Writing from the Inside: Copy Editing at the *Hawaii Review*

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**Abstract**

Copy editors are often described as the invisible people who are responsible for checking facts and catching errors in writing mechanics; however, copyediting is a precise art that is a necessary part of any quality publication. This memoir focuses on my experience as a copy editor for the literary journal *Hawaii Review*, and explores not only what copy editing entails, but what it means to be a writer. Through this piece, I hope to offer readers a glimpse into my work and my thought processes, demonstrating the interrelatedness of work, ambition, and memory.
Tuesday afternoon, 12:15:

Maybe I’m too critical. I mean, they liked it. I look at the text I’ve just scribbled on the submission sheet: *Well-written, but a little lengthy. Not sure if it fits the Hawaii Review aesthetic??*

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Once, in giving advice on how to write a thesis, a guest lecturer at one of my honors classes advised us to read. *Read really good writing,* he said, *like the New Yorker or the Atlantic. But you also need humor. Something to loosen you up.*

My English teachers have been saying that good readers make good writers for as long as I can remember. It’s true, I think. I’ve always had an intimate relationship with books, falling in love with the glossy covers and the pretty words and characters that seemed more real than any of the flesh and blood people who populated my life. Chronically lonely and afraid to speak, I found a voice first through reading, then through writing. I wanted to be a writer. I *had* to be a writer. It was the only real dream I ever had. But now...what am I? A full-time student, and a copy editor. I haven’t written anything other than critical analyses for nearly two years.

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In a 2009 interview, when asked, “What qualities make a person a good candidate for copy editing?” Mary Norris of the *New Yorker* replied,

  *Self-doubt. It’s always good, before changing something, to stop and wonder if this is a mistake or if the writer did this for a reason. When you’ve read a piece five or more times, it is tempting to believe that it must be perfect, but you have to stay alert for anything you might have missed. (“Copy Editing”)*

Self-doubt is what I’m good at. Perhaps I really *am* meant to be a copy editor.

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“Quiet” is the term people have used to describe me since kindergarten. I wish I could say they were wrong, but that would be lying. I sit silently through classes and take notes, drawing black ballpoint webs in the margins, trying to take up as little space as possible. This is why I never would have applied for a position at *Hawaii Review* if Donovan hadn’t asked. I generally avoid leadership-type positions as I have issues with small talk (and even more with big talk), and absolutely hate attention. But Donovan
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asked me to apply. He asked me to apply via Facebook message. He asked me to apply because we were in the same creative writing class two years earlier, and he remembered me. He needed a staff, and I needed lines on my CV, so I signed up for an interview. Three weeks later, I received an email:

Hi Kelsey!
I just wanted to let you know you've been selected to be a new Copy Editor for Hawaii Review! I hope you're still interested! There will be another Copy Editor, her name's Maria Kanai and she's from Japan. If you're free anytime next week and can meet up at the HR office, let me know. There's a tax form that needs to be signed, but it's not super urgent. Hope classes have gone well!!

See you soon,
Donovan
[Wednesday, July 7, 2010 2:58 pm]

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I put down the pen, return the fiction submission to its “in-progress” tray. I’m usually alone on Mondays. Tuesdays, Donovan is here, typing away on his laptop, drafting proposals and making copies—I don’t envy his position as editor in chief. He attends board meetings and designs the issue layout, sets deadlines and makes sure everyone is doing his or her job. Such responsibility intimidates me.

I log on to one of the bulky Dell computers with its horrible, slow Internet, and check the email. Hawaii Review has a Gmail account that we use to communicate with authors, receive new submissions, and correspond with other staff members, advisors, and volunteers. There is specific list of actions I move through as I sit here in the office, scrolling through email:

Look for emails marked “New Submission”
Download and print the attachment plus cover letter
Label the email “Logged and Printed”
Paperclip the new submission, the cover letter, and a submission reading sheet
Fill out the submission reading sheet (date, author’s name, title, genre)
Log on to Zoho (a submissions management database)
Enter data regarding the new submission (name, date, genre, contact info, etc.)
Place pieces in the “new fiction” or “new poetry” trays
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And repeat.

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So what is the *Hawaii Review*? Here is the technical answer, straight from the website:

> Founded in 1973, Hawai'i Review is a student run bi-annual literary journal featuring national, international, as well as regional literature of Hawai'i and the Pacific. We are published by the Board of Publications at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. We feature fiction, poetry, essays, interviews, and reviews from both established and emerging writers. Hawai'i Review is a member of the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines, and indexed by the Humanities International Index, the Index of American Periodical Verse, Writer's Market, and Poet's Market.

Yeah, we're pretty professional. I mean, this is a *real* journal. Not like the high school *Ka Wai Ola* that I was published in years ago. The *Hawaii Review* is resume-quality.

According to the official *Hawaii Review* description, we publish fiction, poetry, and nonfiction, but there's no specific instruction about what *kinds* of fiction or poetry we publish. I suppose the unspoken rule is that we cater to local and Pacific literature because we are the *Hawaii* Review, after all. But maybe that isn't true. We receive submissions from many local writers, but we also receive submissions from writers in New York, California, and Connecticut that take on topics with no relation to Hawaii or the Pacific. So what do we publish? Whatever the editors deem worthy of publication. But there's no doubt that a screenplay on London street life would seem out of place next a poem written in pidgin.

At least we're not an electronic publication. There's something I love about a printed journal, or a printed book. Somehow, I find that electronic publications lack character. Or maybe I'm just tactile.

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The last electronic submission finished, I move on to rejections. I already sent out the final acceptance letters last week, so all that's left is to notify the mountainous stack of people that they haven't been accepted. There is a folder full of generic rejection letters on the shelf by the door. They read:

> Dear Contributor,
Thank you very much for your interest in the Hawai’i Review and for taking the time and effort to send us your work.

Although your submission has not been accepted for publication, we wish you well in submitting your work to other publications and appreciate your continued interest in the Hawai’i Review.

Sincerely,
Editors
Hawaii Review
Department of English
University of Hawai’i at Mānoa

You always know you’ve been rejected when you receive a thin envelope in the mail. Acceptances are always emailed, unless no email address is provided. We send out publication agreement forms and request electronic copies of accepted pieces. But rejections, those don’t require email-urgency.

I pick up a stack of rejected submissions, detach their self-addressed-stamped-envelopes, and fill them with our thin rejections to be sent out in tomorrow’s mail.

It’s funny how work can intersect so sharply with your personal life. Mailing rejections feels oddly ironic after a lifetime of hiding (running) from rejection.

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Deciding how to sort submissions into these various piles is an interesting process. Almost every submission sheet has mixed reviews; two people like it, one doesn’t. Very rarely is the decision unanimous. You read a story and just know if it works. Some are too long or too short. Others have pretty writing but no plot. Some simply don’t make sense. Everyone has different preferences. What scares me is that my opinion actually matters, that I play some small part in assessing what is good and what isn’t. I wonder, am I really qualified for this?
Copyediting is a dying art, apparently. A 2008 article published in the New York Times notes that copyediting has been placed in the News History section of the Newseum in Washington. It seems that the death of print newspapers also means the death of the copy editors and other nonessentials. But maybe copy editors are more essential than you (and I) think. The author of the New York Times and former copyeditor writes,

> Copy editors handle the final transition to an ink-on-paper object. [...] Copy editors are the last set of eyes before yours. They are more powerful than proofreaders. They untangle twisted prose. They are surgeons, removing growths of error and irrelevance; they are minimalist chefs, straining fat. Their goal is to make sure that the day's work of a newspaper staff becomes an object of lasting beauty and excellence once it hits the presses. (Downes)

It’s funny to think of my job as important; I always believed that the real heroes of publications were the authors themselves, people whose names appear in print, whose words appear in neat typeface on the page. And editors-in-chief are those whose opinions matter. But copy editors...no one knows who we are. We check grammar and punctuation and look for minor lapses in otherwise fluid prose.

But maybe, just maybe, I have more influence than I think.

I never could keep a journal. I used to purchase notebooks and tell myself that I would write every day. I meant to, I really did. But I said that about many things: ballet, gymnastics, art, piano—my childhood is a giant memory of failed extracurriculars. Journaling is just one more on the list. But I did want to be a writer. It was the only thing I was ever really good at. In preschool I made books out of my father’s yellow legal pad and scribbled “words” on the pages. I had beautiful journals covered in dark velvet that ended up in the Salvation Army box. But I can’t call myself a writer, and I don’t think I ever will. The term “writer” implies skill and publication and earnings, and is just way more than what I am.

I have distinct memories of tearing pages out of my journal in fourth grade because my handwriting wasn’t pretty enough. I guess I’ve always had issues with perfection. The only journals I have ever kept consistently were for classes. I still have
one, from my senior year of high school. It’s standard red spiral with a bent cover and creased pages. Inside, I write:

*Why is it so hard to say what I think without thinking about each word, and editing it in my head? (9.8.06)*

Rejection pile dwindling, I turn to my last (and most important) duty: copyediting. I am a copy editor. This means I read over accepted pieces and look for grammatical errors, clarification issues—anything that needs revision. It’s a delicate process, I am told. Every change must be approved by the author, and every suggestion communicated respectfully. But reading over my first assignment, I can’t find anything wrong; the grammar is perfect. The story is brief, engaging. So I panic now, and wonder if there’s something I’m missing, if my lack of experience will become painfully obvious when I approve this piece as is when the other editors would suggest changes. But I can’t just make up errors. That would be crazy. I wonder, *am I a bad copy editor?*

I check the time on the computer: 9:35. Forty minutes left. I pick up a pile of new fiction submissions and start reading.

Usually, volunteers read submissions; I read them only when all my other work is done. Volunteers stop by the office and pick up stacks of fiction and poetry, signing them out on a clipboard pinned to the shelf. Attached to the front of each cover letter is an evaluation sheet with five boxes. After reading the piece, the evaluator circles either “Yes,” “No,” or “?” and write comments in the blank space below.

There is something strange about sitting amongst piles of other people’s work, sifting through accepted pieces and knowing that I’m helping someone else be published. I wanted to write novels, short stories, poetry, creative nonfiction, essays—all of it. To see my name in print would provide the validation that I cannot seem to find anywhere else. Measuring one’s self-worth by a single medium is a dangerous thing. I know this; I’ve done it before, but not with writing. Oh, obsessive tendencies.

*I graduated from Punahou in 2007. I think this is important. No other place has shaped me more than that school. This is where I learned how write. This is where I learned how to hide. This is where I learned how to be strong. This is where I learned*
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that you are never as smart as you think (hope) you are. With great privilege comes great responsibility, they like to say.

Imagine: you sit in a class of thirteen other seniors on soft blue couches in the oldest building on campus. Houseplants line plantation-style windows and there are Christmas tree lights draped across the whiteboard. A portable popcorn maker is on the table. You are holding a stack of writing—yours and your classmates’—and you have never felt so inferior. They write with such clarity, with such distinct language. They write fearlessly—about sex, drugs, love, alcohol-induced epiphanies, and distant fathers. But you, the teacher says, you write safe.

What I hear: You live safe.

It is three years later, in the same creative writing class that I share with Donovan, that I first attempt to take a risk. My prompt is the Bodies exhibit I saw at Ala Moana the other week. On a blank Word document one October evening, I write my opening paragraph:

There are 206 bones, roughly 600 muscles, and over 60,000 miles of blood vessels in the human body. Upon learning facts like these, I always wonder who took the time to dissect and inventory a person this way, cutting into arteries and cataloging each section of the brain. There is value in knowing the mechanisms of the heart, and how the rods and cones in our eyes absorb and convert light, translating images so we can understand. But for all the hollow tubes and layers of flesh, we come apart so easily. [October 29, 2008]

Once, admired sportswriter Walter Wellesley said, “There’s nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein.” Recently, I have learned to split my veins and let some of myself leak out. But it is definitely not easy.

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I used to believe that good writing meant good imagery, and so populated my poems and short stories with lengthy descriptions and pretty words. Writing about real things—that was off-limits. And then I took a creative nonfiction class as a freshman at the University of Hawaii, and realized that no one in the class knew who I was, and sometimes, it’s easier to share yourself with strangers than with people you know.
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Have you ever tried to write about the darkest moments of your life? It’s like reliving them all over again. I actually cried, you know. I was sitting in Sinclair Library at 1 AM on a Tuesday night, listening to my boyfriend’s electronic music, and flipping through printouts on anorexia nervosa, as if I could distance myself by reading medical discourses. And so I typed a horrendous 10-page piece and spent the next two weeks throwing out extra words and self-pity, wondering if I was even brave enough to turn it in. This is what writing is really like: attempting to package yourself in black ink and white paper, like those horrible 500-word college essays that are supposed to show admissions committees who you really are. You can make yourself crazy, staring at a dim computer screen, picking over every word and wondering if it’s the right one, telling yourself that it sucks, while secretly hoping that it doesn’t.

I don’t know when my obsession with writing began, but I think it has a lot to do with my teachers, with the glowing comments and red smiley faces on my seventh grade poems and eighth grade essays, and my consequent desire to consistently outperform myself. My papers were the only things I was really proud of; somehow, a perfect score on a math test just didn’t feel as rewarding as an A on a paper I’d worked on for hours. Math is rigid. Writing has infinite possibilities.

People who teach writing like to talk about voice, that special quality that makes writing believable and personal. Voice was even the topic of the first essay in my English 100 class. I write:

Voice can be found in virtually any role a person may assume, including artist or athlete, because voice is simply the visual manifestation of identity; it’s how we show who we are. And it is always changing. As we grow, and our identities shift from child to student to adult to parent, our voices also develop because identity is how we perceive ourselves, and how others perceive us. It represents what we desire to be, our perception of the ideal person, and as we age and gain knowledge through both experience and learning, the roles we envision ourselves in change. (September 18, 2007)

It’s funny, because I never really think about voice when I write. I just assume it’s one of those subconscious things that emerges through patterns of words, influenced by the books I love and the memories I carry. When I write, I hear (feel) the eight-year-old girl who pinches at her thighs and is afraid to raise her hand in class. But every once in a
while, I also feel the girl who walked alone along the Thames and caught late-night cabs in Japan. Writing just seems to bring everything out.

* 

Work has always been a solitary activity for me. My boyfriend likes to talk about his coworkers and the gossip they exchange as they blend mocha frappuccinos and refill the bake case, but I have no such stories. My first job was at Manoa Sushi where I ran the cash register, took out the trash, refilled the fridge, and made instant miso soup. But there was only one worker per shift, and I passed the time between customers by reading *The Fountainhead* behind the counter and flipping through radio stations.

Now, I sit alone in an office, reading and emailing and staring out the window. I don't know. Maybe I just live too much in my head.

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It seems there is a significant body of work that addresses the role of copy editor. Many of these essays are written by grateful authors and by copy editors themselves. Articles by Sylvia Hunter and Ann E. Aulman et al. argue that copyediting is a means of quality control, of achieving credibility, of saving authors from public humiliation via misspelled words. Yet, “Copyeditors, by and large, are invisible people” (Prucha 364).

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So what have I learned from my work life? There are practical skills: how to write formal emails and how to use a submissions database. I learned about the processes underlying a publication. And I have another line to paste onto my CV. I think of work as something I need to do, and if I don't have a job, then I'm falling behind.

It's hard to get out of bed some mornings, knowing I have an honors thesis to write and then three or four years of graduate school, and then maybe, a career. I don't know if that career will involve writing, but some small part of me hopes that it does.

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In the *New York Times* “Writers on Writing” column, Susan Sontag writes:

>You write in order to read what you've written and see if it's O.K. and, since of course it never is, to rewrite it -- once, twice, as many times as it takes to get it to be something you can bear to reread. You are your own first, maybe severest, reader.
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Perhaps all writers are insecure at times, and maybe it’s that very insecurity that makes some writers so good. But I need to learn how to let some things go, to write first and revise later. When I write, I have a horrible habit of spending an average of five hours on each page, reading and deleting and rewriting sentences. Even my rough drafts are not allowed to be rough. Often, the rough drafts I bring to class for workshops have already been revised three or four times. Everything produced is an extension of self, and I can’t let anyone see me stripped down. All the ugly broken parts I try so hard to cover up.

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As I pack up my bag and shut down the computer, I glance at the piles of writing stacked in their neat, compartmentalized trays on the shelf behind me. The rejection pile overshadows all others; it leans slightly to the right as if ready to fall. The acceptance pile is a lonely little thing—maybe two or three submissions thick. Typical.
Works Cited


