



Eagle Eye Editing / MY SERVICES: Writing / Portfolio

The Importance of Being Edited

When freelance editors complain about the sorry state of commercial language, we're also bemoaning the business not landed

By Antonia Morton

National Post, July 23, 2004

When members of our professional association had lunch at a tony restaurant recently, a group of us sat around afterwards deconstructing the menu: "Hand-torn arugula salad topped with chèvre and oven-grilled red peppers, complemented by a vinaigrette of walnut oil and balsamic vinegar."

Elegantly phrased – but not the original version. We had inserted a couple of missing hyphens; corrected the accent on "chèvre" from *aigue* to *grave*; sighed wearily as we changed "compliment" to "complement"; removed an excessive letter "l" from "walnut"; and lower-cased "arugula" and "balsamic," which some inconsistently Germanic hand had capitalized.

That's what happens when a bunch of editors get together: we amuse ourselves by nitpicking minor things, in between debating the hot usage topics of the day. Perversely, what we most enjoy talking about is the deep pain we feel at the state of language in the modern world – and the fact that once-sacred concepts such as structure and grammar are now viewed as fuddy-duddy and passé.

And oddly enough, many of the worst offenders are businesses. Not just Joe's Shoe Repair, either, where hand-lettered signs offer "Heel's fixed and Seude cleaning." Even big companies with deep pockets still manage to foist bad writing onto the world.

Their menus and mission statements, web sites and wall signs, brochures and ad copy, even job postings, can all make sensitive readers cringe.

This is puzzling, because surely the commercial community has a lively incentive to look as good as possible. After all, language cues allow us to accurately judge others – so one might guess that a company with carelessly written promotional material might, for instance, be equally lackadaisical with its software code or its shipping schedule. Ideally, organizations that communicate well would succeed over incoherent ones – a classic Darwinian example of economic natural selection.

A cynic might wonder why editors don't rejoice at this situation: surely consultants who earn their living tidying up messy prose are happy to see a lot of it. When fewer and fewer business people can write well themselves any more, the obvious assumption is that they'd call in the experts to make good the lack.

Ideally, we language pros should reap the benefits. We'd scrutinize all the catalogues, billboards, advertising banners and magazine inserts – eliminating the wonky syntax, punctuation errors and spelling bloopers that might embarrass our clients. We'd get fat contracts and the satisfying sense of being useful.

But alas, that's not the way it seems to work. Granted, staff editors can manage to spread linguistic sanity in their own bailiwicks. But we freelance editors always find that the general lack of interest in good writing doesn't make us more sought-after. Quite the opposite: it renders our skills irrelevant. As people get less and less adept with the proper use of language, and as respect for even basic literacy (never mind elegance) dwindles – so too dwindles any perception of this being a problem.

The point about good editing is that it can make businesses look more polished and professional (as well as allowing overworked managers to focus on more important work, without having to fret over communications). But in today's corporate viewpoint, having material edited seems to make all the economic sense of having it embossed with gold leaf: so few people appreciate error-free writing that the extra expense can't rationally be justified.

So we're faced with the depressing task of persuading potential clients to delve into already tight budgets for the sake of an arcane nicety. If an organization can trim a few thousand dollars off a project budget by letting its text go forth naked and blemished, then why not? Few people are likely to care, or even notice.

Aware that we're fighting a losing battle, we editors use black humour to cope with our impotence. In our professional meetings and forums we share the most wince-making of the solecisms we come across, and laugh heartily at the poor barbarians.

But behind our mockery is disgruntlement: if only these people would pay us to edit their stuff! All that incompetent prose around, and yet many of us struggle to find enough work – we're starving in the midst of plenty.

Some of us even adopt a missionary sort of attitude: whenever we see writing that could stand improvement, we contact the people responsible, gently pointing out the flaws and offering our services.

Unfortunately, such enterprising efforts usually have an almost zero success rate. You can see why: like all other business ventures, peddling editing services hinges on the customer's perception of "need." So for a potential client, getting such an unsolicited tutorial is very much like having an interior decorator sashay uninvited into your living room and exclaim: "My, this place looks just awful – the wallpaper, that couch, those paintings! Pay me \$80 an hour, and I'll come in and really fix the place up for you."

As for consumers, the targets of all this bad writing: either they genuinely don't notice it, or else they do notice but just wearily accept it as one of the unavoidable evils of today's business world (right up there with the demon voice mail).

And with nobody to give businesses feedback and set them straight on their shortcomings – well, nobody whose opinion they actually *respect* – there's no incentive for them ever to get things right.

What can be done? I like to fantasize wistfully that public opinion could force businesses and corporations to smarten up. Perhaps the entire body of the Editors' Association of Canada (supported by an army of annoyed readers and consumers across the nation) should fire off snippy letters to offending presidents and CEOs, saying things like: "I was shocked by your misspellings, your frequent subject-verb disagreements, and the complete lack of structural coherence in your text. I will never buy your products again unless you hire a decent editor."

Then perhaps the situation would improve. Our society would no longer (as George Orwell griped more than half a century ago) view the struggle against the abuse of language as "a sentimental archaism, like preferring candles to electric light or hansom cabs to aeroplanes."

Not only would big business rediscover its grammatical self-respect, we editors would rediscover ours as well. We'd be vaulted to our proper place as guardians of linguistic propriety, occupying professional positions of power, privilege and wealth – clutching our style guides all the way to the bank.
