



## Critical-thinking copyediting

**In his book, John Russial explains that the job of an editor goes beyond just finding typos and grammar mistakes; it also involves complementing your skills with being strategic.**



by Christine Steele

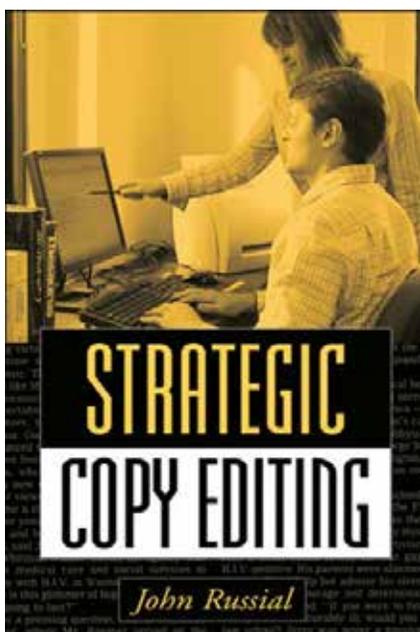
I have visited the book sale table at every ACES conference way more than I should. (After all, I'm a book collector, not a book hoarder!) Each year there are new and old selections on the table, and some are written by conference attendees.

One would always make

a repeat appearance, but I thought it didn't apply to me: *Strategic Copy Editing* by John Russial.

I met John at ACES, and he's a journalism professor at the University of Oregon. The book seemed more for newspaper editors than for corporate copyeditors like me, so I thought I didn't need it.

Boy, was I wrong. This is now one of my favorite books, and it applies to all copyeditors. Of course there are newspaper references; replace them with *client* or *company*, and it applies just the same.



*Strategic Copy Editing*, by John Russial  
The Guilford Press © 2004

Copyediting involves critical thinking, and it's hard to teach that to my students. I've had a few discussions lately with fellow instructors about how we can help students be better thinkers as they review copy. It is hard to convey in an online class, but the word *strategic* came to mind, so I bought the book.

I was so motivated by the readings, I emailed the author. He shared this about the title:

I used the word *strategic* in the book title because I've always thought editing was about more than nuts and bolts. It involved a way of thinking about the job and its purpose, and it also involved relationships, which can be as important in a publication's environment as good word skills. To be honest, it's probably as much tactics as strategy, but if I'd called it *Tactical Copy Editing*, it would have sounded more like a war zone (which admittedly it sometimes was).

Russial states his philosophy on copyediting in the introduction, and it defines exactly what I find challenging to teach. He says, "The nature of the work copy editors do is not well understood." He reiterates that skill in the mechanics of copyediting (finding typos and errors in spelling, grammar, usage, and style) is a necessary requirement for good copyediting, but there is more to the profession. A copyeditor must wear many hats, for example:

- **Editing is not about nitpicking and finding mistakes—it is about making choices.**

It is about deciding what's OK and what isn't, what's worth pursuing and what isn't, what needs to be checked, what should be checked if there's time, and what doesn't need to be checked at all.

Copyeditors work on a number of levels. Editing well means being able to focus on different levels at the same time—to not only see the forest and the trees, but also the branches, twigs, and leaves, and sometimes, even the veins in the leaves. The best editors do not lose sight of one level while immersed in another.

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- **Editing is about critical thinking.**

It's about analyzing and questioning. Copyeditors are not automatons. Their most valuable skills are their ability to think independently and examine critically. When copyeditors look at stories as thoughtful, critical readers do, they have the best chance of finding the problems readers might find, asking the questions readers might ask, and raising the same sorts of concerns readers might raise.

- **Editing is about working together and respecting others.**

It is about learning when to hold one's ground and when to back off. It's about balancing the sometimes-conflicting goals of different groups of professionals, for example, the word experts vs. the visual experts.

- **Editing is about balancing perfection and pragmatism.**

Clients or colleagues might say they want perfectionists to work with, but what they really need are committed, skilled pragmatists. Copyediting is about blending skill and common sense.

- **Editing is about ethics.**

It's about ensuring that stories are inclusive and/or bias free and fair, that all sides are heard, and that questionable assertions are questioned so that involved parties have the opportunity to respond. Editing is about a belief that fairness and balance best serve everyone's interests. In short, it is about both skills and strategies.

Even if you're not in journalism, consider adding *Strategic Copy Editing* to your bookshelf to help you become a more critical-thinking editor. A good copyeditor is a good reader, so it's good to be a "book collector," right?

Note: I followed *The Chicago Manual of Style* and spelled *copyediting* and *copyeditor* as one word. The author followed the *AP Stylebook* and spelled both as two words. ●

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## Call for Writers

ACES is currently accepting submissions for upcoming issues of *Tracking Changes* as well as the ACES blog.

Love language? Have something to say about punctuation? Want to share your editing ideas?

What might you write about?

- Work-from-home and ergonomic practices
- Impostor syndrome in the editing community
- All things technology

In general, articles should focus on practical, real-world advice that our ACES colleagues can apply in their day-to-day work. Articles on the ACES blog are typically between 750 and 1,500 words.

**Interested writers should email [Kim Lawyer](mailto:Kim.Lawyer@aceseditors.org).**