

The Editorial Responsibility

What the editor is and does

I. WHAT IS THE EDITOR

A. He/she is a reader.

Primarily, and maybe even first before all else the editor is a reader -- maybe the writers' first reader.

The editor is a specialist about reading. His specialty is what is sufficiently general and common between a possible readership and what the author has to say.

In this role, the editor's primary tool of his trade is himself.

If the author/writer does not reach the editor then he cannot reach the editor's readership either!

The editor is much more actively creative than the ordinary reader. The reader is not correcting themes, identifying poor grammar, or revising paragraphs.

B. He/she is a listener.

The editor, as he reads, is listening for the sound of people in what the writer has to say in the manuscript. The editor judges content by whether it is true, pertinent, worthwhile. He looks at character in a story/novel and makes a judgment as to whether readers will recognize and believe. He judges dialog by whether his reader will hear it. And so on. This does not mean literalism or realism of treatment.

C. He/she knows the human spirit.

Good editors know that people also dream, and sing, and pray, and hurt inside themselves and to themselves.

Good editors know that people will pretend, will make-believe, invent dream-worlds, are superstitious and suspicious, and that people play a myriad games with themselves and with others.

The editor knows we need the Pauls with the keenest mind and the Peters with the warmth and emotion. The editor knows the reader may want the Hemmingways with the bull fight arena and some who'll prefer the soft-scented garden of a William Faulkner -- the long stride verses the quiet short steps, the open brawl vs. the smoldering hurt. Dynamite sometimes instead of lace.

D. He/she believes people want to read.

The editor also knows that the people who are really readers, want to read. They hunger to read.

These hungry readers will forgive a lot of clumsiness and other faults of every kind if the writer/author will delight them just enough to keep them reading and turning over to the next page.

The editor knows that brilliance is not sufficient -- the writer must have something to say -- he must be able to get through with his ideas.

The editor knows that if we fail in getting a reader it is not because the wrong medium was used but because the author didn't have the right message.

E. He/she knows the sins of authors/writers.

In case you wondered, Christian authors and writers have sins. The responsible editor has to be awake for these if he cares about the word and words. What are a few of these sins?

1. The sin of shallow writing.

Sometimes a writer writes from an overabundance of superficial material -- already available.

Sometimes shallow writing comes from writing based on too little. The editor wants articles/books derived from the overflow, not the dregs.

Sometimes shallow writing comes from the author writing about something out of his range or depth.

William Sloan, has said, "The first requirement of the writer is that he know something". "The second requirement," Sloan adds, "is not much different." The wise writer writes about what he knows, never about what he knows nothing.

And somewhat related, Edward England says most authors are writing the wrong book. He points to the stack of unsold books to prove his point.

Shallow writing is the bane of the editor. He constantly looks for the writer who writes because of either:

- a fresh interpretation of the old
- or ○ new information or new experience

2. Sin of laziness or carelessness.

Many Christian writers fail not because they have no talent, but because of laziness brought about through discipline problems.

The alert editor spots laziness -- it shows in inaccurate facts, sloppy syntax, the lack of the polished sentence or phrase, poor paragraphing, weak structure, and the absence of transitions.

This is one of the areas of editor/writer tension because it demands further re-working, research, rewriting, and re-thinking.

3. Sin of lecturing or sermonizing.

The astute professional Christian editor knows when the writer is talking at the reader -- when the author/writer is lecturing rather than showing.

- It is always easier to tell than to show. When we tell discovery is made more difficult or even destroyed. Jesus was a master at showing. eg. Luke 20:19-26 concerning the matter of paying taxes.
- Whereas the preacher may be able to speak with that kind of authority, the author cannot. He cannot say "Go" as can the preacher. What he can do is to build a case for "going". He can say, "Others have gone and found it advantageous."

4. Sin of abstraction.

Colorless lifeless words have become standard diet in much Christian writing.

The editor has an eye for the abstract noun or the weak verb. He wants strong concrete nouns and active vivid verbs.

The editor's responsibility calls for picture words, rather than bland descriptions.

And what can we say of forced similes that exhaust the reader because the writer heard that he should be picturesque, colorful, and vivid? For example if you talk of "a stream twisting snake-like on its belly through the meadow" be prepared to assume your reader will see an unpleasant sinister stream instead of a clean-flowing brook.

F. Is a nurseryman.

The creative editor has a yearning to and work with new talent -- new writers and authors, with beginners.

In this role the editor is like the nurseryman who looks for the new shoots, who tends young fragile plants with special care. His care and overall watchfulness

ensures a thriving environmentally strong plant in the end.

At such times when the editor discovers talent, discovers potential he becomes a teacher -- he cannot edit in that role. He lays down his pruning knife and picks up the watering can or the stake. He resorts to principles to encouragement, to showing the author how to take his writing and hone it to greater perfection through craftsmanship.

II. WHAT DOES THE EDITOR DO?

To some extent the answer to this question is related to the editor's specific job function.

Editors can be classified in many ways. They can be divided by the market they serve, by the product they handle. Then within each market or product they are divided ascending to function. For example:

1. Managing Editor who runs a department and who may be responsible for the whole house list. This person may also be the publisher/editor.
2. Acquisition/Commissioning Editor who has special skills -- is an idea person -- very creative -- enterprising -- who will think of new ideas for books and who'll find the author to match the idea. This kind of person is a key person and a special person in any publishing house.
3. Copy Editor who is sometimes called the line or pencil editor because the copy editor has special abilities in working closely with the manuscript. Whereas, the acquisition editor works closely with the author, usually.

In the real world of publishing the average editor may do some acquisition, much evaluation, substantive editing, preparation of material for design production and marketing people. Plus volumes of correspondence with authors and potential writers.

Where children's books are involved there is much involvement with artists and graphics people. And shoulder-rubbing for goodwill with people (the leaders, teachers, parents) in the target audience.