

Conference call: Jubilee Campus, Nottingham University, 17–19 September 2006

What is professionalism?

Eleanor Stanley analyses an elusive quality that we aspire to but may find difficult to define.



Editing is an imprecise science. As editors, we may have the reassuring voice of Judith Butcher in our heads as we hack our way through the jungle of ampersands, superfluous capitals and Americanisms, but most of our clients don't. And across the full range of written material out there, there's an infinite variety of editorial styles. An academic publisher may not like to see a sentence starting with 'and', but a marketing company could be equally dismayed by a sentence beginning 'moreover'.

For us editors, this means using judgement and discretion at all times. But how can we know that our work is based on impartial decisions informed by our knowledge of what the client needs, rather than on our personal preferences or judgements? How, in other words, can we ensure that we are truly professional?

The obvious place to start is with proper training, such as that offered by the SfEP. But that's just the beginning. A really good editor will cross 't's and dot 'i's. But they will also build a collaborative relationship with the author and consider the publication's overall aims and its audience throughout the edit. They will also make sure they are clear exactly why they have made each alteration, so that if any queries come back to them, they can justify their reasons.

But editors' professionalism is shown by far more than the quality of their editing. They need other skills too, from project management and client liaison to marketing their services. In some ways it can be easier to think about professionalism in terms of what we consider 'unprofessional' – allowing errors to slip in, missing deadlines, answering the phone with a mouthful of toast or failing to keep a cool head in difficult situations.

If you're freelance, when a new client approaches you, do you give them a business card and refer them to your website? Or do you email them a copy of an ancient CV comprising five pages of previous jobs? What are your strategies for juggling competing priorities to meet deadlines, chasing invoices or dealing with other sources of conflict while maintaining good working relationships?

Eventually, most editors learn to deal with many of these issues. But there's plenty we can do to speed up the process. Having a good network of colleagues is essential for honest criticism or reassurance about any work dilemma, from grammatical conundrums to freelance rates. This is especially important for someone working from home, or as the only editor in an organization. Professional membership can help too. Not only does it show clients that you take your job seriously, but it can provide much-needed continuing professional development, including training, networking, and legal or other advice.

There's another aspect of professionalism – having confidence in your work. Because there is more than one way to edit every sentence, editors can easily find themselves in the firing line. On those days in particular, it can be useful to draw on your course certificates, professional memberships and networks of colleagues to remind yourself that you really are a professional.

About the author ...

Eleanor Stanley is a writer and editor specializing in social, health and environmental issues. She is a member of the NUJ, an associate of the SfEP and an Approved Consultant with the National Council for Voluntary Organisations. Visit her website at www.eleanorstanley.co.uk.

Meeting new challenges

As Eleanor asks in her article on this page, how can we ensure that we are truly professional? One way is by attending this year's SfEP conference, which will concentrate on the importance of being professional in our relationships with clients, colleagues and authors, and will teach you the skills you need to meet new challenges and work more effectively.

Our Whitcombe Lecturer this year is particularly appropriate, given that we are concentrating on being entrepreneurial and professional. Ian Ritchie has clear views on how small businesses can improve their chances of success – including the importance of building relationships with your clients, so that they will want to stay with you and develop a collaborative relationship over many years.

Those who have attended a previous conference know what a valuable experience it is – not only to develop new skills but to network with other members and pick up valuable hints and tips. Newer members are always welcome as well, and this year's programme promises to be as interesting, informative and inspiring as ever.

For further details about the conference, visit our website www.sfep.org.uk or contact the office.

Ian Ritchie, Whitcombe Lecturer 2006

Ian Ritchie's first job was with ICL, where he became a project manager for desktop machines. In 1984, Ian left ICL to form his own company, Office Work Stations (OWL), developing solutions for flexible information handling. OWL soon

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