

## Editor: Friend or Foe?



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April 2011

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ASSOCIATES INC.

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Communications  
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In over ten years of working as an editor in all capacities—contractor, full-time, vendor—the question that never goes away, one that gets asked at all the editor and writer interviews, and gets brought up in annual reviews and one-on-ones with the manager is: how do you manage the relationship between writer and editor? Having worked with many writers labeled “difficult” and, possibly having been labeled “tough” myself (one can hope, right?), perhaps I can shine some light onto what makes this relationship work.

One of my managers, an ex-writer himself, claimed that editors and writers cannot be friends. “Well, thank goodness,” I thought, “because I’m here to work, not socialize.” But most of us want to get along and be accepted, and so this makes the situation a bit more emotional.

## So what makes editors easier to work with?

**Step 1: You have to want to work with us.** At least a little. I know you don’t come into the dentist’s office willingly, but both you and your dentist have one goal in mind—getting your mouth healthy. Similarly, the goal of a writer and editor is to make the document “healthy.”

**Step 2: Set expectations upfront.** I know we all have style guides where each level of edit is painstakingly described. However, what I’m talking about are things that are not usually covered in style guides. For example, do you expect me to reply to each of your edit requests with a confirmation that I received the message? Do you expect me to delete my comments that you’ve addressed? Do you expect me to make every change, even a simple spelling correction, in revisions?

Likewise, editors have expectations that we should communicate. For example, do we expect the writer to respond to every comment we left in the document? Unrealistic, perhaps. Or do we prefer to establish a way of identifying the particularly important comments, usually dealing with legal or document organization issues, those that require a response? If this expectation is not established, we might feel like our comments are ignored, and nobody likes being ignored.

**Step 3: Establish a communication preference.** We’re all humans with different personalities and different communication styles. Some abhor the phone in favor of email and communicator. Some get tired of typing and like to hear a human voice once in a while. So, we need to compromise a bit and work out an approach that works for both parties. For example, do we email with short questions and talk on the phone (or in person) for questions that require longer discussion? Do we burst into each other’s offices spilling out questions as they come to us? Note that both approaches worked for me in the past quite successfully.

**Step 4: Don't think we are grading you.** This is not high school and we're not here to grade you on your work. We're not your English teacher, though we can be, but only if you want us to. In my experience, the best writer-editor relationships are collaborative, where I learn as much from the writer as they learn from me. You do your research, I'll do mine, and then we'll come together and decide the best approach. We editors are not as thickheaded as you think us to be.

**Step 5: Trust us a little bit.** I know that's a lot to ask in the beginning, but chances are there's a reason we've been doing this for a long time (and getting paid for it).

**Step 6: Don't get mad at us.** When you receive a document from us that is full of revisions, don't get mad. You don't get mad at your dentist when they say you need a root canal. Or maybe you do, but only a little, right?

**Step 7: Use us as a resource.** We can help you with localization, globalization, terminology issues and the "how it's done elsewhere" perspective. We are also well connected inside the company to find more resources if needed. Some of us also boast a degree in English or in one way or another have breathed grammar for years. Use us.

**Step 8: Think of the final product.** This is what we are working toward. This is not about the editor making you do all this "extra stuff that's not at all necessary to the understanding of the product." We have other things to consider, you know? Like law suits and professionalism. Sure, we can send a white paper out to the world that's written in developer slang, but so can Joe Developer anywhere in the world. You need to think about the way the company that's producing the white paper wants to represent itself to the world.

At the end of the day, we're just two people trying to get our work done. And while no, we most likely don't want to be friends (unless we do, but that's a subject for another article), we do want a happy medium. If we've been arguing for hours over something, step away for a bit and get some air. It's just a white paper on a new technology and, wish as we might, it will not save a third-world country from poverty, nor cure cancer.

Not sure where all the dental office parallels came from. Perhaps, I'm due for a visit.

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