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Supermind: The Writer's Greatest Challenge

by Chris Roerden

Many writers believe their greatest challenge is mechanics. They cite punctuation, grammar, and spelling as what they most want the freelance editors they hire to fix for them. Add usage to this list and we can refer to all by the acronym PUGS.(1) Errors in PUGS are relatively easy for most editors to fix, so don't worry about not being PUGS-perfect. That's not the writer's biggest problem.

If mechanics are what you want to worry about, be sure you follow SMF: standard manuscript format. A list of format standards appears on my Website.(2) The pages you are now reading were prepared in SMF to demonstrate what

standard manuscript pages look like. But there's more to SMF than appearance, so please don't use this sample as a substitute for checking out all the standards. If you need good reasons for adhering to standard manuscript format, you'll find them on my Website, too.(3)

WRITING

Now that the topic of mechanics is out of the way, we can get to what's really the biggest problem facing writers: imagination. I don't mean that writers lack imagination, though a few do. I mean that when we write--whether we're dramatizing a murder scene in a novel, penning an essay on existentialism, or scribbling a grocery list--each of us has an imagination that lets us know the abstractions and "see" the scenes we are creating. The ability to envision a concept in the mind's eye is good. But what our minds apprehend can get in the way of our using the words that evoke the same concepts in the reader's mind. Not so good.

It is always a challenge to create the word pictures that most effectively transfer one's intended meaning to someone else's imagination. Yet that's what writing is all about.

For writers to simulate the tabula rasa, or "clean slate" that a reader brings to the printed page, writers need to temporarily disengage--to "forget"--the knowledge that

comes from their own experience. But the ability to disengage is thwarted by what I call the Supermind.

The problem starts with the way thoughts arrive: as whole concepts. The Supermind perceives a concept faster and more intuitively than it is able to translate that concept into a sequence of individual words and paragraphs for others to read. It's as if an architect's only tools for carrying out a design were a child's wooden blocks.

Some writers are far better demolition and construction workers than others, but the process is the same for all of us: first, we take apart the thoughts and images in our heads, then we reconstruct them with just the right words in the right sequence. The process requires writers to act like first-grade teachers, spending time and energy coaxing our words to behave in public and line up nicely, one at a time, no pushing.

Computers may speed up the keyboarding functions, but those electronic marvels cannot change the basic process of deconstruction and reconstruction. To use another metaphor, writing is a lot like painting a picture one dot at a time.

EDITING

Rewriting, or self-editing, is where the work of writing really begins. Whenever we step back from our written words

to review them, we begin to hear them in new ways. That freshness enables us to tinker with those words until they come closer to saying what we really want them to.

Even so, we cannot hear our words as others do. We know it helps to put our writing aside for a day, a week, or longer before coming back to it, but no matter how much time elapses, at some level of self-editing the Supermind recalls the already-established internal concepts and images. The writer's objectivity is compromised by the memory of those original experiences, like chalk marks still visible on a hastily erased slate.

Think about watching the History Channel instead of merely listening to it with your eyes closed. Does hearing the script let you picture the action without peeking? For readers, there's no picture to peek at. Words are all there is, all sitting on the page, to be read and interpreted--or misinterpreted.

The grocery list might say "cereal," which the scribbler may have envisioned as hot oats but the shopper may interpret as cold wheat flakes. The sci-fi writer might tell of the captain's plan to get away in a single-seater vehicle, then describe the adjustments she makes to various settings on a control panel mounted on the wall followed by

her leaping into the driver's seat. But the sequence in which these details are presented could make an acquisitions editor picture the hero climbing into the vehicle first in order to access an interior control panel. The editor might learn of the wall mount after being jarred by the reversal of expectations.

With an unending series of barriers to overcome to achieve clear communication, much of what's written is ineffective, whether it's business and technical writing or fiction. Content and meaning are only partially absorbed by readers, who grasp a writer's meaning sequentially; that is, one word after another--like museum visitors who stand too close to a pointillist painting and see only dots.

The more that readers struggle to understand the product of a writer's Supermind, the less of it they experience. The sooner that literary agents, acquiring editors, or their first readers they employ to screen out such work spot the clues to ineffective writing, the faster a manuscript lands in the "no" pile.

Everyone, even the professional editor, turns out clearer, more effective writing if someone else test-drives the draft; that is, if others review it before it is printed, posted on a blog, or otherwise submitted for

publication. One remedy all of us have access to is a friend, family member, or critique group read our drafts and offer feedback. But we also know that the people in our lives don't always have the time and willingness to scrutinize our writing as objectively and painstakingly as a professional market-savvy editor does, or have the skills and experience to be as constructive in offering gentle but honest feedback, fine-tuning, and useful recommendations.

The more intelligent and creative the Supermind, the greater the benefit of having a professional editor thoughtfully question what the written page may be trying to say--or what an amateur editor might have overlooked.

Definitely make use of the free sources of feedback you value. Then, if you're a serious writer with a serious goal of achieving quality publication, consider using qualified editorial services in the same way you consider using legal or accounting services.

I know that not every writer can afford professional editing, but in thinking about cost, also think about whether you can afford to handicap your most creative resource--your Supermind--by not discovering what the market-savvy editorial eye has been trained to show you.

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ENDNOTES

1. Good for you if you recognize that PUGS is an initialism as well as an acronym. When initials can be pronounced as a word, the result is an acronym. I mention this to have an excuse to illustrate here how footnotes or endnotes are handled in a draft. Note that they match the rest of the manuscript in font (Courier), point size (12), and double-spacing.
2. Please go to <http://writersinfo.info>, click the "book editing" icon, then click "[format standards](#)" in the sidebar.
3. To review the article "How to Take Advantage of an Editor," go to <http://writersinfo.info>, click the "book editing" icon, then click "about editing" on the main menu.

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