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Everyone Needs an Editor

August 2, 2017 | By Gregory Kurtz
Instructional Design

Walt Disney once said, “Everyone needs deadlines.” That statement may seem straightforward enough, but it’s important to note that the entertainment legend was referring not merely to arbitrary dates on a calendar. Rather, Disney was talking about the benchmarks to which each contributor to a project must adhere in order for a creative process to reach its ultimate goal—the delivery of a product or production on time and with a minimum of frantic, last-minute activity. Failing to recognize and meet deadlines can easily lead to ill-advised shortcuts and the resulting deliverable either falling short of its full potential or even failing to reach an audience at all.

Based largely on three decades of personal experience, I’d propose a corollary to Walt Disney’s nugget of wisdom about deadlines: “Everyone needs editors.” The common perception of an editor touches on an old stereotype: A worker sitting quietly at a desk, red pen in hand, scouring a document for errors, and parsing verbiage for proper grammar, usage, and punctuation. However, anyone who has performed the role of editor (at least in the information age of the 21st century) quickly comes to realize that reading and correcting the written word comprises only a small fraction of the duties necessary to complete any given assignment.

To help illustrate the point, consider the various social media platforms in which this blog post appears. It requires an editor not just to review the words but also to make sure that the article is properly formatted, is presented in a way that is attractive to potential readers, and is promoted in such a way as to draw the largest, most appropriate audience possible. The various creative and digital skills necessary to achieve those results go far beyond proficient knowledge of the language and the ability to wield a proverbial red pen. An editor needs to have at least a working grasp of a much more elaborate suite of tools, including basic graphic design, trends in web page layout and design, the effective use of images and other multimedia components, web optimization, and the ability to navigate HTML code.

On a more personal level, wouldn’t it be nice to have an editor whose job it was to simply stop you from clicking “Send” on all those too-hastily composed emails, text messages, and Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram posts? Social media enables almost everyone on Earth to share their opinions on any subject imaginable, from sports to relationships to politics, but the process forces us to edit ourselves, and often the results aren’t pretty. We don’t have brains in our thumbs, and lacking an internal editor, sometimes it seems as if our thumbs take on minds of their own. Who hasn’t fired off a text, tweet, or post that we’ve later regretted having sent? Anger, resentment, and hostility have come to dominate the global conversation. When we use social media, it may sometimes seem (especially in the heat of the moment) as if we’re typing into a vacuum,

but as many of us have found out (and as others have sadly yet to discover), there's no medium in which the information conveyed is more impactful, not to mention permanent, than that which is dispatched digitally.

Rigorous university-level coursework may be the polar opposite of a stream of ill-advised tweets, but both types of content occupy the same digital realm. That makes editors essential to effective outcomes in instructional design. Innovative use of existing technology in the development of centralized curricula has streamlined the process of moving course development from the outline stage to a finely polished result that meets the prescribed outcomes and which is engaging and inviting to students and faculty. Throughout that process, though, it's the job of an editor (or a team of editors) to put together all the pieces and parts in a logical, consistent structure and to make the various elements of a course presentable and approachable to anyone who may use it.

The primary task of an editor, then, should be viewed much more as an exercise not in parsing the nuances of the language but rather in producing quality outcomes (i.e., educational success). Despite pedagogical trends that incorporate a variety of exercises and activities meant to engage all types of learners, instruction will always involve reading and writing. To that end, editors still need to have a degree of mastery over the language. However, the technological innovations that allow for integration of multimedia and interactive learning tools also require an editor to have familiarity with various types of media, the ability to work with it to assure functionality and ease of use, and the ability to integrate it into the final means of delivery (i.e., a learning management system).

In the realm of instructional design, then, an editor's responsibilities can be compared to those of a builder. If an instructional designer is the architect, an editor is in charge of construction. It's the designer's job to develop the blueprints and specify all the elements that will comprise a particular course. It's the editor's job to take those specifications, review them to make sure they make sense, facilitate communication with the various parties involved when questions arise or clarification is needed, assemble the smaller parts if necessary, fit them all together, and ensure that the project is sturdy and stable by checking to see that it functions as designed.

An editor is also the inspector who provides quality assurance to the instructional design process by giving a project the final stamp of approval. Only after that long list of building tasks are accounted for—only a small percentage of which involve the traditional "editorial" task of working primarily with words—can a course actually be published and be considered ready for use by students and instructors. The editor is not only the builder but also the finisher.

About the Author

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Greg holds a Bachelor of Arts in History from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio and is resuming his studies toward a master's degree in Business Psychology at Franklin University.