

The Canberra

editor

Canberra Society of Editors Newsletter

Volume 18 | Number 9 | October 2009

Next meeting
Wednesday
28 October
6pm

Making media material by Don Cumming

Don retired last month as Manager, Media and Ministerial Communications with the Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. In 25 years with the department he held a number of communications manager roles including with Natural Resource Management and the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service. He previously worked in the media, including 11 years with the ABC and Radio Australia.

He is ACT President of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, and for the past 11 years has chaired the Walkley Foundation's National Public Affairs Convention, which he was instrumental in establishing.

His talk will cover the processes of drafting, editing and clearing speeches, media releases and other material, the increasing use by departments of 'panel' providers of editing, graphic design and other work and the changing relationship between departments and ministerial offices, particularly in the area of media liaison.

If you have ever wanted to work as an editor in the media or public relations area, this talk by a long-term expert could be very valuable.

Where: Friends Lounge,

National Library of Australia

When: Wednesday 28 October

Time: Join us for nibbles, drinks and networking at 6pm, followed by the general meeting at 6.30pm

President's report

The past month has been a busy one for many Canberra editors. Apart from the usual annual report rush and a quiggle in September (which was enjoyable and educational), there was the biennial IPEd conference in Adelaide.

Quite a few Canberra editors attended, and they say they found it to be well worth the effort. I would encourage everyone to book the date for the next one (in 2011) and make the time to go if you can. I hope we hear more about the conference highlights in the coming months.

I was not able to attend the conference, but Immediate past President Ted Briggs did a fine job of impersonating me one night at a presidents' dinner. He is also our new IPEd delegate, replacing Virginia Wilton. The good news is that IPEd seems to be finding its feet and wanting ideas on how to proceed from here. As an organisation, IPEd is still very young, and you have a good opportunity to have a say in its future direction. Ed Highley has some more information about IPEd and the conference in this newsletter.

The results of the second accreditation exam are due in the next few weeks. There still appears to be some angst around aspects of the exam, and this came up in our committee meeting this month. We agreed to form a small working group to discuss some of these issues so we can give Ted a formal brief to take back to the next IPEd committee meeting. Please contact me or Ted if you would like to contribute to this in any way.

Our end-of-year dinner is set to be a great night. We've booked Pistachio at the Torrens shops. There promises to be fun ice-breaker activities, good food, an interesting speaker, and a chance to meet some more of your fellow editors. As always, members and guests are most welcome. So please mark Wednesday 25 November in your diary and come along for an entertaining night. You will receive more details via email soon, and don't forget to check the website <<http://www.editorscanberra.org/notices.htm>> for updates.



Cathy Nicoll

The Canberra Editor

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Newsletter schedule

The next newsletter will appear in late November 2009.

The deadline for submissions to the next issue is Wednesday 11 November. The editor welcomes contributions by email to <gil.garcon@ato.gov.au> using a .doc file format.

Committee members 2009–10

President

Cathy Nicoll
6259 2984
cathy.nicoll@atrx.net.au

Vice-President

Damaris Wilson
6247 3111 (h)
damaris.wilson@afp.gov.au

Immediate past President Delegate to the IPEd Council

Ted Briggs
tedbriggs@grapevine.com.au
ted.briggs@defence.gov.au

Secretary

Brian O'Donnell
0419 620 714
odonnell1@netspace.net.au

Treasurer

Lee-Ling Sim
6161 5122 (h); 0412 776 365
lsim@velocitynet.com.au

Web minder, membership files

Peter Judge
6296 6211 (w/h/fax)
peter.judge@bigpond.com

Membership Secretary

Ara Nalbandian
ara.nalbandian@defence.gov.au

Training Coordinator

Martin Holmes
martin.holmes-forte@bigpond.com

Newsletter editor

Virginia Cooke (this issue)
Gil Garcon (from November issue)
gil.garcon@ato.gov.au

Assistant newsletter editor

Kerie Newell
0412 042 974
kerie.newell@deewr.gov.au

Public Officer

Helen Topor
6275 7222 (w)
helen.topor@afp.com.au

Catering coordinator

Vacant

General Meeting coordinator

Vacant

Committee members

Gil Garcon (contacts above)

Kerie Newell (contacts above)

Martin Blaszczyk
martin@mbwriting.com.au

Elena Guarracino
wildcroft.1@bigpond.com

Kevin Maguire
kevinmag@bigpond.com

Claudia Marchesi
cmarchesi@netspeed.com.au

Dallas Stow
dallas.stow@defence.gov.au

Briony Winchester
briony.winchester@ags.gov.au

IPEd Accreditation Board delegate

Larissa Joseph
6161 5216
larissa.joseph@gmail.com

IPEd notes

News from the Institute of Professional Editors

The 4th IPEd National Editors Conference held in Adelaide over 8–10 October was not a great success: it was a stupendous success, thoroughly appreciated by the over 200 participants.

All sessions, plenary and parallel, were packed with enthusiastic audiences, who enjoyed highly professional presentations covering topics ranging from aspects of the standard nuts and bolts of editorial practice to the sustainability of green editing. Some 25 per cent of submitted papers dealt with editing and publication in non-print media, reflecting the rapidly overwhelming importance of digital communication. My tip is that, by the next national conference, such papers will be in the majority.

Each from their own particular professional contexts and viewpoints, the conference's four keynote speakers—Neal Porter, Wendy McCarthy, Natasha Stott Despoja and Julian Burnside—focused on Getting the message across, the conference theme.

Neal Porter, an editor and publisher of children's books, revealed through delightful examples and with audience participation, the intimate and reversible relationship between words and pictures in this genre. There's more to the chicken and egg story than I'm sure most of us had thought.

Wendy McCarthy is a champion of mentoring as a means of enabling individuals to reach their full potential and get their message across in their chosen careers. She highlighted the importance of the relationship between mentor and mentee, and that there are

benefits to both parties. We much value her advice, because mentoring is of direct interest to us with the decline and fall of in-house training for editors in the publishing industry.

Julian Burnside was incisive and entertaining in his presentation that showed how we often need to dissect the message to get to the truth—or lies—of the matter. He recounted sections of the summing up of the chief US prosecutor at the Nuremberg war crimes trials, which laid bare the lies created and promoted by the worst of those arraigned. Regrettably, as related by Mr Burnside, such practices remain common among the usual suspects.

Natasha Stott Despoja first entertained us with numerous amusing anecdotes from her time as a senator in the Parliament of Australia. The serious side of her presentation that followed contained many useful tips about getting the message across in politics, parliament and the community. This is something that we, as a profession, need to do if we are to raise our profile from that of pedants and punctuation pundits to communication specialists. And what better to exemplify that we are the latter than the exemplary carriage of this conference.

The conference debate on the motion that 'A writer needs an editor like a fish needs a bicycle' was a hoot and laid 'em in the aisles. By audience acclamation the 'against' case won, but this obscene partisanship was somewhat redressed by chairman Burnside's decision that the 'for' case had won on merit. Just a few cheers there.

The IPEd Council had its first opportunity to make, to a

(Continued on page 5)



Thinking about words—zero tolerance?

Last month's thinking, about Gutenberg and the birth of the press, concluded: 'Literacy took a great leap forward, and Latin a step backward – more books appeared in the vernacular, and spelling and syntax became more standard. And suddenly we needed editors!' If there are standards of spelling and syntax, somebody has to enforce them. Enforce? Perhaps, rather 'encourage'. Is this what editors are for? And did it really all happen suddenly?

Lynne Truss's book, *Eats, shoots and leaves*, was an amazing publishing success when it came out in late 2003 – a book on punctuation that rivalled Harry Potter's popularity and made the New York Times best-seller list.

There can't be many members of our society who don't know the book and its declaration for a 'Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation', but for the odd troglodyte who may have missed it let me say that Truss deplored the relaxed state of punctuation in English writing and wanted to see its rules reaffirmed and reimposed with 'zero tolerance'. So what? As editors, we are professionally engaged in ensuring correctness in punctuation in everything we work on. Indeed, some might think that we owe it to our clients to exercise zero tolerance in all aspects of their written English.

The book gets its title from a joke about a panda who walks into a café, orders a sandwich, gobbles it down, and as he heads out towards the door draws a gun and fires it wildly in all directions. Somebody asks, 'Why?' and the panda just throws a wildlife manual at him. Sure enough, the badly written manual says, 'Panda. Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves.'

I was prompted to revisit Truss because I recently picked up a remaindered book by guru linguist David Crystal, of whom I have been a fan for many years. The title that attracted me was *The fight for English* – how language pundits ate, shot, and left. Crystal explains that Truss's book originated out of a four-part BBC program called

'Cutting a dash', on which he was a consultant and contributor. He thought the program showed 'the right blend of serious interest and quirky thinking' – but a book? Never! He goes on to say, 'I still have no clear idea why that book has done so well. Why did people buy it? What did they hope they would get out of it? Did they actually read it? What is it that makes people think that a book on punctuation will somehow solve their imagined language problems? And after they have read it, do they feel any better?'

The fight for English isn't an attempt to debunk Truss in particular, but rather the whole genre of prescriptive books that her book represents.

Having said which, Crystal goes on to show that since the earliest days of English writing—long before Gutenberg—people have been unhappy with the way things were going, and have tried to lay down rules to improve matters. The Abbot Aelfric of Eynsham (955–1020) may have been the first to press for 'correctness' in speech and writing. He wrote a book structured as a discussion with his students, who ask him to teach them to speak correctly. When the master asks, 'What do you want to speak?', they reply, 'What does it matter, so long as the speech is correct and useful.'

Nevertheless, in spite of Aelfric's efforts, English continued to develop in different dialects, with strange new words introduced by the successive invasions—Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings, Normans and, after the Normans, a return to English-speaking government.

Caxton was well aware of the problem of dialects and the variations they created: 'Certainly, it is hard to please every man by cause of diversity or change of language.' He wanted to simplify his standard spelling, so that a word like poor could no longer be spelt pouere, pouer, poeuere, poeure, pour, poer, powere, poyr, power, poware, poure, powre, pour, pore, poore, poor, pur, pure, puyre, pwyr, poyr, peure, pwir, puire, pur, peer (these are all real examples!). Alas for his good intentions, some of his typesetters were Dutch and they had their own views on phonetic spelling. Also, all those 'e' endings were a great help in justifying a



(Continued on page 5)



Nuts and bolts – more sentence traps

Last month I left you with four examples of writing that I have found in forms. Let's look at them now—they are all structural traps that writers often fall into and that editors sometimes don't pick up because they look OK at first glance:

Confusion

1. (from a pre-school enrolment form)

Hand?

The parent completing the form has to guess that the pre-school wants to know whether little Tommy is left-handed or right-handed at the moment. Handedness changes frequently in small children before it settles down. Now, I know a parent who decided that the question was confusing for most parents. She wrote in the blank: 'Two'!! It wouldn't have taken much effort for the school to ask something more explicit:

Which hand does your child currently favour for holding things like a spoon (left or right)?

Negativity

2. (from a survey conducted by a firm which installs gas heating) *Is your home unheated?*

Yes No

People tend to think positively rather than negatively. It is better to couch questions in positive terms rather than ask respondents to write what amounts to a double negative—that is, 'No (it is not unheated)' when it is already heated. It would be better for the form writer to write:

Is your home heated? Yes No

Unanswerable

3. (from a questionnaire handed out to patrons leaving a local cinema) *How many times do you go to the movies in a year?*

Often Sometimes Rarely Never

If patrons are coming out of the cinema, the 'never' option can't possibly apply to them. The form writer should consider the target consumer and, in this context, omit the 'never' option:

How frequently do you go to the movies in a year?

Often Sometimes ... Rarely ...

Double-barrelled

4. (from a government form) *Are you unmarried and in receipt of a pension? Answer YES or NO*

This question forces the respondent to answer 'yes' or 'no' to each part of the question—the question can't be answered by everyone with one

'yes' or 'no' at the end. It needs splitting into two questions (or two parts of one broader question):

Are you married or unmarried?

If you are unmarried, are you also in receipt of a pension?

.....

What else happens to sentences that make them difficult to read? They can be too long, with two many ideas in one sentence; too sprawled out with extra information tacked on and on and on, or with qualifying clauses added in; and they can be out of whack with bits that are not parallel in structure with each other. Let's finish this series with a look at sentence length and parallel structure.

Sentence length—too many ideas

If an author combines unrelated ideas into one sentence, the reader becomes confused. Take a sentence like this:

• *James is a top student of psychology although he also has interests in linguistics and anthropology and he has recently written a journal article on aspects of psychology and ageing.*

There are two main ideas here: the *psychology* idea and the *other interests* idea. Combining them has made the sentence difficult to read. It would be better to separate the ideas into two sentences:

• *James is a top student of psychology and has recently written a journal article on aspects of psychology and ageing. He also has interests in linguistics and anthropology.*

Sentences generally become too long by (1) adding on more and more ideas and (2) by qualifying with more and more subordinate clauses. Try to find the main ideas in this sentence and eliminate as many add-ons and qualifiers as possible. How many sentences would you recommend? By the way, this sentence is otherwise grammatically correct. It was published in a newspaper advertisement as an explanation of the term Account Statement:

• 'Account Statement' means a printed statement setting out the essential details of those transactions effected on a member's Account during the period to which the statement is expressed to refer and of which transactions the Society is aware, together with such adjustments (if any) as the Society believes are necessary

(Continued on page 6)

(Thinking about words...continued from page 3)

line of type—you could apparently put them in or leave them out at will!

The issue of correct language could become a matter of life and death when translations of the Bible were involved. Portions of the Bible had been translated into English by the Catholic church back in the 7th century, but the first complete translation was largely by John Wycliffe around 1381. His work was based on the Latin Vulgate, commissioned by the Catholic church and completed between 382 and 405 CE. The hierarchy sought to destroy Wycliffe's version, because of what they saw as mistranslations and wrong comments, but it was widely distributed and there still exist about 150 whole or partial manuscript copies. His Bible, through its clarity, beauty, and strength, influenced the English language as the King James Version would do 230 years later. Wycliffe died in his bed of a stroke in 1384, but in 1428, at the command of the Pope, his remains were dug up, burned, and the ashes cast into the River Swift.

The first printed New Testament in English, translated by Tyndale from Hebrew and Greek sources, resulted in his arrest in 1535. He was tried for heresy, because some of his vocabulary and commentaries were unacceptable to English churchmen and to King Henry VIII. He was strangled at the stake and his dead body burned. This was the ultimate in zero tolerance. But within four years, four English translations of the Bible were published in England, all based on Tyndale's work, one of them being the official English Bible authorized by the King 'to be read in church'.

Samuel Johnson began his dictionary in 1746 aiming to 'fix' the English language, as the Académie Française was then attempting to do for French. Before it was published in 1755 Johnson had realised that this was wrong: 'Every increase of knowledge, whether real or fancied, will produce new words.' And the 2009 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary on CD brings together the text of its first edition, published in twelve volumes in 1933, the Supplement, published in four volumes between 1972 and 1986, and the 'Additions' up to 1997. In case you had any doubts, this is hard evidence that the language continues to evolve—and the various forms of digital communication may be accelerating this process.

Punctuation likewise, pace Lynne Truss! Crystal comments, 'We do not know what all the rules of punctuation are ... Punctuation has always been a matter of trends.' He continues, 'Practice varies so much between formal and informal writing, between England and America, between page and screen, between publisher and publisher ... be very cautious indeed about

making generalisations.'

Where does this leave us editors? We need to be aware of trends in language and punctuation, and what is expected of us by our clients. We may try at times to educate those clients, but ultimately we have to compromise with them. In these enlightened times, zero tolerance may not lose us our heads but it may cost us jobs. 'Enforcers'? Never!

Peter Judge

Sources: *The fight for English – how language pundits ate, shot, and left*, David Crystal, OUP, 2006. Oxford English Dictionary Second Edition on CD-ROM (v. 4.0), OUP, 2009. *Encyclopædia Britannica* 2009 Ultimate Reference Suite. Sundry Wikipedia articles.

(IPEd notes...continued from page 2)

national forum, a retrospective and prospective presentation on the Institute's activities. This was admirably done by Virginia Wilton, the Council's retiring chair. IPEd's 2009 Annual General Meeting was held immediately preceding this. In another presentation, the IPEd Accreditation Board outlined its plans and prospects, and honoured on stage some 35 of the first batch of 112 IPEd Accredited Editors (AEs), together with many of the Distinguished Editors (DEs) who contributed their expertise and experience to make possible the first accreditation examination, held in 2008. The Council hopes that, through these presentations and personal contacts made with IPEd associates during the conference, the members of the societies of editors that together constitute IPEd gained a deeper understanding of its role, aims and work.

Congratulations are due to the Society of Editors (SA) for hosting and organising a wonderful conference, which I'm sure will be recalled with pleasure and professional pride by all who were there. If you were not, well, don't worry, there's another big event in two years in Sydney. And from the content of the presentation made by the Sydney team at the end of the Adelaide program, it's again going to be a real occasion. Also, the presentations made in Adelaide will, in due course, appear on the IPEd website. Keep a lookout there.

Ed Highley
Secretary
www.iped-editors.org

(More sentence traps...continued from page 4)

to properly reflect transactions effected during a period prior to that to which the statement is expressed to refer and which were omitted or improperly recorded on the statement for that prior period and such further entries as the Society may pursuant to these Rules be authorised to make. (99 words!)

Here are a couple of easier ones—first an add-on type, then a qualified type (suggested solutions to both are in my book *Effective writing: plain English at work* (pages 81–87):

- Courses for next semester will include one-day seminars on stress management, plain English awareness and personal development and will be held in the small meeting room, and there will also be two-day workshop courses on effective writing, effective listening and reading, and report writing. (44 words)
- For files, general papers, maps and plans which are more likely to have to be housed in the supporting data section, I think that it would be useful to include a half a page of notes on each in the library where we customarily keep one copy of everything of value, as well as a reasonable amount of details for microfilm, which has specific storage requirements for masters in particular. (70 words) For help, email emmurphy@ozemail.com.au.

Parallel structure

This means sticking to the same structure for items in any kind of list or series in a sentence. The author's aim, with the editor's help, is to get a message across. If the reader has to continually jump from one structure to another, the message will get lost. Starting with chapter headings, for example: *Preview, Task Analysis, Theory and Research, Guidelines for Action, Evaluation, Exercises*, these are all nouns or noun phrases, so are parallel. And the same goes for simple word associations—words with words, numbers with numbers, for example: a *two-headed, six-footed monster*, not a *2-headed, six-footed monster*, and matching parts of speech, for example: *Japanese–Australian relations*, not *Japanese–Australia relations*.

What's wrong with *My uncle enjoys tennis, swimming and to water-ski*? Tennis is a noun and swimming is a gerund (verbal noun), so are parallel. *To water-ski* is the infinitive form of a verb, so is out of sync with the other two. Change it to *My uncle enjoys tennis, swimming and water-skiing*—problem solved!

Parallel structure is really important in lists where you have an introductory sentence or phrase with several bullet point items following. The reader expects each of the bullet points to be a conclusion

of the introductory words. Look at this example:

To clean the feed rollers:

- *Take out the development unit and place it on a clean sheet of paper.*
- *removing the feed rollers next;*
- *and the rollers should be cleaned with a damp cloth*

The first bullet point is a complete sentence with the verbs *take out* and *place* both in the imperative mood and active voice.

The second bullet point does not contain a finite verb—*removing* is the present participle of a verb.

The third bullet point goes into passive voice—*should be cleaned*.

Punctuation is variable too. How can we fix this?

Make all the bullet points follow the same structure/pattern. There are several solutions, but here is one:

To clean the feed rollers,

- *take out the development unit and place it on a clean sheet of paper*
- *remove the feed rollers next*
- *clean the rollers with a damp cloth.*

There's more to grammar than meets the eye, isn't there? In this series, I've discussed just a few of the *nuts and bolts*. There are many more. Next month's article will be quite different. As editors we need to be watchful for the traps we can allow our authors to fall into—it is very easy to think something is right, just because we see it a certain way a number of times, but just one of these structural traps can put a reader right off a whole article or a whole book. If anything I have written is unclear, or if you just want to discuss points of grammar with me, or if you have specific grammar queries, please email.

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emmurphy@ozemail.com.au

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A Socratic conversation on copy editing

SOCRATES: Tell me, Redactorios, why does one become an editor?

REDACTORIOS: Why, Socrates, from the love of working with words.

S: Then pray tell me, Redactorios, why doth the editor not write original copy?

R: Ah, learned one, you must understand that editors can't write.

S: Oh, I see. But then it must be that if it is the author who can write and the editor who cannot, then the editor can only debase the writing?

R: Oh, no, sage, it is widely recognised that the author writes very badly. The editor imparts excellence to the author's writing.

S: Oh, I see. But is it not marvellous that two people, neither of whom can write, can produce well-written copy?

R: Isn't it time for your hemlock cocktail?

Annie Dean (author unknown)

We need someone to cater to all tastes!

The position of catering coordinator is currently available. This is your opportunity to fill the gaping chasms that are the stomachs of your cohorts as they arrive at the National Library Members' Lounge for general meetings once a month, hungry after a long day.

All you have to do is spend about \$70–\$80 on food the day before each General Meeting, take it to the National Library Members' Lounge at about 5:30 pm on the day, set up a couple of tables and put the food out. After the meeting, clear away the leftovers and send your receipts to the Treasurer for reimbursement. You will be provided with plastic containers with everything you need, and you don't need to worry about wine as Ann Parkinson takes care of that.

Of course you could lovingly cook and bake if you felt the urge. Or you can make it very simple, as Tina Toth, the previous Catering Coordinator did, and buy things you can cut up or just set out, like cheese and crackers, fresh fruit, nuts, dried fruit, dolmades, samosas, sushi, olives, juices and water.

For more information, please contact the President, Cathy Nicoll at <cathy.nicoll@atrx.net.au>

So long, farewell...

Well, this is it—my last issue as newsletter editor, as I will soon leave for the windy and occasionally sunny shores of Ocean Grove, on the Bellarine Peninsula in Victoria, where I'll live for three years.

I'm not losing the Canberra society as I'll remain a member, but gaining membership of the Victorian society, although the meetings in Melbourne will be somewhat more of a challenge to attend as far as distance goes! I have learned a great deal during the course of the year I have edited the newsletter, not the least of which is how to find my way around InDesign, a skill I would probably not have had otherwise cause to learn.

My thanks go to regular contributors Elizabeth Murphy and Peter Judge, who never had to be reminded to provide me with content, and also to Ted Briggs, Martine Taylor, Ed Highley, Kevin Maguire, and other occasional contributors. And a special thank you to my husband Julian for his excellent proofreading skills.

People give a lot to this organisation because they are passionate about what they do, and they want to share that knowledge and passion with others. So I would encourage you to offer up your contributions, no matter how small or insignificant you feel they may be, to the new newsletter editor Gil Garcon, who will be ably assisted by Kerie Newell. Sometimes it's the smallest brick that makes the whole wall fit together perfectly.

And as a case in point, I'll leave you with such a small brick, a picture I took of an ibis on Swan Bay, Bellarine Peninsula, taken from the window of the Blues Train in December 2006, while smoke from nearby bushfires drifted across the scene. See you in 2013!

Virginia Cooke



Contents

- 1 Next general meeting – Making Media Material with Don Cumming, Wednesday 28 October
- 1 President's report
- 2,5 IPEd Notes
- 3,5 Thinking about words – zero tolerance?
- 4,6 Nuts and bolts – more sentence structure
- 7 A Socratic conversation on copy editing; We need some one to cater to all tastes; So long, farewell...

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