

Exercise 4-3: Editorial Zealotry: A Light Copyedit

This passage is adapted from Arthur Plotnik, *The Elements of Editing: A Modern Guide for Editors and Journalists* (New York: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 2–4. It is reprinted with the permission of Scribner, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc. All rights reserved.

Much of the language has been changed, and all the errors were introduced for the purpose of this exercise.

Some overly zealous copyeditors will pore over a manuscript and change every “till” to “until,” or vice versa, depending on their training, their grammatical ear, and their ideas about prose style. Although editors must try to forestall the depreciation of English into colloquial swill, they should never adopt a self-styled purism that does not allow for some variety of expression. When a tyrannical editorial coordinator waves Fowler, Wilson Follett, and other venerable guardians, the staff should wave back Theodore Bernstein’s *Miss Thistlebottom’s Hobgoblins*, a thoughtful debunking of sacred cows in usage, or William Morris and Mary Morris’s *Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage* which explores the differences of opinion among the so-called experts.

A second danger: Some novice copyeditors misinterpret the recommendations in *The Elements of Style* as a mandate to change such sentences as “The outcry was heard round the world” to “Everyone in the world heard the outcry.” True, the active voice is more forceful, and a procession of passive constructions is a sure cure for insomnia. But the passive voice is preferable when the writer’s goal is variety or emphasizing an important word in a sentence.

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Reflection:

1. Even though I've done a few activities in other classes where we practice doing light and heavy copyediting, I still have a hard time figuring out how much I should be editing when I'm told to do a light copyedit. Sometimes, I feel like adding commas when needed is too heavy, but this activity provided a lot more clarity towards how I'm supposed to do it. I think I missed two commas in this activity, one being after "*Contemporary Usage*." At the time, I wasn't sure if that was too heavy of an edit, so I skipped over it. Now I realize that I should have trusted my gut. I don't think any specific part was difficult except finding the balance of how much to edit without it being too much.
2. I think I finally learned, or understood on, how a light copyedit should be done. I'm not sure what it was about this activity that made everything click into place, but it worked!

The part of chapter 4 that helped me complete this activity was under the section "Function 3: Setting Off Phrases" and specifically when it mentioned how a comma is needed "after a two- or three-word introductory phrase that functions as an *adverb*..." (Einsohn and Schwartz 108). For most of my early life, I would place commas in sentences when it felt necessary, not understanding how proper sentence structure really works. Obviously, as I got older, I began to learn grammar and punctuation, but there are still moments when I'll add a comma simply because it reads better. This section of the chapter, however, was incredibly useful for when I read my sentences and can't figure out if they should or shouldn't have a comma added in or taken out. I wasn't aware of the rule that a comma isn't needed after adverb introductions, but when I look at the example

sentences, it makes *so* much sense to me. They're the exact sentences that would have me a bit stumped on if a comma should go there or not, too. So, after reading that section, I was able to bring my new-found knowledge to this activity.

Now that it has clicked in my head how light copyediting works, I'll keep this activity in mind when I'm editing future manuscripts. Not only will this save money, but it will also save me, and everyone else involved in the process, time. I always want everything to be as perfect as possible, so it's nice to solidify how I should be editing so that I'm not wasting time doing more than I need to.