

How well read should editors be?

Stan Carey

The editor as reader

The central act of editing is reading. It is of course reading of a particular, imaginative kind: reading in anticipation of other people reading, and intervening where appropriate to improve that experience. In serving as a go-between from writer to reader, we put ourselves in the minds of both.

After a day of such reading, re-reading, and mind reading, many editors want nothing more than to curl up with a book and keep reading. Indeed, we often start over breakfast, snatching a few pages of a book, a news app, the ingredients of whatever is on the kitchen table. It all goes in. Reading is not just a pastime but for some a compulsion. Words arrest the attention, and the effect is particularly strong among the editorial tribe.

Editors have limited choice in what texts they handle during work hours, especially if they work in-house. But off the clock, anything goes. So how do editors decide what books to read? And should that be affected by the fact of our profession? In general we make the same kinds of choices as anyone else, influenced by taste, habit, interests, impulse, third-party recommendation, and so on. Motivating each choice may be pleasure, comfort, curiosity, duty, exploration, education, experimentation.

Reasons to read broadly

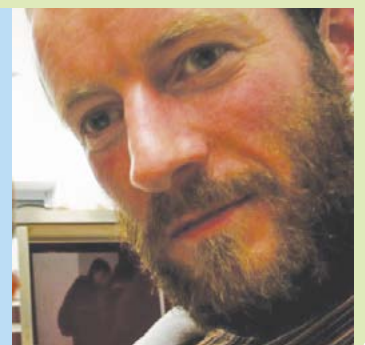
It's common advice for editors to read broadly, and for good reason. Reading in a wide range of genres and disciplines increases our general and particular knowledge about the world. You never know when this knowledge will prove pertinent when editing: a misspelt name, a misguided analogy, an incomplete picture. We become more familiar with salient ideas, events, and schools of thought in various human endeavours.

This gives us a more rounded view of human nature, activity, and development. It also sharpens our critical thinking: specious claims and bad-faith arguments become more apparent. And the more broadly we read, the more we come to appreciate the range of possibilities that prose can manifest. John McIntyre puts it plainly:

I don't know how anyone who has not engaged in a wide range of reading can hope to edit effectively ... You have to hear all the voices to know which one is appropriate for your writer, your subject, your publication, your reader.

About the author

Stan Carey is a freelance copyeditor and writer from the west of Ireland. He blogs about language at *Sentence first* and *Strong Language* and has written for *The Guardian*, *History Today*, *Slate*, *Merriam-Webster*, *ELT Journal*, and the *Irish Times*, among others. From 2010 to 2020 he wrote a regular column for Macmillan Dictionary. His academic background is in life sciences, and he also trained as a TEFL teacher. You can find him at stancarey.com or [@StanCarey](https://twitter.com/StanCarey) on Twitter.



Broad reading opens us up to diverse world views, the same way that talking with different kinds of people does, and this informs our work. More directly, it familiarises us with lesser-known words and their habitats and collocations. It trains the ear on different forms of authorial rhythm, narrative, and humour. It accustoms us to different writing styles and devices, metaphors and clichés, norms and lexicons. Reading from different eras and dialects educates us on the inexorable drift of idiom.

Narrow reading has the opposite effect, constraining our experience and our awareness of stylistic patterns. If we read only non-fiction, for example, we may be unaware of how routine and established comma splices are in fiction. This may prejudice us against them, leading us to prescribe a semicolon that is fussily unnatural. *Whilst* and *amongst*, considered quaint or pretentious in some quarters, are still common in fiction and academic writing. *Plus* as a conjunction is rare in academia but has made inroads in less-formal contexts, such as magazines.

Non-standard *would of* (*could of*, *must of*, etc) is surprisingly popular in literature, where it usually marks a character's lack of education or sophistication. In a client's manuscript it may be an error or a strategic choice. I'm not endorsing it, but if you've seen it in books by Carson McCullers, Shirley Jackson, Dashiell Hammett, James Baldwin, Margaret Atwood, Agatha Christie, Sylvia Plath, Patrick O'Brian, Hilary Mantel, and Terry Pratchett (to name but a fraction of authors I've seen use it), then you may be less quick to doubt or judge the writer.

Fiction has rich truths of its own, of a kind not always found in non-fiction.

Words, words, words

My first, and greatest, liberty was that of being able to read everything and anything I cared to. I read indiscriminately, and with my eyes hanging out. I could never have dreamt that there were such goings-on in the world between the covers of books, such sand-storms and ice-blasts of words, such slashing of humbug, and humbug too, and staggering peace, such enormous laughter, such and so many blinding bright lights breaking across the just-awaking wits and splashing all over the pages in a million bits and pieces all of which were words, words, words, and each of which was alive forever in its own delights and glory and oddity and light.

Dylan Thomas, 'Poetic manifesto'

Applying a strict rule or attitude to a contentious usage regardless of context can invite trouble, whereas prior understanding of its status in a given domain will spare you this and save you time. This understanding is fostered by a broad appetite for reading, which attunes you to an array of registers, vocabularies, and techniques.

Facts about fiction

Some readers disregard fiction because it's not facty enough. They see it as escapism and therefore a waste of time: Why burrow into make-believe when you could be accumulating Important Facts about the Real World? This unfortunate belief misunderstands the nature of facts, and of truth. Fiction has rich truths of its own, of a kind not always found in non-fiction. Zadie Smith says she feels '[no] more "truthy" in essay than I am in fiction', adding that good non-fiction 'is as designed and artificial as any fairy story'.

Fiction relies more heavily on empathy and imagination, which are invaluable qualities in an editor. By seeing them used well, we can improve our craft and potentially – with the best fiction, and a receptive stance – deepen our interaction with the world and its inhabitants. Fiction, like poetry, has an interiority that is necessarily absent from much non-fiction. In some cases it constitutes an act of moral, emotional, or spiritual excavation that leaves us altered.

As editors it behoves us – and rewards us – to keep learning about the infinite variety of language and human expression.

Other readers enjoy fiction but swear off the more fantastical genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror (abbreviated SF/F/H since the 1970s). But these excite and exercise parts of our minds left untouched by other types of text. In her essay 'A war without end', Ursula K Le Guin writes that many adults, in refusing such literature, '[pride] themselves on seeing nothing beyond what they already know, or think they know'.

Such bias can be gendered. Many men, Le Guin suggests elsewhere, reject the imagination as 'childish or effeminate, unprofitable, and probably sinful'. This begets its own horror. Worse, some men eschew any books by women – as though these were a genre, one they can ignore as irrelevant in a patriarchal world.

If the purpose of art is to make meaning, Elisa Gabbert writes, 'That leaves room for lots of different kinds of fiction to make different kinds of meaning.' Reading SF/F/H can loosen our habits of thought and perception, weakening the instinct to impose our conditioned meanings and presumptions on the world. This can make for more mindful, more meaningful editing.

Fiction/non-fiction is a simplistic binary, but it's how we often categorise books for convenience and select what to read or dismiss. Fuzzy though the boundary is, it allows for useful distinctions. Fiction has more variety of style. No one who reads *Riddley Walker*, say, or *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* will forget their bold, unique narration.

Such adventures in voice impress upon us the importance of assessing a work on its own merits. They remind us, if as editors we need reminding, that a living

language is in constant flux at every level and is made coherent not by ironclad rules but by local convention and internal logic. Language is a transaction, not a precious stone. Like editing, it is more alchemy than formula.

'Must-read'

Much as I dislike the phrase 'must-read', with its casual tyranny – especially in an era with no literary canon – there are certain types of text that are essential for an editor. The shelf should have writing guides, style manuals, dictionaries, and grammars, of course. Usage dictionaries should span the descriptive–prescriptive range.

On any item where authorities disagree – and oh, how they disagree! – you need to understand the arguments and be able to justify your editorial decisions with more than ipse dixitism. Some of your sources should be contemporary – Fowler remains a great pleasure, but his advice has rusted here and there and has been duly updated in later editions of his usage dictionary. Not all appeals to his authority are equal.

Popular and scholarly books on language can be extremely worthwhile. They can illuminate, for instance, why typos, malapropisms, and other errors occur. This makes editing more interesting and ultimately, ideally, makes us more forgiving of mistakes. Linguistics books can also educate us on the mechanics of grammar, helping us pivot from 'What's the rule?' to 'What is helpful?', in Carol Fisher Saller's formulation. An understanding of the rules, she writes,

is not the same as an ability to recite them. Understanding the thinking behind a style choice gives you the power both to discard it when better thinking should prevail and to argue for it more convincingly when the reasoning applies.

Conclusion

To read is to exercise the mind; how strenuous that exercise is will vary hugely between readers and, for any reader, from book to book and week to week. To read broadly is to enjoy a balanced mental workout; to read narrowly is to neglect certain cognitive muscles and modes of thought and imagination. Ignoring all but three types of book is like shunning all but three dishes for dinner, forever. It's natural to gravitate to familiar things. But as editors it behoves us – and rewards us – to keep learning about the infinite variety of language and human expression, and that means an expansive literary intake.

References

Carey, S (2008–). Sentence first. Blog. stancarey.wordpress.com.

Davies, M (2004–). English-Corpora.org. english-corpora.org.

Fisher Saller, C (2016). *The Subversive Copy Editor*. 2nd edn. University of Chicago Press.

Fowler, HW (1926, repr. 2003). *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. Oxford University Press.

Gabbert, E (2016). The blunt instrument: What is fiction for? *Electric Literature*, 7 January. electricliterature.com/the-blunt-instrument-what-is-fiction-for.

Hoban, R (1980). *Riddley Walker*. Jonathan Cape.

Le Guin, UK (1989). Why are Americans afraid of dragons? In *The Language of the Night: Essays on fantasy and science fiction*, revised edition. The Women's Press.

Le Guin, UK (2004). A war without end. In *The Wave in the Mind: Talks and essays on the writer, the reader, and the imagination*. Shambhala.

McBride, E (2013). *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing*. Galley Beggar Press.

McIntyre, J (2018). Not a reader? Not an editor. *Baltimore Sun*, 27 February. baltimoresun.com/opinion/columnists/mcintyre/bal-not-a-reader-not-an-editor-20180227-story.html.

Nunberg, G (1983). The decline of grammar. *Atlantic Monthly*, December: 31–46.

Sheidlower, J (ed.) (2021). *Historical Dictionary of Science Fiction*. sfdictionary.com.

Smith, Z (2009). An essay is an act of imagination. *The Guardian*, 21 November.

Thomas, D (1961). Poetic manifesto. *Texas Quarterly*, 4/4.

Written by **Stan Carey**

The Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading (CIEP) is a non-profit body promoting excellence in English-language editing. We set and demonstrate editorial standards, and we are a community, training hub and support network for editorial professionals – the people who work to make text accurate, clear and fit for purpose.



facebook.com/EditProof



twitter.com/The_CIEP



linkedin.com/company/the-ciep

ciep.uk