Effective Onscreen Editing:
New tools for an old profession (3rd edition)
by Geoff Hart

Reviewed by Dave Gardiner who found the unexpected – it was far more useful than he thought it would be.

"If you believed that editing involves nothing more profound than correcting typographical errors and changing words or phrases to suit your personal taste or the dictates of someone's style guide, you wouldn't be reading this book. (Also, your editorial career would be short and inglorious.)". Geoff Hart.

This is the second of Geoff Hart's books I've reviewed, and I wish I'd had it when I started editing. As a technical writer, going by the title, you might think that the book will tell you what you already know, such as using 'track changes'. But it is much more than that. While focusing on how to most effectively use Microsoft Word for Windows and Mac, there are few screenshots. Geoff makes it clear that because the interface of each version of Word changes, it is not worth including screenshots. Instead, there are nearly 800 pages of sage advice that you can (and should) apply regardless of which writing tools you use.

Good technical writing largely comes down to having good editing skills. It's assumed you've learned the basics of editing, but need to know how to apply those skills in practice. What you learn here is neatly summed up in 18 chapters covering the areas of mastering editing tools, identifying and overcoming barriers, coping with the human factor, and implementing on-screen editing.

What struck me as the most useful were several chapters on how to run your business and deal with authors – the *human* aspects of editing. For example, from engaging with authors to negotiating pay, working remotely, backing up files, overcoming resistance to onscreen editing, solving problems with software setup and workflows, and backing up files (again). It is all great information for anyone who is setting up a business and wants to know the tricks and traps.

A chapter on personalising Word is meant to make you more productive, especially with nifty keyboard shortcuts and toolbars, which are far quicker than hunting around ribbons. Throughout are examples of the quirks of each version of Word, and how to work around problems you encounter – "*However, Word doesn't always cooperate; see Chapter 10 for suggestions…*"

Chapters on moving around documents, revision tracking and using search tools are meant to make you more efficient and to achieve consistency.

"Consistency is something readers never notice − until they trip over an inconsistency." There is a good discussion on style sheets as a way to achieve consistency in terms, spelling, and the author's voice. A detailed overview of issues to include, and using style sheets, is supplemented by a brief section on Simplified English and controlled vocabularies. As a technical writer, it would have been good to see a more in-depth exploration of this topic.

Macros are given treatment as a way to automate your edits, and you're warned to be aware of the limitations in grammar and spelling checkers. It was good to see some discussion of markup languages (HTML, XML) – these are not typically what come to mind with onscreen editing, but you need to know how to pick your way through tagging and content when faced with markup.

A chapter on using the internet as an editing resource lists style and grammar guides, as well as reference databases like Google Scholar (which I've found very useful when confirming wording of extracts in publications). And Geoff shows us how to consult online resources before approaching the author with any queries.

The appendices provide a good wrap-up of overall editing strategy, with '*Troubleshooting Microsoft Word*' alerting you to problems like: can't type symbol characters; and Normal.dotm template has been changed.

There's also a glossary and bibliography of reference material that you can add to your own library. The book certainly imparts many years of editing experience and the author doesn't hold back on what works, what doesn't, and how to get around problems.

This book was donated for review by Geoff Hart.

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