

Plan with Authors

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Editors are dangerous people. We brandish red swords. We murder an author's text. We open fire on bad writing. We rip things apart.

Sound scary? Why, the mere thought of those activities would have sent Attila the Hun scurrying for the nearest cave.

We are dangerous because we are lazy. And we are lazy because we are normal, busy people. We are too busy to plan to adequately prepare our authors for writing and publishing. Most editors are busy as hell just trying to keep up. You confront the same old problems every day—the table has no source, the graph has been lifted from another publication without permission, columns of figures don't add up. The text is plodding and rambling, the standards are wrong and the format is inconsistent.

And what do you do? You chase the author down. You prod him. You pry information out of him. And all the while you're correcting errors and omissions that could have been avoided.

So, my friends, plan. Inform your authors. Educate them. Cut out the Band-Aid approach to editing. Spend more time laying groundwork rather than digging yourselves out of holes or filling them in.

How do you plan properly? One suggestion is a light, breezy, uncomplicated brochure. Keep it short, make it light and readable and sprinkle it with humor and cartoons if you are so inclined.

On the first page, list the names, functions, office loca-

L'Arrivee is with the Agriculture Canada Information Division, Ottawa, and the Ontario ACE representative.

tions and telephone numbers of the members of your unit. Invite authors to introduce themselves to you. You could have a standing agreement with your personnel office to notify you of new authors joining your organization.

Next, list and describe all the possible outlets for an author's work—periodicals, technical or statistical bulletins, working papers, pamphlets, flyers, newsletters. Invite authors to tour the word processing, typesetting and graphic units, and the printing plant, if there is one in or close by your organization. Although authors will not necessarily be working with all the people involved in publishing their manuscripts, they should be aware of the services and methods used.

In your brochure, show all the steps in the publishing process, especially those that affect the author. A flowchart would be ideal. Depict each stage through which the manuscript passes (including approval, reviewing, revision, editing, typing, proofreading, typesetting and printing) and the time needed for each step. Most important, the author must know well in advance how long the whole procedure takes.

Next, briefly describe your organization's writing and publishing standards, or set some standards if none exist. List the stylebooks and dictionaries used as references. Emphasize that your organization demands high quality in its publications—fresh, clear writing, and no jargon, buzz words or clichés.

Point out the form in which you would like to receive a manuscript, that is, the spacing desired, number of copies, sources, proper references and footnotes, and when figures and photos are due. Give illustrations of a table and a figure so that authors will have models in mind when doing their own. Politely state that you will not accept reports resembling hieroglyphics in mud. Everything should be typed.

And now, the most important section of the brochure—defining your role. Here you are up against some hardened misconceptions. Many new authors, fresh from the university rolls and never before impaled upon a red sword, think that editors only run newspapers and magazines, and badly at that. Some authors may perceive an editor to be an English composition teacher who raps their knuckles for breaking rules.

Stress that you are more a clarity watchdog than an English teacher, and that you can help authors prevent rigor mortis in their writing.

Point out that you can tighten copy, eliminate redundancies and repetition, rewrite, provide synonyms and reorganize parts of the text. Remind authors that they can avoid embarrassment and keep your work to a minimum by striving for quality in their writing and soundness in their reasoning, and by checking for consistency, clarity and accuracy. Stress that all manuscripts should be as short as possible to save time and money and to bring clarity to the paper.

Authors who proudly present a chubby manuscript will soon find an editor lowering the boom and getting out the hatchet. You might also show authors what editing is by presenting some examples of edited material, complete with all your black marks and scratches, alongside the original versions. This preview will prevent cardiac arrest later should you empty your pen on their maiden manuscript. A few sentences or short paragraphs will suffice.

State that if authors wish to improve their writing, you can arrange for in-house courses to teach them how to edit their own work. Editing stresses conciseness, which automatically spawns clarity and simplicity. Contrary to what we hear, lack of clarity, not poor grammar, is the biggest cause of communication failure.

End your brochure by suggesting that authors meet with you before beginning to write their first draft. At that time, you can help them select their audience and the type of publication best suited for their needs. That is also a good time to impress upon the author the need for clarity and economy in time and money, including keeping expensive graphics and color to a minimum.

In summary, three points bear repeating. First, the editor's role. If your authors are well informed and know what is expected of them, your role as clarity watchdog will be easier. That means making sure that the message is clear even if all else fails.

Second, insist on courses for authors. Start off with simple exercises showing authors how to edit—phrases first, then sentences and paragraphs. Give them a collection of facts to assemble in a story or report, and the concept of editing will steer an author automatically toward brevity, simplicity and conciseness. Courses should be workshops and at least two days long. Conduct a few pilot exercises with an author you know well.

Finally, discuss the author's target audience. Beware of the author who says, "It's okay, 95 percent of my readers will know what I mean." Remind him that the other 5 percent

might kill themselves. Take this concept seriously. An incomprehensible economics term is not likely to cause much harm, but poor wording in an aircraft training manual could cause pilot error and possible tragedy.

So, take time to plan.