

In conversation with the author, the editor and the designer

Roger Underwood (the author), Jan Knight (the editor) and Louise Burch (the designer)

From the author

I am very proud to be before an audience billed as ‘an author’. I have been called many things but never anything so flattering. And I am pleased to be sharing the stage with my two greatest associates, my editor Jan Knight and my graphic designer Louise Burch. When I say ‘my’, I don’t want to imply that I own them ... indeed when we are in the throes of a book I sometimes think they own me!

I know some authors who have a fierce love–hate relationship with their editors. My brother said he had a six-month tussle with his editor over the use of the pluperfect, neither conceding defeat as the date of publication loomed.

My professional background (in forestry and bushfire management) and my sporting life both emphasised the value of teamwork. I see the author, editor and designer as a team. Needless to say, I see myself as the captain of this team, marshalling my resources, providing leadership and management.

The fact that both Jan and Louise also see themselves as the captain is beside the point. I reserve the final decisions to myself in all matters ... or at least I allow myself the fantasy of thinking that it is me making the final decisions, even when the outcome of a long negotiation is the opposite of what I originally wanted.

Generally, I find the relationship with the designer is easier because she is doing a job I know I can’t do. I am very respectful of her esoteric skills with the computer and the software. When she says ‘What you want is not technically feasible!’ or ‘I can do what you want but the cost of printing will exceed the price of the book’, I always concede.



About the authors

Roger Underwood has worked for nearly 50 years in forest conservation and research, and in bushfire management. He has published six books and numerous articles on forestry and bushfire history and a history of botanical science in Western Australia.



Jan Knight has been editing non-fiction publications for 15 years following her training with the large in-house publishing unit of the Department of Agriculture. In 2012 her freelance editing service, Flying Edits, celebrated its 15th anniversary.



Louise Burch, having begun with the Forestry Department over 30 years ago, became senior graphic designer at the Department of Conservation and Land Management, and later at the Department of Environment and Conservation. She has been an independent graphic designer since 1992.



Editorial skills, on the other hand, are not esoteric. The rules of spelling, punctuation, syntax and grammar were drummed into everyone of my generation at school and (in my case) at home. I always feel Jan and I are operating on common ground, using similar skills. The difference is that she is more than a grammarian. She is also a fine-tooth comb merchant, a sweeper-up of ill-considered and irrelevant trifles, redundant repetitions and obscure references.

While I like the sound of what I write, my editor is concerned about its structure and the way it conveys its meaning. Furthermore, unlike the work of the designer which is always there, the work of the editor becomes invisible the moment I incorporate her suggestions into the manuscript.

Invisible to the reader, that is. Years later I can pick up one of my stories and although I will see instantly where Jan has mucked about with my pluperfects, mostly I will read a sentence or a paragraph and think to myself, ‘Hmmm, I put that rather well!’, quite forgetting the editorial input that occurred back then.

I know I cannot design a book but I know I can edit. The very process of working from an idea to a first draft to a second and then a third draft, happily wordsmithing along the way, is a process of editing that I go through well before my real editor gets to work.

Jan meets all the requirements for a good editor: she is a professional and a perfectionist and works quickly. She adapts to my writing style, which is basically conversational, although she will not let me ramble. True, she can be a ‘details person’ and she cannot help herself from fooling around with my formatting.

Jan can sometimes be a tough mistress, wielding her vivid red Track Changes tool like a stock whip. Her attack on the mildest of clichés is absolutely ruthless. ‘Find a fresh way of expressing this!’ she will snarl as she savagely scores out a well-loved phrase like ‘pouring oil on troubled waters’. But she never fights to the death and she always leaves the final decision to me, even when she knows I am wrong.

I love the way she continually challenges me to express an idea in a fresh way, and never tolerates ‘sloppy writing’.

I have known Louise for many years as we were once colleagues in the same department. We even collaborated on a satirical cartoon series back in the 1980s, and succeeded in putting a lot of noses out of joint before we were shut down.

To my eyes Louise has the three things a book designer must have: 1) professional competence with computer and software and an understanding of how the printing industry works; 2) the imagination and artistic creativity that can come up with an appealing and interesting book; and 3) a practice of quoting by the page. I don’t feel guilty when I demand the ninth set of changes to the thirteenth draft of the ‘final’ proof.

I know I drive her mad. When I see a proof on paper, as distinct from a computer screen, I immediately see changes that are needed. First there are the macro changes: eliminate a story here, insert a chapter there, shift a photograph, re-arrange the entire table of contents. Then there are the micro changes: take out this sentence and replace it with this one; change the caption on this picture; convert that semi-colon to a full stop; use italics here, here and here.

I enjoy all this. Whereas I work with Jan by email and Track Changes, with Louise I can sit beside her at the computer, making suggestions and ignoring the sound of grinding teeth.

Finally, I am no different to any author. We all crave two things: 1) enormous financial rewards for our work, or at least enough to cover the cost of the editor and designer; and 2) positive feedback. (I could have said ‘fame and fortune’ but Jan would leap to her feet wielding her cliché crusher).

My editor Jan and designer Louise always told me that they liked my writing. Jan even sent me a Christmas card, addressed to her favourite author. Louise makes insightful comments that indicate she has actually read the wordy stuff in between the pictures. What writer could ask for more!

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From the editor

My wish is always to avoid the maelstrom in a collaboration. I know what it's like to be edited and I don't take it very well myself. Nothing stirs up a writer as much as seeing their precious document with red marks all over it!

I try very hard to be diplomatic. My first notes to myself usually read something like 'not clear; please revise'. But the report I send to the author will read: 'This may not be clear to the reader. Can you rewrite?' That's why our job descriptions always say 'Editors must be diplomatic'.

But editors can be prickly, too. Two things stir me up. The first is the brief—I can't quote without it and I usually have to drag it out of the prospective client bit by bit. This is a very useful service for any author. What's more, I know that if I don't get the job I won't be paid for time spent on developing the brief.

Clichés are the other cause of willy willies in my brain. We all use them because they 'flow off the pen' (cliché). They make us think that every reader will 'get the point' (cliché). But they are really 'one size fits all' (cliché).

What can I say?—clichés are insidious! Using clichés is lazy writing. And they are a barrier to the beautiful fresh writing the author can achieve. So I never set to work without my cliché crusher!

I think that non-fiction editors care more about the words than they care about the writer. They love clarity. They feel they must choose the meaning over the writer because the message is sacred. This can lead to painful swirling feelings if the editor has to pass the author's version and drop her own preference.

There are boundaries to cross when speaking into the writer's world, the designer's space or the editor's realm.

At times I feel wary of the author. I must be alert. I am walking beside a big, unpredictable, shaggy bear that has to be managed. This is another way of describing how our boundaries, our borders, affect our way of operating.

Roger's style is on the formal side and rather gentlemanly. [interjection from Roger: 'Old fashioned'.] No, not old fashioned, gentlemanly. Foresters of the Raj was seriously over the word limit and required a serious discussion between author and editor early in the first edit stage. One doesn't want to spend editing hours reducing sentences when whole sections, if not chapters, have to be cut. The alternative of editing sentence by sentence into a concise journalism style is very time consuming and seldom reduces the word count sufficiently. Even worse, it destroys the author's voice. Much of Roger's humour lies in his wry leisurely remarks with a twist in their tail (cliché!).

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From the designer

My job is to take the author's 'edited' manuscript, design it and format it ready to hand on to the printer.

The author creates and researches and the editor applies the rules, structures and styles of English. I'm a bit more airy fairy. I would like to produce a large format coffee table book with lots of white space, embossing on the hard cover, A1 fold out maps, pop up sections! But I must collaborate.

So we approach the maelstrom.

First I meet with the author and go through the specifications of the book: the size, format, preferred fonts, colour or black or white, photographs, illustrations, maps; the audience and so on.

I then send a quote. I charge per page, Mate's Rates. It's easier than keeping time sheets. For all others I add a clause: Any editorial changes required after design has begun are charged at an hourly rate! In bold italic.

Next I get the 'final' text—LOL—as a word document and all the photos numbered and referenced in the text—ROFL.

So I start the design using InDesign. I set up the page dimensions and the text flows in, chapter by chapter. Each chapter is separate; otherwise, if a butterfly flaps its wings in chapter one, chaos can move through the whole book.

I prepare a 'mock up' for the author. Something strange happens here, as mentioned by Roger. When the author sees a mock up with everything nicely in chapters with photos in the right places, they have an epiphany, a rush of blood. They realise a paragraph should go here, a new photo there, an extra word or line must be added.



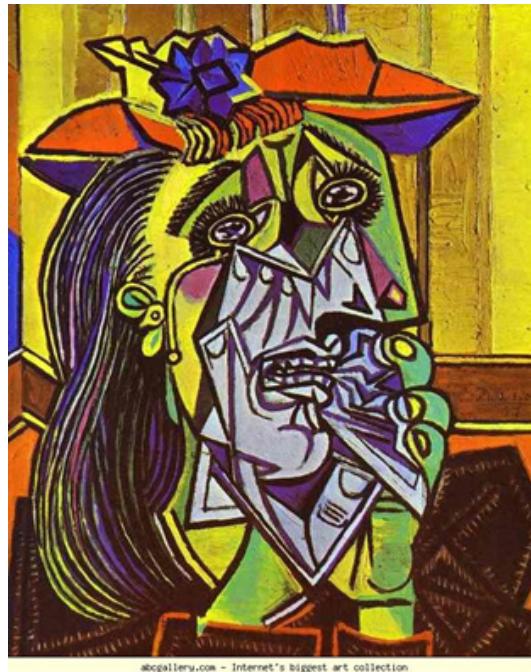
Aaaaaargggghhh!!!

Three bane of my life are the widow or orphan, getting chapters to start on the right and making sure the text on each page ends at the same level.

Just one word, just one little word, can push a line onto the next page. If there are lots of edits I have to start again at the beginning and work my way through chapter by chapter.



However, there are many ways to adjust the text and recreate pages with no widows, orphans and so on. Then comes the next mock up, which I give to the author. You can all predict what happens.



Aaaaaargggghhhh!!!

Our maelstrom theme made me think of the planet Jupiter and his maelstrom. He keeps his moons in orbit while pushing and pulling to create volcanoes on Io (me) and cracking ice sheets on Europa (Jan).

Just a mention here of my collaboration with Europa, the editor. The editor is always right and I never ever change any word without checking with the author, and then leave it to the author to check with the editor.

About now, with fairly final pages, I get quotes from printers. The next thing that makes my Ionian volcanos rumble is that now the author begins to think seriously about his budget. Of course I must again collaborate. Can we lose some pages by using a smaller, narrower font, taking out some photos, making the photos smaller? You can imagine what this can do to my widows and orphans.

I also think to myself: I am being paid to do this, and who is paying the author? So if he wants it printed on butcher's paper I can only advise and then take his direction.

Eventually we do sail through the maelstrom of collaboration, the final mock up is signed off, the .pdf is delivered to the printer, the printer produces one proof in book format ... and guess what. The author sees something.

Eventually the next proof is the final final one and the book is let go to be turned into 500, 1000, even 20,000 copies.

We all hope we have done a good job and that the books will return without a spelling mistake on the front cover in 72 point type. The maelstrom calms down to a still pool of deep water waiting for when the author next pulls out the plug and the whirlpool begins again.

