

Unit 5 : Presenting the subject matter

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Introduction

Once you are satisfied with the basic structure of a unit, you will start editing. What will you look for? First, how does the writer present the material? A writer will intend in her units:

- * to introduce each point in an interesting way;
- * to start with a point that readers will understand;
- * to explain each point clearly and accurately;
- * to cover points in a logical order;
- * to demonstrate the relationship between points.

The editor has to assess whether the writer has presented the subject thoroughly and accurately, so that the students will understand.

At the end of this unit you should be able to:

- * decide whether a writer has presented good explanations;
- * identify trouble spots;
- * hold a constructive discussion with the writer about problems in the text.

In this unit we shall examine together two samples of text, and you will practise identifying problems. While it is the writer's job to make the corrections, you must point out where the text is not clear. The unit will take about an hour to complete. The assignment may take a further one or two hours. It asks you to hold a discussion with writers.

3. What other points are made?

4. Is the presentation well-ordered?

(15 minutes)

Comment

This may remind you of a school comprehension exercise. The difference is that at school you are tested on your understanding. As an editor, when you do not understand, you must ask the writer to explain it better.

The main point of this passage occurs in the first sentence; "it is necessary to have a precise definition of an urban unit." Three kinds of definition are given. The first two are technical ones, one relating to local government structure and one relating to population density, and to illustrate the point, numbers of urban dwellers in Britain in 1951 are given. The third is a sociological one, and a quotation is given as an example. The passage goes on to mention some problems of urbanisation and some characteristics of cities.

The passage is unsatisfactory in several ways. First, the writer uses the word 'city' in the heading and 'urban unit' in the first, key sentence. Does he mean the same thing by these two terms? Or is an urban unit part of a city? This needs explaining. Second, he says we need a precise definition for social investigations but the passage does not provide one. The first paragraph describes different ways measurements of cities are made, but does not end with a definition, or even a statement of which measure the course will use. The second paragraph quotes another writer's definition, and we are not told whether the course writer thinks it's a good definition or not.

The two short paragraphs that follow do not seem related to the topic of the section, although they are interesting. So the section does not hang together. I think the writer means to cover two different questions: what is a city, and what sociological problems do cities present us. An editor could point out to him that he has not given a clear answer to the first question, and he has given a partial answer to the second but not asked it. This might prompt him to make a clearer statement. We have, of course, taken the passage out of context. Some of the criticisms might be unfair if we saw the complete text.

2. Pointing out difficulties to a writer

Many writers find it difficult to accept criticism, and are surprised to learn that their thoughts are not clearly expressed. The editor has to point out inconsistencies and omissions, and do so tactfully. The next exercise will help you approach this task. First, study Example 9. It is from a history lesson on British foreign policy 1902-14. Read it carefully and identify the trouble spots by underlining them or putting a mark in the margin.

LESSON 2

British Foreign Policy 1902-14 and The Causes of the First World War

- A. Essential Reading: Isaac, P. 66-77 (2nd edition)
Teed, P. 69-83
- B. Supplementary Reading: M.R.D. Foot, British Foreign Policy
Since 1898, P.9-52

The End of Splendid Isolation: the Anglo-Japanese Alliance (1902)

"Splendid Isolation" is the policy we associate with Lord Salisbury, who was Prime Minister until 1902. Even he, at the end of the nineteenth century, was making approaches to other powers to form an alliance.

Agreement with France was made impossible by the Fashoda Incident (1898) when Kitchener forced the withdrawal of a French force which had trekked nearly 3000 miles across Africa and was claiming the Upper Nile Valley for France. France eventually gave way after Kitchener garrisoned Fashoda but the incident nearly brought the two countries to war. Germany under the Kaiser showed a marked hostility.

Agreement with Russia was spoilt by events in China, for in 1900 Russia had seized Port Arthur and occupied Manchuria.

Unable to find an ally in Europe, in 1902 Britain signed an alliance with Japan. The Alliance stated:

- (i) Japan guaranteed British interests in China and the Pacific
- (ii) Britain recognised Japan's right to Korea
- (iii) If either country were attacked by one power, the other country would remain neutral
- (iv) If either country were attacked by more than one power, then the other country would immediately be involved.

EXAMPLE 9: From 'History GCE 'O' level, National Extension College, UK, 1965, Volume 1, p.24

EXERCISE 2

Imagine you as editor are talking to the writer and describe the problems as clearly as you can. Make notes on what you would say. Remember that if you do not understand the passage clearly, neither will the students.

(15 minutes)

Comment

There is a major shortcoming to this passage, and that is lack of information. What is 'splendid isolation'? Why did Britain want to start making formal alliances? Very little information is given about the background to relations with France, less about Russia and only 8 words about Germany. We do not know why Japan was prepared to make an alliance when others weren't, nor are we told why it was of any use to either side. What we have here is bones with no meat on them. It is a set of notes, not a full explanation.

There is some reading the students must do in their textbooks. We are not told how the notes relate to the reading. How much are the students meant to learn? With what purpose?

It is difficult to see how to approach the writer. The point to stress is that the text must be much fuller, but, as this is a major criticism, you have to do it tactfully. I would start by saying that it is a clear summary, but students would need to know what 'splendid isolation' was, and why the British wanted to change the policy. We would discuss that first, and then go on to the other points. I would hope that the writer would see for himself that the text was inadequate, without becoming upset or defensive in the process.

You may have found these two exercises rather difficult. That will be partly because you are looking at examples out of context. You will find it easier to pick out problems when you are working on a complete unit.

3. Using a textbook

Many academic courses are built round a textbook, as in Example 9. In such cases, the textbook is normally expected to provide most of the explanations and examples, while the distance-teaching text is more of a commentary with exercises. Such a text is often called a study guide.

The commentary, as we saw above, must be more than just notes. It should:

Before reading

- * give clear instructions about what is to be read

- * indicate the main points to look for
- * give hints on taking notes, if necessary

After reading

- * explain key points
- * comment on or elaborate the argument
- * explain technical vocabulary
- * check that the student has understood, usually with an exercise

4. Copyright

Often a writer will include extracts or quotations from textbooks or articles in her units. She may also include pictures, diagrams or maps taken from other books. When suitable material exists, it is a good idea to use it. But such material is normally copyright material. This means that only the copyright holder (publisher, author or illustrator) may reproduce the material freely, and anyone else must seek permission to do so. (The copyright laws vary from country to country. You will have to check the terms of the law in your own country.)

To get permission to use copyright material, we have to write to the publisher and ask. This is usually the editor's job. As you have to seek permission to use every extract longer than a sentence or two and every illustration, it is useful to have a standard letter. In the sample below, the main text is standard, while underlined parts vary with each letter.

Copyright letter

People's Education Centre

21 December 1985

The Rights Officer
Best Books Company

Dear Sir

The People's Education Centre is publishing a text called Nutrition for Everyone. It is for adult students and will be distributed free to all registered students or groups in the country. We would like to include in the text the following material:

Figure 1, p.93, from E Bunn, 'Food for All', 1982 Edition. (A photocopy is enclosed for reference).

We shall acknowledge the source of the material. I hope that you will grant permission.

Yours sincerely

M. Stirling

M Stirling
Senior Editor

It can take a long time to identify copyright holders and get replies from them. You have to act early, taking the following steps:

- a. for each extract or picture, ask the writer to provide you with exact details of the source (author, book, publisher, date, page number).
- b. write to the publisher. If no reply, write again.
- c. compose a list of acknowledgements (usually placed on the back of the title page).

You will find it helpful to open a copyright file for any course where there are more than one or two items.

It is most unusual for copyright permission to be refused for use of extracts or pictures in educational texts. Sometimes a small charge will be levied, particularly for using photographs.

5. Some problems

It is time consuming to examine the entire text as we did in Exercises 1 and 2. In fact, you will never have time to do it all, nor do you need to. Instead, you need to get the habit of picking out key passages and checking them. The function of such analysis is not to produce a perfectly argued text - you will never get that anyway - but to alert the writer to passages that are less successful than others. In fact, once some points have been identified, the writer becomes aware of the kind of woolliness or jerkiness he or she is prone to, and will make efforts to improve.

You will not spot all the flaws. A different editor will see different ones, and you yourself will see more each time you go through the text. You may have noticed points I missed as you did exercises 1 and 2. If you miss something, do not feel you have done the job badly. It is never possible to remove all imperfections.

When you raise questions about the content of the text, who rewrites, you or the writer? Normally, it should be the writer. In the process of making amendments, the writer may see other problems, or may decide a whole topic needs presenting in a different way. But sometimes it will help the writer if you offer suggestions. Instead of noting in the margin, 'Change the example', you could write, 'The example you have given here is a good one, but perhaps outside your readers' experience. Perhaps you could include instead a more relevant one, such as ...'. Suggestions will help the writer to think more quickly and constructively.

Finally, you could worry that you are being too fussy. Indeed, the writer could challenge you: 'Why do you want more examples? My class students usually follow this all right. And the students should be able to think for themselves and fill in the gaps. I am not prepared to spoonfeed them.' This is a reasonable point of view, and it is difficult to judge what is the right amount of information and help to offer to students. Two points will help you decide. First, distant students may have no access to information beyond the course. They may have no books of their own or no library to refer to. It is in such cases necessary to include sufficient facts and information in the course. If you do not, you put the most isolated students at a disadvantage.

Second, and more difficult to resolve, is the question of how far arguments and explanations should be laid out in detail. The writer may want students to learn to think for themselves and draw their own conclusions. A thorough exposition may get long and boring. It may help to realise that students often need a lot of help in processing information and selecting key points. What the writer sees as a reasonable challenge could be an insuperable barrier to the student. It is easy to underestimate difficulty.

Summary

We have identified several ways in which a text may be difficult to understand. A writer may have written something different from what was intended. The argument may be in a muddled order, or the presentation incomplete, or the examples irrelevant to the students. The text may lack explicit distinction between main and subsidiary points.

We have also discussed the use of textbooks and copyright material.

I have suggested that you should check key passages for inconsistencies and omissions, and point these out to the writer and ask for amendments. You should also raise questions, even when you are not sure that there is a problem. Be prepared to make the case for comprehensive, explicit texts, given the known difficulties of distant students. If textbooks are used, make sure that the study guide gives clear directions on reading and contains enough explanation. If copyright material is used, start seeking permission to use it as early as possible.

ASSIGNMENT D

For this assignment, you will need a course unit or text similar to those you will normally be working on. You could use the same one that you used for Unit 4.

Read through your unit, mark any particularly good explanations, and mark unsatisfactory ones. Mark relevant examples, and poor ones. Think how you would improve the presentation.

Spend up to one hour on this. By this time, you should have picked out a few problems from part of the unit. There is no need to go through the whole unit in detail (unless you particularly want to).

When you have done this, arrange a meeting with the writer, or find another experienced course writer or editor, and ask them to act the part of the writer. Hold a discussion for 30 minutes to an hour, bringing up each of the problems you have noted. Explain to your partner that you want their help in developing your editing skills.

In your discussion, concentrate on making points concisely and in a way that encourages your partner to make positive changes. You must be clear, firm, but not threatening. You will find this a demanding but rewarding exercise.