

The Writers Network News, March 2017

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The Writers Network News

No Rules; Just Write!

Editor: Bobbie Christmas

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#### Meet Fellow Writers

Do you live in or visit metro Atlanta? Sign up for notices of local (but sporadic) meetings today! Send your name and e-mail address to [Bobbie@zebraeditor.com](mailto:Bobbie@zebraeditor.com).

**MARK YOUR CALENDAR!** We finally have a meeting arranged for Friday, March 24, at 12:00 in Roswell, Georgia. Folks who told me they wanted to be on the local list have already received all the information. If you did not get the information and would like to sign up for local meetings, send me your name and e-mail address, and I'll send you all the information.

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#### Writer's Quote of the Month

"Poetry: A 'natural activity...a poem comes to one,' whereas prose required making 'an appointment with one's mind to write a few thousand words.'" --Norman Mailer, author of *The Naked and the Dead*, *The Executioner's Song*, and dozens more books

When Mailer died in 2007 at the age of 84, he towered above all other American writers of his and subsequent generations, according to his New York Times obituary. His writing exposed the human condition among Americans better than any of his contemporaries for more than three decades. Mailer likely will rank with Herman Melville and Hemingway as among the greatest writers produced by the United States, according to [imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com). For more on Mailer, see [http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0537551/bio?ref\\_=nm\\_ov\\_bio\\_sm](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0537551/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm).

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#### One: From the editor's desk: Writing and Editing: Exciting or Daunting?

Dear Fellow Writers:

I received an e-mail from a woman in college who wanted to become a writer and was tasked with writing a paper on the subject. She found me on the Internet and sent me a list of questions. While I was answering them, a picture formed that explained to me why some writers become editors and why some writers hire editors and prefer to leave details to them. The student's questions gave me many things to think about, but here are a couple of her questions and my answers.

- How much writing do you do daily for your job?

Every day is different, and the work each day depends on the projects in progress. Some days I write a column or a blog, and some days I write an evaluation of a book I edited. Some days I piece together a monthly newsletter. Some days I simply edit and barely write anything at all. Some days I concentrate on writing my own books or a book proposal for a new book.

While I used to write on a wide variety of subjects for a great number of clients, nowadays most of my articles and reports revolve around

creative writing and writing for more marketability.

- Does your job involve filing?

Most of the work is electronic and is filed on my computer, but because I've been in business for some twenty-five years, I have old files in many filing cabinets. The only papers I have to file these days are for tax purposes or for when a client sends a manuscript in hard copy. In that case I file the Editing Request Form after I've completed the job. I also keep receipts and other things related to tax matters, but I easily stash those in large envelopes instead of file folders. I'm not a fan of filing, myself.

- Are you required to keep copies of your writing?

I'm an independent contractor, and computers easily keep copies for me. I also use Carbonite to back up my computer automatically. On occasion I have edited work for a client who later lost a file or whose edited file was somehow corrupted before publication. In three of four cases over a quarter of a century a client has come back to me for another copy of the edited version of a file. Thank goodness for computers!

- Do you collaborate with other writers?

On rare occasions, and by coincidence, I'm in the beginning stages of and considering the possibilities of collaborating with another editor on a book at this time.

- Is the writing challenging to you?

The word "challenging" can mean either stimulating or perplexing. It can mean either exciting or daunting. The word can be either negative or positive, so I'm not sure what this question may be asking. For that reason I will answer in both ways the word can be used.

Writing and editing can be daunting, because both activities are extremely detailed, sedentary, solitary, and time consuming. Such things have the potential to be off-putting, but because I like solitude, details, and working alone, the work resonates with me. Even so, some projects become remarkably difficult when I'm working with a manuscript written by a person for whom English is a second language or with beginning writers who have little knowledge of how to form correct sentences or punctuate correctly to a reasonable degree. If I have to add almost every quotation mark or repair a high volume of sentences, I can get frustrated. In those cases I remind myself that as an editor my job entails making the manuscript the best it can be as well as educating the author, if possible.

On the other hand, both writing and editing challenge me mentally—that is, such work tests my abilities in ways that I find thrilling. As I read, write, or edit, I must ponder details such as whether two words should be one, where commas should or should not go, whether something should be capitalized or lowercased, when to write out a numeral and when to use the number, and especially whether each sentence is clear and cannot be misinterpreted. With novels I have to remember what occurred before each passage, so that each chapter progresses logically, each character is introduced in a rational manner, and every scene moves the plot forward. In nonfiction I must ensure every statement and concept is clear and direct. With both fiction and nonfiction I have to ensure that every word usage is correct, every punctuation mark is correct, and every sentence is grammatical. I must question everything, so I spend time looking up things in Merriam-Webster or in The Chicago Manual of Style often. Sometimes I have to search the Internet, too. As an example, I recently edited a book that referred to a convenience store as 7-11. On the Internet I learned that the company name is spelled 7-Eleven, not 7-11. I enjoy such research, though, so while research might slow me down, I learn something new that I hope to remember the next time the same issue shows up.

Yes, the work is challenging, but if I wanted unchallenging work, I would have followed some other career. I went into this field as a natural progression. Because I loved writing and it came easily to me, I received encouragement from my English and creative-writing teachers. Because I was given encouragement, I studied writing more diligently. Even when I was young and not employed as a full-time writer, I was always the person who wrote the reports, brochure copy, and other things for employers until I eventually landed a job as a full-time writer. Because I studied how to be a good writer, I learned a great deal about editing, too, and I gradually became the appointed editor wherever I worked. Because I edited under some very good editors, I learned how to be an even better editor. Because I shared my writing in critique circles, I learned from other writers, as well, which is how I eventually began editing novels as well as nonfiction.

I see editing as a puzzle, and my job is to make sure all the pieces fit together correctly and create a clear, convincing picture. Who wouldn't love to work puzzles every day for a living?

Yours in writing,

Bobbie Christmas Bobbie@zebraeditor.com or bzebra@aol.com

Author of two editions of WRITE IN STYLE, owner of Zebra Communications, director of The Writers Network, and coordinator of the Florida Writers Association Editors Helping Writers service

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## Two: Ask the Book Doctor about Rejections, Agents, and Dialogue vs. Narrative

By Bobbie Christmas

Q: I received two more instant rejections from agents today. One said, "We've read your material, and I'm sorry to say that we don't think it is right for the specific talents of the people working at our company at this time." Another rejection said, "Unfortunately we feel that your manuscript is not right for us."

I am getting concerned. I researched agents who were accepting new clients and who were interested in the type of material I was submitting; however, already almost half have stated otherwise. Is my research model flawed?

A: Agents and publishers rarely give the full reason for rejecting a submission. "It is not right for us" does not necessarily mean the submission is the wrong genre. It could mean the agent's interest is not piqued or the writing isn't up to par or the agent is already handling a similar book. If I had to guess, I'd say that only one percent of fiction manuscripts get accepted for publication. It's simply not easy to find an agent and sell a book. If it were easy, anyone could sell a book, and the success stories would have no meaning. The process is not so simple that you send out a few queries and find an agent. The process is slow, and it is not easy.

Rejection letters are generalized and worded in a vague way that appears to blame the agent or publisher. I've never seen a rejection letter that admitted, "We did not like your novel." Instead letters say "It's not right for us," or "We're not taking on new clients at this time."

Instead of blindly mailing submissions or filling out online submission forms, a better way to find an agent is to meet with one at a writers conference. Agents who go to conferences are actively looking for new clients. You may have to pay a fee to meet with the agent, but after the agent reads or listens to your pitch, he or she may ask you to submit your full manuscript. In such a case, your chances of acceptance are higher. If the agent does not ask you to submit the manuscript, you might still get valuable feedback when you meet in person.

Believe me, if a manuscript touches a good nerve with an agent, he or she will take on the author, even if the agency is listed as not taking on new clients.

Q: You were a great editor for my manuscript, and I agree with almost all your suggested changes, deletions, and additions. Now I wish you were a literary agent too and would sell my book to a publisher.

A: I'm not an agent for several reasons. When I opened my editing service in 1992, a friend talked me into being an agent for her novel, to see if I enjoyed the work. I quickly learned how much scut work—researching, contacting, copying, e-mailing, and even traveling—an agent must undertake to be effective. After all that work with no pay, the agent faces long waits punctuated by a high degree of rejection. I also came to recognize that being both editor and agent created a conflict of interest. Prospective clients asked if I would promise to represent their books if they paid me to edit them. One person even asked if I would guarantee to sell her book to a publisher if she paid me to edit it. I did not like the implication that I lured clients by promising such extra service, plus, no one can guarantee any book will sell to a publisher.

Quite frankly even after I evaluate and edit some manuscripts, they still are not ready for self-publishing or marketing to a publisher. Many need more work, and some manuscripts are good only as first-novel learning experiences.

After failing to sell that one manuscript—a well-written book I truly believed in—I dropped all interest in being an agent and concentrated on the part I know best: editing and consulting. I have a deep respect for everything that agents do, but I have no interest in being one.

Q: I am a statistician. Much of the software I work on is related to communications and statistics. I was intrigued by your comment that seventy percent of novels should be dialogue. This figure seemed to be a lot of dialogue.

I took a random sample of pages from books by three authors, Patricia Cornwell, Jonathan Kellerman, and Clive Cussler. As a measure, I used the number of lines on the page that were part of dialogue. A more accurate measure would be to count the number of words, but this measure should favor dialogue, because a one-word comment, "Yes," would count the same as a full line of non-dialogue.

The results ranged from forty-three to fifty-nine percent, with a mean of fifty-one percent dialogue.

Thought you might be interested.

A: You picked some popular current authors and undertook an interesting study. Thank you for your time, talents, and observation.

I did not pick the seventy-percent figure out of thin air, though. It was an answer agreed upon by a group of agents, publishers, and editors on a panel at a writers conference where I too sat on the panel. Maybe the information is idealistic, but in general publishers want more dialogue than narrative. Dialogue shows, whereas narrative often tells, and contemporary writing must show more than tell.

Which figure is right? The answer is not an absolute. Writers who strive for the seventy-percent figure can't go wrong, even if their novels don't quite reach that mark. Less than half dialogue, and the writing might be considered literary, but it may not appeal to contemporary readers.

For much more information on these subjects and hundreds of others of vital importance to writers, order PURGE YOUR PROSE OF PROBLEMS, a Book Doctor's Desk Reference Book at <http://tinyurl.com/4ptjnr>.

Send your questions to Bobbie@zebraeditor.com. Bobbie Christmas, book doctor and owner of Zebra Communications, will answer your questions quickly. Read more "Ask the Book Doctor" questions and answers at [www.zebraeditor.com](http://www.zebraeditor.com).

Bobbie Christmas's award-winning second edition of WRITE IN STYLE: How to Use Your Computer to Improve Your Writing is available at <http://tinyurl.com/pnq5y5s>.

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### Three: This Month's Easy Editing Tip from Bobbie Christmas: Capitals

Many things do not require capitalization, including the names of plants (oak tree, pansies); titles that are not part of proper names (John's doctor, my father, German shepherd, Tom's professor, Cuban dictator); and the titles of courses (biology, history), unless languages (English, French). Be careful to capitalize only proper names and trademarks. (Carol ate French toast and drank a Coke near the Pentagon with her uncle in Washington.) Capitalize directions when used for areas of the country. (He moved to the North for the summer.) Do not capitalize for general directions. (We drove south for four blocks.)

Do not capitalize words to provide emphasis or set them apart. The editors of The Chicago Manual of Style quipped, "Only Plato still gets to cap Truth, Beauty, and Cultural Movements."

Use my Find and Refine Method to power up your prose. In this case you will want to search your manuscript for incorrect capitals. Search your manuscript for any of the things mentioned above (directions, class titles, kinship names, etc.) to see if manuscript has incorrect capitals. Use the Find and Replace function and check Match Case and then one at a time, type in words with capitals that may be incorrect in your manuscript and repair any that are incorrect.

This lesson teaches you how to use the Find and Replace function to catch opportunities to write stronger, more stylistically correct prose. For almost a thousand more editing and creative writing tips, order PURGE YOUR PROSE OF PROBLEMS here: <http://tinyurl.com/4ptjnr>.

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Four: Subjects of interest to writers

#### MORE ON CUSTOMER SERVICE

Quite a few members wrote to me in response to my customer-service rant last month. Here are a couple responses:

Chrissy Jackson, director emerita of the Florida Writers Association said, "I teach customer service and it's amazing some of the stories I hear and attitudes I see in classes where students are surprised they are expected to be nice to customers."

How sad!

Member Howard Thomas wrote, "I agree, customer service is tasked with sales quotas and up-sales. Pity you have to threaten to leave before they give you a better deal."

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#### NOW ACCEPTING PAGES FILES FROM MAC COMPUTERS

For many years I accepted only printed manuscripts for hard-copy editing or Word files for electronic-file or hybrid editing. I am now able to accept files in Pages, too, the Mac program for word processing, from clients who want electronic-file editing (line editing with no report) or hybrid editing (which includes a detailed report on all my suggested changes as well as creative writing tips and comments on marketability). Like Word, Pages has a Track Changes function that allows me to show clients every change I've made to the manuscript, so they can easily accept or reject each change as they see fit.

I'm in the process of changing my website to indicate that I can accept files in Pages, too, but if you see a message that says I accept only Word files, ignore it, and let's get your Mac-based or PC-based manuscript edited and ready for publication together.

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#### ARE YOU MISSING OUT ON SALES?

This BookBaby blog addresses the number-one mistake of self-published authors for worldwide book sales. See <http://tinyurl.com/guh5wul>

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#### SAVE THOUSANDS ON EDITING—AND GET A REBATE, TOO!

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#### ABOUT READY TO LAUNCH YOUR BOOK?

For a short time BookBaby offers a free e-book to help you launch your book successfully. See <http://preview.tinyurl.com/h65avku>.

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#### TWENTY WRITING TIPS FROM FICTION AUTHORS

<http://www.iuniverse.com/Resources/Writing-Editing/20WritingTipsfrom12FictionAuthors.aspx>

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#### WRITING PROMPTS

If you like writing prompts, you'll love this website: <http://www.toasted-cheese.com/>.

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News, information, immediate updates, and other things writers can put to use.

Like Zebra Communications at <http://tinyurl.com/7vcxaxu>.

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#### CMOS ONLINE Q & A

This month's Chicago Manual of Style Online answers the following question:

How should we style the name of a competition? In quotes, italics, title case? Example: An initiative recently named a finalist in the "Tokyo Vertical Cemetery" competition.

Read the answer to this question as well as many more questions and answers at <http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/qanda/latest.html>

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#### WRITE IN STYLE: How to Use Your Computer to Improve Your Writing

WRITE IN STYLE has won seven big awards for helping writers. Copies are selling fast on Amazon, but I make a little more per book if you order it through my publisher, so please order it here: <http://tinyurl.com/zeq6z5g>.

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#### Five: Contests, Agents, and Markets

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2402 N Shadeland Ave., Ste. A  
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Our books are consistent with basic Judeo-Christian values, advocate the dignity of life, and aim to share the rich experience of the Catholic people, their brothers, sisters, and friends around the globe and in history. Our catalog includes the most stellar writings on spiritual tradition, discipline and formation; writings in support of family life, community building and personal and professional development; and writings of academic brilliance in search of theological and mystical truth.

We welcome unsolicited proposals. We do our utmost to get back to you in six to eight weeks. Our experience is that many authors have powerful and potentially life-changing ideas emerging from their training, study, and experience, but they have not identified the best way to communicate their wisdom. Your ideas are not new to you, but they are new to the person who will be reading your work. So before you send a submission, the most important thing is to do your own research about publishing in general and about the potential audience for your specific proposal. The Internet offers many opportunities to learn about the publishing industry (e.g. Writer's Market, Publishers Weekly, and online bookstores) and your subject matter (online discussions, books, reviews, etc.)

For more information including basic guidelines for a proposal to this company, see <http://www.crossroadpublishing.com/crossroad/static/for-authors>.

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MID-AMERICAN REVIEW  
The Fineline Competition for Prose Poems, Short Shorts, and Anything in Between  
Department of English  
Bowling Green State University  
Bowling Green, OH 43403  
<http://casit.bgsu.edu/midamericanreview/fineline-competition/>

First Prize: \$1,000 and publication in MAR Volume XXXVIII, Number 1.

Ten finalists: Notation and possible publication

Contest Deadline is June 15, 2017. Contest is for previously unpublished work only—if the work has appeared in print or online, in any form or part, or under any title, or has been contracted for such, it is ineligible and will be disqualified. There is a 500-word limit for each poem or short. A \$10 entry fee (payable online for online submissions, or check or money order made out to Mid-American Review for submissions by post) is required for each set of three prose poems/short short stories. Entry fees are non-refundable. All participants will receive Mid-American Review v. XXXVIII, no. 1, where the winners will be published. Submissions will not be returned. Manuscripts need not be left anonymous. Contest is open to all writers, except those associated with the judge or Mid-American Review, past or present. Our judge's decision is final.

Note: All pieces submitted in verse form—i.e., poetry with line breaks—will be automatically disqualified, as will previously published work or pieces over 500 words.

For online submissions and online payment, please use our Submissions Manager.

Send all postal entries with check or money order to address above.

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GIBBS SMITH  
P.O. Box 667  
Layton UT 84041  
Phone: (801)544-9800  
E-mail: [debbie.uribe@gibbs-smith.com](mailto:debbie.uribe@gibbs-smith.com)  
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#### Six: Got Muse? Be Another Age

The great thing about getting older is that you don't lose all the other ages you've been. ~Madeleine L'Engle, writer (1918 - 2007)

If you could be any age you've already been, what would it be? Is there an event or an era that comes to mind that you recall? Write a scene, fictional story, or nonfiction essay from the point of view of a person of that age. Remember to use the voice—manner of speaking, word choices, and subject choices—of a person of that age.

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Do YOU have news for The Writers Network News? Please send it in the body copy, not an attachment, to Bobbie@zebraeditor.com.

Deadline: The 15th of each month.

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Send a copy of this newsletter to all your writing friends. Tell them to join The Writers Network F-R-E-E by visiting [www.zebraeditor.com](http://www.zebraeditor.com) and clicking on Free Newsletter.

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