

## **Academic Editing: A Fine Line in the Sand**

When I was asked to give this talk I was asked to address issues concerned with the practical use of English. That seemed like an incredibly broad area. I decided that what I really knew about was academic editing in English, a field that I've been involved with for 25 years. I hope that what I have to say is of interest to you and that I am able to broaden the discussion somewhat to address the questions that I have been asked to address. I also hope that you will feel at liberty to interrupt me should you have any questions.

As I have said my involvement in the editing of academic texts began about 25 years ago at the SA College of Teacher Education and continued in the Language Services Directorate at Unisa. Since my retirement last year I have been busy editing students' theses, dissertations and research articles, as well as working for a number of publishers. I also have an agreement with the University of Basel, editing theses and research articles in various fields.

The editing of theses and dissertation is a growing industry and is likely to expand in the future. The phenomenon is also not limited to South Africa, and my work with Unibas is evidence of this.

There are a number of reasons for this increasing demand for copy editing.

1. Firstly, students' inability to write properly – to formulate arguments, to argue their propositions and to convey the result in a way that will convince their arguments.
2. The fact that many students are conveying the results of their research in a language that is very often their second and third language.
3. The hegemony of English in the academic sphere – the fact that if researchers wish their research to reach a global audience they very often have to present the results of their research in English, often not their first language.

The editing of this type of text raises a number of ethical concerns. Three areas are a 'no go' for the academic editor:

1. Altering data – the editor must work with the data as written – it is not the editor’s job to change data in any way. Just ensure that the data are presented in accordance with the standard rules of language.
2. Improving the writer’s performance – editors need to walk a fine line of improving the original writing without unduly improving performance.
3. Doing the ‘heavy lifting’ – taking a project in which the original author seems to have put very little effort – sometimes students hire editors under the mistaken impression that they will actually produce text from a mere framework. This has happened to me a number of times with articles because they are very often written without the supervisor’s help. In such cases, students should be contacted and just informed that the work is not yet ready to be edited.

Quite often the supervisor requires that the student have the chapters edited before she/he sees them. This is fine if the supervisor has requested this but make it clear to the students that you will charge them again if they send the document back to you at the end for a proofread.

Before starting work I always make sure that the supervisor has passed it for editing.

I do not shorten documents.

Until the thesis has been accepted, the editor should keep a copy that shows the editing, either a photocopy of hard-copy editing or a tracked-changes copy of electronic editing. (Some faculties require the thesis writer to submit such a copy as well as the original unedited and final edited versions.) The editor should also keep copies of query sheets, correspondence, and other pertinent material.

Always a good idea to ask for a style sheet – referencing style and any other requirements such as US or UK English. Also a good idea to keep a style sheet for each job you do.

Ask for 50% up front not because I don't trust people, although there is that, but rather to ensure a commitment from the author.

Because of the nature of academic editing and the misunderstandings that can arise as to the remit of the work, I have drawn up a document that I send to all prospective clients setting out exactly what they can expect from a document that I edit for them.

## QUESTIONS

1. Where should the full stop be placed in the following example? Must it be placed before the closing quotation mark or before the source given in parentheses?

For Dorian, history serves as testimony to language loss: Extinction is a common enough phenomenon in the history of the world's languages (Dorian 1981:1).

2. Where are quotations (together with sources) given in academic texts? Also punctuation, script type and formatting in the case of direct speech, specifically in studies where participants' responses are reported verbatim.
3. Please explain the English usage of capital letters in headings and titles. Is it compulsory or does it depend on style? Example: The Story of the Black Cat; Medical Funds and Other Benefits/Medical funds and other benefits.
4. What is the latest regarding the use of Ms, Miss or Mrs. Is Ms used only if you are not sure whether it is Miss or Ms?  
  
Ms. is the default form of address, unless you know positively that a woman wishes to be addressed as Mrs.
5. Most common mistakes in English.
  - i. Misplaced apostrophes – indicate possession, or to indicate a contracted word (don't). They are never used to form a plural in English. Generally speaking inanimate objects should not have an apostrophe – table leg or leg of the table.
  - ii. Its/it's – it's is only ever used when it short for 'it is'

- iii. Fewer/less
- iv. Amount/number
- v. Me/myself/I – The rules: When referring to yourself and someone else, put their name first in the sentence.

Choose “me” or “I” by removing their name and seeing which sounds right.

For example, with the sentence “John and I are off to the circus”, you wouldn’t say “me is off to the circus” if it was just you; you’d say “I am off to the circus”.

Therefore when talking about going with someone else, you say “John and I”.

You only use “myself” if you’ve already used “I”, making you the subject of the sentence.

How not to do it:

Me and John are off to the circus

Myself and John are going into town

Give it to John and I to look after

How to do it properly:

John and I are off to the circus

John and I are going into town

Give it to John and me to look after

I’ll deal with it myself

I thought to myself

- vi. Who/whom
- vii. Incomplete comparisons –When employees perceive the state of their psychological contract as positive, they are likely be more committed to and less likely to leave the organisation.
- viii. Dangling modifiers – After decreasing for months, Anne tried a new tactic to increase profit.

- ix. Who/that – when you are describing a person, Jane is a little girl who likes puppies – use who. When describing an object use that. Her desk is the one that has the flowers on it.
- x. Between/among – The word "between" is used to refer to two (or sometimes more) things that are clearly separated, and the word "among" is used to refer to things that aren't clearly separated because they're part of a group or mass of objects.
- xi. Subject–verb agreement – the list of items **are** on the desk (is)
- xii. Pronoun misplacement – When a plural noun is used and later referred to as 'it' rather than 'them'. E.g.
- xiii. Capitalisation – e.g higher education institutions (HEIs)