Coping with Wordslaughter and the "Good Enough" Syndrome

By Bradford R. Connatser
Senior Member
East Tennessee Chapter

MARK SHAVER/LAUGHING STOCK

Editor's note: While the author did not submit this article for our trends issue, it offers technical writers tools to deal with an unfortunate but all too familiar trend—management's efforts to keep costs down during these tough economic times. Skills in sticking to a budget and raising management's awareness of your work will be critical until that trend turns around.

As a veteran technical writer and editor in a small engineering firm, I've experienced my share of disappointment over technical reports passed on to clients. These reports are disappointing in the sense that I cannot claim them with pride, they cannot be entered in a publications contest, and they certainly cannot be entered into my portfolio. Yet for our clients, they served their purposes. They were good enough.

"It doesn't have to be beautiful," an engineer once told me, speaking about a report he wanted me to edit cheaply.

"Did you hear about the 1999 Mars Climate Orbiter?" I asked. "It crashed because English units were not properly translated into metric units in the software specifications."

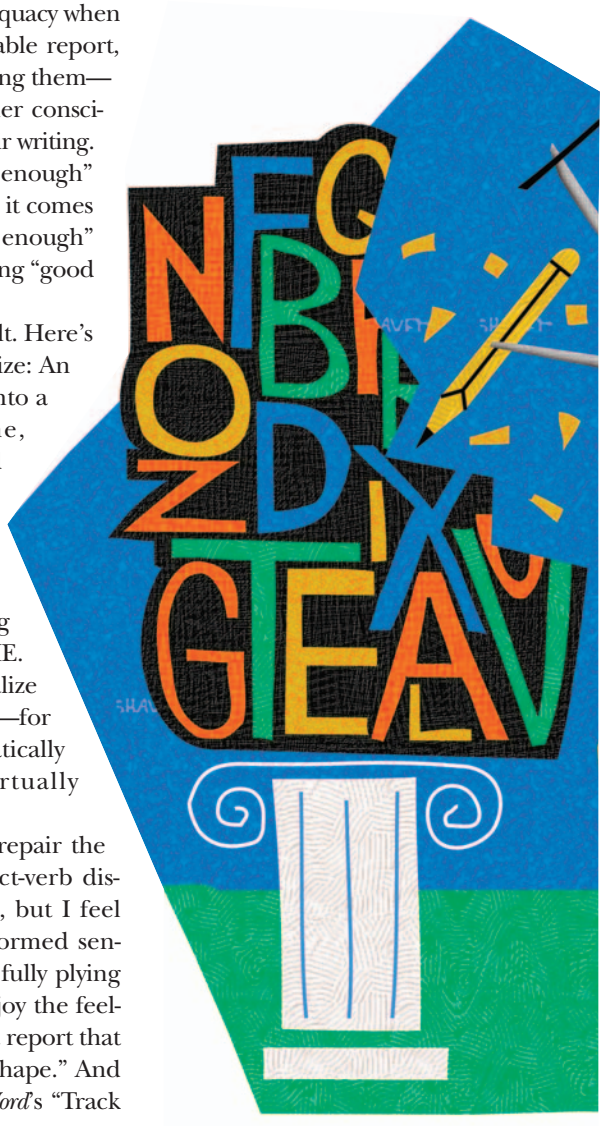
"That's my point," he said. "It has to be *good enough*. Apparently, NASA's translation wasn't good enough. 'Good enough' is all I'm asking for."

There are, however, two problems with the "good enough" requirement. First, most of the engineers I've worked with over the years don't know their own power to slaughter the English language. The engineers who write technical reports where I work want to get their thoughts across to the listener with the least work possible. Many subject matter experts (SMEs) have delusions of adequacy when it comes to writing a serviceable report, but even the best writers among them—in my experience—are neither conscientious nor meticulous in their writing. Therefore, my idea of "good enough" may differ from theirs. When it comes to budgeting time for "good enough" work, the difference in defining "good enough" can be a problem.

The second problem is guilt. Here's a scenario you might recognize: An SME hurriedly stuffs words into a sentence-making machine, hands you the results, and tells you that the budget can withstand only a light copyedit. Besides, he assures you, the report is already in good shape, having been reviewed by another SME. As you start the edit, you realize that although his sentences—for the most part—are grammatically acceptable, they are virtually inscrutable.

In such a scenario, I can repair the omitted commas, the subject-verb discord, the affect-effect thing, but I feel guilty when I can't fix malformed sentences—guilty that I am not fully plying my trade. Furthermore, I enjoy the feeling I get when I rehabilitate a report that has been deemed "in good shape." And when I turn on Microsoft *Word*'s "Track Changes" feature, the engineer can see just how worthy I am of my paycheck. But budget constraints sometimes force us to settle for making a bad report better instead of making it something we would submit to a publication competition.

Making peace with "good enough" can do more than combat disappointment: It can help you keep your job.



Making peace with "good enough" can do more than combat disappointment: It can help you keep your job. Recently, my employer had to lay off an exceptionally good editor because he could not cope with "good enough." If he had only eight hours to spend on a report because of a limited budget, he would use up twelve, pointing out the gross compositional errors that impeded his progress. He was contrite in every case, but in the end we simply could not brook his habitual budget-busting.

Following are a few ways to manage the "good enough" syndrome. Some require concessions from the project manager, and some from the editor or publications manager.

Beg for Money—Logically

Spending 99 percent of your fuel to get to your destination and 1 percent on a soft landing is a fine strategy for traveling to the Moon, but it doesn't work well for a mundane project that culminates in a formal report. I recently pleaded my case that our publications group needs about 5 percent of a project budget to produce an adequate report. The project managers listened—sort of. Theoretically, 5 percent of our engineering project budgets goes to the publications group, but in practice, money sometimes runs out before we reach the Moon.

It's often necessary to plead for money, but that's not the only alternative. You can also present a logical justification for your employer's investment in producing reports, which perhaps only a handful of people will ever read. State your case for a firm report-processing budget as soon as you hear about the project so that the money can be set aside. Our publications group does this by using a document management database that has a field for budget—our budget. Finally, spell out the process for creating a report. Often, project managers are not aware of all the hard work that goes into making a formal report.

Reward Success

Beyond begging for money, I use rewards that help project managers feel better about dedicating 5 percent of a project budget to the publications department. I sometimes enter publications in our STC chapter's publication competitions, listing the engineers as principal contributors. If a publication wins an award, the engineer receives a certificate to hang on the wall. Engineers appreciate recognition as much as technical communicators do.

Use the "Menu" Approach

Make clear—preferably in writing—what the project manager will get for a particular budget. For example, I created an *Excel* spreadsheet that lists work categories (called "levels of edit") and their corresponding cost per page. Given the number of pages and the amount of money budgeted for processing a report, I can estimate what the project manager will get in return. Of course, some SMEs write better than others, so the level of effort per page will vary somewhat. Still, the manager will get a sense of the effort afforded by a particular budget.

For example, say that your company has four levels of edit:

- Developmental Edit
- Content/Organizational Edit
- Copyedit
- Proofreading

If the manager has a $2,000 budget for a 90-page report, you can consult your spreadsheet and inform him or her that you can do a light copyedit bordering on proofreading, but you can't ensure that the sentences will be well crafted or that the report will be coherent. At that point, the manager can accept the estimate or increase the budget. If the original estimate is accepted, you won't feel too guilty about the quality of the prose or the coherence of the report. If the budget is increased, you can take more responsibility for the quality.

Stay Focused

Abiding by well-defined levels of edit will enable you to stay within budget, which will help you the next time you negotiate with a project manager. If you exceed the budget now and again, a project manager may look elsewhere for report processing, perhaps even outside the company. If a budget can withstand only a light copyedit, then define up front what that entails and stick to it. For example, during a copyedit, stick with correcting grammar, even though you notice—by happenstance—that a bullet list is not parallel or a sentence is worded awkwardly. Focusing on a particular level of edit helps you ignore the poor writing you don't have time (or money) to touch. It may not be Shakespeare, but it will be "good enough" if you complete your assignment under budget.

Learn Your Place

The place of technical communicators in the business hierarchy is a highly debatable subject, but here is my take. As wordsmiths, we are often categorized as support staff. From the SME's point of view, wordsmiths exist among the laity, those who are unable to interpret technical content. The putative name for our profession is "technical communication," which is a good fit most of the time—that is, most of the time, the documents that we work on are indeed topically technical. But for many of us, the title "technical communicator" isn't quite accurate.

Many in the field of technical communication are not particularly technical—we have neither a technical background nor a special technical skill. We may be neither mechanically dexterous nor mathematically minded. Even when we possess certain skills that can be classified as technical—and I'm talking about those among us who can craft a good Web page with HTML, JavaScript, and other programming languages—those skills are made insignificant by SMEs who swipe bits of HTML and JavaScript from Web-developer resources such as *webmonkey* and call themselves "Web designers." That's the sad truth in many technical companies with small publication departments.

You can limit your liabilities and avoid going over budget by letting the SMEs take responsibility for the content. Even if you are asked to conduct a content edit, that does not mean that you are responsible for *technical accuracy* but rather for ensuring that the content *makes sense*. You can move through a document much more quickly if you are free to assume that the content is accurate. Once again, specifying the responsibilities of the editor—just as the levels of edit are specified—and limiting yourself to those responsibilities will help you stay on budget. Let the project manager know that doing more—say, conducting a fact check—will cost more money.

Commiserate with Colleagues

Group therapy does wonders for pent-up frustrations, which can sap your energy and make a bad situation worse. Every once in a while, you need colleagues to validate your interpretation of a situation, act as a sounding board, show some sympathy. A certain amount of griping before you start editing a report under challenging circumstances—such as a tight schedule and small budget—can be cathartic. However, complaining about every assignment will annoy both the technical and the support staff, so save your gripes for the really bad projects.

Ultimately...

Wordslaughter is a crime against communication, but it is not premeditated. SMEs don't intend to stack nouns beyond comprehension, confuse "your" with "you're," or omit necessary punctuation. We *need* SMEs to write poorly so that we can earn a living making repairs. Even so, we must often work according to their terms, which may debilitate our professional pride and engender frustration. But if the project manager and the client are happy, then perhaps "good enough" should be good enough for us.

Brad Connatser is the publications manager for an engineering firm located in Knoxville, Tennessee. He is a senior member of the East Tennessee Chapter STC, a member of the IEEE Professional Communication Society, and a volunteer for the Knoxville–Knox County Animal Center. He can be reached at ***bconnatser@epri-peac.com.***