

Technical Editor, Advocate for Others



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Often technical editors are viewed as the means by which to keep documentation “legal,” avoid typos, and adhere to the styles and guidelines of a doc team, but editors can contribute so much more. Not only do I work with the writer to make the writing the best quality that it can be, I am an advocate for the unseen audience: the end-user and the localizer.

I am a technical editor of IT Pro content. I consider it part of my job to validate procedures and the graphical user interface controls with the product. I also suggest word choices that enable easier, more consistent localization or machine translation, in addition to the obvious tasks of grammar, punctuation, style guidance, and logical flow suggestions.

When I edit, I have a mental checklist of questions that I ask. These may prompt questions or suggestions to the writer.

- Does the intended audience, the user, have clear instructions and all the tools necessary right here to perform this activity?
- Is the sentence structure straightforward?
- Is there anything that makes this writing US-centric?
- Is the terminology easily grasped by a global audience or non-native speakers of English?
- Is the terminology consistent with localization and machine translation guidelines?
- Are the format and terminology consistent with the rest of the document library?

I often work on worldwide documentation. Inherent in that is the responsibility to advocate for the localizer. Many libraries are translated, or localized, into multiple languages. Applying standardized terms and phrases assists localizers to optimize a translation. When a localizer does not have to make a new translation because the wording is the same as a previous localization or is an existing term or phrase, the cost of localization is lower. Managers are always happy when there is less cost, a better “bottom line.”

As to our end-users, editors play an important role in advocating for a document’s intended audience. The global audience may be native speakers of English reading the American English version or non-native speakers of English reading the American English version or a localized version. That is why I consider these points as I edit.

- Keep sentence constructions simple: subject verb object—no convoluted sentences that would make it difficult to parse by the reader.
- Keep the topic as self-contained as possible. This means that cross-referencing within the topic or procedure should be minimal or nonexistent. There is a place for cross-references, and it's called the See Also section.
- Avoid politically sensitive terms. A good rule of thumb is to prohibit words that you wouldn't want to pop up in a browser search in association with your documentation.
- Avoid terms that have multiple meanings or possible misinterpretations.
- Avoid examples that require knowledge of a specific culture.
- Avoid humor. It is almost never successful, understood, or funny.

Editing is the semi-invisible layer between writing and publishing. Editors work for and with writers to help okay writing and polish good writing. If editors can also improve the user experience of global users or make for a smoother localization by applying common-sense principles, well, the editors-as-advocates have had a good day.

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