

## Editor Jekyll and Editor Hyde

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## Editor Jekyll and Editor Hyde

### Abstract

The first few months of an extension editor's job are great fun.

## *Editor Jekyll and Editor Hyde*

JACK BELCK

THE FIRST FEW MONTHS of an extension editor's job are great fun. In front of you are typescripts created by PhD's and important people which you, bearing only a little bachelor's degree, dig into. Gleefully, you add commas here, pull them out there, turn a few long-winded, cloudy paragraphs into shiny, neat prose, and hope the authors won't raise too much hell.

Then, wonder of wonders! You discover that folks in extension are Good Guys. They actually appreciate having literary ineptness laundered out of their copy before the public gets to read it. They grin and pat you on the back and even go so far as to smuggle you journal articles for quick editing.

Life is indeed wonderful after you realize only the occasional extension specialist crank resents anyone monkeying with his prose, so you settle down and do your best.

Then comes the dawning. This is the day you are busily blue-penciling a manuscript when you suddenly sit bolt upright, more than a little nauseous as you understand that, no matter how much heavy rewriting you do on this paper, it's awful. Poor grammar, lousy organization, stuffy phraseology aside, this thing contains a serious mistake.

Positive that the PhD author will be delighted that you discovered a subject matter error, you dash off a note, informing him that what he stated as a fact on page 400 is wrong; you happened to read something in the *Plant Disease Reporter* yesterday which proves it.

A week passes, then another. Nary a word from your author pal. Finally, you call him up, immediately aware of the chill in the air.

So you learn that most of your fellow extension workers don't mind and may even love your comma work, but when it comes to arguing with their subject matter—watch out!

Now that you've learned this much, a second spectre arises be-

fore you on another day when you're reassembling a rather lightweight transcript intended, let's say, to go into a popular home demonstration booklet. This time, your queasiness is caused by something a lot more pervasive than a single technical booboo. Your considered opinion is that the lady author's subject is dumb.

After all, didn't the Dean say that extension has to swing with the times? Didn't he send around a lengthy memo stating that lacing lampshades wasn't as important today as narcotics education, the Pill, and minority problems?

So what's this 16-page fluff by extension home economist, Suzy Gronch, who ecstatically details for all the girls how to crochet handbags?

Not quite sure of what to do, you drop into a fellow-editor's office and casually bring up the subject. He grins and says, "That's nothing! Last year, we spent \$4000 putting out a thing called *Consumer Expectations Among the Elderly When Buying Floor Coverings*."

The boss, you come to realize soon enough, isn't growing bald solely because of natural aging. He, too, has a mental list of really horrendous publications that somehow got into print despite all kinds of complaints.

Doggedly—you're job is to make the most of the printing dollar, after all—you try to keep yourself from evaluating manuscript **quality** and try to concentrate on the commas and split infinitives.

And then you get a messy bog of typed pages entitled *Refinishing Furniture*. A quick check discloses that the number of copies wanted times the number of pages in this clunker comes out to 50 cents apiece. You also know that another state is in the middle of running its own furniture refinishing publication and has offered to let you buy in for a dime a copy.

With true dedication, you politely inform the head of the women's brigade of these facts. She sniffs disdainfully and informs you that refinishing furniture in this state isn't the same as refinishing it in Alabama—or someplace.

Upshot: extension pays out \$2,000 for 1,000 copies—instead of buying them elsewhere for \$100. Squelching the newfound, bitter knowledge that there are extension specialists who would rather die than circulate the writings of another specialist in the same area from another state, you go back to cropping photos. Locked deep inside your brain is the thought that you, as a furni-

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ture refinisher with 10 years of experience, know that this overpriced leaflet was B-A-D.

As time passes, the wounds collected in forays like those described heal into one solid mass that adds up to the fact that you, as an editor, and your department as a handler of other people's goods, are torn between keeping quiet and sticking to the mechanics of the business and speaking up and trying to get maximum value for both extension and consumer.

The boss fights the battle at department head meetings, carefully maneuvering into position so the fewest feelings will be hurt, then tactfully bringing up the subject of Harry Phlanz's PhD dissertation on palm tree frond virus, which someone has decided the public needs to read. The boss softly points out that there is only one palm tree in the state, and that in the lobby of a hotel scheduled to be torn down.

Lips purse, dark threats are mumbled, dire predictions are telephoned around campus after the meeting, and the upshot is that the print order is cut back from 50,000 to 45,500 copies.

The boss had to lose, just as you did. After all, what does either of you know about such scientific things? He's got a journalism background, you're an English bug, so what right have you to so much as suggest Phlanz's paper isn't worthy of your indicia? Some nerve.

But it's very unfortunate—not for you as an editor, but for the entire extension organization. After all, in these days of tight bucks, frozen positions, tremendous budget and power jockeying among the political units in your state, and the muddying effect of rapidly changing client groups and public needs, extension needs anyone who can help.

And editors, who make up a group that has a powerful advantage over most specialists because they're **not** specialists, can help. They read widely, they listen, they observe. Editors spot inconsistencies, say, between one author's stuff on cows and another's on milking machines. In other words, as generalists, they are among the few who have a chance to see the whole picture.

While no one would suggest that editorial opinions should be the last word in decisions as to programming—and rotten, pointless publications inevitably suggest rotten, pointless programs behind them—any extension administration is selling public and organization short if it doesn't at least pay close attention to what editors have to say.

The editor has no axe to grind. He doesn't favor agronomy over horticulture. He has no prejudice when it comes to loose versus herringbone milking parlors. And if he reads an ag economics article that says raising bananas in Alaska is a bad idea, the fact that banana-growing is the sole life interest of the staff's fruit expert concerns him not at all.

The editor wants only the maximum bang for the printing buck, which means good, clean, readable copy—and sensible, relevant, contemporary contents that match up with the stated goals of his extension organization. But what can he do when the people he works for look on him as a comma counter, paragraph polisher, and printer's errand boy?

Easy—find a weak link and hack away at it. Every extension organization has at least one unit that's getting the short end of the budget and manpower dollar. It might be a dedicated but ignored sheep specialist, for example, trying to survive in a state where dairy is God. Or it might be a hip home demonstration girl who's up against a 1920's crop of tenured elderly ladies who stoutly maintain that the poor can be saved if only they learn home canning and quilting.

Find this person and offer to help him upgrade his printed goods, not offering just snazzy type, classy paper, mod artwork, and other technical glosses, but solid help with content. Talk about reaching people, talk about impact—maximum bang for the buck. Preach advertising, the hard sell even, not only gentle and academic lecturing.

Talk about the experiment station scientist, used to printing 5,000 each of his technical papers who was talked into boiling facts down into single-fold pamphlets and sending them to his regular mailing list with the offer to supply mimeos of the whole dreary paper if anyone wanted them. Then explain how this specialist awoke one day to find only 15 people in the entire United States wanted the unexpurgated facts about quackgrass nematodes.

Some will listen because they're hungry and eager to get their message to the people. Working with them will build a reputation for you, convince others that a real editor isn't just a copy mechanic and handyman. He's a pro, sharing extension goals with the rest, and able, because of his broad, dispassionate, and generalist training, to help the entire organization get the most out of both money and manpower.