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18. Defend your style

Smooth, consistent, effective communication has enemies; they are called editorial assistants or copyreaders.

An *editor* can be a very great help to a writer. Mathematical writers must usually live without this help, because the editor of a mathematical book must be a mathematician, and there are very few mathematical editors. The ideal editor, who must potentially understand every detail of the author's subject, can give the author an inside but nonetheless unbiased view of the work that the author himself cannot have. The ideal editor is the union of the friend, wife, student, and expert junior-grade whose contribution to writing I described earlier. The mathematical editors of book series and journals don't even come near to the ideal. Their editorial work is but a small fraction of their life, whereas to be a good editor is a full-time job. The ideal mathematical editor does not exist; the friend-wife-etc. combination is only an almost ideal substitute.

The *editorial assistant* is a full-time worker whose job is to catch your inconsistencies, your grammatical slips, your errors of diction, your misspellings—everything that you can do wrong, short of the mathematical content. The trouble is that the editorial assistant does not regard himself as an extension of the author, and he usually degenerates into a mechanical misapplier of mechanical rules. Let me give some examples.

I once studied certain transformations called "measure-preserving". (Note the hyphen: it plays an important role, by making a single word, an adjective, out of two words.) Some transformations pertinent to that study failed to deserve the name; their failure was indicated, of course, by the prefix "non". After a long sequence of misunderstood instructions, the printed version spoke of a "nonmeasure preserving transformation". That is nonsense, of course, amusing nonsense, but, as such, it is distracting and confusing nonsense.

A mathematician friend reports that in the manuscript of a book of his he wrote something like "p or q holds according as x is negative or positive". The editorial assistant changed that to "p or q holds according as x is positive or negative", on the grounds that it sounds better that way. That could be funny if it weren't sad, and, of course, very very wrong.

A common complaint of anyone who has ever discussed quotation marks with the enemy concerns their relation to other punctuation. There appears to be an international typographical decree according to which

a period or a comma immediately to the right of a quotation is "ugly". (As here: the editorial assistant would have changed that to "ugly." if I had let him.) From the point of view of the logical mathematician (and even more the mathematical logician) the decree makes no sense; the comma or period should come where the logic of the situation forces it to come. Thus,

He said: "The comma is ugly."

Here, clearly, the period belongs inside the quote; the two situations are different and no inelastic rule can apply to both.

Moral: there are books on "style" (which frequently means typographical conventions), but their mechanical application by editorial assistants can be harmful. If you want to be an author, you must be prepared to defend your style; go forearmed into the battle.

19. Stop

The battle against copyreaders is the author's last task, but it's not the one that most authors regard as the last. The subjectively last step comes just before; it is to finish the book itself—to stop writing. That's hard.

There is always something left undone, always either something more to say, or a better way to say something, or, at the very least, a disturbing vague sense that the perfect addition or improvement is just around the corner, and the dread that its omission would be everlasting cause for regret. Even as I write this, I regret that I did not include a paragraph or two on the relevance of euphony and prosody to mathematical exposition. Or, hold on a minute !, surely I cannot stop without a discourse on the proper naming of concepts (why "commutator" is good and "set of first category" is bad) and the proper way to baptize theorems (why "the closed graph theorem" is good and "the Cauchy-Buniakowski-Schwarz theorem" is bad). And what about that sermonette that I haven't been able to phrase satisfactorily about following a model. Choose someone, I was going to say, whose writing can touch you and teach you, and adapt and modify his style to fit your personality and your subject—surely I must get that said somehow.

There is no solution to this problem except the obvious one; the only way to stop is to be ruthless about it. You can postpone the agony a bit, and you should do so, by proofreading, by checking the computations, by letting the manuscript ripen, and then by reading the whole thing over in a gulp, but you won't want to stop any more then than before.