

An editor's rant against 'no'

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Any decent bookstore's reference shelf probably packs layers of volumes on editing-and-grammar nuts and bolts. You can learn about "lie" and "lay," and parallelism, and



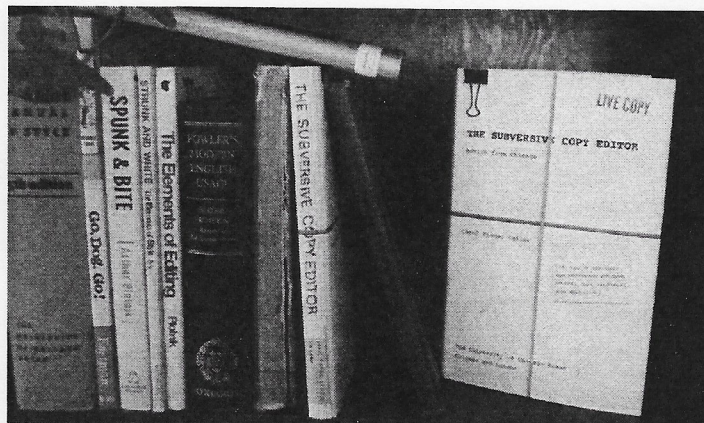
CAROL FISHER SALLER

writing in the active voice. But these books reduce our jobs to antiseptic word shuffling and error fixing. They eliminate a key element

of writing and editing: the people.

Carol Fisher Saller, senior manuscript editor at the University of Chicago Press and editor of the Chicago Manual of Style Online's question-and-answer forum, posted monthly on www.chicagomanualofstyle.org, knows editing is as much about people as paragraphs, and that mastering diplomacy is as important as mastering stylebooks. In "The Subversive Copy Editor," Saller presents tactics editors can use to manage relationships as they manage copy. Her overarching message seems to be, "be flexible."

"The Subversive Copy Editor" is basically a rant," said Saller, who has worked in editing for the University of Chicago on and off since 1986. "I saw how many troubled copy editors were writing to the Q&A for help, and when I tried to analyze the most common source of difficulty, I saw it as a problem with relationships. Our insecurities tend to create poor relations



with writers and colleagues and almost anyone whose words we're in charge of."

In her book, Saller advises editors, whether they're editing copy for periodicals or books, to first strive not to harm the text. She also advises us to be willing to work with writers, checking with them on changes and explaining decisions.

Most everything is negotiable, she says; editing changes can be debated, altered or scrapped. People can work together.

However, some writer-editor relationships seem doomed from the start, sabotaged by editors' faulty assumptions. Saller writes that copy editors, especially new ones, may enter a job thinking that they'll be working against stubborn writers who haven't bothered to learn style rules. This thinking helps no one, she says.

"(Copy editors) are taught to say no to authors, employing the vocabulary of rule enforcement — it's unconventional; it's not our style; it's too expensive; it will cause a delay," Saller writes in her book. "Sometimes, as

a last resort, we do deploy those weapons. But to see the writer-editor relationship as inherently adversarial is to doom yourself to a career of angst and stress."

By white-knuckling rules, or rules that aren't, editors may wreak unintentional havoc. If they spend enough time trying to replace every "which" with "that," editors may miss bigger problems, Saller suggests. They may also alienate writers, presenting themselves as niggling nags with shallow editorial judgment.

Instead of issuing knee-jerk "nos" when working with writers, Saller encourages copy editors to practice saying "yes." She acknowledges that this may be hard for us. We may think being flexible about writing tenets or style rules means sacrificing something we believe in. Saller writes that she's seen this attitude in Chicago Manual of Style's Q&A page queries that seek a referee for style or grammar arguments. Questioners want to know who's right as much as what's right.

"When we know a rule and have taken pains to impose it consistently throughout

a document only to meet with the writer's resistance, our instinct is to go down fighting," she writes. "It's a matter of honor. Of professional pride. And maybe even, just a little bit, of power."

Style, the kind governed by the Chicago Manual of Style, The Associated Press Stylebook and other guides, exists to help publications keep copy consistent, Saller argues. AP in particular, she writes, is designed with newspaper-selling in mind; it promotes vocabulary accessible to readers of varied education and avoids politically charged language, striving for neutrality.

Saller acknowledged that style rules may be more rigid for newspaper editors than for their peers in book editing. Given this lack of negotiating room, the newsroom copydesk can rely on the stylebook and hope for higher-ups' support when conflicts with writers and colleagues arise.

"If your disagreeable writer is resisting a seriously firm house style, then someone more powerful than you has your back, and you can use that to your advantage," Saller said.

"Don't say no; instead tell the author you'll appeal to authority on her behalf; make the appeal; deliver the verdict. Most writers will appreciate your advocacy."

"Set aside your ego, listen to another person's reasoning, and accept it if you can — do all that and you'll feel professional, generous, humane, in control," she said.