What's Black and White and Red All Over?

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What is black and white and red/read all over? We've all heard this joke and its many responses: a newspaper, a sunburned zebra, an embarrassed skunk, a Communist nun. Depending on how the listener understood the homophone red/ read the answers are endless and thus humorous. But if the person wasn't meaning to say a riddle, or the listener/ reader misunderstood what the writer was trying to say, it wouldn't be as funny and could lead to frustration and confusion. The situation then calls for an editor to listen to the writer and understand the purpose, to offer suggestions from the standpoint of the reader so that the original meaning was conveyed correctly, or perhaps just to correct the homophone.

My mother was a high school English teacher. I was brought up on rules of grammar, diagramming sentences, understanding the difference between types of pronouns, and knowing how to correctly conjugate the verbs to lie versus to lay. As a child I embraced the structure, the objective right versus wrong. In school I preferred math and science classes with their objectively correct answers instead of creative writing assignments that to me seemed to have arbitrary standards and grades. Spelling, grammar, organization, and rules carried me in those early composition classes. The content of what I wrote might not have been brilliant or inspiring, but it was at a minimum well organized and without grammatical errors.   Structure and organization made me feel safe.

As I have matured, I have stepped away from this rigid perspective and become more comfortable with the vagaries of life. As opposed to the black and white thinking I had in the past of right vs wrong, I now believe in many cases there is more than one right answer, more than one way to convey similar meaning. With this I also understand the importance of editing

in context. Exploring the rhetorical situation when editing a document helps to step away from a limited programmatic approach based on rules of grammar, with a fixed set of right and wrong. In the article "A Rhetorical Approach for the Technical Editor", Buehler advocates that in addition to a programmatic approach to editing, the editor must also incorporate a rhetorical approach to editing, which encompasses the writer, the message, the purpose of the message, and the audience. (2003). This allows for greater flexibility in interpretation and application of grammar "rules". According to Saller in <u>The Subversive Copy Editor</u>, it is important for the editor to be flexible and understand that matters of style are negotiable (2016). The editor must have a better understanding of the writer's purpose and style with an emphasis on the effectiveness of the writing more than the correctness. (Buehler 2003). Cunningham et al. in <u>Technical Editing</u> phrases it this way, the editor's job is to be an advocate for the reader (2020, p.2). As part of editing work with the reader in mind, the editor ensures the accuracy, organization, and general readability of the work. Sometimes rules and consistency are necessary for the reader to have clarity, sometimes there is a place for bending those rules to give greater meaning of what the writer is trying to say.

As an editor I am drawn to nonfiction work. As a medical professional I review and edit countless medical charts. In this setting I understand the writer's purpose. I am better able to read through and organize the work to help the writer accomplish that purpose. I have a better understanding of which words must be precise, and when synonyms are not truly synonymous. For example, I recently had to contact a writer and ask "did you mean to say Fever of Unknown Origin or Acute Febrile Illness of Uncertain Etiology" because these two diagnoses have completely different criteria.   Somnolent, obtunded, and lethargic have very different

meanings when describing someone's mental status. Similarly, a wound exuding pus should not be described as "pussy" but "purulent". Specific words matter. <u>Technical Editing</u> phrases it this way, as the need to make sure the material is not only clearly understood, but that it cannot be misunderstood (Cunningham et al., 2020, p. 4). As an editor it is important to have attention to detail, an ability to see the big picture and context of the writing, and the flexibility to work with writers to support them in their ideas and style while improving the clarity of the message to the reader.

Generally, in technical writing the current rhetorical style values clarity and simplicity.   I am drawn to this genre of editing since as a practical person my focus is on the end result. The process is measured based on the outcome. It is more important to me that the reader fully understand, and not misunderstand, what the writer is conveying, even if it does not follow a black and white rule. My goal as an editor is to use structure to promote organization and readability, while allowing for differences in style, with the goal of clarity and understanding for the reader.   And my favorite the answer to the riddle? A penguin wearing too much lipstick.

References

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