

II. THEORY AND PRACTICE OF EDITING *NEW YORKER* ARTICLES

This was written by Wolcott Gibbs around 1937, apparently at the request of Katharine White, who was then trying out a succession of new fiction editors. Though it has passed into New Yorker legend, "Theory and Practice" was a working document and fairly reflected the magazine's guidelines and tastes of the time. [--from Genius in Disguise: Harold Ross of the New Yorker, by Thomas Kunkel (Carroll & Graf, NY 1995)]

THE AVERAGE CONTRIBUTOR TO THIS MAGAZINE IS SEMI-LITERATE; that is, he is ornate to no purpose, rull of senseless and elegant variations, and can be relied on to use three sentences where a word would do. It is impossible to lay down any exact and complete formula for bringing order out of this underbrush, but there are a few general rules.

1. Writers always use too damn many adverbs. On one page, recently, I found eleven modifying the verb "said": "He said morosely, violently, eloquently," and so on. Editorial theory should probably be that a writer who can't make his context indicate the way his character is talking ought to be in another line of work. Anyway, it is impossible for a character to go through all these emotional states one after the other. Lon Chancy might be able to do it, but he is dead
2. Word "said" is O.K. Efforts to avoid repetition by inserting "grunted," "snorted," etc., are waste motion, and offend the pure in heart.
3. Our writers are full of cliches, just as old barns are full of bats. There is obviously no rule about this, except that anything that you suspect of being a cliché undoubtedly is one, and had better be removed.
4. Funny names belong to the past, or to whatever is left of *Judge* magazine. Any character called Mrs. Middlebottom or Joe Zilch should be summarily changed to something else. This goes for animals, towns, the names of imaginary books and many other things.
5. Our employer, Mr. Ross, has a prejudice against having too many sentences begin with "and" or "but." He claims that they are conjunctions and should not be used purely for literary effect. Or at least only very judiciously.
6. See our Mr. Weekes on the use of such words as "little," "vague," "confused," "faintly," "all mixed up," etc., etc. The point is that the average *New Yorker* writer, unfortunately influenced by Mr. Thurber, has come to believe that the ideal *New Yorker* piece is about a vague, little man helplessly confused by a menacing and complicated civilization. Whenever this note is not the whole point of the piece (and it far too often is) it should be regarded with suspicion.

7. The repetition of exposition in quotes went out with the Stanley Steamer:
Marion gave me a pain in the neck.
"You give me a pain in the neck, Marion," I said.
This turns up more often than you'd expect.
8. Another of Mr. Ross's theories is that a reader picking up a magazine called *The New Yorker* automatically supposes that any story in it takes place in New York. If it doesn't, if it's about Columbus, Ohio, the lead should say so. "When George Adams was sixteen, he began to worry about the girls he saw every day on the streets of Columbus" or something of the kind. More graceful preferably.
9. Also, since our contributions are signed at the end, the author's sex should be established at once if there is any reasonable doubt. It is distressing to read a piece all the way through under the impression that the "I" in it is a man and then find a woman's signature at the end. Also, of course, the other way round.
10. To quote Mr. Ross again, "Nobody gives a damn about a writer or his problems except another writer." Pieces about authors, reporters poets, etc., are to be discouraged in principle. Whenever possible the protagonist should be arbitrarily transplanted to another line of business. When the reference is incidental and unnecessary, it should come out.
11. This magazine is on the whole liberal about expletives. The only test I know of is whether or not they are really essential to the author's effect. "Son of a bitch," "bastard" and many others can be used whenever it is the editor's judgment that that is the only possible remark under the circumstances. When they are gratuitous, when the writer is just trying to sound tough to no especial purpose, they come out.
12. In the transcription of dialect, don't let the boys and girls misspell words just for a fake Bowery effect. There is no point, for instance, in "trubble," or "sed."
13. Mr. Weekes said the other night, in a moment of desperation, that he didn't believe he could stand any more triple adjectives. "A tall, florid and overbearing man called Jaeckel." Sometimes they're necessary, but when every noun has three adjectives connected with it, Mr. Weekes suffers and quite rightly.
14. I suffer myself very seriously from writers who divide quotes for some kind of ladies club rhythm. "I am going," he said, "downtown" is a horror, and unless a quote is pretty long I think it ought to stay on one side of the verb. Anyway, it ought to be divided logically, where there would be pause or something in the sentence.
15. Mr. Weekes has got a long list of banned words beginning with "gadget." Ask him. It's not actually a ban, there being circumstances when they're necessary, but good words to avoid.

16. I would be delighted to go over the list of writers, explaining the peculiarities of each as they have appeared to me in more than ten years of exasperation on both sides.
17. Editing on manuscript should be done with a black pencil, decisively.
18. I almost forgot indirection, which probably maddens Mr. Ross more than anything else in the world. He objects, that is, to important objects, or places or people, being dragged into things in a secretive and underhanded manner. If, for instance, a Profile has never told where a man lives, Ross protests against a sentence saying "His Vermont house is full of valuable paintings." Should say "He had a house in Vermont and it is full, etc." Rather weird point, but it will come up from time to time.
19. Drunkenness and adultery present problems. As far as I can tell, writers must not be allowed to imply that they admire either of these things, or have enjoyed them personally, although they are legitimate enough when pointing a moral or adorning a sufficiently grim story. They are nothing to be light-hearted about. "*The New Yorker* cannot endorse adultery." Harold Ross vs. Sally Benson. Don't bother about this one. In the end it is a matter between Mr. Ross and his God. Homosexuality, on the other hand, is definitely out as humor, and dubious, in any case.
20. The more "as a matter of facts," "however," "for instances," etc., you can cut out, the nearer you are to the Kingdom of Heaven.
21. It has always seemed irritating to me when a story is written in the first person, but the narrator hasn't got the same name as the author. For instance, a story beginning: "George," my father said to me one morning; and signed at the end Horace McIntyre always baffles me. However, as far as I know this point has never been ruled upon officially, and should just be queried.
22. Editors are really the people who should put initial letters and white spaces in copy to indicate breaks in thought or action. Because of overwork or inertia or something, this has been done largely by the proof room, which has a tendency to put them in for purposes of makeup rather than sense. It should revert to the editors.
23. For some reason our writers (especially Mr. Leonard Q. Ross) have a tendency to distrust even moderately long quotes and break them up arbitrarily and on the whole idiotically with editorial interpolations. "Mr. Kaplan felt that he and the cosmos were coterminus" or some such will frequently appear in the middle of a conversation for no other reason than that the author is afraid the reader's mind is wandering. Sometimes this is necessary, most often it isn't.
24. Writers also have an affection for the tricky or vaguely cosmic last line.

"Suddenly Mr. Holtzman felt tired" has appeared on far too many pieces in the last ten years. It is always a good idea to consider whether the last sentence of a piece is legitimate and necessary, or whether it is just an author showing off.

25. On the whole, we are hostile to puns.
26. How many of these changes can be made in copy depends, of course, to a large extent on the writer being edited. By going over the list, I can give a general idea of how much nonsense each artist will stand for.
27. Among other things, *The New Yorker* is often accused of a patronizing attitude. Our authors are especially fond of referring to all foreigners as "little" and writing about them, as Mr. Maxwell says, as if they were mantel ornaments. It is very important to keep the amused and Godlike tone out of pieces.
28. It has been one of Mr. Ross's long struggles to raise the tone of our contributors' surroundings, at least on paper. References to the gay Bohemian life in Greenwich Village and other low surroundings should be cut whenever possible. Nor should writers be permitted to boast about having their telephones cut off, or not being able to pay their bills, or getting their meals at the delicatessen, or any of the things which strike many writers as quaint and lovable.
29. Some of our writers are inclined to be a little arrogant about their knowledge of the French language. Probably best to put them back into English if there is a common English equivalent.
30. So far as possible make the pieces grammatical, but if you don't the copy room will, which is a comfort. Fowler's *English Usage* is our reference book. But don't be precious about it.
31. Try to preserve an author's style if he is an author and has a style. Try to make dialogue sound like talk, not writing.