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Tools for Nonfiction Developmental Editors

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Tools for Nonfiction

Developmental Editors

Jacoba Lawson, Spring 2017

Fiction editing is a specialty that has been written about well and widely by others. Less attention has been paid to how editors of nonfiction may prompt their authors.¹

Nonfiction books come in a variety of forms. There's narrative nonfiction, which resembles a novel but is based in fact; instruction-based texts, designed to help impart practical knowledge or skills to readers; scholarly and peer-reviewed journals, which seek to preserve and further knowledge in a field; reference guides; technical manuals; and a host of other categories too numerous to mention. Fiction, with all its near-infinite possibilities for world-building and experimentation, can at least be relied upon to follow some rules of a narrative.

Fiction's audience is also profiled more easily. I don't mean it's easy to predict which readers will like which books—if that were the case, publishing would be a much simpler industry—but when they pick up a novel, fiction readers are entering a world they don't

know, filled with characters they need to meet. There are no true expert fiction readers. Every book must establish its rules clearly. You could make the case that long-time readers of sequels and series are experts, and to that I argue that sequels and series comprise one “work,” and the rules still apply.

Nonfiction audiences vary more than their fiction counterparts. Often they overlap—a large portion of narrative nonfiction is written for an audience authors must assume has little or no previous knowledge of their subject. But there is no fiction equivalent to the audience for cookbooks, field guides, or how-to manuals (with the possible exception of something like a *Star Wars Encyclopedia of Droids*, which covers a fictional topic as if it were fact and thus must follow the rules of nonfiction and fall into a hybrid space; a subject for another day)—for the most part, the phenomena of experts writing for other experts to help them develop skills or drive research further is unique to nonfiction.

These variations in form and purpose create a challenge for editors of nonfiction when determining how to approach a project, so it is perhaps understandable that no broad study has been done on the tools nonfiction editors use. A quick search on Amazon or other online catalogues reveals a good number of titles devoted to employing narrative conventions in nonfiction, and I will touch on those, but for non-narrative work, there is a surprising lack

of coverage. This paper is my attempt to catalogue and investigate the tools and techniques most useful to editors as they navigate the unique challenges of nonfiction, the theory and thinking behind their use, and the different ways editors today and in the past have implemented these tools.

When I refer to editors throughout these pages, I'm talking about developmental editors doing substantive edits on manuscripts, either complete or in-progress. I will explore exactly where in the publication process these edits take place shortly. In the meantime, know that when I say "editor," I mean, as George Stevens puts it, someone who edits for "sense and effect," not a copyeditor concerned with mechanical errors. Because "an editor who catches mistakes or inconsistencies in spelling, punctuation, and other usage will seldom get into an argument with his author,"² it is a more useful exercise to focus on the areas where friction is likely to appear and the ways an editor can ensure writers are actually saying what they intend to say.

My research relies on books written by nonfiction editors from 1962 to present and on interviews I conducted with editors working in nonfiction today. It is my hope that this catalogue will allow editors to identify the most effective tools for the types of projects they typically work on. However, I also think it will be helpful for editors to look across the

spectrum at techniques their peers working on other types of projects use—perhaps an editor will see something and feel inspired to implement it, or will rethink a tool they had previously rejected.

What is nonfiction?

*Nonfiction means much more than accuracy, but it begins with not making things up.*³

Nonfiction is such an imprecise term. It's like defining every flavor of ice cream besides chocolate as "nonchocolate." Vanilla? Nonchocolate. Pistachio? Nonchocolate. Cherry Garcia? Wait. That has chocolate chips in it. Is it chocolate or nonchocolate? What about cookies 'n cream? It's made with Oreos. Oreos are sort of chocolate. Or at least, they're chocolate-flavored. Where then, should it be shelved?

Cookbooks, guidebooks, reference books, travel guides, histories, biographies, memoirs—each is as different to the other as cookies 'n cream to pistachio ice cream, but they're all nonfiction. Some in the writing community subscribe to the base definition like the one from *Good Prose* above. In her book, *Thinking Like Your Editor*, Susan Rabiner outlines a situation in which a writer described a rattling coffee cup just before a plane crash in which everybody who could have heard the cup rattling died. She considered the detail to

be a slippery slope. “First it’s a rattling coffee cup, then a character who was never on the plane in the first place. . . . Maybe a character . . . who never even existed until conjured up by the author to help him get past a siege of writer’s block.”⁴

Others take issue with this rigid approach. Jonathan Lethem, a writer known for creative nonfiction who often questions the idea of perfect memory, calls the ban on these kinds of details “kabuki etiquette” on the part of journalists projecting their ethics “into a different kind of writing.” He considers it “a total botch. It doesn’t make sense. It’s wrong.” Lethem and his peers embrace cookies ‘n cream–type projects—fiction-flavored nonfiction.

Still, it’s useful to have a working definition, so for the purposes of this paper, assume that the books I’m discussing are factual unless I specifically state otherwise. Cookbooks, guidebooks, and other informational nonfiction projects aren’t much use to their audience if the information contained within them is not accurate, and most of the editors I surveyed and spoke with work on these kinds of projects.

Writers and their audience

Though any editor will tell you that every author is different, it is still possible to categorize authors into two basic groups. Professional writers, writers by trade, and non-professional

writers, who make their living doing something other than writing. Usually non-professional writers authoring a book are experts in a field. According to Scott Norton, these kinds of writers are “the ones who can benefit most from developmental editing. In the more successful of these [editor/author] collaborations, the authors have an almost missionary zeal for the propagation of their hard-won knowledge and are willing to defer to the DE’s expertise in the sphere of book development.” Norton doesn’t suggest what to do with authors who aren’t willing to defer, but as we’ll see, author relations are a key editorial tool and would presumably come to play in such a case. Occasionally the professional writer and expert exist within the same author.

In my survey of nonfiction editors, I found that professional writers who are not experts in a particular field (other than writing) are usually writing for the general public or layperson. Their books are likely to be narrative works, and their editors must be sure that they are representing the facts honestly, not generalizing for effect. In later sections, we’ll see which tools are most useful to editors working on these kinds of projects.

Non-professional writers who are experts in a field will also often write for the general public, but they just as often author books to share expertise with others in the same field. Going forward, I’ll refer to the latter as experts writing for experts and the former as

experts writing for the general public, with the non-professional writer aspect implied unless specifically noted otherwise. These two different pairings of writer and target audience represent distinct editorial challenges.

When an editor gets involved and what they do

Developmental editors can start their work on projects in a wide range of development stages, depending on the company for which they work and their position within it. Some, like acquiring editors, are involved right from the start—a prospective author has an idea for a book and the editor works with them from concept to finished manuscript. Many DEs, especially freelancers, will not get their hands on a project until the author has produced a full first draft. These editors are generally coming on about halfway through a nonfiction book's publishing journey—it has been accepted for publication; the publisher, acquiring editor, or marketing team has identified its target audience; and it's then the DE's job to work with the author to get the manuscript ready for mechanical copyediting and the remainder of the publishing process.

The editors I surveyed run the gamut from acquiring editors to freelancers to small press publishers who do a bit of everything. I'll give you a better idea of their backgrounds in

the section below, but first I want to mention a couple special cases where the role of a DE is somewhat different from what I've just described.

Editors who work on established nonfiction series deserve a special mention. In these cases, an editor is likely to work with an author from the concept stage; however, they are less likely to be hands-on with the author as the first draft is written because all the questions about format, structure, style, and many other matters have been determined by earlier books in the series. Often the writer will have submitted sample chapters that demonstrate they can write within the series' specifications.

Textbook editors face a similar, if infinitely more complicated, version of this. "A variety of miscellaneous ideas ... dealing with methods of presentation, specifics of content, language, format into which content must fit, vague generalizations, minute details, taboos, prejudices, and sales gadgets must be brought into some kind of pattern. Everyone who has any contact with the book or any stake in it feels free to express an opinion about what should go into it and how it should go in."⁵ Because of the specialized nature of textbooks, this paper does not attempt to address the unique challenges of editors working in that field.

Editor profiles: who they are, what they do, and how I know them

For this catalogue to be useful, readers must be able to identify the context within which each of my sources is working. I have employed two methods to ensure this. Both methods cover my survey respondents, interview subjects, and the published authors whose books I've cited (information on these authors was gleaned directly from their texts and author biographies).

The first method is a code that identifies each source according to the types of authors they work with and the kinds of audiences for whom they edit. These codes will appear after each source's name anytime they are first quoted or referenced in a section.

While not the most aesthetically pleasing device, this allows readers instant access to a source's credentials and eliminates the need for tedious page-flipping to reference an appendix. To protect the anonymity of my sources currently working in the industry, all survey respondents and interview subjects have been given pseudonyms—all published authors are identified by their first and last names.

Writer Codes:

ENP = writers who are experts in their field but not professional writers.

PRO = professional writers, whether experts in another field or not, will all be identified by this code as my research did not reveal enough variation to warrant a separate ID.

Author/Audience Codes:

e4e = experts writing for other experts

gp = any author writing for the general public

Both writer and audience codes will sometimes be used in reference to the editors who work on those projects. For example, rather than saying “editors who work with writers who are experts in their field but are not professional writers use this editing tool,” I’ll simply say “ENPs use this editing tool.” This will almost always be in relation to the data collected by my survey, which, because I only polled editors, should eliminate any confusion over whether or not the writers themselves are using the tools.

The second method I’ve employed to help readers track context is to provide a brief profile of each editor. These are available in [Appendix I](#). I have tried to give as complete a picture as possible of who they are and the kinds of work they do. Survey respondents who did not supply extra information in their responses and whom I did not have a chance to interview are identified only by their codes and their stated specialties. Because all of my published sources are books written by editors on the craft of editing, I have treated their books the same way I did the survey responses, as an editor’s perspective on the work they do

and the tools that make their work more effective. A profile on each source is included in the appendix.

I've also attached a copy of my survey as [Appendix II](#). Because I needed to ensure respondents would have time to answer, I created and distributed it early in my research process. As a result, I was able to ask direct questions about only a limited number of tools I had used personally or come across in my preliminary research (creative writing/narrative writing techniques, recurring phrases, expert consultants, and reference books). I asked respondents for feedback on multiple aspects of these tools, and also asked them to report on each tool's effectiveness. I was able to follow up with several of the respondents and conduct more detailed interviews, filling in the gaps from my initial survey and inquiring about topics I had discovered in my interim research.

Tools for nonfiction editors

Specific Audience

I believe that a book that knows why it is being written, for whom and most important, what it wants to say, is a book well on its way to successful publication.⁶

Before we can talk about editing, we need to talk about audience. Every editor I spoke to, and every source I consulted mentioned audience at some point. Susan Rabiner places such importance on the concept that she named the first chapter of her book “Thinking Like an Editor: Audience, Audience, Audience.” Often a clearly identified audience is a condition of a book’s acquisition at a publishing house. Acquiring editors have input at this stage and can help an author refine their idea of who their audience is. Tandy^{ENP_BEP_gp} is an acquiring editor at a house that publishes trade books: “I choose a book because I think we can sell it to the appropriate general trade audience. The decision is complicated. It’s never just the manuscript’s strength—there also has to be an audience for the book, and the author has to have some reach into that audience.” Many survey respondents gave an answer like this, a response that might sound mercenary to authors who want to execute their vision without worrying about markets and sales. To those skeptics Rabiner cautions, “Talk to an author who has worked for years on a book only to find it languishing indecently on a remainder table in some bargain outlet store. That’s not the fate you want for your book.”⁷

Once an audience has been identified, it is the editor’s job to act as the advocate for that audience. When asked what role audience plays in their editorial process, many survey respondents gave a version of this answer from Hank^{ENP_gp}: “We edit the manuscript to make

it clean and make sure that it is something the intended audience will find valuable.” The concept of value and the needs of an audience inform every decision an editor makes—from whether to include images, to what the structure of the book will be, to how much jargon will be allowed at the line level.

Sometimes an editor will suggest content changes based on audience. In an editorial letter to an author working on a book about the history of writing, Harold Straus is able to pinpoint, based on “long experience in handling works in your field” what the “single most fascinating thing to the general reader” is. “I consider this subject so important and such a sales asset that I would like to urge you to prepare a whole special chapter on it.” Other times the changes are more subtle, as in the case of tone. “To write is to talk to strangers. You want them to trust you. You might well begin by trusting them—by imagining for the reader an intelligence at least equal to the intelligence you imagine for yourself.”⁸ Nobody knows this better than an editor like Kitty^{ENP-PRO_gp}, who works on books for teens. In addition to ensuring that the content of her books is developmentally appropriate, she says it’s essential for her authors to have a respectful tone because “if teens think you’re talking down to them, they’ll ignore everything you say.”

Scott Norton has a particularly helpful example of how content and tone work together to serve different audiences. He is examining a manuscript on the art of fly fishing and cautions, “An irreverent tone toward ‘codgers on the pier’ may increase the book’s appeal to young X-treme anglers while alienating a core group of retirees. Instructions for tying twenty kinds of flies may delight the craft-minded, but the author will need to invest those details with poetic or philosophical significance to keep the armchair angler entertained.”⁹

To help her authors keep track of all the elements that serve their audience, Emma^{ENP_gp} uses the exercise of audience avatars for “the person at the center of the community the author wants to reach.” They discuss who the person is—their age, background, job, hobbies, hopes and dreams, etc.—then they give the person a name, say Julie, find a picture to represent her, print it out and tape it up beside the writer’s workspace. When Emma encourages her writers to “write for Julie,” the resulting pages have a clearer voice and communicate essential information more effectively for the book’s target audience.

Some elements of nonfiction

Because nonfiction books vary so much in origin, development, and purpose, certain elements like narrative, illustrations, and argument appear in some books but not in others. Often the decision to include these elements comes down to budget, house style, or target audience. In cases where these concerns don't factor, the decision to include or not include some of these elements amounts to another tool in the editor's toolbox. It is worth exploring the nature of these elements and the effect they can have on a nonfiction project.

Creative/Narrative Writing Conventions

"We think that the techniques of fiction never belonged exclusively to fiction, and that no techniques of storytelling are prohibited to the nonfiction writer, only the attempt to pass off inventions as facts. ... And we think that every piece of writing—whether story or argument or rumination, book or essay or letter home—requires the freshness and precision that convey a distinct human presence."¹⁰

Though some writers and editors are wary of the temptation to embellish that can creep in when writers of nonfiction start using their research to tell a story,¹¹ many editors agree that techniques like sensory details, characters, action scenes, and narrative structure can enliven a potentially dull or complicated subject. In my survey, I grouped these techniques under the umbrella "creative writing/narrative writing conventions" and asked which specific techniques editors found useful when working in nonfiction.

“A focus on structure (the container), narrative if appropriate or content and organization in the case of informational nonfiction (what’s inside), and language (the building materials) benefits all writing. ... There’s no difference between editing creative and informational prose in terms of applying these conventions,” says Charles^{ENP_PRO_gp}. Many survey respondents listed organization as the primary concern for their nonfiction books. Jubilation^{ENP_BEP_e4e_gp} said, “Our books are largely informational. How that information is organized and presented is critical to the book’s success.” And Betsy Lerner says, “Almost every book I have ever worked on needed help with the pacing and structure.” Lerner uses narrative to help her writers with the “staggering” challenge of sustaining pace and rhythm throughout a book. “I like to imagine the narrative as a journey. Just as a trip feels shorter on the way home ... even though it is the exact same number of miles away, the reader expects that time will pass more rapidly as the book heads toward the finish. Once we know the way, the scenery rolls by like so much wallpaper. Your editor should help you see when the writing has turned into wallpaper.”¹²

Narrative gives readers a reason to turn the pages. If an editor is working on a reference book like an encyclopedia or cookbook, then narrative will be of limited use, since the primary goal of those kinds of books isn’t to get readers to turn pages but rather to help

them find the information they need as quickly as possible. Lead these readers on a winding path to that info and you are going to annoy them. “Instructions on how to generate multispecific antibodies can only be so creative, so unfortunately the narrative portion of the art of writing gets put to the wayside more often than not,” says Molly^{ENP_PRO_gp}, who works with technical articles.

However, books that include a great deal of research, like histories and biographies; explore scientific discoveries, like scholarly journals and popular science writing; and even books that aim to illustrate techniques, like instruction-based texts and self-help, can all benefit from narrative. Jean^{ENP_PRO_e4e_gp} explains that because the books she works on are about abstract ideas, they can feel nebulous—“using narratives allows the ideas to become seated in the reader’s mind by giving concrete vignettes of the idea in action.”

According to Jack Hart, story and narrative serve “universal human needs. Story makes sense out of a confusing universe by showing us how one action leads to another. It teaches us how to live by discovering how our fellow human beings overcome the challenges in their lives. And it helps us discover the universals that bind us to everything around us.”¹³

Jack’s book, *Storycraft*, does more justice to the concept of narrative and how to apply it to nonfiction than I could hope to cover in this paper—the most responsible thing for me to do

is to point editors in its direction. However, before moving on, I want to highlight one specific type of narrative Jack discusses in his book because it is a technique several of my other sources and survey respondents mentioned. Jack calls it explanatory narrative, and describes it as an action line that's not dependent on a narrative arc, interrupted regularly by what John McPhee calls "digressions."¹⁴ "Digressions provide the actual explanation, placing the action line in some larger context."¹⁵

Rabiner recommends explanatory narrative and digressions also, but she calls the digressions, "break-narrative chapters." "They work well in providing readers with what I refer to as a 'freebie' education on an interesting side topic."¹⁶

Raven^{ENP_e4e_gp} uses digressions in the instructional materials she edits because not only do "anecdotes allow for variety and humor" they also "help readers connect to the material on a personal level." Carol^{ENP_e4e} agrees. "I am a fan of short illustrative stories to teach how to use a concept, idea, rule, or process in a real situation. The books I edit contain a fair amount of nuts-and-bolts that can be dry or confusing. To break up the nuts-and-bolts, I am always asking the authors to include stories. Put this into action for me, in a situation that the reader will be familiar with, and show me how it works. Whatever the technique is [that the author is trying to teach], put it into action."

Whatever structure an editor ends up working with, they need to fill it with details.

In a letter to a writer he ended up publishing, Harold Strauss cautioned about the importance of choosing the right kind of details for nonfiction books that popularize scientific or medical discoveries: “One of the most important distinctions between good and bad popularizations is the direct relevance of human interest detail to the discovery. Bad popularizations stress irrelevant detail, such as the discoverer’s hobbies or his father’s religious beliefs. Good popularizations rest on good sensory reporting, if that is possible; if not, on good research.

What did the place in which the discovery was made look like at the climactic moment? Who was there at the time? What irritating distractions were there? What was the weather like, and did it have anything to do with what the scientist was doing that day? ... Anything of this kind is useful. It is much better than saying abstractly, for instance, that controlled tests took two years to complete.”¹⁷

From his editorial letters, we get the impression that Strauss was a big believer in sensory details. In his correspondence with a different author, he chides the man who has submitted an otherwise exemplary manuscript for not including enough sensory details. With what might seem like brutally candid feedback (“you are not a master of this”), he informs the writer, “A ‘blind’ nature writer is no nature writer at all, as far as the general public is

concerned. ... You say clearly and intelligibly that a landslide menaced a certain highway. Are you really going to leave it at that? It must have been an awesome spectacle—and perhaps terrifying to hear, also. Couldn't you spare a paragraph or two to say what it would have been like for a traveler to pass under it on the highway?"¹⁸ If I had a time machine and good connections, I might have traveled back to ask Mr. Strauss his opinion of Rabiner's rattling coffee cup and whether or not that imagined sensory detail crossed a line he would be comfortable with.

Poll Numbers

Creative writing conventions are a fairly popular tool among the editors I surveyed. While a good number of respondents did not use them, those that did overwhelmingly reported them as effective.

- Thirteen out of twenty-one ENP report using them and twelve of those thirteen say they are effective. For PROs, nine out of twelve say they use creative writing conventions with only one of those nine reporting the tool as ineffective.
- Of editors working on gp projects, nineteen out of thirty use these techniques, with eighteen of those reporting them as effective. Editors of e4e follow the same pattern—eight out of ten report they use the device, with only one naysayer labeling it ineffective.

Conclusion

Because the sample size is small and not broken down by specific project type, it is difficult to know why such a large percentage of ENP and gp editors choose not to employ this tool when it is considered so essential by those who do. Unlike some of the other tools covered in the poll, none of the respondents who said they don't use the tool gave a reason why. If we look to the types of books they edit we get a partial answer—cookbooks, guidebooks, and reference books dominate, and it is possible that despite some who edit these kinds of books finding the tool useful, a large number do not. More specific questions tailored to this area would allow for clearer conclusions to be drawn.

Thesis or Argument

While good argument is most effective when built on solid research, a piling on of facts does not an argument make.¹⁹

According to Rabiner, a book's topic is what an author is talking about, while a book's thesis is what is said about that topic. Much like narrative, a thesis or argument probably will not be

as useful to editors of reference books as it is to editors working on biographies, histories, and the like. Once again, audience needs must be the editor's guide. Editors would do well to examine these needs closely before choosing to implement or reject theses or arguments.

For example: A cookbook may be strictly utilitarian, written to impart step-by-step instructions and nothing more. The audience for a book like this will be unmoved by argument. However, another cookbook might benefit from a clear thesis on the health benefits of certain ingredients or an argument in favor of certain cooking techniques over others, and the audience for such a book would likely find these aspects a key component of the book's appeal.

To help identify her book's thesis, Jean^{ENP_PRO_e4e_gp} likes to ask these questions, "What is the problem it's trying to solve? What is the solution it is offering? What is the call to action? Why is it urgent? Why should the reader care?" While Emma^{ENP_gp} asks only, "What about this content is unique and what does it add to the body of knowledge?"

Rabiner defines thesis as what an author has to say about a book's topic.²⁰ And she defines argument as "the process of leading others to accept our positions, attitudes, or even our mere inclinations about issues under discussion."²¹

“Keep in mind that the excitement of reading [narrative] nonfiction lies in retracing with the author the trail that brought the author to his conclusions.” While this technique need not be limited to narrative, it is a particularly useful addition to that form. “Just what is it that keeps readers reading? ... Readers stay with a book as long as it promises to answer still unresolved questions. Each chapter must give the reader a sense of a deepening, more complicated understanding of the competing forces at play.”²² These questions come from thesis and argument, two concepts that are explored at length, and in much greater detail than I can hope to cover here, in Rabiner’s book *Thinking Like Your Editor*. I bring them up now because they play a key role in our next elements.

Display elements

Think of a department store in a shopping mall. The outer display windows draw your attention, providing a sense of the style, range, and quality of the wares within. You step inside, and smaller displays are the gateways to each department. If you’re lucky, a map near the escalators gives you the store’s floor plan, and large signs hang over each department in clear view. A book’s display matter functions in much the same way. Good display entices and guides readers on their stroll through the text; bad display confronts readers with a snootful of perfume and leaves them dazed to wander an obstacle course of racks and counters.²³

Display elements are all those parts of a book separate from what Norton calls “running text.”²⁴ Publishers will often have a template they follow for subheads, section titles,

epigraphs, sidebars, text boxes, images, and diagrams. In a series, that template has been honed over many volumes and leaves little room for change. When an editor is working within these parameters it is their responsibility to make sure that the text conforms to the established plan. However, if an editor has the option to choose their own display elements, it is worth examining the ways each functions within a nonfiction text.

Subheads and section titles. If we envision, as Rabiner instructed us to, that a narrative nonfiction audience wants to follow the trail an author took to reach their conclusions, then we can think of subheads and section titles as the signposts that let the audience know they are following the correct path. “Subheads periodically let readers know where they’ve been, how far they have left to go, [and] which points of interest are along the way.”²⁵ Emma^{ENP-sp} employs them frequently. “I like subheads that link the last section to the next section. They’re not just labels. They keep readers engaged and give them a reason to turn the page.”

Epigraphs. “Like vivid subheadings they draw the reader into the text at the bookstore shelf and revive her curiosity at home in the armchair. ... A pair or trio of contrasting epigraphs can hint at conflicts to come in the ensuing chapter; a single epigraph can foreshadow the chapter’s climactic event, creating suspense. An epigraphs source note

alone can speak volumes about character setting and theme.”²⁶ Carol^{ENP_e4e} often has authors employ epigraphs in their manuscripts. Usually they are quotes from highly respected members of the expert community that is her target audience, though she recently published a book in which the author used quotes from various pop culture references as his epigraphs. This helped establish the irreverent tone of the book and the playful persona that defines the author’s reputation in his field.

Sidebars, text boxes, and other design elements that encompass text. Norton posits, “standard convention dictates that text boxes contain only optional reading. If readers skip text boxes and miss key info, they will be irritated.” However these elements are flexible, as is the definition of optional. Emma^{ENP_gp} often employs what she calls a “patchwork quilt” structure for books in which an author has multiple goals. She gave an example of a book about natural disasters. The author wanted the book to 1) show how communities recover, 2) educate about extreme weather, 3) show off cool pics. To meet all these goals, they employed what Jack Hart would call an “explanatory narrative”—that is, a straight action line plus the diversions that give the story all its detail. The action line made up what looked like the main body of the text, and thematically designed sidebars held the diversions. In this case, the

sidebars contained the true meat of the text and would not be considered optional by either editor or author.

Thematic and artistic layouts. When budget, timeline, and audience allow for it, artistic layouts can be used effectively to support a book's theme. Here is an example from Emma^{ENP_gp}: A prominent journalist wanted to republish some of his older columns with annotations that included how his opinions had or had not changed over the years. They struggled to incorporate the annotations in a way that was not intrusive to the original text but was still prominent. Emma's solution was to create a font based on the author's handwriting and add the annotations to the margins of the original text. This technique supported the book's theme of self-reflection, and the handwriting font added an extra personal touch.

Raven^{ENP_e4e_gp} was able to use a similar technique to boost the sales potential for one of her titles. "The author had maintained a blog during his time working with famous [members of his field], and we wanted to put it into the book. We worked with a text designer to get that portion of the book to look just like a series of blog posts, which was really neat! We think this feature definitely added to the book's sales, as the web journal was

very popular. This kind of design work is unusual for us, but we like thinking outside the box whenever we can.”

Photos and illustrations. Sometimes an editor has control over the design elements in their books and sometimes they don't. Especially with photos and illustrations, decisions are made at a concept level, before a writer starts writing. Often the conditions for who will provide photos or illustrations are worked into the writer's contract. With cookbooks and guidebooks, photos and illustrations are often key elements and are settled well in advance of the author even writing the project. However, things are not always so rigid. Depending on the situation, editors can make suggestions on when to add or omit images to strengthen the manuscript. They can use photos or diagrams to illustrate difficult concepts. Some editors warn against becoming too dependent on images: “It is the rare picture that is worth a thousand words. Good descriptive language can accomplish as much as most pictures in fifty words or less.”²⁷ But others recognize the power of a diagram to do what explanation cannot.

Angelica^{ENP-gp} works on guidebooks and reference manuals that often contain upwards of three hundred photos. If an author is explaining a concept that is difficult to visualize, she will request diagrams or photos to ensure reader understanding. When working on children's

books, Kitty^{ENP_PRO_gp} will often recommend adding images in places where the text has become dense, “just to keep kids looking at the page.”

Jargon

*Jargon saves words but squanders time.*²⁸

Jargon is the language that pops up around specialties. It can be used to describe unique aspects of the field or, just as often, to describe common actions, items, and concepts in a more industry-specific way. For example, in kayaking, a spray-skirt is the unique piece of gear worn around your waist that, when stretched over the opening (cockpit, more jargon) of the boat when you're seated in it, keeps water out. This specialized item has a specialized name. In the same field, a PFD, short for personal floatation device, is what most people would call a life vest. Both are simple instances of jargon.

Jargon can enrich a text or weigh it down depending on how much and how well it's used. The amount of appropriate jargon usually depends on a piece's intended audience. Scott Norton advises, “Harness the jargon. Abstract language can be precise. ... Promotional blurbs often tout an author's text as jargon-free, but this quality is a virtue only in books aimed at lay readers. Jargon is the best way for fellow specialists to discuss their subject with precision,

and DEs should support the use of a term when it is the most appropriate word available.”²⁹

Raven^{ENP_e4e_gp} agrees. “Our books are targeted towards customers who usually already have a wide understanding of the field, so we are more free to use jargon. In fact, using jargon well can often help an author to establish credibility with a reader. If our customers and our authors can communicate with a shared language, this makes the reading experience more intimate, useful, and nuanced.”

Harold Strauss has a conflicted view on Jargon: “The common language is much better and more communicative, not only because it does not send readers to the dictionary too often, but because it has more stability. The meaning of a technical term can sometimes be altered ... In extreme cases, jargon conceals meaning, and the discipline of translating it into the common language often forces a writer to sharpen his grasp of his own topic.

[However] I have no objection to the use of the proper technical term if it is accompanied by a vivid description in the common language. This will be very important to the success of the book outside of purely scientific circles.”³⁰

For experts, jargon can be a neat shorthand in explanations. Though Strauss’s lesson should be heeded—meanings can shift over time, so tomorrow’s expert might not

immediately understand today's jargon. For lay readers, learning new bits of jargon can be a key component of why they enjoy reading nonfiction, and eliminating it completely can make the writing feel drab or uninformed. Rabiner finds a good middle ground when she advises, "Assume a high reader level of intellectual sophistication, even though you suspect their knowledge of your particular subject may not be high. Fully explain but do not simplify. Educate your readers fully before you rely on interdisciplinary shorthand."³¹

Tools for an editor's process

A word about editor/author relations

*The art of editing is a dance one engages in with the author to help him achieve the best results. ... She must establish trust. ... An editor builds trust with an author through the careful attention to his pages. The comments and queries become a net beneath the writer so that he feels emboldened to risk the high wire ... the editor says, I won't let you fall. The editor says, I will catch you.*³²

Before we could talk practically about the elements an editor might add to a nonfiction book, we had to discuss audience, because the needs of the audience dictate what should and should not be included in a book. In a similar way, we cannot discuss an editor's process without addressing the relationship between an editor and their author. An author must trust that their editor knows what they're doing and that "the editor's purpose is not to superimpose his

own opinions or tastes on those of the author, but only to be sure that the author is actually saying what he intends to say, that he is achieving the effect he desires.”³³

To establish this trust, an editor must communicate their own expertise in a way that their author is able to understand. Personality plays a huge role in this communication. Some writers crave authority and will disregard edits offered in too conciliatory a tone, while others are more sensitive and will feel bullied by brusque notes and queries. With the exception of survey respondents who gave minimal answers and *Storycraft* by Jack Hart, a book for writers about writing, which addresses development but not the editor/author relationship, nearly all of my sources mention the author’s personality and how it affects the editorial process. Even *Storycraft* has clues to this dynamic in its introduction, where Jack lists his credentials, explains why he has written the book, and why certain elements have been included—this is him telling his readers that they can trust him.

Carol^{ENP_e4e} works with experts who can be very protective of their ideas. “One of my catchphrases to start out a relationship with an expert is that ‘editing is a conversation’ and ‘please tell me if I got it wrong.’ I don’t want to come across like their 8th grade English teacher. Once they’re willing to trust me, and they understand that I’m invested in their work, I really want to understand it thoroughly, then the relationship can be a great one. It’s a

huge compliment to them and their work to have someone deeply invested in their message and their success, trying to actively help them be better.” Not every editor will be this explicit about delineating the line between their expertise as an editor and their knowledge of whatever topic is the focus of the book. But friendly and open, or authoritative and removed, an editor’s bedside manner is a key component of their success with authors.

The tools listed below are all extensions of an editor’s approach to author relations. While you may find many of these tools on the workbench of editors working with novels and other forms of creative writing, they are worn from use in the nonfiction editor’s hands and can have a significant impact on the nonfiction developmental editing process.

Recurring Phrases

An editor’s style is as unique to them as a writer’s voice. Every editor has their own approach to the dance that is author relations. Some like to maintain an authoritative position, while some have found that a friendly, “you do what you’re good at and I’ll do what I’m good at” attitude is effective for them.

Many editors have pet phrases or boilerplate that they use over and over across different projects. These phrases often address the issue of the author’s familiarity in a subject

that the editor is not as familiar with. Especially when the target audience is the general public, it is the editor's job to help the author bridge "the gap between the author's zeal and the audience's response."³⁴

Rabiner has the boldest approach to this issue of any editor I encountered, whether through research, survey, or interview. When one of her authors becomes too enamored of their facts and ends up simply reciting everything they know without "an attempt to advance some insight larger than the story itself," she labels it a MEGO moment (Mine Eyes Glaze Over) and advises them to get to the point.

Generally editors are a bit more gentle. When she comes across a passage that does not match up with her research or personal understanding of the topic at hand (more on this to come), Angelica^{ENP_gp} relies on the phrase, "I was under the impression x, y, z ..." which gives her author a chance to either defend their facts or adjust them.

Raven^{ENP_e4e_gp} likes to ask "Would this word/phrasing be familiar to others in the industry?" "Am I understanding this correctly?" or simply "Does this mean ____?" Helen Harter has a similar approach, skipping past any admission that she might not understand a passage to get at the real issue, reader comprehension. Rather than saying, "the paragraph is not clear," she writes, "I know what it means, but it *could* be interpreted this way ..."³⁵

Norton illustrates an even subtler approach to this same issue. “The DE can demonstrate the ... need to clarify the relevance of an existing detail, by willfully misreading the author’s intentions.”

“[Example]: On Christmas Day, three young men were attacked by a Siberian tiger that had maimed a zookeeper only last year.

“Query A: Clarify the relevance of the earlier attack to the later one?”

“Query B: Are you arguing, then, that the tiger should not have been allowed to live after the first attack, and that the second one is therefore the fault of the zoo?”

“Query A might well be met with an authorial response of “Okay as is.” If an author has not foreseen the potential for misreading a sentence before now, she or he is not likely to do so without some help.”

Norton cautions that this strategy should be used sparingly, lest the disingenuous tone undermine the author’s trust in their editor’s judgment.³⁶

Trust and issues of authority proved contentious among the editors I polled when it came to one very specific phrase. When working with experts writing for other experts, editors must remain conscious that certain passages, which read like gibberish to their eyes, may be perfectly clear to the writer’s fellow experts in the field. Early in my research,

Carol^{ENP_e4e} mentioned a phrase she often uses when working with her expert authors: “I’m not an expert but ...”

She has found it to be an effective tool. “Usually it forms the basis for a conversation with the author. I try to be collaborative—we all have things we’re good at. They’re the expert in this topic, I’m trying to make it clear. Sometimes I (erroneously) ask them to clarify something that ‘any [novice] would know.’ So I try to always make room for that in my queries. Does your audience already know this? If they do, let’s not cover it, and I’ve learned something new. If the audience doesn’t know it, or most likely won’t know it, let’s cover it. In a lot of ways, this is a continuation of the audience definition problem/process described earlier. If the audience already knows everything the expert knows, then there’s no reason for the book. Trying to define that line between what the audience already knows and what the expert is there to teach is difficult. I find that the ‘I’m not an expert but’ phrase helps both me and the author continue to refine what the audience knows and doesn’t know.”

I included this phrase of Carol’s in my polls and got very divided responses. Editors either loved it or hated it, with very little middle ground.

Jean^{ENP_PRO_e4e_gp} likes the phrase because it says “While I’m not an expert in your field, as a trained editor a part of my skillset is aimed at ongoing learning to best serve the subject

matter of the material I'm working on." She lets them know that her purpose is to help them and their content reach and serve readers and says that "Usually the author opens the door on this—they want to know what allows an editor to have the knowledge base in their area ... I respond from there. One of the most important things to establish for an author is that, while an editor may not be an expert in that particular field, they are an expert at communicating ideas through language and that the editor's primary job is help the author connect content to reader."

Other editors had very strong reasons for avoiding this particular phrase.

Charles^{ENP_PRO_gp} likes to establish "a dominant rhetorical position immediately." And says, "[Authors] know I'm not a subject-area expert, but I want them to also know that I am an expert at editing English, and if their book is in English, working with me will improve their work a great deal. Using phrases like 'I'm not an expert but' can undermine your authority some, so I generally avoid them." Molly^{ENP_PRO_gp} has a similar motivation for avoiding the phrase: "I find capitulating to my ineptitude to be a poor choice when trying to sound authoritative and inspire confidence. It's my job to make them feel like I *am* an expert ... If they don't believe I am, they'll walk all over me."

Poll Numbers

Recurring phrases (especially the specific phrase “I’m not an expert but...” are the least utilized of the editorial tools included in my survey.

- Only nine out of twenty-one ENP report using them. Two thirds of those who do use them, say they are effective. For PROs, only five out of twelve say they use recurring phrases and of those five only two say they are effective.
- Of editors working on gp projects, twelve out of thirty use these phrases, with a little over half reporting them as effective. Editors of e4e are split, with only five out of ten reporting that they use the device—however, of those five, all regard them as an effective tool.

Conclusion

Though the sample size is indeed small, anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that the phrase “I’m not an expert but...” is a divisive approach among editors—there are those who embrace it and those who actively shun it. It appears to be most useful to editors who work with experts and have a “let’s acknowledge each other’s strengths and weaknesses” approach to author relations.

The numbers on this particular poll are harder to parse than in the sections that follow, due to an ambiguously worded question that respondents interpreted in a number of ways. The intent of the question was to inquire after recurring phrases and boilerplate that editors use frequently when working on manuscripts. I included the example “I’m not an

expert but” because it had been suggested to me early in my research. Some respondents understood what I was asking for and listed their own examples. Others responded specifically to what I also seemed to be asking: Do you use the phrase “I’m not an expert but” and how effective is it? While it is easy to tell who was answering which question for the respondents who included typed responses, it is impossible to know the intentions of the respondents who only checked the effective–ineffective scale and did not elaborate. However, the phrase clearly touched a nerve in several respondents and the ensuing debate is valuable for editors who might consider employing it.

Expert consultants or boards

I have now finished the extremely laborious and time consuming job of editing and rewriting your manuscript and I have sent it to Professor X for his expert advice.”³⁷

When an editor is working on a manuscript about a field in which they are not themselves an expert, it can be useful to put the manuscript before an expert who can give feedback on the accuracy, relevance, and usefulness of the content. Frances Halpenny, who worked at a scholarly press, declares, “It remains ... the conviction of all press editors that a manuscript which has taken years of devoted labor to prepare deserves the compliment of a report by the

person best qualified, and that this person should be given time for reading and reflection.”³⁸

Today, this “person best qualified” can come in many forms.

Some editors have access to (or are required consult with) an entire editorial board made up of experts, while others engage a single expert to act as an advisor to the author throughout the project’s life. Some editors consult experts before even deciding to acquire a book, while others wait until late in the process and hire an expert who is also a copyeditor to catch any mistakes.

If the phrase “I’m not an expert but ...” seeks to assure an author that their editor is staying within the bounds of language editing (the editor’s area of expertise) and not overstepping their bounds, the use of an expert consultant can serve a similar purpose with less “capitulation” as Molly put it. Emma^{ENP-gp} works with authors to develop their books from concept to complete manuscript. She finds it useful to consult with experts early in the development process and describes the benefit like this: “I like to position myself as the editing expert, not the subject matter expert, so having an expert advisor on board relieves me of that responsibility/pressure and creates accurate expectations of my role.”

Carol^{ENP-ct} finds benefit in expert consultants because they help her to communicate more effectively with her authors. “[Experts] can sometimes shed light on questions that I

have, or they can raise questions I didn't think to ask." Carol works with an editorial board, made up of experts who work in the same field as her authors. Like Emma, she gets her experts involved early in the development process.

"In one particular case, my editorial board said about a new manuscript, 'There's nothing new here.' They went on to say that the content was all things they'd learned over the past two or three years at various local professional conferences. Nothing felt new or groundbreaking. It wasn't bad, it just wasn't worth the price of a book. When I presented this back to the author, our ultimate decision was to discontinue the book. The author decided they really didn't have anything else to say, and didn't have the time to dig out anything new. It was an amicable but very worthwhile parting based on editorial board feedback."

Unlike Emma, Carol acts as a buffer and does not give her experts direct access to her authors. She creates profiles of the board member so her authors can get a sense of who is critiquing their work and what factors might influence their feedback, and she picks "illustrative quotes that get the feedback across" so that authors aren't overwhelmed by getting the same note over and over from multiple sources.

The need to protect authors from being overwhelmed, and from criticism that may sound harsh and discouraging, inspires most editors to take on the buffer role as Carol does.

Authors are justifiably sensitive about their writing. While they want their final book to be the best version possible, and are usually eager to hear advice about how to make it better, they've been working with the text for so long that they are often unconscious of its flaws and surprised to hear about them. Editors know this and spend considerable energy building their authors' trust to a point where the author can hear criticism as constructive rather than insulting. Expert consultants are not always so careful. When asked if they filter feedback from experts before passing it along to their authors, most survey respondents replied with some version of "DEFINITELY!" like Raven^{ENP_e4e_gp}.

Raven also added, "I often soften the language, using words like "seem," "think," "feel," etc. The author feels less directly challenged, and will usually go along with the proposed change" Jubilation^{ENP_BEP_e4e_gp} also cites the need to mitigate defensiveness, and Molly says her reviewers "can be very demanding and snarky in their comments, so I need to make sure to weed through everything to make sure my authors don't get offended or hurt feelings." She also likes to filter the commentary to make sure "the important bits are given attention and the unnecessary pieces are weeded out."

Occasionally an editor will encounter an author who cannot see their own limitations. These are difficult cases, in which the writer treats the editor as an impediment. Access to an

editorial board can further degrade the relationship because such an author may be inclined to seek reassurance from fellow experts in their field rather than the expert in language and communication whose advice they have decided to ignore. Jean^{ENP_PRO_e4e_gp} experienced a dynamic like this when her publisher, who didn't quite understand the working relationship between editor and author, gave the author direct access to the editorial board, which then became "intrusive" and "mucked the whole thing up."

Overall, however, even if they complicate the process, most editors had positive things to say about their experience with editorial boards. Raven summed it up by saying, "more cooks in the kitchen means more questions, challenges, and a longer process! But it also results in a better book."

Poll Numbers

Though the number of editors who report using expert consultants is not much higher than the number who use recurring phrases like "I'm not an expert but," the percentage of those who consider the tool to be an effective one is significantly higher.

- Twelve out of twenty-one ENP report using expert consultants. Ten out of those twelve, say they are effective. For PROs, ten out of twelve report using experts, and of those ten, seven say they are effective.

- Of editors working on gp projects, nineteen out of thirty use consult experts, with fifteen of those nineteen reporting them as effective. All ten e4e editors report consulting experts, with only two out of the ten considering them to be ineffective.

Conclusion

Despite their occasional drawbacks, expert consultants are a valuable resource to most editors who have access to them. Their involvement in the editorial process can vary greatly, and editors considering adding experts to their own toolbox would do well to consider their own editorial style and approach to author relations beforehand.

Reference Books or Other Research in the Field

First I should clarify what I mean by reference books. While dictionaries and style guides like the *Chicago Manual of Style* are technically reference books, they are also what I consider to be essential editorial tools for every project (not CMS or any specific dictionary, just the ability to reference guides to maintain consistency within a piece of writing)—they are as indispensable to the practice of editing as the ability to read and understand the language in front of you. This might be overreaching—I'm sure some readers might like to argue the point. But that's a different paper. For our purposes here, I'm defining reference books as resources within the field that is the subject of an editor's manuscript. And though I might

say reference *books*, I'm including electronic resources like online databases, articles, and internet searches under the same umbrella.

Of all the tools mentioned specifically in my survey and ranked for effectiveness, reference books are by far the most utilized and regarded most often as effective. However, their written responses reveal that the ways in which editors use reference books can vary widely. There are two major schools of thought and they are just as firmly divided as those who were for and against the phrase "I'm not an expert but."

In the first group, we have editors who use reference books to deepen their understanding of a subject in order to communicate more effectively with their authors. Just as expert consultants can help editors to think of angles and questions the editor might not have thought of on their own, so does researching the field allow editors to navigate the subject with confidence. Moira^{ENP_gp} depends on this foundation to the extent that "almost 100% of my comments back to the author use reference books as the basis for my suggested edits." Charles^{ENP_PRO_gp} brings it back to authority when he says, "Reference books and research in the field can replace the 'I'm not an expert but' situation a bit. For example, when I edited a memoir with heavy discussion of an obscure disease, I did as much layman research as possible on the disease, then read as many medical journal articles as were available for free

on the internet. Doing that kind of research enriched my edit, as I was able to understand and discuss the subject matter approximating the way an expert would discuss it.”

Raven^{ENP_e4e_gp} also appreciates the way research helps her understand her authors better. “I’m always reading in our genre! It’s pretty niche, and it’s important to know a lot about the subject to capture it well in a project. Subjective opinions about certain aspects of [this field] can appear as fact when stated with confidence and authority. I have to be able to parse out strong feeling from industry standard.”

It is not unusual for these editors to request recommendations from their authors on which sources would be most useful for background research. Molly^{ENP_PRO_gp} requests “anywhere from 3-10” sources per project, and Carol^{ENP_e4e} likes to “ask the author for other books I should be reading to familiarize myself with the field. Who do they respect and why? Or who should I *not* read and why?” She says, “I wouldn’t research without the author’s guidance. There are so many opinions in any field. I want to make sure I’m accurately representing the author’s vision and opinion.”

This group tends to do quite a bit of research prior to starting on a project. It is tempting to look at these similarities and, together with the quote from Charles above, conclude that editors in this first group use research to level the playing field, thus

eliminating the need to use phrases like “I’m not an expert but.” However, the group isn’t that homogenous. While some shun the phrase, others consider it a staple in their process. What they do have in common is a belief that researching the topic they’re editing, both before and during the editing process, is time well spent—an attitude that sets them apart from the second group of respondents.

Compare this quote from Charles about researching a topic ahead of time, to the responses from group two:

Charles: “Subject-area familiarity is key to editing anything you’re not immediately familiar with. If I’m editing a nonfiction book on technology market disruptions, I’m going to study that conceptually—the economics, anthropology, history, and the science—until I can discuss it with some comfort. You don’t need to have the broad subject-area knowledge that the writer does, but you must have a basic to intermediate subject vocabulary to be an effective editor for that project.”

Group two, when asked if they do research before starting a project:

“No. A good editor should be able to edit any subject matter for organization, flow, and understandability” (Hank^{ENP_gp}).

“No, I rely on the author for content issues and make sure that the writing is clear and logical, querying where necessary” (Logan^{ENP_e4e_gp}).

“No, I only do research if I find I don’t understand what the author is writing about” (Angelica^{ENP_gp}).

“No. I expect to learn from the author-expert in the course of editing the book. My role is only to make sure their (presumably correct) narrative is presented in the best way possible. I may have to check their spelling, but not their knowledge.” (Jubilation^{ENP_PRO_e4e_gp}).

“I do, but it is minimal. We trust our authors to bring their expertise to the subject (that’s why they’re writing on it)” (Bobby^{ENP_PRO_e4e_gp}).

That’s a pretty consistent line of reasoning. Again, it is tempting to look for similarities among this group. Do they all employ experts during their process? Do they all use “I’m not an expert but”? The sample size just isn’t big enough to say. This group does seem to contain editors who all work on books for the general public, which makes a certain sense. If an author is writing for lay people who aren’t familiar with a subject it could be less important for their editor to know all the vocabulary and concepts, since they want to ensure that the text is comprehensible to a wide audience who also won’t have that knowledge. More research is needed in order to say that for sure though. More useful to editors interested in

this group's point of view is examining the way that, after shunning research as preparation, they incorporate reference books into their process.

Hank^{ENP_gp} covers a lot of ground common to his group in this description: "I don't consult reference books other than *The Chicago Manual of Style*. I use the internet consistently to check facts and gain understanding of a vocabulary that I don't know. Before I suggest that an author might be mistaken, I first try to prove the author is right. If I am unable to back up the author's statement of fact with support from other sources, then I ask the author to explain, change, or verify. Researching vocabulary, terminology, trying to understand what the author is saying by looking it up to see if the author is correct is my modus operandi. If my research conflicts with what the author has said, then I simply present the author what I have learned through research and ask them if they are sure of their own point of view or if they would like to make a change."

Fact checking is a primary motivator for editors in group two, but, as in group one, research allows editors to communicate more effectively with authors by asking more educated questions. After researching something, "if something is unclear [in the manuscript], you can ask the author, 'do you mean this or that?'" Says Angelica^{ENP_gp} when

asked to list the benefits of research. “You can’t just ask an author to clarify something, because they’ll say it is perfectly clear the way it is.”

Almost all of the editors in group two cited time as the biggest limit to the utility of research. Some had the attitude that researching a subject ahead of time is simply a waste of time because they trust the author to be the expert. While others caution that it is futile to try and use research as a shortcut to expertise. “The literature can be pretty complex ... there isn’t adequate time to get a very competent understanding of the material” (Bobby^{ENP_PRO_e4e_gp}).

“You can’t do as much research as the author, so you will never know everything you need to know” (Angelica).

“Obviously, you can’t study enough in any project’s timeframe to have any true expertise in the field, so it’s sometimes dangerous to do enough study that your own opinions feel like they’re ‘right’ enough to conflict with consensus in that field, or that sometimes contradict what your author has said.” This last quote comes from group one’s Charles, a big believer in prior research. In the danger of misinterpreting research we find common ground between the two camps. Both groups stressed the need to acknowledge that, even though they may consult reference books, they are not actually experts, and their understanding of the material may be flawed. Author queries are the key to incorporating any independent

research, and most editors defer to their author's expertise when there seems to be a conflict between what the author has written and what other sources say. "The biggest thing an editor should never do is to think they know enough. If you think that, you don't" (Jean).

Poll Numbers

These numbers reflect the popularity of reference books as an effective tool.

- Eighteen out of twenty-one ENP report using reference books, and only one out of those eighteen report the tool as ineffective. For PROs, all twelve respondents report using reference books, again with one holdout who views them as ineffective.
- Of editors working on gp projects, twenty-six out of thirty use reference books, with only two of those twenty-six reporting them as ineffective. Editors of e4e continue the pattern, with nine out of ten employing the tool, and eight out of nine considering it to be effective.

Conclusion

While the poll numbers illustrate that most editors of nonfiction use reference books, they do not reflect the different ways those reference books are used. As with the phrase "I'm not an expert but," there is a clear divide among editors with different approaches to the editorial process. If the question had been "How effective is it to consult reference books prior to starting on a project," the numbers would be quite different. Whether or not these dueling philosophies can be traced back to any consistent profile (editors who work on these kinds of

books from this kind of author for this kind of audience), is a question for further study. For now, it is enough to acknowledge that the two camps exist and for editors to examine the arguments made by both when deciding to when and how to incorporate reference books into their editorial processes.

Reviewers

Any author would prefer to hear about the weak spots in his manuscript in private from an editor than in public from the book reviewers.³⁹

While an editor is always on duty as the audience advocate, and most authors are sensitive the importance of serving the needs of that audience, occasionally an editor will need a little extra support to convince an author to make a certain edit. The specter of book reviews can be that support.

Emma^{ENP_gp} described a situation in which an author who was not an expert in the field was writing a book about a politically sensitive topic also very personal to the author. She was prone to “sweeping generalizations and stating opinion as fact” and was reluctant to change her behavior until Emma pointed out that “just saying stuff because you believe it to be true” is catnip to reviewers, who will pounce on it and tear it to shreds. As George Stevens

puts it, “The editor may call upon the author for his sources, much to the author’s annoyance; but it pays dividends in the end, for reviewers are skeptical and can be mollified only if authors provide their own grains of salt.”⁴⁰

This technique is also useful for encouraging writers to take notes on language. In support of her argument that a pile of facts does not a book make, Susan Rabiner includes this review from the *New York Times*: “Sadly, the significance of the story is not matched by the skill of the telling. [The book] reads like a string of encyclopedia entries.” She also invokes reviews when urging her writers not to rely on coded language. From the *Times*: “Mr.—’s book is less than nifty in other respects, however, especially in the way it is written: stodgily enough to make you think this author had pebbles in his word processor. His prose is burdened with an academic jargon that takes the juice out of his depictions, leaving behind dehydrated abstraction.”⁴¹

Emma cautions that she doesn’t rely on this technique too often. In most cases, an editor’s authority is enough. “They trust that I know what I’m doing, and that my edits will make their book better.” But every so often, when an author is being stubborn, and “cannot see the forest for the trees,” she finds it handy to have the reviewer-as-boogeyman for backup.

Author reading assignments

The entire editorial process can be thought of as one long author assignment; however, many editors find it useful to assign additional “homework” that, while it may not make it into the body of the manuscript, will improve the book overall. Often this takes the form of reading assignments. If the writer is working within an established series, earlier books in that series are required reading to ensure they understand the format. Even without the formal structure of a series, helping an author to fit within the house style can also be beneficial. Kitty^{ENP_PRO_gp} often will give writers other successful books from her publisher, if they need examples of what works.

In his correspondence with an ENP author whose first language is not English and who struggles with the language, Harold Strauss gives him a reading assignment to help with some recurring styling problems. “I think, both for the purposes of this book and for the future, it would be a most important investment of your time if you would read [this other book] immediately. ... [The author] is not a scientist ... but he is a magnificent stylist, and since in the early chapters he deals with [some of the same things this author is writing about], I think you will do well to absorb his vocabulary.”⁴² Carol^{ENP_e4c} has also used this

device. One of her authors was struggling with how to convey the many ways a difficult concept applied to multiple situations—as it happened, the publisher had just released a book that dealt with a very similar problem. Carol was able to provide this book to her struggling author as a kind of blueprint for laying out their own ideas.

Kitty doubts how effective this approach would be to her authors. “They are not pro writers so they wouldn’t know what to take away from reading another book you say has good language or style—it’s more helpful to simply rewrite portions of their work as examples to show what you would like changed.” Jean^{ENP_PRO_e4c_gp} does give reading assignments for her non-pro writers, but rather than asking them to emulate a certain style as Strauss does, she recommends books on writing. “For the most part, the number one book I recommend is Stephen King’s *On Writing*. I also send articles on rhetoric and how to effectively use the different modalities to best move the reader, etc.”

Start at the beginning

It is not always possible for an editor to work with a writer from concept to finished manuscript. It's a process that requires time and an author willing to take direction. However, there are several tools only available to editors who have this luxury.

Table of contents. Creating a table of contents before a book has been written is counterintuitive for writers who want to discover their book as they write—how can they say what the book will contain before the book has been written? This kind of thinking can lead to writers neglecting their arguments and stranding readers to find their own way through the research. “If your reader senses that the book has gone as deep as it will go and can go no deeper, he'll stop reading or begin to skim. After all, we tell ourselves, do I really need another layer of data supporting the same point? So it behooves all would-be authors to do more than find a serviceable outline for their book. Good authors think deeply about tying the organization of their book to the specific intellectual questions the book will ask and answer.”⁴³ Though the table of contents might change before the book is published, it is worthwhile to have the scaffolding in place before an author starts to build.

Working title. Emma^{ENP-gp} insists that all her books have a working title: “How can you know how to structure a work without a thesis? How do you know what to take in or

leave out? The title may change in the end but a working title that doubles as a thesis is imperative.”

Editing chapter by chapter. If the process allows for it, some editors find that working with authors as the author generates chapters to be an effective method. Kidder and Todd worked this way almost exclusively, Kidder sending pages to Todd as he built his manuscript and Todd giving notes on how to proceed. In fact, the only time the two did not employ this method, it caused a bit of a rift in their decades-long collaboration, with Todd finally giving the ultimatum “Kidder, if you rewrite this book again before I have time to read it, I’m not working on it anymore.”⁴⁴

Not every editor and author has the luxury of the long association enjoyed by Kidder and Todd. Their collaboration is unique in today’s publishing world where editors seldom stay at one house for long and successful authors seldom leave. Still the technique isn’t only useful in a context like theirs. Emma likes to employ chapter-by-chapter editing with novice authors. “In this way, I find out what might be the author’s mechanical issues before too much has been committed to paper. It reduces the editing time overall and is a learning process for the author. I believe it helps them write better books.” While not every editor has

the time or the patience to work with authors in this way, and not every author is suited to it, working chapter by chapter can be a valuable tool for the right project.

Conclusion

My goal with this paper was to highlight some of the unique aspects of nonfiction that an editor must navigate and identify which editorial tools are most useful in addressing them.

Because nonfiction books encompass such a broad range of subjects, structures, audiences, and authors, it was challenging to find unifying elements. My sources weren't always as sharply divided as they were over when and how to consult reference material, but almost every category contained enough variation on technique and reasoning to warrant multiple examples.

With more time, this study could be expanded to include more focused investigations into different types of nonfiction. A survey of only cookbook editors, for example, would yield much more detail on the ways tools I've highlighted are used in that field. It would also probably reveal some tools not included in this study because I did not think to ask about them specifically.

An expanded study might also allow for more useful patterns to emerge from the numbers, perhaps revealing through a weight of evidence exactly which tools are most effective for editors working with certain kinds of authors or for certain audiences. For now, it will have to be enough to show the options and the varied ways they are used in the field.

By surveying a broad sample, I was able to create a catalogue of tools available to nonfiction editors and provide examples of how and why an editor might choose to use them. Editors working within the confines of a rigid house template might have the process so fine-tuned that they don't feel the need to look across at what their peers are doing. However, in my own editing career, I am always interested in learning new methods and assessing how they might apply to my work.

It is clear from the responses of those I interviewed and whose books I consulted, that every editor has a unique style. The ways those styles interact with the many author personalities and project types out in the world creates an infinite variety of processes for making a book. Editors must take these factors into account when stocking their editorial toolboxes, however, I hope that this catalogue, filled with reasoning and first-hand accounts from their peers, will help editors make more informed decisions about which tools most effectively support every writer and editor's goal: to make each book its most perfect

version—the most effective piece of communication that writer and editor can create for that book's audience.

Appendix I

Editors whose published work I relied on for research

George Stevens was, at the time of his contribution to *Editors on Editing*, vice president and managing editor at J. B. Lippincott Company. He edits both fiction and nonfiction, usually getting involved with a project at the first-draft manuscript stage.

Helen Harter was the senior editor at Rand McNally & Company. Her specialty was textbooks and she worked with them from concept to publication.

Harold Strauss. *Editors on Editing* contains excerpts from Strauss's correspondence from his time as editor-in-chief at Alfred A. Knopf. These excerpts detail his notes to expert authors of books popularizing their scientific and medical discoveries. He seems to get involved after a first draft has been written.

Frances Halpenny was the editor of the University of Toronto Press. She worked on scholarly research books and started in at the manuscript stage.

Jack Hart is “a former managing editor at the *Oregonian* who guided several Pulitzer Prize-winning narratives to publication” (*Storycraft* jacket copy). He works on nonfiction narratives of all lengths, mostly with professional writers who are not experts writing for the public, and has been involved in projects at all stages.

Betsy Lerner is a literary agent who previously worked as an executive editor at Doubleday. She works with both fiction and nonfiction trade books for the public and starts at the manuscript stage.

Tracy Kidder is a Pulitzer Prize–winning nonfiction author and Richard Todd is his editor. They work together from concept to publication and chronicled their relationship in the book *Good Prose*.

Scott Norton is Director of Editing, Design, and Production at the University of California Press. He works with experts, non-experts, and professional writers and his book gives advice for editors working on projects at all stages of the development process.

Susan Rabiner had a long career as a senior editor at different presses before she became a literary agent. She wrote *Thinking Like Your Editor* with her husband, Alfred Fortunato, to help writers of nonfiction develop their books for a general public or expert audience from concept to publication. Though they wrote the book together, there is a note in the front matter advising readers that it is written in Rabiner’s voice. Throughout the text I refer to “Rabiner,” rather than “Rabiner and Fortunato,” to keep things simple.

Editors I was able to interview extensively

Charles_ENP_PRO_gp works mostly with subject-specific memoirs but has, in the past, edited textbooks, instructional materials for autistic children, financial reports for Wall Street companies, and short and feature articles for internet content providers. He generally works freelance and gets involved with projects after a complete manuscript has already been written.

Jean_ENP_PRO_e4e_gp works on books about mind/body/spirit, business, and narrative nonfiction on a variety of subjects. Because she works with multiple companies her level of involvement with a project varies—sometimes she is involved from the concept stage and sometimes she comes in at the first draft of the manuscript.

Kitty_ENP_PRO_gp works with books on teen self-help and career development. Many of the books she works on are part of an established series and on these she works with authors from concept onward—sometimes the concept will be the author’s and sometimes it comes from the publisher who solicits authors to execute it. Outside of the series she generally works with authors starting at the manuscript stage.

Jubilation_ENP_PRO_e4e_gp works on books about gardening, plants, landscape design, and the natural world. Many of these are reference books and guidebooks. Depending on the project, she can get involved at either the concept or manuscript stages.

Emma_ENP_gp works on serious nonfiction on a variety of topics including political history, natural history, travel, and social issues. Emma runs a boutique publishing company that helps writers take their books from concept to publication (both self publishing and professional).

Raven_ENP_e4e_gp works on performing arts educational books, manuals, and textbooks. She is involved in a project from the earliest concept stages, sometimes even before (when it is her publisher's idea).

Angelica_ENP_gp works on geology guidebooks and topical books on science and history. She generally works on established series and gets involved at the concept stage.

Molly_ENP_PRO_gp works as a scientific editor developing articles discussing everything from solar energy conversion to the latest medical lab software. She helps her publisher solicit authors for articles on behalf of clients and often works on a project before a concept has been finalized.

Carol_ENP_e4 works on instructional books for professionals in a highly skilled field. She works as an acquiring editor and can get involved with projects in early stages but generally starts at the manuscript stage.

Editors who responded to my survey but whom I did not interview

Hank_ENP_gp

Works on: cookbooks and history-Native American history and art

Scott_ENP_gp

Works on: home reference, interior design, and humor

Kurt_ENP_gp

Works on: architecture, home reference, outdoors, cooking, history, humor, and inspiration

Remy_ENP_gp

Works on: home design and cooking

Cain_PNE_gp

Works on: art, design, and travel

Tyrone_ENP_PRO_e4e_gp

Works on: scholarly monographs in archaeology, anthropology, history, Southwest regional interest, environmental studies, and Latino and Indigenous studies

Tandy_ENP_PRO_gp

Works on: cookbooks, humor, regional titles, gift books

Logan_ENP_e4e_gp

Works on: outdoor guidebooks (hiking, skiing, climbing)

Moira_ENP_gp

Works on: cookbooks

Bobby_ENP_PRO_e4e_gp

Works on: botanical/horticultural guides, natural histories, academic monographs and edited volumes (in anthropology and other social sciences)

Karolina_ENP_e4e_gp

Works on: scholarly journals

Nico_ENP_e4e_gp

Works on: transportation solutions

Gertrude_ENP_gp

Works on: self-help books and memoir

Appendix II

Nonfiction Editing Tools Survey

Q1 What types of nonfiction projects do you generally edit?

Q2 Which types of authors do you usually work with?

- experts in their field who are not professional writers (1)
- professional writers who are not experts in the field they are covering (2)
- experts in their field who are also professional writers (3)
- other (please explain or elaborate) (4) _____

Q3 What is the intended audience of the books you usually edit?

- fellow experts who want to improve and learn (1)
- the general public (you assume no previous knowledge of the field) (3)
- other (please explain or elaborate) (4) _____

Q4 What kinds of tools do you use when editing nonfiction?

- recurring phrases like “I’m not an expert but…” when editing experts writing for other experts (what are some phrases you find useful?) (1) _____
- expert editorial boards (i.e. other experts in the field who can read the manuscript and comment on the accuracy, relevance, and usefulness of the content) (2)
- creative writing / narrative writing conventions (pacing, character arcs, narrative tension, physical description, other) (3) _____
- reference books or other research in the field (4)
- other (please explain or elaborate) (5) _____

Q5 How do you choose the audience for the books you edit?

- I don’t choose, the author chooses (1)
- I don’t choose, the publisher/acquisitions/marketing/company chooses (2)
- I choose based on the manuscript’s strengths (3)
- other (please elaborate) (4) _____

Q6 If you answered question five that you choose a book's audience based on the manuscript's strengths, what kind of indicators dictate the audience? What challenges do you encounter when tailoring a manuscript to fit that audience?

- I decide the audience for the books I edit: (1) _____
- I don't decide the audience for the books I edit (2)

Q7 If you use them, how effective are each of the following tools and what effect do they have on the editorial process? If possible, please elaborate beyond the examples provided.

Q8 How effective are phrases like "I'm not an expert but..." or others provided by you in question four?

- Extremely effective (1)
- Very effective (2)
- Moderately effective (3)
- Not very effective (4)
- Not effective at all (5)
- I don't use this tool (6)

Q9 What effect do phrases like "I'm not an expert but..." or others provided by you in question four have on the editorial process? Do authors ever have a negative reaction to these phrases?

- please elaborate (1) _____

Q10 How effective are expert editorial boards?

- Extremely effective (1)
- Very effective (2)
- Moderately effective (3)
- Not very effective (4)
- Not effective at all (5)
- I don't use this tool (6)

Q11 What effect do expert editorial boards have on the editorial process?

- Do they change your relationship with your author? If yes, how? (1) _____
- Do they ever compromise your position of authority in editorial decisions? (2)

- How much do you filter feedback from the board before it gets to your author and why? (3) _____
- Please elaborate further: (4) _____

Q12 How effective are creative/narrative writing conventions when editing nonfiction?

- Extremely effective (1)
- Very effective (2)
- Moderately effective (3)
- Not very effective (4)
- Not effective at all (5)
- I don't use this tool (6)

Q13 What effect do creative/narrative writing conventions have on the editorial process?

- Which conventions are most useful? (1) _____
- How do you apply these conventions to your nonfiction manuscripts? (2)

- Are there limits to the usefulness of these conventions in nonfiction? (4)

- Please elaborate further: (3) _____

Q14 How effective is it to reference other books in the field when editing a subject with which you are unfamiliar?

- Extremely effective (1)
- Very effective (2)
- Moderately effective (3)
- Not very effective (4)
- Not effective at all (5)
- I don't use this tool (6)

Q15 What effect does referencing other books in your manuscript's field have on the editorial process?

- How often do you consult reference books? (1) _____
- Do you read up on a subject before starting to work on a manuscript in that field? If so, how much research do you do? (2) _____
- What are the limits or pitfalls of researching the field on your own? (4) _____
- Please elaborate further: (3) _____

Q16 Please share details on any tools you use to edit nonfiction that I have not explored in the questions above. Any insight you can give into your editorial process will be helpful.

Q17 This survey is anonymous, however I may think of some follow-up questions after reading your responses. If you would be willing to receive this follow up, please type your name below. Thank you so much for your time.

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Notes

- ¹ Norton, *Developmental Editing*, 2.
- ² Gross, *Editors*, 114.
- ³ Kidder and Todd, *Good Prose*, xviii.
- ⁴ Rabiner and Fortunato, *Thinking*, 183.
- ⁵ Gross, *Editors*, 84.
- ⁶ Rabiner and Fortunato, *Thinking*, 32.
- ⁷ Rabiner and Fortunato, *Thinking*, 44.
- ⁸ Kidder and Todd, *Good Prose*, 3.
- ⁹ Norton, *Developmental Editing*, 18.
- ¹⁰ Kidder and Todd, *Good Prose*, xviii.
- ¹¹ Rabiner and Fortunato, *Thinking*, 183.
- ¹² Lerner, *The Forest for the Trees*, 221.
- ¹³ Hart, *Storycraft*, 5.
- ¹⁴ Hart, *Storycraft*, 183–188.
- ¹⁵ Hart, *Storycraft*, 186.
- ¹⁶ Rabiner and Fortunato, *Thinking*, 206.
- ¹⁷ Gross, *Editors*, 189.
- ¹⁸ Gross, *Editors*, 195.
- ¹⁹ Rabiner and Fortunato, *Thinking*, 142.
- ²⁰ Rabiner and Fortunato, *Thinking*, 74.
- ²¹ Rabiner and Fortunato, *Thinking*, 141.
- ²² Rabiner and Fortunato, *Thinking*, 103.
- ²³ Gross, *Editors*, 187.
- ²⁴ Norton, *Developmental Editing*, 187.
- ²⁵ Norton, *Developmental Editing*, 192.
- ²⁶ Norton, *Developmental Editing*, 197.
- ²⁷ Norton, *Developmental Editing*, 204.
- ²⁸ Gross, *Editors*, 190.
- ²⁹ Norton, *Developmental Editing*, 175.
- ³⁰ Gross, *Editors*, 190–1.

³¹ Rabiner and Fortunato, *Thinking*, 213.

³² Lerner, *The Forest for the Trees*, 197.

³³ Gross, *Editors*, 114.

³⁴ Norton, *Developmental Editing*, 18.

³⁵ Gross, *Editors*, 91.

³⁶ Gross, *Editors*, 91.

³⁷ Gross, *Editors*, 190.

³⁸ Gross, *Editors*, 94.

³⁹ Gross, *Editors*, 114.

⁴⁰ Gross, *Editors*, 116.

⁴¹ Rabiner and Fortunato, 194, 215.

⁴² Gross, *Editors*, 193.

⁴³ Rabiner and Fortunato, 102

⁴⁴ Kidder and Todd, *Good Prose*, xvii.