Editing for Literary Societies – A Quick Guide

by Marty Ross (© Alliance of Literary Societies, 2019)

INTRODUCTION

'Publishing for Literary Societies – A Quick Guide', available on the Alliance of Literary Societies' website, contains a brief outline of good practice in editing. While writing it, I felt that it could usefully be expanded into another Quick Guide for members of societies who undertake editing on a regular basis. The standard of editing which I see in society publications, including newsletters, journals and reprints, is generally good and, in some cases, demonstrates a very high level of editorial expertise. The following advice is offered to those with little editorial experience, who may be undertaking to edit a society newsletter or journal for the first time. Additions and corrections are welcome.

Consistency is the golden rule of editing. Any publication that includes different spellings of the same word (e-book or ebook, for example), different formatting for the same level of sub-headings, or many proofreading errors, will appear sloppy and unprofessional. There are many hard and fast rules in editing – i.e. where there is a right or a wrong usage – but many more instances that require the editor's common sense and judgement. My aim as an editor is always to provide readable, coherent text that looks good on the page. Some writers require a great deal of help, in the form of editing, to achieve this; others will produce text which is ready for the printer.

Be aware of the differences between American and British usage. The American standard is to use double quote marks ("American"), while the British is for single quotes ('British'). American spelling omits the 'u' in words like 'favour'; there is also the reversal of –re endings (theater vs theatre) and many other instances. As an American who has worked as an editor in Britain, I have needed to be peculiarly aware of these differences (and often get it wrong!), but I have noticed recently that the rise of Microsoft and the ubiquity of Word has blurred the boundaries for many, especially younger, British people. There is no right or wrong, though personally, I feel a British publication should use British style. Whatever choices are made, apply them consistently throughout your text.

RESOURCES

The three references that are rarely out of my hands when I am editing are:

- *New Oxford Spelling Dictionary: The Writers' and Editors' Guide to Spelling and Word Division* (OUP, 2014). Exactly what it says on the box, and excellent for a quick check on whether or not a word should be hyphenated, American and British variant spellings, etc.
- *New Oxford Dictionary for Writers & Editors: The Essential A-Z Guide to the Written Word* (OUP, 2014). This provides a quick reference for abbreviations, words that require italics, variant names ('**Dunkirk** port in northern France; Fr. Name Dunkerque'), or usages ('**druggist** *North Amer.* pharmacist').
- *New Hart's Rules: The Oxford Style Guide.* The editor's Bible.

A good contemporary dictionary is also, of course, essential. I have a whole range of dictionaries, including the American *Webster's* (for checking Americanisms), the *Shorter OED* (for derivations, archaic words, etc.) and a Collins Cobuild dictionary (intended for learners of English and providing very good modern examples of usage), but the dictionary I use the most is an extremely battered, paperback *Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (which was 'totally up to date' when I bought it in the late 1980s!).

Needless to say (and sad to say, as I used to earn a living editing reference books), you no longer require a shelf-ful of reference books, when you have the internet at your fingertips. What is Queen Anne's Bounty? What were John Clare's dates? Who was Slobodan Milosevic? What is Breslau called today? These queries, which might have required a trip to the library in the past, are now easily resolved, though as always, judgement needs to be exercised over internet sources.

There are many good books on copy-editing; I have used for many years Judith Butcher's *Copy-editing: The Cambridge Handbook* (CUP, 1981).

HOUSE STYLE

As you begin to edit a publication, you will need to make decisions about what style you will use in particular situations. What headings are required, and what fonts will you use for them? Will you indent the first line of a paragraph, or have the left margin full out with a line space between paragraphs (as I have done here)? Are you going to 'justify' (i.e. align on left and right) the paragraphs, or leave the right edge ragged? You may decide to indent quotations over a certain length, or have them in italics, or just use quote marks. How will

you deal with numbers? (The norm is to write out numbers from one to nine, and to use figures for 10 upwards.) What about ranges of numbers and dates? Figures must be numbered and captioned in a consistent manner. What form of referencing will be used?

Most of these decisions can be based on guidance found in the sources given above, but you may find it helpful to make a note as you go along for reference the next time you encounter the same situation. These notes will accumulate into a style sheet for your publication, and this becomes your house style, which is useful not only for you, but for any colleagues working on the publication and for your contributors (if they can be bothered to read and follow it, which may be doubtful!).

Here is the style sheet for the *Johnson Society Transactions.* This began as my own jottings, when I began to edit it about 10 years ago. It was expanded last year when John Winterton, now my co-editor, joined the team and we have now placed it on the Johnson Society (Lichfield) website to provide guidance for prospective contributors.

THE JOHNSON SOCIETY TRANSACTIONS: *STYLE SHEET (REV. APRIL 2019)*

Structure and layout

- Font: Arial.
- Article headings: title bold and centred; author italic and centred.
- Order of article: main text, followed by 'Notes' and 'References'.
- Paragraphs: spaced, not indented.

Quotations

- Quotations longer than *c.*40 words spaced and indented, not italic.
- Single quotes throughout; double quotes for quotes within quotes.
- Punctuation in quoted passages should generally be preserved (though, e.g., double quotation marks may be changed to single to match 'house style').
- Titles of books, plays, etc.: italic, with initial caps (*Lives of the English Poets*)
- In-text citations of references should use the 'Harvard' (author/date) system, with the full details of works cited listed in a 'References' section at the end. In-text citations take the form '(Boswell 1934–50, vol. 2, p. 470)'. The corresponding entry in the References section would be: 'Boswell, James 1934–50. *Boswell's Life of Johnson* (ed. Hill, George Birkbeck; rev. Powell, L.F.), 6 vols. Oxford.'
- Where an author cited (or a person mentioned) has two or more initials, these are closed up (e.g. 'J.C. Loudon', not 'J. C. Loudon').
- Websites: *italic*.

Spelling

- Where in UK English a word can be spelled with either an 's' or a 'z', the 's' form is used (e.g. 'civilisation' and 'realise', not 'civilization' and 'realize').

- 'Focussed' and 'focussing' (double 's'), not 'focused' and 'focusing'.
- 'Acknowledgement' (with a middle 'e'); 'judgement' also with a middle 'e', except in a legal context, where the form 'judgment' is used.

Punctuation

- Serial (Oxford) comma used only where necessary to avoid ambiguity; in other cases, use 'X, Y and Z' rather than 'X, Y, and Z'.
- Spaced en dash (–) for punctuation, unspaced en dash (–) for number/date ranges.
- Dr, as in Dr Johnson, does not have a full stop (except where one is found in quoted passages).

Numbers and dates

- Numbers: spelled out one through nine; 10 and above as figures.
- Maximum elision of numbers is used, e.g. '125–38', '246–7', but there is no elision of the last two digits where these are from 10 to 19, e.g. '211–17'.
- Dates: 23 March 1732.

You will see that, as the style sheet develops, it becomes customised to your publication. So, for example, we actually point out that the abbreviation Dr does not require a full stop, with hopes that our contributors will notice this and we won't spend entire mornings deleting the full stops in Dr. Johnson! A very useful rule of thumb is that abbreviations which are contractions (i.e. Doctor) do not require a full stop, but abbreviations that are shortened forms of the word (i.e. Oct. for October) do. My mnemonic for this is the abbreviation for Right Honourable: Rt Hon.

Your style sheet will evolve with time. A certain degree of flexibility is always required.

A CHECKLIST FOR EDITING

- Is all the material there?
- Number the pages if this has not been done.
- Check chapter titles (or article names) with the contents list (they should be identical).
- Check figure numbers and captions against the figures list; again, they should be identical, though a shortened form of the caption may be used in the figures list.
- Format headings and sub-headings to comply with house style.
- Edit the text to comply with house style: i.e. quotations, spelling, numbering, etc.
- Edit the text for errors and clarity. Some will require very little work; with others you may need to suggest revision or alternate wordings or raise specific queries with the author. With a difficult text, you may need to go through several iterations. The author must, of course, always check the final copy.

- Check that citations in the text match the references at the end, and that all references are included (in my experience, they are often omitted through carelessness).
- Check that the citations and references are consistent and follow the chosen style (usually they are not!).
- Check that the reference list is in alphabetical order.

VERSION CONTROL AND BACKING UP

As mentioned above, copy will normally go through several iterations before being printed. Even if a contributor provides you with perfect copy (it sometimes happens!), you will make changes based on your house style, and you will need to check that he or she is happy with the final text before it is printed. You may also want other people to read the piece in order to check for quality or accuracy. In my case, there is an editorial committee for the *Johnson Society Transactions*, whose members read all the articles that will make up that year's edition. Many of them know far more about Johnson and 18th century literature than I do, and I rely on them to prevent the publication of howlers. Sometimes authors will provide text that requires a great deal of work and many, many iterations (seven is not unusual). This is not necessarily the fault of the author; it may simply be a complex article with many images.

However, in this situation, version control becomes crucial. The worst thing imaginable would be to print the wrong version of a text that has been agreed. You can devise your own system for this by dating or numbering. I use v.1, v.2, v.3, etc. and then FINAL (but beware of this, as I have seen files marked FINAL FINAL FINAL).

It is also critically important to back up every version and the most minuscule of changes to the text. Apart from the document files on my PC, I normally back up on DropBox and then on two separate USB sticks. This is a pain, but one year, nearing the end of the year's work on *Transactions*, my computer crashed and one USB stick failed (they do, and without warning). Fortunately, the other USB stick was ok, and I had also backed up the files, in the days before DropBox, on a DVD.

A CHECKLIST FOR PROOFREADING

Some of the points are the same as for editing:
- Check that everything is there.
- Check that the chapters listed on the contents page are the same as the chapter headings in the text; ditto for figures.

- Check the pagination on the contents and list of figures pages.
- Look at each page individually, to make sure that the running heads are correct, that the layout is acceptable, that the images are in the right places, that you do not have hyphenated words split between pages. Are the headings correctly formatted? Also, check that you don't have any headings at the bottom of the page with the follow-on text on the next one.
- Read the text, not for meaning, but simply looking for errors. The hardest error to spot, in my experience, is where one word has been accidentally substituted for another (ingenuous vs ingenious). The proofreader tends to see an acceptable word on the page and moves on without questioning it.
- If there is a really glaring error, the tendency is to jump down the page to it, and an intervening error may easily be missed.

Always recruit a couple of proofreaders who have not been involved in the editing process. Once you have read a text four or five times, it becomes almost impossible to see any remaining errors in it, whereas a fresh pair of eyes will pick these up with ease.

It is essential to provide copy that is as nearly perfect as possible to the printer. Errors after the proofreading stage are punitively expensive to rectify.

Don't be too hard on yourself if you discover errors after printing. There always are.

AND FINALLY…

If you ever need to send out a rejection slip, here is one, courtesy of Dr Johnson: 'Your manuscript is both good and original, but the part that is good is not original, and the part that is original is not good.'

The benefit of an umbrella organisation like the ALS is the expertise of its members. If you have corrections to this Quick Guide, or additional information which you feel should be included, please contact us via the website.