

EMPIRICAL PAPER EDIT 2

In a copyediting course, I edited another student's paper, "Editing Clarity versus Politeness: Studying Editor-Writer Relationships within the Online Writing Community." Her research was aimed at helping other editors to effectively communicate corrections in their suggestions to authors while still being polite. After a round of edits and revisions, I edited her paper again, looking for ways to improve the paper's clarity and concision.

**Editing Clarity versus Politeness:
Studying Editor-Writer Relationships within the Online Writing Community**

ELANG 350: Basic Editing Skills

May 29, 2019

Commented [EE1]: Name removed from paper for author's privacy.

Introduction

An editor's job ~~includes notis not limited to~~ only editing, but also ~~includes~~ maintaining a good relationship with the writer. This presents an interesting dynamic within an editor's job, especially when opinions differ or the writer is resistant to change. Thus, editors must practice a balance of being both polite and clear because, as Carol Fisher Saller says, an editor's "first goal is merely to do no harm" to ~~eitherboth~~ the document ~~orand~~ the writer.¹ This ~~equilibrium~~ ~~balance~~ between politeness and clarity has been discussed many times in the editing world. I've had to ~~weigh the two qualities~~ ~~balance this myself~~ as a freelance editor, and I've also been on the receiving end of editorial comments as a writer. As an editor, I want my edits to be both clear and polite; as a writer, I want my work to improve and I want to feel comfortable with the editor's decisions. In a study done to explore this balance between clarity and politeness, authors Jo Mackiewicz and Kathryn Riley explain that editors "must *be clear* in conveying how a document should be changed, but they must also *be polite* to maintain good working relationships with writers."² Their study provides a list of different strategies to achieve both politeness and clarity in editorial comments, and has provided a basis for my own research of the editor and writer relationship within the ~~context~~ ~~dynamics~~ of clarity versus politeness.³

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Research Question

As a writer and reader with an online presence on Instagram, I've noticed that many writers ~~in my generation~~ are turning to self-publishing. This rise in self-publishing greatly affects freelance editors, who are often hired before a writer makes the plunge to self-publish their work

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¹ ~~Saller~~, Carol Fisher ~~Saller~~. *The Subversive Copy Editor* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 7. ~~italics in original.~~

² ~~Mackiewicz~~, Jo ~~Mackiewicz~~, and Kathryn Riley. 2003. "The Technical Editor as Diplomat: Linguistic Strategies for Balancing Clarity and Politeness." *Technical communication* 50, no. 1 (February 2003): 83.

³ Mackiewicz and Riley, "The Technical Editor," 92.

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online. Because I'm also a freelance editor, I've often wondered about the writer-freelancer relationship, especially when it comes to writers not yet published or not employed in writing-focused occupations. I have thus focused my study on this niche of writers for the purpose of discovering what kind of editor they prefer, and what kind of editorial comments they find are helpful. This feedback will aid me as I begin to establish my own freelance editing business among the online writing community. The rest of this paper will showcase the study I've conducted, as well as the results and insights I've gained.

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Methods

To gather my data for this study, I created an online, seven-question survey through Qualtrics to distribute to writing friends on my Instagram writing community. These friends are mostly between the ages of seventeen and thirty-five and all are avid writers who aim to publish their work in the future, ~~with a goal of future publication~~. They are also likely to hire freelance editors before self-publishing or submitting to an agent, making this study towards freelance editors relevant.

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In order to get an idea of how many writers hire freelance editors, I asked the survey respondents if they had ever hired an editor before and if they would hire an editor in the future. I then asked them to rank eight editorial comments (focusing on changing chapter heading font size) from the most clear to the least clear and then rank them from the most polite to the least polite. To keep the integrity of the study, ~~these sentences are similar to Mackiewicz and Riley's survey sentences~~ to keep the integrity of the study.⁴ At the end of the survey, I asked the participants which kind of editor they would prefer: (1) clear and direct—getting straight to the point, (2) polite—focusing more on complimenting and not offending, (3) suggesting—making

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⁴ Mackiewicz and Riley, "The Technical Editor," 92.

~~only all editorial comments are~~ suggestions or sharing personal opinions, or (4) a combination of all three—~~editing an editor who is~~ polite~~ly~~, get~~tings~~ straight to the point, and offer~~ings~~ suggestions. This was perhaps the most important question of my survey because it helped me know which kind of editor writers prefer. I then analyzed the data using Qualtrics's data analysis page and self-made graphs.

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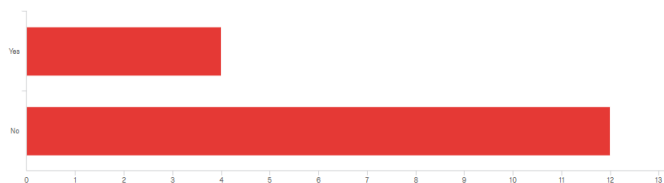
Results

Sixteen people responded to my survey: all female, and thirteen of them ~~were between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, which was~~ in my target age group (eighteen to thirty-five). The entirety of their responses can be found in the appendix, but I will discuss the most relevant findings here.

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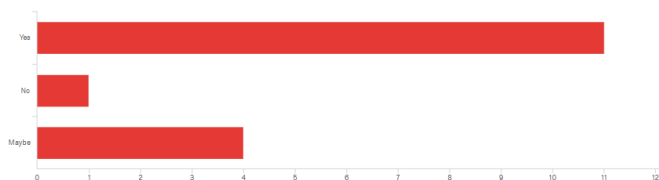
Of the sixteen people, twelve stated they had never hired an editor before, and eleven ~~out of sixteen~~ people said they would hire an editor in the future (see tables below).

Q1 - Have you hired an editor before?



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Q2 - Would you ever hire an editor?



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In their rankings of editorial comments from most clear to the least clear, a majority of participants (ten) ranked the following comment as the most clear: "Increase the font size in these chapter headings. That will make it easier for the reader to differentiate the chapter headings from the body text." as the most clear. Half of the participants put "You could increase the font size in these chapter headings. That's just a suggestion" as the least clear. There are many other variations in the ranking that are not statistically significant.

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In ranking editorial comments from the most polite to the least polite, the majority of participants (seven) rated "Using font size to differentiate between chapter headings and body text aids the reader's comprehension" as the most polite. Interestingly, seven people rated "You should probably increase the font size in these headings" as the least polite.

Commented [16]: I don't think this sentence needs to be included because it's easily inferred that there are other variations and that they were important that you'd discuss them.

Commented [17]: It did make me wonder though if the examples you just shared are statistically significant. If so, I would include that information.

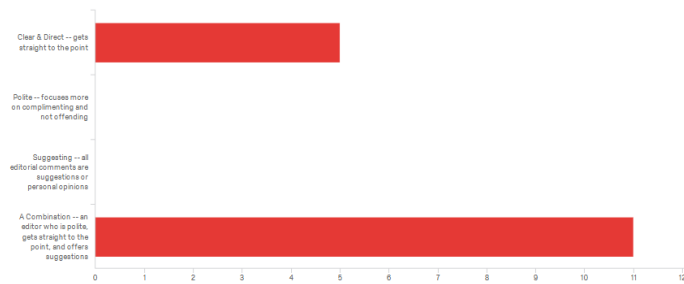
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In sum, the majority of these sixteen participants thought that the most direct editorial comments were the most clear, and that suggested editorial comments were the least clear. Most participants also rated the most vague comment as the most polite, with the comment using "should" as the least polite.

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The final question on the survey is perhaps the most telling of what kind of editor the participants prefer:

Q5 - Based on your rankings in the previous questions, which kind of editor would you prefer?



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Discussion

~~According to these sixteen writers on the online writing community, m~~Most of these sixteen writers reported that they hadn't ~~haven't~~ hired editors before, but would consider hiring one in the future. This is a hopeful result for freelance editors. The rest of the study is more telling about how freelance editors should tailor their comments to balance both clarity and politeness and achieve a good relationship with the writer.

It is not surprising that the most direct editorial comments are the ~~most clearest~~ and that suggestion comments came in as the least clear. ~~I think this is largely due to a writer's expectation of an editor's job. Editors are supposed to have all the answers, so w~~Writers expect ~~their comments, not suggestions,~~ to be both direct and clear, ~~and not suggestions~~. Suggesting editorial changes can ~~imply suggest~~ a lack of editor knowledge and confidence. Thus, editors must be clear when they edit, and only suggest when the edit could be optional.

Perhaps the most surprising part of the study is the politeness rankings. The participants ranked the editorial comment ~~that had with~~ no direct order as the most polite. Mackiewicz and Riley call this type of statement a “hint” and rank it as the least effective strategy in editorial commenting.⁵ Perhaps this is considered as the most polite because it does not contain an order or suggestion and doesn’t require the writer to do anything. More surprising is the ranking for the least polite: the “should” comment. Mackiewicz and Riley rank this as the second most effective strategy in editorial commenting, especially when including a downgrader like “probably.”⁶ However, a majority of my participants agree that this statement is the least polite, perhaps because “should” carries a negative, judgmental connotation. These findings are helpful for me as an editor. I’ve learned that it’s necessary to be direct in editorial comments, to only suggest things that are optional, and to avoid using the word “should” in my editorial comments.

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The last question in the survey about what kind of editors writers prefer is perhaps the most helpful to me. I’ve learned that clarity is the most important, but writers from the online writing community appreciate an editor who is multifaceted—who can be direct, polite, and offer suggestions when needed. I’m hoping that I can achieve all these ~~different~~ qualities as a freelance editor by paying attention to the content and connotations of my editorial comments. ~~By~~ And by doing this, I hope I can achieve a comfortable relationship with the writer and ultimately create a polished finished product.

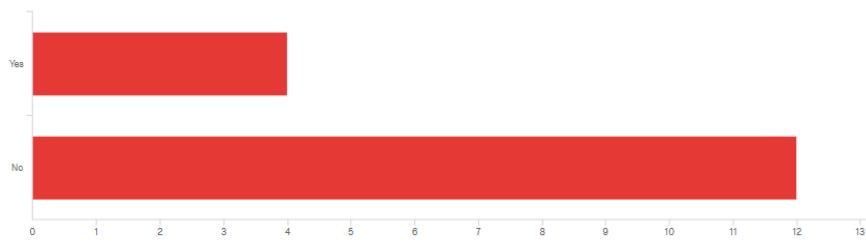
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⁵Mackiewicz and Riley, “The Technical Editor,” 92.
⁶Mackiewicz and Riley, “The Technical Editor,” 86.

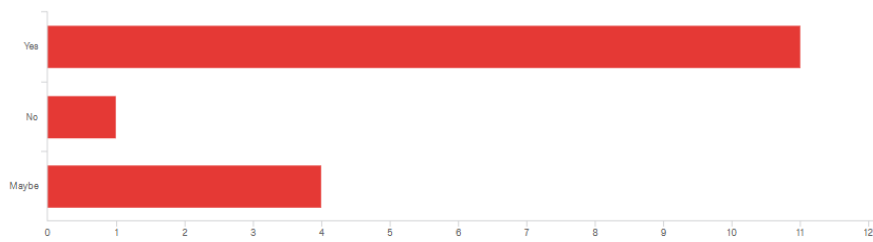
Appendix

Clarity versus Politeness in Editing

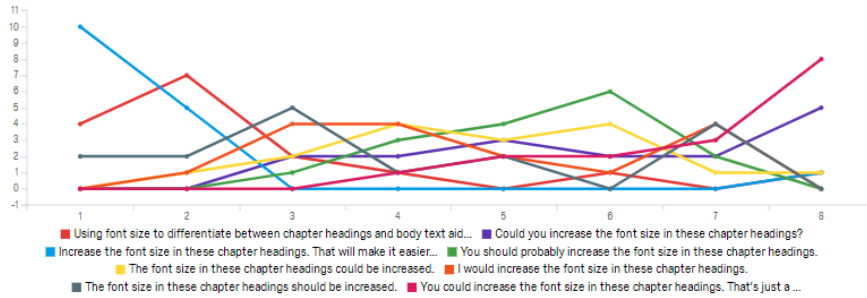
Q1 - Have you hired an editor before?



Q2 - Would you ever hire an editor?



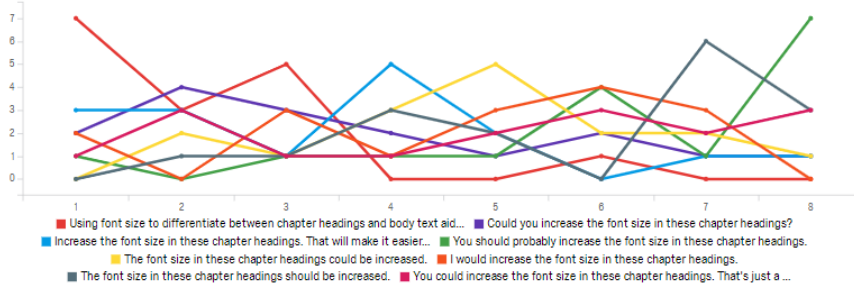
Q3 - Rank the following editorial comments in order from the most clear (1) to the least clear (8).



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Using font size to differentiate between chapter headings and body text aids the reader's comprehension.	1.00	8.00	2.63	1.87	3.48	16
2	Could you increase the font size in these chapter headings?	3.00	8.00	5.94	1.78	3.18	16
3	Increase the font size in these chapter headings. That will make it easier for the reader to differentiate the chapter headings from the body text.	1.00	8.00	1.75	1.68	2.81	16
4	You should probably increase the font size in these chapter headings.	3.00	7.00	5.31	1.10	1.21	16
5	The font size in these chapter headings could be increased.	2.00	8.00	4.88	1.54	2.36	16
6	I would increase the font size in these chapter headings.	2.00	7.00	4.63	1.65	2.73	16
7	The font size in these chapter headings should be increased.	1.00	7.00	3.94	2.08	4.31	16
8	You could increase the font size in these chapter headings. That's just a suggestion.	4.00	8.00	6.94	1.30	1.68	16

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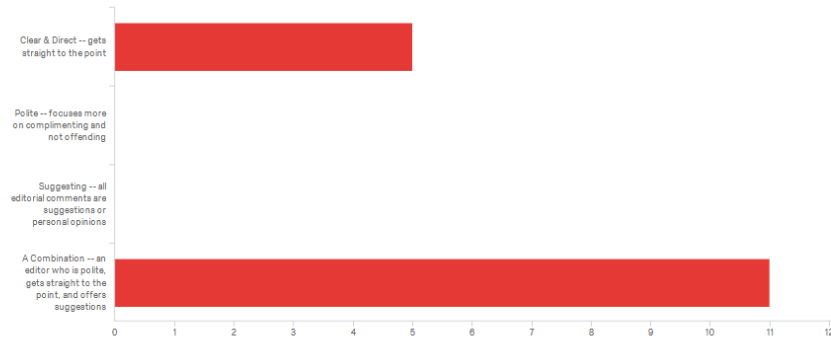
Q4 - Rate the following editorial comments in order from the most polite (1) to the least polite (8).



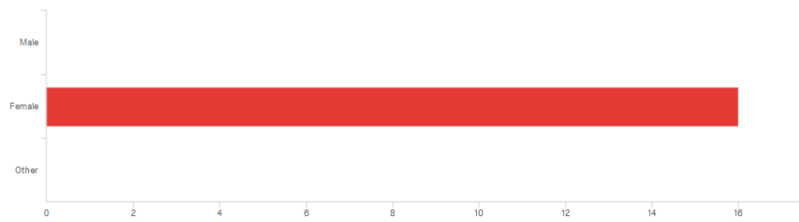
#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Using font size to differentiate between chapter headings and body text aids the reader's comprehension.	1.00	6.00	2.13	1.32	1.73	16
2	Could you increase the font size in these chapter headings?	1.00	8.00	3.69	2.08	4.34	16
3	Increase the font size in these chapter headings. That will make it easier for the reader to differentiate the chapter headings from the body text.	1.00	8.00	3.56	2.00	4.00	16
4	You should probably increase the font size in these chapter headings.	1.00	8.00	6.25	2.05	4.19	16
5	The font size in these chapter headings could be increased.	2.00	8.00	4.88	1.65	2.73	16
6	I would increase the font size in these chapter headings.	1.00	7.00	4.69	1.93	3.71	16
7	The font size in these chapter headings should be increased.	2.00	8.00	5.81	1.88	3.53	16
8	You could increase the font size in these chapter headings. That's just a suggestion.	1.00	8.00	5.00	2.32	5.38	16

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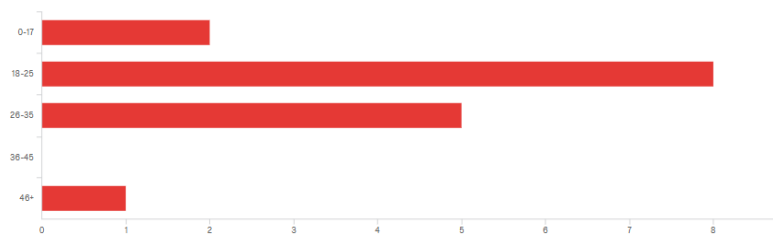
Q5 - Based on your rankings in the previous questions, which kind of editor would you prefer?



Q6 - What is your gender?



Q7 - What is your age?



Bibliography~~Reference List~~

Mackiewicz, Jo, and Kathryn Riley. ~~2003~~. "The Technical Editor as Diplomat: Linguistic Strategies for Balancing Clarity and Politeness." *Technical communication* 50, no. 1

(February 2003): 83.

Saller, Carol Fisher. *The Subversive Copy Editor* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 7.

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