SHARPENING THE STORY

WORKING WITH WRITERS TO GET
TO THE HEART OF IT ALL

GOAL

To help editors better work with writers to get the story.
The one with oomph.

ABOUT ME

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In 2023, the print edition received the first place prize from the Evangelical Press Association in its category.

She is based in Los Angeles, where she lives with her husband, baby and West Highland Terrier.

WEBINAR AGENDA

01   Intro

02   Questions to consider when beginning editing process

03   Situations you might encounter in your editing life

04   Things to think about when working with writers to sharpen stories

05   Telling person-first stories

06   The fun stuff (where the magic happens)

07   Delivering feedback

08   Q+A

INTRO

- You're an editor, so you're working with writers
- You know this is a team sport

 How do we get the best stories possible that meet our publications' content aims?

"There are probably a number of ways to tell your story right, and someone else may be able to tell you whether or not you've found one of these ways."

Anne Lamott, "Bird by Bird"

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN BEGINNING EDITING PROCESS:

Big question: **Who is this for?**

Do you have a **specific person** in mind?

Other important questions:
- What do I want readers to know?
- What do I want readers to feel?
- What is the call to action?

If you're clear on your why, you'll be clear on where you're headed

EDITING BRINGS CLARITY

Editing helps ensure a clean translation from writer's brain to reader's brain

Good=Undetectable

SITUATIONS YOU MAY ENCOUNTER IN YOUR EDITING LIFE:

Situation 1:

If you ideate story concept and it comes back so so

Situation 2:

If you have a submission you didn't ideate but need to improve upon

Situation 3:

If someone else ideates but you assign (i.e. freelancer), but it still needs some help

GUIDELINES FROM EPA

-Stay professional in all interactions

-Remember the Golden Rule

GENERAL THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN WORKING WITH WRITERS

Stay calm

Sit on your hands for the first read!

Consider:

What jumped out at me the most?
What was the most memorable?

Ask:

How are we moving the reader along?
Did I get stuck/distracted anywhere?

A WORD OF CAUTION: PERSON-FIRST STORIES

02 Be wary of "Single Story"

01 Keep eye out for language that could cause more harm than good

"Single stories can have significant negative impact. They can rob people of their dignity, and emphasize how we are different rather than how we are similar."

-Novelist Chimamanda Adichie's [Powerful Ted Talk](#)

Often we are privileged to share stories from people whose lives are very different from ours and it can be tempting to make it a simple, clean, familiar narrative

But we're not looking to repeat tired tropes... ask:
- What's timely about this piece? Any news pegs?
- What's different in this story?
- How is it changing the narrative?
- How are things good?
- What challenges exist?
- How can readers come alongside this work in a respectful way?
- What should they do with the info?

THE FUN STUFF!
(WHERE THE MAGIC HAPPENS)

In polishing the story, we get to the good stuff—the ultimate aim of why we had someone write the thing
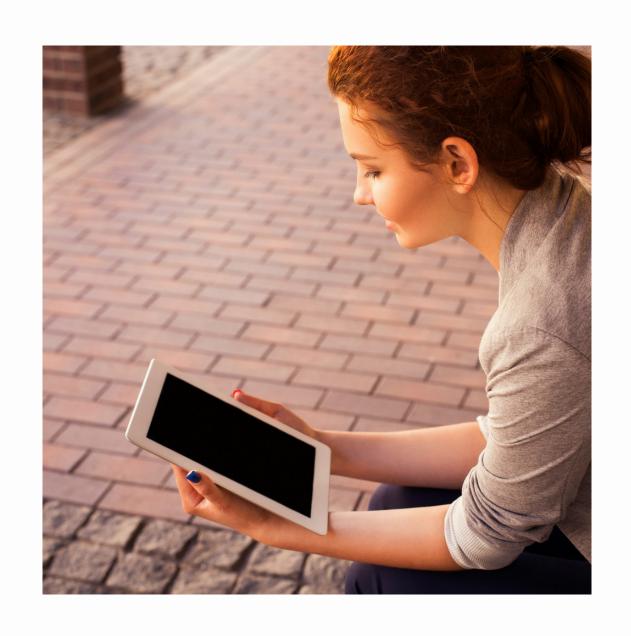
Check the nutgraf

- What are the story's proclaimed aims?
- How can we boost them throughout the story?
- Opportunity to strategize

Highlight strengths

- How can we highlight what is already there that is helping?
- What can be deleted?
- Make every word count

Good>better

- Show vs. tell
- Stronger word choice
- Cut excess words (1/3)

FUN STUFF: CONTINUED

Revisit: What do we want people to feel?

- What felt needs does the piece address?
- What examples point to shared humanity?
- How will readers be moved to the next step after reading the story?

DELIVERING FEEDBACK

- Fun part of being an editor is delivering feedback

- When giving feedback, psychologist Adam Grant says to avoid compliment sandwich

- Instead: "I'm giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and I know that you can reach them."

- I try to only make changes to a piece that I can support with explainable rationale/clear reasoning ... this translates to what Grant says.

- When I raise areas of concern, I can communicate along those lines... "I believe this should change because of x, and I believe you can get there."
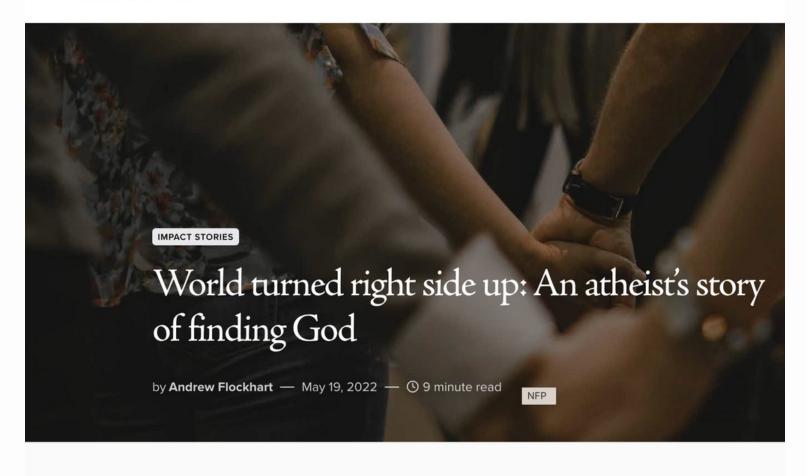
BACK TO THOSE SITUATIONS...

When story comes back that needs some help:

- Pinpoint areas of needed improvement
- If it's someone on my team, we'll often talk it out!
- I use Google Drive, so I like to leave comments on the document
- I then write a short recap email before sending story back to the writer
- Try to keep revision rounds brief

When you didn't ideate it, but it needs help:

- If internal news that is not sensitive, I make the changes
- If sensitive, follow extra protocols that might require additional sets of eyes on the piece
- If written by leader/other key internal voice, I'l make changes and send it over for review to make sure it still aligns with their vision (usually does, just want to cover the bases)

EXAMPLE: TESTIMONY

- Internal writing submission
- Shared his testimony and was encouraged to submit for publication
- Testimony=entire life story
- Part that grabbed my attention? Conversion at the airport
- Suggested we start the story there, which cut the story in half
- He agreed and we did a light edit to the rest
- Later, we used it again with updates, which he added
- Top 10 stories on *Caring* that year

CAN THE READER SEE WHAT THE WRITER SEES?