THE EDITORIAL PROCESS: WHAT YOUR EDITORS LOOK FOR—AND WHY

NATIONAL GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY QUARTERLY

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Every article published by the *NGS Quarterly* is edited from the following standpoints.

1. *Accuracy of facts*. Are the details within the text, explanatory notes, and reference citations free of obvious problems? To every extent possible, facts, quotations, and citations are checked by your editors. The most-common problems are found within the latter category.

2. *Elimination of ambiguities and completeness of facts*. Do all impersonal pronouns (i.e., this, that, etc.) have clear antecedents? Is the situation under discussion perfectly clear to the uninformed reader? This is a major problem for most writers (including editors when they do their own writing). The fact that authors are thoroughly familiar with their subjects makes it difficult for them to identify the precise detail the unfamiliar reader will need.

3. *Relevancy of detail*. How necessary is each piece of information? When every essay is composed, there are many interesting facts that could be included; but these often are peripheral to the main subject. The criterion here must be: does the reader have to know this fact in order to understand the problem or use these records? Among genealogists, names present the greatest temptation. Since names are fundamental to genealogy, writers hate not to include the identity of anyone involved with each event under discussion. Yet too many names confuse readers. How are they to know which persons are so important to the subject that they must be remembered? Writers must do this judicious culling of names and facts, or their editors must do it for them.

4. *Organization*. Are related facts treated together? Do all subjects within a paragraph correspond to the subjects covered within the topic sentence? Is there a topic sentence? Are all paragraphs of reasonably the same length? Exceptions exist; but one-sentence paragraphs and those that typeset at only two to four lines ordinarily should be combined with the paragraph immediately preceding or following—adding a new topic sentence, if necessary, to cover the material that appears in both of the shorter paragraphs.

5. *Consistency*. Are facts stated in one place that later seem to be contradicted? Are all subject headings presented in parallel form? Do subheadings at the same level treat the same type of subjects? When items appear in a series, do all elements of the series actually parallel each other in grammatical structure and subject matter? Are words and terms spelled in the same manner each time they are used? Do reference citations follow the same format throughout the essay?

6. *Repetition or redundancy*. Are the same subjects treated in more than one place? Are the same statements made more than once? Is the same word used over and again (especially in close proximity), when a synonym would make the sentence or paragraph less monotonous? Are words or statements within a sentence actually redundant? (Example: "a census listing of Kalamazoo" —when, obviously, a census is a listing— or Rio Grande River.)

7. *Voice*. Is the essay presented in a chatty first-person voice or in the third-person voice that is usually expected of objective analyses and formal discussions? Most readers don't care to hear about the writer; they want to know about the subject. (Some writers do handle the first-person voice quite well; but far more often, those who write "I did . . ." and "I think . . ." wander onto many personal matters that are more interesting to them than their readers.)

8. *Passive and remote verb structure*. Both are appropriate at times. Yet placing sentences in an active and present tense will make them more concise and keep the reader moving to the next piece of action.

9. *Quotations*. Are these woven into the text in a manner that does not violate grammar and syntax? Special care is needed to be certain that the words selected for quotation are in the same voice and verb tense as the remainder of the sentence and paragraph. (This is a special problem for genealogists who quote from old documents.) Is the quote absolutely necessary in the first place, or would the sentence carry more punch if the writer put it into his or her own words?

10. *Miscellaneous points of grammar*. Are there clichés? Unnecessary capitalizations? Subject-verb disagreements? Incompatible pronouns and antecedents? Punctuation problems? Nouns used improperly as adjectives (i.e. genealogy libraries instead of genealogical libraries)? Distracting or inexplicable abbreviations? Awkward transitions from each paragraph to the next?

11. *Writing tight*. Is there unnecessary verbiage? The biggest problem an editor has is space. A lackadaisical editor or a journal in need of materials is grateful for long articles, because more words help fill space. If a journal is in good health, however, the amount of material being submitted is more than the amount that

can be accepted; and the editors realize that readers expect as much material and as varied content as possible. Space, then, is at a premium. *NGS Quarterly* is a journal that has to use space judiciously. Therefore, after all else is considered, your editors must read and reread each manuscript from the standpoint of the maxim *write tight*! If something can be said in one word instead of four, or three words instead of a sentence, then excess verbiage must be culled. At this stage, manuscripts are likely to go through several rounds of tightening. A typical example of the results is:

> Its archivists are in the process of indexing . . .
> Its archivists are now indexing . . .

This small alteration saves nearly one-third of the space. Without this attention to detail, NGS would pay for 120 pages of printing each quarter instead of 80; and membership dues would have to be increased proportionately.

12. *Final thought*. No writer's work escapes the editing process at any legitimate press in any field, no matter "how big a name" that writer has. It is impossible for writers to have the same detachment and objectivity as outside readers. Obviously, if authors could perceive all problems within their work, they would remove these problems to start with; and editors could be dispensed with entirely. For whatever consolation it is worth, when editors don a different hat and become writers themselves, even their work gets edited.

As your editors (as well as writers in our private lives), we view the production of any article as a cooperative effort between writer and editor, with two very interrelated objectives: to make both the writer and the society look as good in print as possible; and to present an article that will have permanent value.