

Does anyone have any words of wisdom and/or encouragement concerning handling editors who go a little overboard in pruning a writer's work?

I don't mean merely chopping off your stories near the end (you handle that by putting the important information up front--so the reader doesn't have to slog through to the bitter end) I mean editing your work to the point of changing the very meaning of what was originally written.

I understand that due to space considerations writing may have to be altered, but when the meaning of what was written is changed, I become upset. I've written regularly for this particular paper since 1999, and this is my second editor, whom I've been working with for about three years. However, I do appreciate your advice should I ever work as a writer again. (Wallowing in pessimism always helps me:)

Perhaps, assuming that I ever have another assignment ever again, I will stop reading what goes out under my name. Simply cash the check, and go on.

Of course, that is assuming that the publication sends you a check, which is another question entirely. Is there some unwritten rule that writers work for free? Silly me, expecting to be paid!

I realize now that should have framed the question to read: "Does anyone have any words of wisdom and/or encouragement concerning handling your feelings when editors go too far in pruning your work?" For, in reality, I suppose one does not "handle" editors and expect to work with any regularity.

Maggie Boleyn

Virtually every newspaper and magazine that has published me has "edited" a mistake into my work at least once.

It sucks every time!

Any paper worth spit will run a correction if it needs to be.

Hang in there Maggie, nice to hear from you again.

Vivian L. DeGain

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Hi Maggie:

These are good questions, and I think we've all asked them at one point or another.

I believe we all need a good editor -- I am a terrible proofreader of my own work -- but nobody wants to see her work hacked beyond recognition. I get annoyed if I find errors edited into an otherwise clean text. Since I occasionally sell reprints, I find it interesting to see how some editors change things that other editors had "fixed" to suit their style, or had left alone. But for the most part, I have been very grateful to my editors. A couple of them have saved my butt and my pride.

That said, I used to write a monthly column for GRIT -- way back when. They willingly purchased reprints of my stuff, and while the GRIT reprint rates were low, it was nice (at first) to get increased national exposure. But when a new editor came aboard and suddenly began to seriously alter my columns in tone and content, I decided to pull the

column. And I told her why. (Once, she completely reworked an essay that the Christian Science Monitor had been particularly "delighted with" ... The CSM had barely changed beyond a stray typo, while the GRIT editor totally ruined the essay. What angered me most, as you indicated, is that the CONTENT of the essay was actually changed to reflect the GRIT editor's views! It happened often enough, and later, that editor was let go.

If this keeps happening to you, I would ask the editor why he/she is doing so much editing. If you are not satisfied with the answer, don't write for them anymore.

I wish I could offer advice on the payment issue. I can't think of a writer who hasn't had trouble collecting \$\$ at some point. Usually, these issues are resolved with a phone call, although I did work for one paper that never paid what they owed me. After six months of patience, I stopped writing for that paper and didn't look back.

Good luck -- Cindy La Ferle

Hi, Maggie:

First, I've found that some writers and editors are not compatible with each other -- but it's wonderful when they are. I'd like to say I've felt lucky to have worked with some editors, who have helped me improve my writing with their diplomatic personalities and skillful blue pencils. However, I think there are other editors who forget that their job is to edit -- not to rewrite your work in their image. My advice is: don't take it too personally. To me, an editor's response to a written work is like an inkblot test. It says more about the editor than about you. However, if an editor changes the meaning of a story, I think the writer has a duty to contact the editor to find out why.

I have a question: Did you submit something you had already written or did the editor assign you the story? If the editor assigned you the story, I'm wondering how clearly the editor defined the assignment: what news peg, whom to contact, how many words or column inches, how many different voices to include, etc. Sometimes, I've encountered editors who've called me with facts-to-hunt-down or people-to-contact after all my research was done and the article was nearly finished. One magazine editor wanted me to write my own headlines and was surprised when at first I didn't -- not what I was used to working on newspapers where headline writing was clearly the editor's job.

Once, an editor changed what I had written so much that my source, who had liked my first draft, was furious after the edited version. The article couldn't be salvaged. I felt lucky to be paid despite the fact that the article never was published -- the editor wanted to maintain a good relationship with me, and I did appreciate that.

I hope this helps you a little.

Cindy Hampel

Maggie,

I have always got along well with my various editors and have no problem correcting, editing, when necessary (which can be quite often). However, four years ago I had an agent/editor who

made me rewrite my memoir so many times, in different styles, formats, etc, that I was unable to recognize my own life. It was very frustrating and embarrassing. The final blow came when, after two years of working together on that book, she suddenly decided that she did not want to be an agent/editor anymore, and returned all manuscripts to her clients without a single word of apologies. I am still fuming.

This memoir has never been published, but I "sold" pieces of it to literary mags, in their original version . . .

From this experience I have decided that a story belongs to me. The role of an editor is to advise on making the writing better, easier, purer and sellable, but if an editor "wants" ownership of my writing, it's time to part.

Good luck. Annick

Ask for a copy of your article as it will appear in the publication. You can then discuss changes the editor wants to make. Elaine Watson

Hi Barb,

So good to hear from you!

As an editor, I have to agree with you 110 percent!

We have to:

1-satisfy our bosses, the publishers who answer to the readers and what they expect 2-the deadline (always too soon, with another dozen deadlines and stories right after that) 3-the space and placement in the product, along with the photos, the headlines, the ads, and all the other "noise" on the page Still, I argue that ALL of us, writers, editors and design people ONLY do this job because we love it!!! We love the work and working with the media to reach the readers. We HAVE to, because the pay is lousy, the hours are long, the deadlines are murder and the pressure and competition are ridiculous.

Nuff said!

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Hi, Barb:

Thanks for your thoughts on this topic. Your editing schedule sounds grueling. I do appreciate your point of view. Although I speak for myself, I bet others here also have worked as both editors and writers. When I started working full-time in journalism, at two small daily papers in Ohio, everyone in the editorial department not only wrote at least five stories a day, but also edited pages, shot photos, developed film in the darkroom and worked with production staff in the paste-up room. We had no other choice.

I did learn a lot. Some of the best editing tips I learned came from one of the production staffers in the paste-up room. After working all these different positions, I'm glad for the help of others in putting out a publication, and I realize how much depends on cooperation and good communication. I think that my experiences editing have helped me grow as a writer.

I think it's important for unhappy editors to talk with their writers and unhappy writers to talk with their editors.

Cindy Hampel

And now a word from the editors! This is Barb Modrack, and I am the editor of three community papers put out by the Flint Journal. It's small potatoes, but also very basic and I use my share of freelance writers. Keep in mind: once I get a story, my concern is how it works for my product. About the last thing I can worry about is the writer's feelings, unfortunately, despite having great respect for writers and their feelings.

So, when I get a news story that reads like a feature, I have to turn it into a news story. When I get a feature that reads like a news story, I have to turn it into a feature.

Meanwhile, I have to find the lead, and if it's at the bottom (a common spot!) I have to bring it to the top.

And it has to fit the space I have, so I might have to cut it. That is a reality worth facing: we have to fit around the ads. There isn't any negotiating.

But these are all things that give me a headache, not fiendish pleasure. I would rather not edit at all....I edit for a job, not for sport. I love to get a story that is acceptable as it comes to me, and I get lots of stuff that is.

If I possibly have time, and a big re-write is in order, I will ask the writers if they want to do it themselves. But usually there isn't time for that.

I also would never refuse to explain to a writer why I changed what I changed but very few ask.

That's all for now! Hope this helps at least a bit.

It's been really interesting reading all this. Barb brings a lot of insight into the discussion, and, as an editor, I found myself echoing her as I read her reply. Ditto Cindy H.

We have a lot of publications here at Third Street, and I read every piece after our editors and copy editors work on the copy. I almost always have my own edits, and often many questions. We factcheck all our stories, and often find things out factchecking that we write into the stories, either because they are very interesting or because they should have been in the story in the first place. We often rewrite leads because they lack the spark necessary to pull readers in. Conclusions are another thing: Stories should always have one!

(FYI: I cannot tell you how many times, after factchecking, we learn that writers got many facts all wrong. Often names are misspelled and cities of residence are wrong.)

I'll say this to the writer who asked the question: DO talk to your editor to find out why your story was changed, but approach him/her with the attitude of learning the editor's preferences so you can have more success next time. As Barb says, we editors do this for a living, not for sport. We'd much rather read a story and put it straight on the

page, but that rarely happens. That said, as an editor, I try very hard when rewriting to retain the voice of the writer, matching his or her style. I also am careful to be as accurate as possible, retaining the original meaning.

And try as we may to be kind to the writer, we have a lot of work to do in a short amount of time, and must think of our readers first. Sometimes writers perceive editors as heartless, but that's rarely the case.

Best,
Theresa

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Hi Maggie,

I do feel your pain. And now that I've been on both sides of the fence, I can share what it's been like from the editor's perspective.

In my experience, good writers who read the assignment details (and the publication they're writing for!) and consistently deliver a well-written story with accurate quotes and information on time are a rarity. Writers who don't read the assignment details, choose to ignore them or don't understand them and fail to ask for clarification, inevitably deliver a story that needs a lot of editing. Depending on the scenario, I've approached the situation in a couple of different ways.

This last issue, I had not one but two veteran writers submit stories that were not on the mark. One writer simply didn't deliver the story she had promised (and she pitched the idea in the first place) and the second writer's story was written in the wrong format. Yes, I could have just edited the stories to make them what I wanted, but I knew they would be practically unrecognizable. I felt these writers deserved more respect than that. And that's what I told them. They both reworked the stories, with better results. One is a writer who has been pretty dependable in the past, so it was important to me to preserve that relationship.

But if a writer I'm trying for the first time delivers a piece that either doesn't fulfill the assignment details and/or is poorly written... I am more likely to just edit the thing to what I want rather than deal with a writer I know I won't hire again. Or, I've asked them to improve/rewrite a story and get it back with little changed and/or added (guys, by the way, are the worst). Based on these experiences, I can see why editors find it easier to just change the story to what they wanted rather than deal with (or avoid dealing with) the writer.

Since we are a trade publication, our formats are pretty straightforward and I don't think that "meaning" comes into the picture very much (I actually wish it would—too many writers deliver fluff rather than meaty stuff). But I admit, it's hard not to over-edit, when I can see how much better the story could be! I do try to be conscious of the writer's style and not obliterate it with editing.

You don't really make it clear whether this happens on a consistent basis with one editor (which in that case I agree with Cindy La Ferle and just wouldn't write for them anymore), or has happened with several different editors. If that's the case, I think you need to take a hard look at whether you're giving them the story they asked for and the quality of your work. If you're not sure of the assignment, don't be afraid to ask questions. I would much rather answer a lot of questions than get a story that isn't what I wanted.

Anyway, I hope this is helpful. If there's anything else I can do, let me know.

Cathleen

Hi Cathleen,

Just wanted to make sure you got my message--a definite "yes" to your idea. Even though this discussion revolves around prose writers vs. editors, as a poet I have a few horror stories of my own regarding editors (e.g., having my line breaks totally screwed up--even in high profile journals)!

Hope all's well with you and your writing.

Best,
Linda Nemeč Foster

As an author, I feel pride of authorship in all of my work. As a publisher and editor, I recognize that all work does need editing. It is important to respect the author when editing, and it is important to respect the editor when writing. Fact checking is significantly essential.

Having said all that, I stopped submitting articles to a publication that routinely over-edited them Best, Len Charla

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