveled to Georgetown on the C&O Canal in a barge, and how a fire broke out and killed three of their young children. He then showed pictures of the graves of these kids, graves which are located in Maryland. Then, we switched to 1985, and to discussing KGB spy Aldrich Ames and where he met his handlers (in a bar near the Waterfront). And to discussing the buildings along the Waterfront. And the construction of the C&O Canal. And the unsolved murder of a purported lover of John F. Kennedy, whose body was found near the C&O and who had lived in Ben Bradlee's home in Georgetown. And we went to the oldest structure in Georgetown, the Old Stone House. And then to a bank that had been a hospital during the Civil War, and where Louisa May

Alcott was a nurse.

(There was much, much more...)

### **And he kept going**

After two and half hours we weren't done. The guide said we had a good 45 minutes left. As interesting as it was, the heat (it was near 90 and very humid) and the hour (it was near 6:00 p.m.) convinced me it was time to go home.

When I got home, I was reflecting on the tour and decided it could have been much improved by some editing. The tour guide suffered from what many writers do—the desire to throw as much information as possible to show the breadth and depth of knowledge. But so much information can become amorphous—lacking in structure—to such an extent that it becomes irrelevant. He also had no overarching theme. There was little to connect the unresolved murder of a woman in the 1960s to the Old Stone House or to how divided Georgetown was during the Civil War. He also had too many asides—as important as the Watergate was to American politics, it does not belong in a Georgetown focused tour.

**In writing, editing means deciding what to leave in and what to take out. Editing means tightening up concepts and getting rid of wordiness. Editing means finding focus.**

For the Georgetown walking tour, we could start editing by deciding to stick to a time period (Civil War or the 1800s), or to a specific type of event (murders, spying, politics) or to a specific area (Waterfront, N Street). This would give it a tighter focus and more meaning. And in this case, it would've also have shortened the tour.

Editing does make everything better!

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# 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 sheer 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.

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## 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.**

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# 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.

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# 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 started 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](https://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.

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## 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!**