

Introduction

I hear you.

As the editor of *The Chicago Manual of Style Online*'s monthly "Chicago Style Q&A," I've been handling readers' questions about writing style since the University of Chicago Press launched the Q&A in 1997. That amounts to tens of thousands of queries from students, professors, copy editors, businesspeople, and others who struggle as they write and edit. As of this writing, *The Chicago Manual of Style Online* receives more than a million "page views" per month.¹ Fortunately for us, most visitors do not submit questions to the Q&A.

The Chicago Manual of Style, for the uninitiated, is one of the English-speaking world's most revered style manuals. Although Chicago style may not have the most users, it surely has the most devoted. From its beginnings in the 1890s as a simple in-house sheet of proofreading tips for manuscript editors at the University of Chicago Press to its current online, print, and "mobile optimized" editions, it has grown into a bible for writers and editors in almost every kind of writing outside journalism (where Associated Press style and *New York Times* style dominate).

1. "Analytics CMOS Top 50 Pages, Nov. 9, 2014-Feb. 9, 2015," courtesy of Google Analytics.

Written by the Manuscript Editing Department at the University of Chicago Press, *The Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS)* has advice on everything from punctuation and capitalization to mathematics and diacritics. Its chapters on the styling of note and bibliography citations have been adopted by universities around the world. Users of *CMOS* include the most impossibly learned writers and editors as well as the most clueless, and for nearly twenty years the monthly Q&A has played host to them all.

Reading the questions that come through the site is a daily adventure away from editing tasks. We answer as many as we can, and I choose the best ones for the monthly posting. The range of topics can be startling. Here's a note we received from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory at NASA:

Q / Dear *Chicago Manual of Style* Q&A Person: What is the rule for sequencing adjectives in a series? For example, we know that numbers come before size indicators (e.g., six small apples). We also know that colors come after size indicators (e.g., six small yellow apples). The specific problem is whether to say “narrow anticyclonically dominated northwestern coast” or “anticyclonically dominated narrow northwestern coast.” (Please don't say the correct answer is “anticyclonically dominated northwestern narrow coast”!)

And their kicker ending: “What is the rule that supports your answer?”²

2. After consulting a linguist, we replied: “Our consultant was somewhat hesitant to comment without a fuller context to work with, suspecting that this may be a ‘sentence-level issue and not an adjective-phrase-level issue.’ He pointed out that sequencing can vary for reasons of emphasis and that without having the context, he couldn't discern the intended emphasis. If ‘narrow’ is the emphasis, then it should come first (followed by a comma). If ‘anticyclonically dominated’ is the emphasis, then it should come first (followed by a comma).”

In contrast, another rather dreamy-sounding note read simply, “Dear CMOS, What is Chicago style? Could you give an example?” And one of my favorites: “Would rats die if they drink soda?”

Questions come from all over the world, some from readers who struggle with English. Their grammar questions go deep and are sometimes beyond our ability to respond. (“Please tell differences of *at* and *to*.”)

One day this came in:

Q / Hello. I wonder how I can cite the Korean Constitutional Court case. The CMOS, as far as I’ve searched, does not provide a clear tip on it although it spent many pages on the citation rule of U.S., Canadian, and European Court cases. As an illustration, how can I cite “헌법대판소, ‘대한민국과 일본국간의 재산 및 청구권에 대한 문제 해결과 경제협력에 관한 협정 제3조 부작위 위헌확인’ 2006헌마788”?

Recently I learned that a Chinese translation of the 16th edition of the *Manual* has been published. (I wonder what kinds of questions we’ll receive once its readers discover the Q&A . . .)

Most of the messages I read, however, are basic questions about style. Often I know the answer, but sometimes I have to look it up—or I e-mail my colleagues for a quick consensus, or I run around and ask the first two or three editors I can find. Although people outside the Press call us “style goddesses” and assume we are experts on everything in the *Manual*, most of the time I feel more like the pathetic little person behind the curtain in *The Wizard of Oz*. It’s only because I’m surrounded and protected by knowledgeable and generous coworkers that I can assemble the authoritative front that appears in the Q&A. When I get an esoteric question involving technical writ-

ing or linguistics, I can phone or e-mail one of the professors on campus for help. Other times I can do an Internet search and point the reader to a more relevant site.

For the most frequently asked questions, I keep template replies that I can personalize. I can't count the number of times we've been asked whether to type one space or two at the end of a sentence (it's one) or how to cite a tweet (this doesn't worry me as much as it used to). The monthly postings to the Q&A that I cull from all these exchanges are always read by our managing editor and at least two other colleagues, who check my grammar and punctuation and tactfully set me straight when something is wrong.

These days, two categories of questions seem to make up the bulk of the mail. The first type comes from those urgently seeking advice on a writing or an editing issue:

Q / How do I cite a phone conversation with an anonymous caller?

Q / How do you make a proper name and its acronym possessive? The district attorney (DA)'s argument?

Q / *CMOS* lowercases prepositions in book titles, but what if it's a really long one, like "concerning"?

The second type of question comes from readers who want us to settle an argument. In these questions I hear a persistent cry of frustration:

Q / I know I'm right about something. Could *CMOS* please confirm it?

Q / I know I'm right about something. Could you please set my husband/teacher/student/author/colleague/boss/editor straight?

Q / I know I'm right about something. Could you please save the world from its slide into illiteracy?

Questions like these inspired me to write this book, for all of you: for students, professors, copy editors, businesspeople, and writers who are sometimes dogged by indecision or confusion over rules of style and grammar; for those who know the rules but agonize over when or whether to apply them; for those who copyedit for a living and those who don't and those who would like to.³ In the following pages, I hope to soothe and encourage and lend power. I am not going to do this, however, by setting your teacher/student/author/colleague/boss/editor straight. And I'm not going to help with your homework. You won't learn the fundamentals of copyediting from me. Rather, consider this a "relationship" book, because I'm going to talk about the main relationships in your work life—with the writer, with your colleagues, and with yourself—in ways that you might not have considered before. Ways that might be called subversive.

Right away I should explain what I do *not* mean by a "subversive copy editor," in case anyone has in mind a character

3. I will follow *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (11th ed.) in my spelling of *copy editor* and *copyedit*, *pace* Chicago. And at the risk of annoying some readers, I will use the terms *copy editor* and *manuscript editor* interchangeably. Although their definitions vary, in my mind they are overlapping terms. Copyediting is done by many workers who are not primarily editors—it involves the more or less mechanical reading of copy for spelling, grammar, logic, style, consistency, and appropriate expression. Depending on the worker's level of responsibility, it can be restricted to those functions or allow for greater engagement with the work. Manuscript editing is the work of professional editors. It includes copyediting but may also entail deeper engagement with the content: rethinking, rewriting. It may also encompass administrative responsibilities such as handling copy through stages of production before and after editing, creating and monitoring schedules, or arranging for proofreading and indexing.

like the one my former colleague Joe Weintraub once described in a prize-winning short story. In the story, a snooty language expert named Ezra Peckinpah has been tormented for months by a copy editor who purposely inserts errors into his column at the final stage before printing. In this scene, Ezra has just received the latest issue:

He held the issue up to the light as if he were inspecting the texture of the paper itself for flaws, and when he found himself beginning the final paragraph with the ungrammatical apostrophe “Just between you, dear reader, and I . . .” his arms twitched outward, his elbow striking his reading lamp so that it tottered on its base and almost toppled to the floor.

“Galleys!” he screamed into the telephone. “I demand to see galleys!”⁴

No—at the risk of disappointing my more twisted readers, let me clarify that my subversive copy editor is an entirely different creature.

Subversive, first, because this editor overthrows the popular view that the writer is a natural adversary competing for power over the prose. In part 1 of this book, I will lay out an alternate view and suggest what I believe to be the most productive order of an editor’s loyalties, an order that puts the writer closer to the top of the list and (don’t tell my boss) the publishing house closer to the bottom, as they work together in the service of the reader.

Subversive, second, because to live a good life as a copy editor, a person must occasionally think outside the rules. To copyedit is to confront and solve an endless series of problems,

4. Joe Weintraub, “The Well of English, Defiled,” *Ascent* 10, no. 1 (Fall 1984): 43–57.

great and small. In part 2 of the book, in examining the copy editor's life of conflict, I will zero in on some of the ways we create problems for ourselves even when our writers are expert, thorough, and compliant. You will see how a need to always cleave to the rules can be counterproductive.⁵ I will seek to banish the pet compulsions, inflexibilities, and superstitions that get in our way. More than once in these pages, you will read the heretical idea "It's not a matter of being correct or incorrect. It's only a style."

Years ago, in explaining these ideas to my son John, I said I wanted to find ways for everyone to get what they⁶ want, sometimes by breaking the rules, and John asked, "Like shoplifting?" Well, no. The idea isn't to allow bad grammar and sloppy attribution of sources. The idea of a good author-editor relationship involves working with writers in ways that will tell you what they really want so you can help them achieve it. A great deal of the time, you'll find that what the writer wants, you want, too. And if you're skilled, your writers will discover that they want most of the same things you do. The second idea, of having good relationships with our colleagues and with ourselves, involves forming work habits and attitudes that allow us to complete our tasks having done the best we can do with the material we were given, without sacrificing more than a little bit of our standards, our sanity, or our sleep.

And who knows? If we're lucky, in the course of figuring out some strategies for getting along with our authors, our bosses,

5. If you are rushing off to tweet about that split infinitive—or whatever else you think is in error in this book—may I suggest that you be prepared to cite an authoritative source or two? (I already have mine.) If you find a typo, I'd appreciate knowing of it. But please read chapter 12 before you take to public shaming. One of my goals here is to build a supportive community.

6. See note 5.

our colleagues, and ourselves, we might also happen to learn something more about getting along in life.

. . .

I am a working editor at the University of Chicago Press, which publishes scholarly books in a wide variety of disciplines. My work has given me contact with people in acquisitions, design, production, and marketing as we go through the mechanics of making books. Since our fifteen full-time in-house manuscript editors aren't enough to handle all the books, we use freelance copy editors as well. Almost all the editing is done electronically using the "track changes" feature in Microsoft Word. In this book I will try to keep in mind that not all of you are working on books or in Word; you aren't all working in-house; you don't all have the flexibility to balk at rules. I devote one chapter to the special concerns of freelancers, and another to those of writers.

In the Manuscript Editing Department at Chicago, although most of the editors have higher degrees, they don't tend to specialize in particular subjects. Manuscripts are usually assigned on the basis of schedule and availability. Over the years, I've landed a three-volume work on the vertebrate skull, a book of Jewish jokes, and a seven-hundred-page bibliography of historical geography. Books that are heavy in math and the physical sciences are usually sent to specialist freelancers. (I once supervised a freelancer who read *Quantum Field Theory in Curved Spacetime and Black Hole Thermodynamics*, a book I kept on my shelf for years to impress visitors.)

Although the bulk of my experience has been in the editing of scholarly books, I have also worked in trade publishing and journalism, and indeed long ago as a secretary, as a clerk/typist, in data entry, and (just for the record) as a letter carrier.

In all those jobs, I was responsible for writing or editing—or carrying—copy. All this is only to say that I've edited a lot of words and learned a few things along the way that I'd like to share, because you are asking.

In the e-mails seeking help from *The Chicago Manual of Style*, we hear from the frustrated, the panicked, the disaffected. But I like to believe that when we're *not* hearing from them, it's because they're doing just fine, enjoying the pleasures of working at their craft. Knowing how to tinker with a broken piece of prose until it hums is a source of contentment known by all who have mastered a worthy craft. The midwife works with a laboring woman to produce a healthy child. A seamstress or tailor finishes the couturier's garment until it's a perfect, flattering fit. Carpenters and masons execute an architect's vision and take pride in a safe and well-functioning building. What we all have in common is our wish to cooperate—not compete—with the originators of our material, and we share a satisfaction and sense of accomplishment when everything is going well.

Ultimately, I'm hopeful that a reexamination of your role as copy editor—whether that's your title or not—can benefit all parties while liberating you from the oppression of unhelpful habits and attitudes. My point is not how to copyedit, but how to survive while doing it. My hope is to give you some self-assurance and a measure of grace as you go about negotiating one word at a time with the writers you are charged with saving from themselves.