

The Proof of the Pudding Contest* (Corrected version))

As part of my post-retirement, continuing education in the newspaper business, I was asked to help with proofreading at the the world's best hometown newspaper last week. It was a temporary assignment (thank goodness) while my colleague and the woman who usually has last eyes (and sharp eyes they are) on each issue, Chris Petermann, was off. At 73, I must be the world's oldest rookie proofreader. And did I learn a lot, like what a demanding task it is, how many moving parts there are to a weekly newspaper and how many darn words the paper contains, all of them needing to be checked.

Do you have any idea how many words there are in one issue of the paper, now that it's gone to 24 pages with the merging of the *East Aurora Advertiser* and the *Elma Review* into one? To save you the trouble of counting, I conducted a quasi- (very quasi-) scientific count here at Right Field World Headquarters on the western fringe of the village. By looking at the average number of words in a line and multiplying by the number or lines on a page and adding in photo captions, I concluded that there are approximately 28,100 words, not including advertisements in the Feb. 22 *Advertiser*. (For comparison, William Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," Ernest Hemingway's classic novella, "The Old Man in the Sea," and John Steinbeck's "The Red Pony" are about the same length, give or take a few words.) Each week the editor, Shelly Ferullo, Chris Petermann and several members of the staff look over the several dozen notices, letters, editorials, columns, press releases, not to mention photo captions and, of course, the many stories created by *Advertiser* writers. Thatsa lotta copy.

We're not looking for typographical corrigenda (RIP Snake), exclusively, either. Spellcheck can be a blessing and curse, often trying to take over like the HAL 9000 computer in the "2001: A Space Odyssey" movie. Every sportswriter has ended up with a spellchecked "variety" when they meant to type "varsity," "win" when they wanted "won" or even "inception" for "interception." Try typing a lower case "i" that stands alone and see how many times spellcheck wants it to be a capital "I." It knows better, it seems to be saying.

We have to watch for consistency in style as well. Is the girl who had her drawing featured in an *Advertiser* story last week a 4th grader or a fourth grader or a Fourth Grader? I've seen it all three ways. And isn't it supposed to be hyphenated if fourth grade is an adjective, a "fourth-grade student?" If a story comes in where the writer has used the Oxford comma—"beer-battered fish, potatoes, and Cole slaw"—do we change it to our preferred style—"beer-battered fish, potatoes and coleslaw?" If an interviewee says, "Well, he was just laying there, not doing nothing, when..." do we change it to, "Well, he was just lying there, not doing anything, when...?"

So many people want to capitalize words that don't need it. For instance, it's "Last week, Deputy Mayor [capitalized] Ernie Scheer said..." but it's, "Last week, the deputy mayor [uncapitalized] said..." And apostrophes. It's and its, your and you're, they're and their and there. People feel the need to write "the 1960's," or "the 60's," or even "the '60's" when no apostrophe to separate the "s" from the numeral is needed: the 1960s and the '60s. Is the abbreviation for the state we live in NY or N.Y.; is the time of day before noon am, a.m., AM or A.M.? As I said, there are so many moving parts.

Of course, there are errors that don't show up in proofreading. Like the times I've been taken to task by a parent or grandparent for misspelling a kid's name, picking the wrong Connor/Conor/Conner or Megan/Meghan/Meaghan or Katherine/Katharine/Catherine/Catharine/Kathryn for a sports article. All are correct in certain circumstances; it's on me to find the coach or the roster. Eric Zimmermann of Visual Impact Signs gently chided me for spelling his surname with one "n," Zimmerman, several years ago. I printed a correction, inviting him to change his name to the shorter, more compact Zimmerman, but for some reason, he wasn't interested. I've had some beauties over my years at the paper: wrong dates, addresses, even names. I have two signs on my desk that remind me to "CHECK NAMES, DATES, NUMBERS."

I tried my best to catch the mistakes before the paper went to press last week. But you never get them all. No sooner had the February 22 issue appeared than I heard about a mistake. If it was the only mistake, we would have gotten 99.9998 percent of the words right. Over the years, there have been some notable gaffs: photos mixed up, unintentional double entendres. My favorite was the obituary for a 100-year-old woman, a petite woman under five feet tall and quite slight of build who was called a "Centurion" instead of a "Centenarian" in the headline to her obit. Hey, stuff happens. The family got a kick out of it. None of these are hangin' crimes, as the expression goes, but we want to get things right. And for the most part, we do. Hopefully, this issue that comes out on February 29, will be perfect.

*Note: I have purposely left several mistakes in spelling, punctuation, fact and grammar in this column. Be the first to identify the mistakes and win a prize. Contact me through my website, www.rickohler.com, or leave a note in my box at 710 Main Street.

Columnist Rick Ohler invites readers to find past columns and articles on his website, www.rickohler.com.