

Red Pen COMMUNICATIONS

Your message. Better.

Hello,

You may have seen this advice from writer James Ellroy on the Red Pen Communications web site:

You have to read, read, read, read, read, read, read, read, and read. As you read, unconsciously you assimilate the rudiments of style and technique.

And, might I add, editing.

Bad editing is easy to spot, in the form of mistakes and murkiness in the prose. Good editing is almost invisible because it removes those obstacles without calling attention to itself. If you've finished reading an article without tripping over typos, snagging on bad syntax or being caught in generally unclear language, you can usually thank the editor.

So what should we read to absorb good editing? The daily newspaper used to be a good place to start, but copy editing has been choked by tight budgets in many newsrooms. Even nationally syndicated copy, right up to the level of the AP, is afflicted with subject/verb disagreement, wrong homonyms, over-reliance on slang and jargon, and a host of other ills, which aren't trivial. They affect meaning and leave the reader confused.

Good magazines, in print or online, still employ good editing. But glossy paper and snazzy web design don't always indicate careful attention to the message. Two large and directly competing businesses in my city send visually beautiful magazines. One is very well produced top to bottom, but the other is so riddled with typos and clumsy language it is (or should be) an embarrassment to the institution.

I regularly read *Time*, *Ms.*, and *Prevention*. I appreciate *Time* for the rigor of its reporting as well as the vigor of its prose. *Ms.* artfully applies editorial vision and standards to material widely divergent in form, geography, topic and style. I confess to reading *Prevention* mainly for the food and nutrition articles, but it's also interesting as an exemplar of Rodale publications--the voice and viewpoint is unmistakable across many mastheads. (Quite coincidentally, Rodale publishes *The Synonym Finder*, a serviceable alternative to Roget.)

What do you read, in particular for the quality of wordcraft? [Send your favorites](#) and the reasons why; we'll report back here and on the Red Pen site.

Until next time—

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