

BOOK WORM

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIETY OF EDITORS (WA) INC.

November 2003

From the Vice-president's Chair

James Hansen

Soapbox time, folks! Issues of accreditation will, after November, be mostly behind us, and it will soon be time to move on. Editors have traditionally regarded themselves as invisible, the “seamless menders” of the publishing world, content with modest rewards and the respect of their clients and fellow professionals.

Times have changed. In-house editing has declined. More editors are working as freelancers for rates that are undeservedly low. And although there are, fortunately, still many good editor–client relationships, we are nevertheless becoming uncomfortably aware that a lack of appreciation of the importance of the editor's role is growing, especially with the new class of managers, the MBAs (Masters of B*****-all). It is definitely not a time to be invisible.

The hour is approaching when editors will speak with a national voice (whatever the final form of the national organisation is). A national spokesperson, supported by an advisory committee, would command attention from the media and employers, and put forcefully our position on a host of issues of importance to members. Our spokesperson could, for example, assert our traditional responsibilities as custodians of Australian English, and not leave all the running to academics and sundry lexicographers.

So, I'm a little surprised to find that we are the only society without a representative on the Working group: Promoting the Editing Profession, which is aiming to develop a national strategy (or a “strategic process kit”). Anyone volunteering to become involved with this group would have the opportunity to “meet”, by email and teleconference, colleagues from around Australia and make a valuable contribution to promoting our profession. Please let me or Anne Surma know if you can help.

Editorial

We've another packed edition this month with some entertaining and interesting contributions from colleagues, as well as a report on our three new members, who were invited to speak at the October meeting. This is an excellent way of introducing new members to our society and making them feel welcome.

This is the penultimate edition of *Book Worm* for this year, and I must say editing our journal has been an interesting and enjoyable task. As well as establishing some firmer connections with colleagues, I've learned that we are a pretty eclectic bunch, but united in the common cause of promoting and maintaining the standards of our beloved language.

As I have taken on some fairly demanding work recently (for money!), which will be continuing into the foreseeable future, I will be handing in my badge as editor of *Book Worm* after putting our December issue to bed. So, once again, we're calling for a volunteer to take over the reins after our summer hiatus. This is a not particularly onerous task and one that is guaranteed to make you feel that you really belong to the society; and you'll have some great support from other members as proofreaders, distributors and contributors. Please get in touch with me and Anne Surma if you can spare a few hours a month.

Three Interesting People

Michelle Crawford and James Hansen

The variety and depth of talent, training and professional experience that is a characteristic of our membership was again on display when three new members spoke at the general meeting on 7 October. What they had to say in the informal atmosphere of the meeting, and in the discussions which followed, made for an enjoyable and informative evening.

Susan Hall has returned to Perth after 10 years in Asia. A qualified pharmacist, Susan turned to writing and editing following her husband's posting to Japan. She spent her first year and a half there trying to learn the language. Then she was appointed proofreader for the English language magazine *Kansai Time Out*, considered the foreigner's "Bible". This magazine covers current events and guides foreigners on how to "survive" Japan. It is an exception

among periodicals as foreigners are generally not catered for. Susan said the habit of rigorous checking developed in her pharmacy training was useful in proofreading, but that, in order to proofread accurately, she had needed to research and come to some understanding of Japanese culture.

Subsequently, Susan and her husband moved to Guangzhou in China. There she contributed to *Clueless* in Guangzhou, a magazine for foreigners started by a young Chinese–American woman. Susan’s article “That’s Shanghai” dealt with China’s revolutionary past and required researching important milestones in the history of the Chinese Communist Party. The energy and enthusiasm of the youthful Chinese staff working on the magazine was evident from the samples she displayed.

A third posting took Susan to Singapore where she wrote for ANZA, another publication with high production values, but run this time by Australian and New Zealand volunteers. She also did book reviewing for John Wiley Publications in Singapore.

Susan said that life back in Perth is pleasant, but working here is frustrating as our telephone and internet services fall well short of what she had enjoyed in Singapore.

Helen Shurven began by remarking, with a smile, that she knew Tresillian well. She had lived in the two-bedroom cottage behind the building some years ago while studying law. (She already had a degree in Psychology.)

Helen has had a variety of employment experience, and at one time worked in Robert Muir’s antiquarian bookshop which attracted no more than a handful of customers a week; unexpectedly, one of the few turned out to be *the* Michael Jackson, to whom she sold a couple of valuable medical texts dealing with skin disorders. However, she found the job too solitary and book-focused, and left after a year.

Helen later joined a private law firm where she was active in, among other things, dispute resolution and issues requiring mediation. She currently works with the Health Department’s family counselling service, a field she finds is always satisfying, generally challenging, and occasionally hair-raising.

Tanya Marwood has used her degree in Engineering and a further research degree in Engineering and Applied Science to write for and edit industry periodicals and technical manuscripts. Tanya has her own business,

Write On Writing Services, offering writing, editing and proofreading services. However, she considers herself primarily a writer and finds it rewarding helping others who haven't the same facility with language. She is currently ghost writing a book on financial management for a Chinese–Australian. One of her most satisfying jobs has been writing the Curtin Research Report. Tanya spoke extensively of the ups and downs of freelance writing and editing, and brought plenty of knowing nods from her audience.

At the end of the evening, following some keen discussion, life member Betty Durston thanked the speakers on behalf of the society for a very interesting evening.

How quickly can you read this?

Mar Bucknell

This piece made the rounds among us a little while ago and raised some interesting discussion.

Elingsh

Aoccdrnig to a rscheearch at an Elingsh uinervtisy, it deosn't mttar in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteers are at the rghit pclae. The rset can be a toatl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit a porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae we do not raed ervey lteter byit slef but the wrod as a wlohe.

Two points immediately spring to mind in response to Elingsh. The reason Elingsh is the hardest word to read in that garbled paragraph is that the ascenders and descenders are in the wrong order. If it had been Ensgilsh it would be easy, and most wouldn't notice the extra s. It would even read easily if the descender was on the wrong letter, Enspilsh, Ensqilsh, Ensyilsh.

But it is all to do with familiarity. We can read it because we expect to be able to read it. I can read French a little, and slowly, but I am completely flummoxed by typos in French because I am not familiar enough with it to have a natural guess at the error as part of my vocabulary. If I spoke or read French every day it would be different.

This would all be trivial and amusing except that it does alert us (or should) to one of the biggest traps in proofreading, that is, seeing the sentence you expect to see, rather than what is on the page. This is why it is often very useful to proofread a sentence backwards. I also find that if I have been letting my concentration slip a little, I will notice a typo I have skipped over the second I take my eye off the paragraph. I often can spot a typo by looking at the whole page with my eyes not quite focused. In both these cases it is because I am not speaking the sentences in my head, I am just observing marks on paper.

A Pandinote from the Edge

Ian Nowak

While I was fiddling about rearranging stuff in my computer, I came across my last “Pandinode” to the geologists of the Geological Survey of WA (GSWA). They were designed to be light and instructive pieces to authors there. (They were called Pandinotes because the editing section of the Survey was known as P and I.) It was written in 1998, to mark the anniversary of my retirement ó and to let them know they were still being watched!

I've taken some of the preamble and postamble (if this is not a word, it ought to be!) out, and removed the “in-house” allusions, and wondered whether you would be interested in some of the remaining guff to fill out a Book Worm? [Indeed, Ian! Ed.]

As many of you would realise from my periodic revisiting of the Survey since “retirement”, I continue to take on the odd editing job. And I must say, I have gained two general impressions over this past year: the system of peer review seems to be working well (editors don't hold a candle to peers when it comes to the desire to savage a colleague!) and, related or not, the standard of writing and style of manuscripts continues to improve. But, be assured, the editor is nowhere near being redundant. And I shall let you know when I'm ready to really retire.

So, as this Pandinode is intended to be instructive, here are a few points and observations, both general and specific.

a) Abstracts are showing a tendency to get out of hand. Please read

(reread) all about them in the “Authors’ Guide”. The main problem with a few authors is that they cannot bear to leave out of the abstract anything that appears in the text. I sometimes feel that the body of the text might as well consist merely of the words “Well, that’s all, folks” and go straight to the references and figures. Peer reviewers could be far tougher here than they are ó do they perhaps fear the kettle returning a serve to the pot?

b) Certain words are overused. My old nemesis “occur”, in all its forms, continues to bug. The USGS Suggestions to Authors states, “‘Occur’ is the refuge of writers who lack the imagination to think of a more appropriate verb.” My own list of alternatives so far numbers 43 — headed by the simple “is” and “are”. Try them sometime!

Another is “utilise”, especially beloved of the hydrogeologists. There is a place for “utilise” (to do with making practical use of something), but in so many contexts where this word springs to mind, the simpler verb “use” will say it better. And lastly, “significant(ly)” seems to be re-emerging as a threat to our reputation for rigour. The word is slipped in to mollify the inexperienced reader where

- 1) real data are absent; or
- 2) bum data are present.

This is a woolly word much beloved of polities, chairmen, CEOs and other charlatans. Best largely avoided unless, of course, used — even, perhaps, utilised? — in the strictly statistical sense.

c) Speaking of rigour, time words are still being used where they have no place (unintended pun). When I see “usually” (or “often” or “frequently”) for “commonly”, I’m inclined to wonder whether the granite is present also on Saturdays. Other similar uses, such as “occasionally” for “locally”, and “while” for “whereas”, need to ring alarm bells in some contexts.

(d) “Comprise” remains the most misused word I see. I’m not going into it all again save to remind that 1) the whole comprises (all) the parts — not vice versa; and 2) “comprised of” is not a valid construction. “Composed of” is. However, an uncharacteristic pessimism has me believe that I am about to be marginalized in this matter by the juggernaut of linguistic evolution. After all, we have relatively recently lost the finer meanings carried by such words as “enormity”, “decimate” and “disinterest”. And when, further, I hear even ABC newsreaders now saying “ceremoany” and “testimoany”, and speaking of

“mee-yons” and “bee-yons” of dollars, I never send to know for whom the bell tolls: it tolls for inflexible old editors. (When I once remarked to a friend how the onset of the “Spanish” pronunciation of “million” had suddenly struck me back in 1993, he replied, “Ah yes — the first Nokl.”)

e) Speaking of inflexibility, I do welcome much of what the New Oxford Dictionary of English has to say. For example, the infinitive is often crying out to be split, and the only solution I can see to the “he/she” problem is to use “they”. But, I doubt I shall ever feel comfortable with “data is”. So, “data are”, please, until the custodians of our House Rules decide to the contrary. That said, in all these things George Orwell’s (1950) sixth rule of good writing should hold: “Break any of the other five rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.”

f) “Less” is still sometimes being used for countable entities where the correct word would be “fewer”. Should I ever come across an author also writing, elsewhere in the same report, “Many of the shale contains much fossils”, I shall at least award full marks for an awful consistency.

g) These days, GSWA authors have a good grip on the need to hyphenate where an adjectival modifier precedes a noun, e.g. “... fine-grained sandstone” But it is not always realised that this hyphen is dropped if the first of these words is itself modified by an adverb. Thus: “... very fine grained sandstone”.

h) Nouns joined by linking words or coordinators other than “and” are followed by a singular verb if the first noun is singular, e.g. The Director and the Minister swim at Swanbourne on Sundays. But: The Director, together with the Minister, swims at Swanbourne on Sundays. (A picture, here, would indeed be worth a thousand words!)

i) The word “however” and its associated punctuation continue to cause trouble. Often, this word is being used where the simpler “although” is meant, e.g. “There is an abundance of epidote, however, other evidence of metamorphism has not been found.” This is quite wrong. Leaving aside notions of recasting the whole shebang to better effect, the author means to say “There is an abundance of epidote, although other evidence of metamorphism has not been found.” Better still, consider whether you really mean, simply, “but”. Possibly so. Frequently, use of “however” will carry a connotation of “nevertheless”, in which case it will either start a sentence and be followed by a comma, or be found mid-sentence, still followed by a comma, but now also

preceded by a semi-colon. And this is only the meagrest of guides!

Finally, there has been a huge improvement in the confusions between “its” and “it’s”, and “principal” and “principle”. So I do believe we are winning on a number of fronts. And the Grocers’ Apostrophe hardly ever appears these days, and when it does, it is invariably in the form of “... in the 1990’s ...” when there is no suggestion of possession. Please watch out for this.

Now, let me leave you with something I’ve heard on radio far more than I have seen in print. It goes like this: “If he would have kicked straight, they would have won.” I have dubbed this solecism the Commentators’ Conditional.

Pedant’s Corner

Mar Bucknell

This is a slightly longer Pedant’s Corner than the previous ones, as I feel I should write about all the things which have disturbed me recently, rather than just picking on one example. So it’s more of a Pedant’s “quite a bit of the lounge room” than a Pedant’s Corner.

There have been a few different things who has caught my eye in recent times. What exactly happened which led people (usually printed as “lead people” these days) to forget that there are important differences between “who”, “that” and “which”? It’s clear that when “that” and “which” are being used to introduce phrases, there is much scope for understandable confusion. I don’t want to get involved in an unnecessarily intricate argument here, and I have seen an entire book on the subject. As a general rule “which” should be used when the phrase in question is very specific, and “that” when there’s a sense of vagueness, ambiguity or doubt. But it seems odd to me that people confuse “who” and “that”. There’s a sign on Perth’s trains which (specific and detailed here so better ‘which’ than “that”) says: “Please offer your seat to someone that needs it more than you.” The sentiment is commendable, but a person is not an object, and that “that” ought to be “who”. How did we get to a position of confusing people and objects?

I’m beginning to despair about the use of singular verbs with singular nouns and plural verbs with plural nouns. There is obviously confusion about the status of collective nouns, and there doesn’t seem to be a simple solution. The

most egregious example I saw of using a rule without context appeared in *X-Press* magazine a few years ago: “Johnny Diesel and The Injectors is playing tomorrow night at ...” But what is the excuse for formations such as “The Premier and the Cabinet are discussing how the issue of the environment and the economy are affecting the Government’s popularity”? Do people get confused when there is more than one noun in a phrase?

What ever happened to the very accurate and useful words “abbreviation” and “initials”? Just what happened when people discovered the word “acronym”? I’ve seen references to CSIRO, ABC, SGIO and so on as acronyms. Many years ago Spike Milligan was in Perth and he did a promo for 6UVS-FM, as it was then, and he did a hilarious job of pronouncing Uvsvfm as a word, treating it as an actual acronym. Poor dead Spike probably didn’t know that he was prophesying (usually rendered these days for no good reason as prophesising [and even my hopeless computer spellchecker underlined that one in red]) a disturbing trend of forgetting what words actually mean.

Does anyone else remember that “refute” does not mean “deny”, it means “prove wrong”? John Howard cannot refute suggestions that his policies are mean-spirited. He constantly says he “refutes” suggestions that he is mean-spirited. For someone with training in law, he is remarkably poor at grasping important distinctions in meaning.

Similarly, the word “alibi” is slipping back into misuse. Fifty years ago “alibi” was so frequently used to mean “excuse” that Ernest Gowers wrote about it in *The Complete Plain Words*. For decades the misuse went in to decline, but now the resurgence of “alibi” as “excuse” is clear and disturbing. To paraphrase George Orwell, if we forget that “alibi” has a very specific meaning which no other word conveys, and we use it to mean the very general set of ideas to which it belongs, then we lose clarity, and we need to find a new word for the specific instance. “Alibi” means “I can prove I wasn’t there.” It doesn’t mean just any old defence or excuse to suggest that you aren’t guilty of the crime. If it does come to mean that, how can we describe the actual situation of alibi?

Many years ago, someone I knew was raided by the police, who said that they had evidence that he was guilty of inciting a riot. One of the cops said that he had been witnessed standing on a wall in Brixton with a megaphone inciting people to attack the police. My friend made the mistake of declaring his alibi on the spot, which obviated the chance of an absolutely hilarious piece of theatre

when the charges went to court. He was well known to the police as a regular anarchist speaker at Hyde Park Speakers' Corner. What the police didn't know was that he was also first violinist and Leader of the Orchestra with the Dulwich Symphony Orchestra, and more than 50 musicians and hundreds of music lovers would have been able to testify that, at the time in question, that long-haired, bearded hippy was indeed done up in an evening suit and playing violin at a symphony concert. Now *that's* an alibi.

Forthcoming meetings

November: State Accreditation Workshop

Please note: The State Accreditation Workshop takes the place of the November general meeting. There will be no general meeting at Tresillian on the first Tuesday of the month.

This is your opportunity to have your say on the CASE Accreditation Working Party's proposal for a national scheme of accreditation for the editing profession (proposal reproduced in the October issue of Book Worm and posted on the SOEWA web site).

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When: 1.00 ñ 4.30 pm, Saturday 22 November 2003

Where: Kimberley Room, Ground Floor, Alexander Library, Cultural Centre, Northbridge

Cost: No charge

RSVP: Amanda Curtin (phone 9377 2091; curtin@highway1.com.au) **by**

Monday 17 November

Enquiries about the CASE proposal to: Betty Durston, SOEWA Accreditation Representative, bdurston@cygnus.uwa.edu.au

December: SOEWA Christmas

Join your SOEWA colleagues for the last time in 2003 to network, socialise and celebrate the season and another eventful year. Further details will follow by email, but please mark your diary now.

When: 7.30 pm, Tuesday 2 December 2003

Where: Lorenzoís, 137 Melville Parade, Como

Cost: TBA

RSVP: Amanda Curtin (phone 9377 2091; curtin@highway1.com.au) by
Tuesday 25 November

Deadline for December 2003 Book Worm issue:

Tuesday 18 November 2003. All submissions gratefully accepted.

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