11. Editing

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Within the field of technical communication, *editing* is quite a common term. Almost 20 years ago, three quarters of responding members from the Society for Technical Communication indicated that editing others was an important job function (Dayton, 2004, pp. 86-87). Today, most undergraduate and graduate programs in technical communication have a technical editing course. Editing is represented in our professional societies, such as the International Society of Managing and Technical Editors; the Society for Technical Communication has the Technical Editing Special Interest Group.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* states that *edit*'s etymology is partially a back-formation from *editor* and partially from the Latin *ēditus*, "to bring forth, to produce, to utter, to tell, relate, to declare, to publish (writings), to display, show" (Oxford University Press, n.d.). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *edit*: "To prepare an edition of written work by (an author) for publication, by selecting and arranging the contents, adding commentary, etc" (Oxford University Press, n.d., Definition 1.a.). The first example of this definition in use was in 1699.

Edit quickly evolved to mean more generally "to prepare (a piece of writing, copy for a newspaper or magazine, etc.) for publication or use by correcting, condensing, or otherwise modifying it" (Oxford University Press, n.d., Definition 1.b.). The first example of this definition in use was in 1867.

Editing, however, became even more complicated over the last 100 years. Sub-definitions were added to show what new discoveries could be edited: a television or radio program (1913), computer code (1958), a digital image (1971), and genes (1969). This extension of the term *editing* to multiple fields and careers is its first problem: It causes problems with search terms, complicating searches for jobs, educational programs, and **research** literature.

To distinguish technical communication's editing from all the other types, we typically use the term *technical editing*. Technical editing "does not have a well-established definition" (Flanagan, 2019, p. 15); definitions have been grouped into **technology**-based, **rhetoric**-based, **actor**- or **activity**-based, discipline-based, and levels-based definitions (Flanagan, 2019). One of the best definitions of technical editing is "the planning, analysis, restructuring, and language changes made to other people's technological or scientific documents in order to make them more useful and accurate for their intended audiences" (Murphy, 2010, p. 1).

As there are so many types of editors, technical editing job searches typically have a few inappropriate ads mixed in with relevant ones. An indeed.com search for "technical editor" in Dallas, Texas on February 26, 2021 provided mixed

opportunities. Of the first 15 ads, less than half were technical writing and/or editing of written documents, five were editing other media (such as film), and three were not even close—two 9-1-1 operators and a "labor editor" whose job appeared to be keeping timecards. For a Monster.com search for "editor" in Dallas, TX, three of the first five ads were for technical editors, along with one video editor and, somehow, a principal engineer with no ***documentation*** responsibilities. While these two searches on the two largest job-finding websites are hardly exhaustive, they indicate that any search for a technical editing position involves time eliminating extraneous job listings. This isn't news—in their 2011 technical editing textbook, Nicole Amare et al. note that every workplace has its own nomenclature for job titles.

The widely applied term also makes it difficult to find educational programs and publications on technical editing. The University of Chicago has an Editing Certificate, but it has to do with the publishing industry, preparing students for positions as acquisitions editors and managing editors.

Searching the ***research*** databases using the term *editing* presents similar problems to the job search. A Google Scholar search of the term on March 23, 2021 returned 5.74 million results. Of these, the top four articles pertained to film editing, image editing, editing software, and surface editing. When *technical editing* was specified, the number of results dropped to 24,700.

Is this issue with the term *edit* being applied to multiple fields likely to change? Frankly, no. It's simply too entrenched in our culture. We will just have to wade through extraneous job listings, educational searches, and research literature databases.

The second issue with the term *edit* comes from within technical editing. The field agrees fairly well on what the editing process accomplishes. Editing the text means "making it complete, accurate, correct, comprehensible, usable, and appropriate for the readers" (Rude & Eaton, 2010, p. 8).

However, where the field really disagrees is with how we envision the editing process. We have dozens of models that have been created over the last 45 years, models created from the authors' professional experiences and workplace.

Robert Van Buren and Mary Fran Buehler's (1980) *The Levels of Edit* is often cited as the first modern editing process. At the Jet Propulsion Lab, they created the levels to better describe what edits were available, along with time to complete and cost, so that their program managers could better plan. They first grouped all of the editorial tasks they could think of into separate categories, ending up with nine, such as editing for format, mechanical ***style***, policy (checks whether the new document contradicts any existing policies), and integrity (making sure the document is consistent). The levels then indicate how many of those listed edits will be conducted. The lightest level is Level 5, with only two of the nine types of editing performed. The most intense editing happens in a Level 1 edit, which contains all nine categories. In addition to providing a better understanding of the services available, showing clearly to editors and authors what edits to expect, and serving

as a tool for budgeting, the levels of edit also serve as scaffolding for new editors and assist professional editors with planning schedules (Tarutz, 1992, p. 162).

There are, however, different ways to categorize levels of edits, and not even the textbooks agree on one process. The textbook *Technical Editing* defines three levels of edit: proofreading, copyediting, and comprehensive editing (Rude & Eaton, 2010). Proofreading is simply checking for errors introduced when a document moves from manuscript or draft form to printed form; it looks for the mistakes introduced by the graphic designer when laying the document out in ***design*** software. Proofreading was a more important stage when old-fashioned printing presses were used, which used humans to lay out the actual letters in a frame. As a human-based process, printing made a lot of opportunity for introduction of errors. Now that most graphic designers are taking computer text and cutting and pasting it into a different software program, there is less of an opportunity for introduced errors, but proofreading is still a necessary editing step. At the next level, copyediting "check[s] for correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar; for consistency in mechanics, such as capitalization, from one part of the document to the next, and for document accuracy and completeness" (Rude & Eaton, 2010, p. 9). Last, comprehensive editing "evaluates how well the content, organization, visual design, and style of the document support comprehension" (Rude & Eaton, 2010, p. 203).

The Amare et al. textbook (2011) also uses three levels of edit: editing for correctness, ***visual*** readability, and effectiveness (p. 12). Those levels, however, don't correspond to the levels of proofreading, copyediting, and comprehensive editing used in the *Technical Editing* textbook (Rude & Eaton, 2010). The correctness edit involves fixing grammatical and mechanical errors (similar to proofreading and copyediting), while the effectiveness edit deals with all rhetorical issues, and is defined as "substantive editing for content issues such as organization, sentence, structure, style, logic, and meaning" (similar to comprehensive editing; Amare et al., 2011, p. 12). The middle level of edit, the edit for visual readability, however, is completely different, entirely about formatting and page design, including color issues, white space, bulleting, and all graphics.

Other texts categorize for both types of edits and levels of edits. For example, Judith A. Tarutz's textbook (1992) describes four major types of edits—developmental, preliminary, copy and literary, and production. She adds a chapter on the levels of edit, providing her own levels: what is found by turning pages, skimming, skimming and comparing, reading, analyzing, and testing and using (p. 165). Similarly, Donald H. Cunningham and colleagues (2020) use both approaches, types and levels, to classify editing practices, but they also introduce a third, scope. For them, the types are substantive editing and copyediting. Substantive editing covers editing for organization, navigation, completeness, accuracy, and style as well as effective visuals and page design. Copyediting usually focuses on correcting errors in grammar, mechanics, typography, alignment, and punctuation; correcting formatting inconsistencies in headings, tables of contents, etc.; and ensuring adherence to style sheets and style manuals. Proofreading, which they fold into

copyediting, is a late-stage check for errors—especially those introduced during the editing process. Cunningham et al.'s levels of editing reflect the amount of time, attention, and effort entailed during substantive editing (minimal, moderate, extensive) or copyediting (light, standard, heavy). Finally, the scope of the editing can be global (throughout the document) or local (in one part of it).

Even a study which surveyed authors who had been edited by professional editors still turned up baffling definitions and levels of editing (Eaton et al., 2008). Of the more than 400 respondents, only 26 percent defined editing in terms of all three types of editing (proofreading, copyediting, and comprehensive). Only 50 percent of respondents' definitions included comprehensive editing at all. In other words, not even those who have been edited define the process as an editor would.

What are the negative outcomes of not having consistent terms to describe editing? For potential clients, not knowing about the editorial process, particularly that comprehensive editing exists, really limits their ability to envision how an editor might help them. It limits the editor's ability to sell their services.

For practitioners, this means having to explain to every new client what model of editing they are following. Skipping the explanation can result in mismatched expectations and conflict. Practitioners will also need to learn the editorial process at each workplace. For teachers, having so many models, we have to use what mirrors our experience the best, what we find most helpful. For researchers, these different models negatively affect planning studies: we don't have large groups of students who have been trained using the same techniques.

Are these problems with the term *editing* very serious? The use of "editing" to describe multiple professional activities is inconvenient for people who must take more time to find job opportunities or relevant articles, but ultimately not serious. But editing having multiple processes is the larger issue. I predict that no matter how well the field defines its editing process, we will always have to explain the editorial process every time we work with a new client.

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