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## The importance of being edited

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When you think of having your content edited, you may envision a severe-looking character tearing your text to shreds with very sharp red pencils. Instead, be thankful to get your text reviewed *at all*.



Fewer and fewer technical documentation departments employ full-time technical editors to review content, and many groups rely upon writers to review each other's work.<sup>1</sup>

Whether your reviewer is a fellow writer or a dedicated editor, the editing process can help you do the following:

- Improve the organization, tone, and consistency of your content
- Correct spelling and grammatical errors

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1. There are some departments that do not review content at all. We do not recommend this option, however. At a minimum, a department should institute a peer review policy so that writers review each other's content before it is released.

To ensure that content is consistent, a technical editor (or the writers reviewing each other's work) should establish style guidelines early in a project. Coming up with the rules at the outset of a project can save everyone lots of work—when all the writers know the rules up front, everyone's text will be much more consistent and will therefore require less rework later on.

An editor ensures that your material clearly communicates the necessary information at the appropriate audience level. That sort of feedback is invaluable. And, of course, every error caught during the editing process is one less mistake that users see—and that makes you look better.

This chapter explains the importance of editing content during the technical communication process. If you work in a department where there is no full-time editor, you and your fellow writers will handle the tasks described in this chapter.

#### Handling reviews electronically

Today, many departments rely on electronic review processes, particularly when employees are not in the same location. Instead of writing comments on pages of printed output, reviewers insert comments into an electronic version of the content. For example, Acrobat has tools that allow you to include notes and highlight text in a PDF file. Some companies have sophisticated electronic workflows that enable multiple people to include comments in a review copy. The writer can see all reviewers' comments combined into one file and then accept or reject the changes.

**NOTE:** Some companies also use software (such as the acrolinx IQ Suite) to automatically check grammar, adherence to style guidelines, and use of terminology.

## Preventive measures

The sooner a team considers the editing process during a project, the better. In particular, there are several editing tasks to complete in the early phases of a project:

- Reviewing doc plans and schedules
- Establishing style guidelines
- Deciding on terminology
- Examining legacy content
- Reviewing early chapters

### Reviewing doc plans and schedules

If you have a dedicated technical editor for your project, it's important to coordinate dates with the editor's schedule, particularly because an editor often supports multiple writers and will need to stagger reviews.

A schedule should also take an editor's workload into account—it's not reasonable to expect an editor to do a thorough edit of 1,000 pages in less than a week.

**NOTE:** A decent rule of thumb is that the editor will complete about 10 pages per hour, which means about 400 pages per week. However, that number is affected by the complexity of the content and the quality of the writing.

If you work on a team that doesn't have a dedicated editor, you still need to account for peer reviews when building doc plans and schedules. Allow enough time

for writers to review each other's work, and schedule time for making revisions based on the reviews.

## Establishing style guidelines

Most documentation departments already have style guidelines in place. These guidelines explain issues such as the following:

- Punctuation
- Capitalization
- Word choice and terminology
- Highlighting
- Acronym use

Many companies develop their own style guides and distribute them to all employees, either in printed or online form. However, some companies follow the guidelines in an established reference such as *The Chicago Manual of Style* and may distribute a smaller, separate document that details any exceptions and additions to the reference's rules. See "Editorial" on page 293 for a list of style references.

Scriptorium Publishing's style guide is available on the web at:

[www.scriptorium.com/Standards/](http://www.scriptorium.com/Standards/)

If you're doing work for a client, be sure to ask about the client's style guidelines. You need to ensure that your work matches the client's guidelines.

### **Alienating an editor or a reviewer in one easy step...**

The fastest road to a bad relationship with someone editing your content is trying to impose your personal style preferences on the style guide. Remember, your preferences are just that—preferences—and that's why it's a *style* guide, not a grammar guide. Telling the person reviewing your work that “only idiots use serial commas” is not going to build a good working relationship.

If you feel strongly that something in the style guide should be changed, approach the editor who manages the style guide; in the case of a department that has no editor, have a team meeting and decide whether the style guide should be changed.

Keep in mind, though, that every writer has a set of ingrained style preferences. If a department modified the style guide to accommodate every new writer, the style guide would change constantly—and frankly, the only thing worse than style guidelines you disagree with is style guidelines that change constantly!

## **Deciding on terminology**

Style guides often contain word usage information that explains the correct way to use particular terms (for example, use *list box* instead of *listbox*) and what terms should be avoided altogether. This usage information, however, may not anticipate terminology specific to the project you're documenting. In that case, writers and editors should work together to draw up a list of terms for the new product. The editor or a writer on the team should compile the list of project-specific terms and ensure that all writers have a copy of the list.

## **Examining legacy content**

If one of your information sources is legacy documents from the product's previous release, examine those documents for terminology and specific presentation methods at the beginning of the project. Check with the client about any of the terminology and presentation

methods from the previous release that should be preserved.

A review of legacy information can also identify any weaknesses in presentation or organization that you should avoid in the new content. If you didn't write the earlier version, this is a pain-free way of getting some excellent feedback.

## **Reviewing early chapters**

It can be very helpful for an editor or fellow writer to look at the first chapter or two that you write, particularly if you're a new writer. Early edits can give you an idea of what to avoid as you continue to write, and they can also ensure that all writers on a project are consistent in tone, audience, and presentation.

## **Copy editing vs. technical editing vs. production editing**

Different types of editing include:

- Copy editing—editing text for spelling, adherence to grammar rules and to style guidelines, and general clarity.
- Technical editing—examining the content for organization, presentation, and consistency. Does the text flow logically? Do the text and graphics work together? Are similar types of information presented in the same manner? Also known as developmental editing.
- Production editing—ensuring that a book is ready for printing or that online help is ready for release.