

AN EDITOR'S LIFE AT THE JOURNAL OF ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES

by Timothy Taylor*

In spring 1984, I was a disgruntled graduate student of the standard make and model on my way to bailing out of Stanford's Ph.D. program in economics with what I regarded as a consolation master's degree. I was clueless about my future career path, except that it seemed crystal clear my road would not travel through academia. Four years later, in fall 1988, I moved into an office in Stanford's Department of Economics, with my own full-time assistant in the neighboring office. At that point, I had been working as managing editor of the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* for two years. When moving back to Stanford, I had the mind-bending experience of rejoining friends with whom I had entered graduate school, who were just then finishing their doctoral degrees and heading out to first jobs. A year later, in fall 1989, I found myself lecturing to 500 students in Stanford's Economics 1 class with 10 graduate students as teaching assistants.

This chain of events seemed wildly improbable to me even as it was happening, and the passage of time hasn't dimmed its serendipity. In this essay, I will tell the story of how I went from an academic car crash in graduate school to spending the last 22 years as the managing editor of a prominent academic economics journal. Part of my personal history, of course, is also the history of the origins and mission of the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, an academic journal with the distinctive mission of presenting essays on cutting-edge topics, often by prominent authors, but doing so in an expository style that minimizes specialized technique and jargon and thus is accessible to a broad readership of economists. Along the way, I will offer some thoughts about graduate school in economics, the mindset needed for aggressive editing, and the role of editors in academia.

Graduate School Crash and Burn

After graduating in 1982 from Haverford College, a 1200-student liberal arts college on the Main Line of Philadelphia (as the guidebooks say), I enrolled in Stanford University's graduate program in economics. I refer to my two years in economics graduate school, without hyperbole, as "the two worst years of my life." It's not that these years were tragic: I learned an enormous amount and made some life-long friends. But it's hard to wake up every day feeling like some mutated combination of a fish out of water and a gerbil on a treadmill.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, some of my difficulties were systemic. A few years after it was too late to do me any good, Hirschel Kasper (1991) reported the results of a study of nine liberal arts colleges—Amherst, my own Haverford College, Middlebury, Oberlin, Smith, Swarthmore, Wellesley, Wesleyan, and Williams—and their experience in sending students to economics Ph.D. programs. Historically, these colleges had each produced undergraduates who completed two or three economics Ph.D.'s per year; however, by late 1980s, these colleges were only sending about one person a year to an economics Ph.D. program—and that person was often not completing the program.

Why did this dramatic change occur? Kaspar (1991) emphasized a substantial shift in graduate education in economics. He wrote in 1991 (p. 1098): "Two decades ago a significant segment of first-year graduate theory was a review for liberal arts graduates of advanced undergraduate theory, as evidenced by the fact that the graduate courses made use of textbooks written by undergraduate faculty." But this situation changed dramatically. Kaspar (p. 1102) again: "The gap mentioned earlier between undergraduate and first year graduate

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theory arises from the increased emphasis on technical methods at the graduate level, with an apparently corresponding decrease in emphasis of economic analysis. The emphasis during the first year on techniques, with too little announced justification for them, strikes liberal arts graduates, whose interest in economics is partly fueled by social concerns of the consequences of economic problems, as an approach which is, at best, misplaced.”

My Haverford education was excellent along a number of dimensions. I read widely across the classic literatures of economics and political science. In particular, I developed my ability to read sympathetically—that is, to assume that knowledgeable and profound thinkers almost never say idiotic things, although they may often make difficult or subtle points that at first reading seem unclear or inconsistent or contradictory. A sympathetic reading and re-reading leaves open the possibility that the author is less than clear, but works hard at not dismissing or negating the text for that reason, and instead drawing out whatever lessons and analytical frameworks are available.

The small class sizes and individual attention at Haverford, along with the particular classes I selected, also encouraged sheaves of writing. In those prehistoric years when students still brought a typewriter to college, rather than a computer, I typed hundreds of pages on Eaton’s “Corrasable Bond,” that particular brand of typing paper where a pencil eraser could eliminate mistakes. I wrote columns for the school newspaper. I wrote early and final drafts of many 10-, 20- and 40-page papers. I designed an individual study class with the head of the freshman writing program (thank you, Joanne Hutchinson) in which I wrote a 15-page paper each week, she commented extensively on the writing, and then the following week I rewrote the first paper and produced a new first draft. I wrote multiple drafts of a 200-page senior thesis on how to think about fairness in the federal income tax.

But when it came to mathematical background, I was woefully underprepared for graduate school in economics. I’d had a semester of econometrics, a year of calculus, and a semester of linear algebra. This mathematics background was actually more than most Haverford economics majors had at that time. Kasper (1991, p. 1099) wrote: “Changes in the mathematics requirement at Haverford are illustrative of the changes which

occurred at all nine colleges. In 1974 no Haverford economics course required any calculus; in 1984 one semester of calculus was required for the intermediate microeconomics course; and by 1989, calculus was required in both intermediate micro and macro, plus an advanced field course.” I scored highly on the math portion of the GRE. But when it came to the mathematical demands of Stanford’s Ph.D. program, I was carrying a cheese grater to knife fight.

When a student and a graduate program are a bad fit, no one comes out looking good. To many of the faculty in Stanford’s graduate program, I’m sure I just looked like another drowning graduate student. Maybe I was drowning from lack of effort, or lack of background, or lack of brainpower, or lack of interest—frankly, it didn’t seem to matter too much to anyone to find out. From my point of view, I felt as if I had drifted into a parallel universe where instead of actually studying the economy, I was studying a set of mathematical and statistical tools that one might use if at some point in the future one desired to study the economy. After all, the years from 1982 to 1984 were eventful economic times. The United States was emerging from a decade of oil shocks, repeated recessions, and unemployment and inflation rates that had topped out in double digits. Huge budget deficits and trade deficits were developing. “Supply-side economics” was in the news. Deregulation of airlines, trucking, banking, and many industries was underway. Paul Volcker was changing the rules for how to conduct monetary policy. The country was only about a decade into its experience with floating exchange rates. Japan’s economy seemed inexorably on the rise, with South Korea not far behind. The Latin American debt crisis was underway. But those topics—indeed, any real-world topics—were essentially absent from our first-year curriculum.

Kasper (1991, p. 1105) summarized the issues facing graduates of liberal arts colleges in economics programs in this way:

We conclude that the graduate programs no longer attract the same numbers of top liberal arts graduates as they once did in large part because graduate study is no longer merely the advanced specialization of the undergraduate field, but instead has nearly become a discipline distinct from undergraduate

study, especially from the perspective of first year graduate students. The emphasis on technique, at the expense of less attention to the analytical issues of economics, tends to depreciate the importance of the intuitive and creative talents of the liberal arts graduates.

As I was fighting through graduate school, working hard and hating my days, lots of students offered reassurance of this general form: “Everyone hates the first year of graduate school. It’s actually pretty pointless and you won’t ever use most of what you learn. It’s just a set of hoops you need to jump through so that you can do interesting work later on.” I recognized a substantial element of truth in this message, and perhaps in some galaxy far, far away, this message could be viewed as inspirational. But for me, this well-meant reassurance felt like an acknowledgement that I was living through an intellectual hazing ritual, which made the whole experience feel even more grim.

My personality and temperament was ill-suited for graduate school in some other ways as well. In graduate school I discovered that by the standards of academic researchers, I’m intellectually impatient. Some years later, I ran across a paper by Xavier Sala-i-Martin (1997) called “I Just Ran Two Million Regressions.” As I read the paper, I thought to myself: “That’s one reason I wasn’t suited for graduate school. Let *him* run the two million regressions. I want to be the person who comes along after the work is done and learns about what he’s done—maybe over lunch.” I have a grasshopper mind; I like to hop from one subject to another. A common experience for me in the second year of Stanford’s graduate program was that a wide array of topics courses were pretty interesting to me for about six weeks. Then I began to feel that I pretty much knew what I wanted to know on that subject, diminishing returns had set in, and I was ready to move along to some other field of economics.

A friend of mine who attended graduate school in library science once told me that a librarian needed to be like the Missouri River—a mile wide and an foot deep. In other words, librarians didn’t need to know a whole lot, except how to find everything they might want to look up. Conversely, most research economists are closer to a crevasse in an ice-field: say, a mile deep but only a foot wide. (As the old joke goes, experts know more and more about less and less until they

know everything about nothing.) I’m most comfortable with a mix of breadth and depth—call it a quarter-mile deep and a quarter-mile wide. In many areas of economics, I know more than the nonspecialists in that area, but decidedly less than the specialists.

I did learn an enormous amount of economics in my two years at Stanford. Sure, on my best days I remained fuzzy on how semi-continuity differed from hemi-continuity and demi-continuity, along with why I should care. My efforts to sketch a quick macro model or to derive a new maximum likelihood estimator were weak. But I spent considerable time working my way through the lengthy first-year reading list, which was heavily weighted toward classic articles of the previous few decades. In terms of doing well on the end-of-year comprehensive exams, this careful reading was largely time wasted. The comprehensive exams were all about fluidity in applying and interpreting mathematical techniques, not about developing a broad understanding of the modern evolution of the economics literature. In this way, as in others, my intellectual approach was dysfunctional for graduate school, but has turned out to be highly useful as a journal editor.

An Interlude in the Newspaper Business

Thanks to a newspaper executive willing to take a chance on a economics grad student (thank you, Rob Elder), I left graduate school for a job as an editorial writer for the *San Jose Mercury News*—the predominant daily newspaper in Silicon Valley. I loved that job. I’ve got opinions a-plenty, opinions to burn. After the straitjacket of graduate school, I especially liked the intellectual freedom and the focus on current events. Silicon Valley was taking off in the mid-1980s, which meant that any number of issues related to high technology, R&D, finance, competition policy, international trade, and the environment all had local angles. I look back at my time as an editorial writer at the *Mercury News* with great affection: great people, a great work environment, a great time to be in that particular job. It also taught me two professional lessons in particular that have been essential for my later work as managing editor of JEP.

First, the newspaper business taught me about writing as a professional drill. You wake up in the

morning, walk to your front door and pick up the morning paper, see a headline, and know that in about six or seven hours you will have written a short essay on the subject—an essay which will be on the breakfast tables of 300,000 households the next morning. You don't have any excuses for not finishing the essay. The newspaper can't be printed with a white space because you didn't feel quite up to finishing your piece. You need to adjust the length of what you write. You may start off thinking that you are going to fill 10 column-inches of space, but an hour before deadline you may find that you only have six inches, or perhaps 12 inches. You write 3–5 of these unsigned editorials each week, along with occasional signed op-ed columns.

I once read a sentiment (which I remember as being attributed to Ernest Hemingway, although I've never been able to track down a source for the quotation) to the effect that “the first 500,000 words that anyone writes is garbage.” Well, writing something like 2,000 words per week works out to about 100,000 words per year. After my Haverford writing experience, I must have finished out my time at the newspaper near the brink of that 500,000 word minimum.

My second major lesson from my time at the *Mercury News* is that I learned some useful reading habits. My job at the newspaper required a broad awareness of what economists were thinking about the events of the day, so that I would be ready to churn out those daily editorials as events dictated. I began regularly reading reports from the Congressional Budget Office; publications from the regional Federal Reserve banks; the annual *World Development Report* from the World Bank; the *Economic Report of the President* from the Council of Economic Advisers; and newsletters and articles from think tanks like Brookings and Cato. When the president's budget proposals were unveiled each year, I'd spend a day or two going through the *Historical Tables* and the *Analytical Perspectives* volumes. When the *U.S. Statistical Abstract* arrived each year, I'd spend a day doodling around the pages, looking at levels and trends. When these sources or the issues of the day led to the research literature, I'd spend a day in the Stanford library stacks, tracking down working papers and journal articles. Sometimes this reading turned into an immediate unsigned editorial or op-ed, but often it just deepened my own background in economics.¹

The JEP is Born

In the summer of 1985, while I was working at the *Mercury News*, I heard an intriguing rumor from Tim Bresnahan, a Stanford economist (and Haverford alumnus) for whom I had worked as an RA during my second year in graduate school. Tim had been talking with Joseph Stiglitz, who used to come out to Stanford for a summer institute each year, and Tim had heard that Joe was expecting to become the editor of a new and different economics journal. The intention of the journal was to present sophisticated economics in a relatively nontechnical way to the broad audience of academic economists. Thus, Joe had been asking if anyone knew of someone who was tooled-up on technical economics, but who was primarily a writer. I'm sure there were other people at the intersection of those Venn diagram circles, but most of them were securely perched in jobs they didn't want to leave. I was ready to take a chance. Tim passed along my name to Joe, we talked, and by early in 1986 I was planning to move to Princeton University to take the job as managing editor of a new and as-yet unnamed journal of the American Economic Association.

I will always owe Joe Stiglitz an enormous debt of gratitude along a number of dimensions. First and foremost, he was willing to hire me as managing editor of JEP. I'm not sure I would have hired myself—I probably would have looked for someone other than a 26 year-old who hadn't run anything before.

I learned an enormous amount from Joe. He has the extraordinary gift of truly great economists, which is that when Joe explains the intellectual structure of how he looks at a problem or a situation, it seems like the only sensible way that anyone could ever look at it. Joe also has remarkable breadth across many fields of economics. Just rubbing shoulders with him on a regular basis was an education.

Working with Joe opened other doors for me. For example, I worked with Joe on the first edition of his *Principles of Economics* textbook, which was published in 1991. In turn, this experience led to opportunities to teach the intro economics class at Stanford and later at the University of Minnesota. In turn, winning student-voted teaching awards led to offers to record lectures for the Teaching Company, a for-profit firm that sells

lectures to the adult education market. It also led, through a winding road that is a story in itself, to a chance to write an intro textbook of my own that was published in 2007.²

Finally, Joe treated me as a partner in the founding of the journal. I was a junior partner, to be sure, but the difference between a junior partner and a subordinate or an underling is very real. Maybe I'm hypersensitive to being treated as if I matter—surely, that was an issue for me in graduate school. But with Joe, I always felt that my opinion was heard and heeded, whether or not the eventual decisions went the way I preferred.

When I was hired as managing editor of a new economics journal, the journal was just an idea. It not only lacked a title—the very mission of the journal was ill-defined. Joe, co-editor Carl Shapiro, an editorial assistant named Carolyn Moseley, and I sat down together and looked at different fonts, kerning and leading, page sizes and weights of paper and cover stock. We looked at many other journals to see where they placed the table of contents, what running heads they used at the top of pages, where they put page numbers, where they listed qualifications of authors and acknowledgments, and other details. We carried around samples of different colors and designs for the cover. We thought about the desired length of articles and issues. In short, we invented the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* from the ground up.

I'm not sure how many economics journals existed in 1986, but the American Economic Association currently indexes over 1,000 academic journals of economics. From the start, the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* was intended to be a different kind of economics journal. Most academic journals serve two functions: they certify that the author has written a paper of quality, which is useful for promotion decisions and grant applications; and they serve as metaphorical file cabinets for storing worthy papers so that they are relatively easy to refer to and to locate when needed. Both functions are important, but neither function implies that readers will actually sit down to browse through the articles in a given issue, not even for a prominent journal. Even scanning the abstracts at the start of the article is more than many economists actually do. Indeed, if you are active in research in a certain field, you should almost always be aware of research in your field from seminars and working papers and discussions

with colleagues—well before the finished draft of the paper struggles through final revisions, typesetting, and the long wait for actual publication.

In contrast, the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* was intended to publish articles that could be read—not articles that could be figured out given a sufficient investment of time and energy, but actually read. All economists (with the possible exception of Joe Stiglitz and a few others) are non-specialists in most fields. Rather than behaving as yet one more standard double-blind refereed journal, the JEP would invite its authors. The comments from the editors and co-editors would all be signed, rather than anonymous. And rather than just requesting that “this section needs tightening up” or “this argument isn't quite clear” or “the discussion here seems repetitive,” a hands-on editor—me—would actually work through every line of every paper. Thanks to the miracle of floppy disks in 1987, and now to the even greater miracle of e-mail attachments, it became possible not just to scrawl red-ink comments in the margins of pages, but for an editor to make revisions directly to the text, clarifying and trimming and cutting and expanding. The revised text could then be returned to the author for further changes. Once someone has accepted an invitation from the JEP to write, then we are committed to working through an editing process with them. As long as JEP authors are willing to be responsive to comments and feedback, we eventually will be willing to publish their articles.

When the journal started, one main concern was whether the often high-powered academics who were being invited to write for JEP would accept this kind of interactive editing, or whether we would confront a volcanic outburst of temper at least once every full moon. But the hope of the JEP editorial process, which has proved true over time, is that this kind of direct hands-on interaction is actually more effective in getting to a readable final draft in a way that doesn't make everyone crazy. Instead of authors getting general comments about making a manuscript shorter or clearer, they get specific suggestions. Many authors will throw out or overrule 10, 20, or even 50 percent of the advice they get—but by accepting most of the advice, their article is typically finished after one or two revisions, rather than dragging on through the many multiple revisions that easily lead to bad feeling. As many authors have noted, it's always hard to revise your own work, so having someone

else take a first stab at it, and then returning to the manuscript, often leaves authors feeling less stale and as if their time has been spent more productively. Also, because authors know that their article will appear in the journal—and typically with much shorter lags other journals—they have generally been willing to work with our editorial process to mold the article into shape.

But while the JEP editorial process has worked well, by and large, it does require striking a balance. Detailed hand-on editing requires caring a great deal and being confrontational with authors about things that matter, but not caring too much at all about things that don't matter—and having sufficient perspective to see the difference. Arthur Plotnik (1986, p. 1) describes this balancing act in his *Elements of Editing*: “What kind of person makes a good editor? When hiring new staff, I look for such useful attributes as genius, charisma, adaptability, and disdain for high wages. I also look for signs of a neurotic trait called compulsiveness, which in one form is indispensable to editors, and in another, disabling.” Humorist Ambrose Bierce (1911) also conveyed the necessary editorial combination of aggressive interventionism while soothing the savage author when he defined “editor” in his *Devil's Dictionary*, in part, in this way:

editor: . . . a severely virtuous censor, but so charitable withal that he tolerates the virtues of others and the vices of himself; who flings about him the splintering lightning and sturdy thunders of admonition till he resembles a bunch of firecrackers petulantly uttering his mind at the tail of a dog; then straightway murmurs a mild, melodious lay, soft as the cooing of a donkey intoning its prayer to the evening star . . .

Here, I want to discuss three aspects of the mindset of an tough-but-oh-so-tender editor: the nuts and bolts aspect, the confrontational aspect, and the peacemaking side.

The Nuts and Bolts Aspect of Editing

One central and perhaps undervalued aspect of hands-on editing is to work on the nuts and bolts of the writing and style. Nuts and bolts editing doesn't challenge the substance of an article at all,

but only seeks to smooth the presentation. In many cases, authors barely notice that nuts and bolts editing has been done, except for a warm and fuzzy feeling that by some alchemy their very own words now read more clearly than before.

As an extreme example of nuts and bolts editing, consider the problems posed in editing the papers of Jeremy Bentham, the utilitarian philosopher and occasional economist. Bentham wrote perhaps 15 pages in longhand almost every day of his adult life. His admirers gathered some of his work for publication, but much was simply stored in boxes, primarily at the library of University College, London. In 1941, an economist named Werner Stark was commissioned by the Royal Economic Society to prepare a comprehensive edition of Bentham's economic writings, which in turn are just a portion of his overall writings. In the three-volume work that was published 11 years later (!), Stark (1952) wrote in the introduction:

The work itself involved immense difficulties. Bentham's handwriting is so bad that it is quite impossible to make anything of his scripts without first copying them out. I saw myself confronted with the necessity of copying no less than nine big boxes of papers comprising nearly 3,000 pages and a number of words that cannot be far from the seven-figure mark. But that was only the first step. The papers are in no kind of order: in fact it is hard to imagine how they ever became so utterly disordered. They resemble a pack of cards after it has been thoroughly shuffled. . . . The pages of some manuscripts, it is true, were numbered, but then they often carried a double and treble numeration so that confusion was worse confounded, and sometimes I wished there had been no pagination at all. In other manuscript collections the fact that sentences run uninterruptedly from one sheet onto another, is of material help in creating order out of chaos. I was denied even this assistance. It was one of Bentham's idiosyncrasies never to begin a new page without beginning at the same time a new paragraph. But I cannot hope to give the reader an adequate idea of the problems that had to be overcome.

Stark's lamentations would chill the heart of any editor. “Bentham was most unprincipled with

regard to the use of capitals.” “After careful consideration, it was found impossible to transfer the punctuation of Bentham’s manuscripts on to the printed page. When he has warmed to a subject and is writing quickly, he simply forgets to punctuate . . .” And so on.

The technology of word processing has blessedly deleted most the problems that confronted Stark. Articles for the *JEP* arrive in an electronic form suitable for editing. Modern economists may be guilty of irrelevance, ponderous prose, unnecessary technical detours, and an occasional run-on sentence, but few dispense with punctuation and capitalization altogether, and page numbering is automatic these days. However, along certain dimensions, my editorial work faces difficulties worse than Stark’s. Stark was trying to produce a literal draft of what Bentham had written; my task is to suggest revisions as aggressively as necessary to make the draft readable by our broad target audience of generalist economists. Jeremy Bentham was long dead, and in no position to object to any decisions that Stark made; my authors are very much alive and kicking. This difference calls to mind the description of an editor’s “Platonic ideal of the perfect contributor—the writer who hands in his article and is then run over by a bus before he can complain about the editing” (Ferguson, 2007). When an author sends me a paper that promises in the first sentence “to disambiguate” any questions I might have on a certain subject (the example is not hypothetical), I need to confront the author directly.

Nuts and bolts editing can take on a mechanical feeling. No, we will not have five page of introduction previewing what will be said in the following five pages of text. Just say it. No, we will not publish an article that is 88 pages in length when we requested one of 25. No, we will not suddenly change the philosophy of the journal and decide to publish a blizzard of mathematical equations and statistical results. No, we would prefer not to repeat the same thought in every other paragraph. No, you may not *italicize* for emphasis every fifth sentence or every tenth word. No, we won’t ask our typesetter to create new fonts for your particular article. No, we don’t need 20 figures and tables in your article. No, you may not start every other sentence with a version of “there is,” “this is,” “that is,” or “it is.” No, not everyone thinks in the passive voice.

Many academics have had the experience of editing something, sometime, but mostly as a side dish rather than a steady diet. It’s difficult to convey how time-consuming the sort of intensive editing that I do can be. On a tough article—where “tough” can refer either to how little I know about the topic or how much work the exposition needs—I may edit a page an hour; an easier one, perhaps I will cover three pages an hour. The *JEP* publishes about 1,000 total pages per year, with about 500 words per page, so call the total about 500,000 published words a year. Original drafts tend to be longer than we requested, so I cut at least 100,000 words each year. As I sometimes say, with that well-known economist sense of humor, my economic value-added happens through subtraction. I started running the journal at age 26, so I could potentially end up doing it for 40 years (or more?). If the journal stays about the same size, my life’s work could end up being the purification of perhaps 20 million words—and the outright elimination of millions more.

Part of the editor’s credo, or compulsion, is that even if no individual nuts-and-bolts change matters, the accumulation of these changes does matter. No article was ever sunk by a few inelegant sentences. But I was long-ago struck by a comment in E.B. White’s (1957 [1979], p. xvi) “Introduction” to *The Elements of Style*, where he described a central belief of his mentor, William Strunk: “Will felt the reader was in serious trouble most of the time, a man floundering in a swamp, and that it was the duty of anyone attempting to write English to drain this swamp quickly and get his man up on dry ground, or at least throw him a rope.” In my case, I try to bear in mind the broad and non-specialist target audience of *JEP*: the faculty members dipping into a subject that is not their specialty, either just out of curiosity, or but where they may need to give a lecture or explain to undergraduate students; economists not based at research institutions, but who would like some access to what research economists are thinking; older economists interested in more recent developments; graduate students sampling possible topics to pursue further; advanced undergraduate students; economists outside academia, perhaps in government or private business or at a think-tank, who are checking in on the research literature; and specialists interested in how another specialist would lay out the key arguments and intuition.

Economics can be hard, and readers of economics often struggle; as an editor, I fix in place the ropes that can help the climb to understanding.

The Confrontational Side of Editing

At some point, however, nuts and bolts editing inevitably slides into content editing, and here a new set of pitfalls arise. Authors for JEP may have their difficulties with clarity of expression, but they are acknowledged experts in their fields. Even when what they have written is convoluted or nonsensical to me—and presumably would read that way to many other nonspecialist economists as well—I must operate on the assumption that behind what looks to me like garble is a cohesive and substantially correct insight. My problem is that I am not grasping that insight, even if it might be perfectly clear to another specialist in the subject. My first step in this situation is to struggle for a sympathetic understanding the author's meaning in my own terms. This sometimes necessitates time spent web-surfing through working papers or a trip to the library to look up past articles on the subject. At this level, editing academic prose becomes a sort of wrestling match. My primary opponent is not the author, but rather my own ignorance of the subject, and my ego—which would prefer to blame the author for any lack of clarity rather than to feel foolish myself. People with offices near mine over the years have become used to the sight of me pacing in the hallways, head down, sometimes gently kicking the wall.

Of course, in some cases I face considerable temptation to give up on the process. I sometimes wish for the near-dictatorial editorial powers of John Maynard Keynes who, among his other accomplishments, served as editor of the *Economic Journal* from 1911–1943. (I occasionally contemplate the year 2019, when my then-33 years as managing editor of JEP—if I can stick it that long—would equal Keynes' tenure as editor.) In the earlier, simpler times of Keynes's editorship, he often served as his own editorial process, turning down papers as he saw fit, sometimes with barbed commentary. In one rejection letter, Keynes wrote (as quoted in Moggridge, 1990): “[I]t seems to me clear that your article, in its present shape, is half-baked and not fit for publication. I have not

been able to spare time to read it carefully enough to know whether there is anything in it at the bottom. But I find it a bit of a rigmarole, of which I fear the reader would make little or nothing. It is neither clear what you are driving at nor where you arrive. And behind all that lies my doubt as to whether the method you are employing is capable of helping much with this particular problem.” To another rejected author, Keynes wrote: “I am inclined to return to the opinion that the article is pretentious, misleading, inconclusive and perhaps wrong. I would rather have cheese to a weight equal to the paper it would occupy in 5,000 copies of the *Journal*.” I'd like to think that I could write such letters. But Keynes was not only capable of dazzling turns of phrase, he had also earned the professional right to arrogance, which I have not.

But my job is also different from that of Keynes, or indeed that of any editor at a standard peer-reviewed journal. I'm not trying to make judgments on the overall value of the article—that decision was already made when we decided to invite the author to write for JEP. Instead, I view myself a stand-in for readers everywhere. I sometimes call myself, only half-joking, the “designated dummy” of the JEP. If the argument doesn't read clearly and make sense to me, then it can't be published in the pages of the journal.

Proper editing needs an element of personal confrontation. A good editor must be willing to confront the author's ego, even when it sometimes means trespassing on the social niceties of a personal relationship with the author. The editorial function is a shaky three-legged relationship in which the editor mediates between the author and an unseen readership. Someone in this ménage à trois of author, editor, and reader needs to point out possibly helpful nips and tucks in the exposition, and to insist on major surgery when necessary. The readers are invisible and powerless—they don't see the article until after publication. Authors are presumably doing the best that they can, given their abilities as writers, the other constraints on their time, and the depth of their inner fears about belonging to the ranks of academia, being correct, and being perceived within academia both to belong and to be correct. If an editor doesn't speak up on behalf of the future readers, no one else is in a position to do so.

Management guru Peter Drucker described the necessarily intrusive aspect of editing in a discussion

of newspaper editors (as quoted in Jenkins, 2007): “Every first-rate editor I have ever heard of reads, edits and rewrites every word that goes into his publication. . . . Good editors are not ‘permissive’; they do not let their colleagues do ‘their thing’; they make sure that everybody does the ‘paper’s thing.’ A good, let alone a great editor is an obsessive autocrat with a whim of iron, who rewrites and rewrites, cuts and slashes, until every piece is exactly the way he thinks it should have been done.”

This level of aggressiveness in editing doesn’t seem appropriate to me for an academic journal, although I fear that certain JEP authors feel that they have been treated in this way (you know who you are, and I apologize). After all, newspaper editing is ultimately a commercial product aimed at attracting readership; in academic journals, the articles are ultimately the responsibility of the author. But even with this difference, it remains my editor’s mission that the papers should be reworked as necessary to conform with the mission of the journal and with the needs of readers. As one of my former co-editors Brad De Long said of the JEP editorial process: “We can’t always make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear, but we can usually make a rayon handbag.”

The Peacemaking Aspect of Editing

In the minds of nonacademics, academia is all about the free-flowing give-and-take of ideas—some blend of open arguments, fair-minded criticisms, and honest responses, all conducted in a spirit of good faith. However, most academics went through their formative years from elementary school to college as the smartest person in the room. They are in the habit of being correct. As budding academics progressed through graduate school and into research and classrooms, being right became not only a habit, but an important element of professional success. For some sizeable share of academics—I’ll sidestep here the question of whether it is a majority or only a substantial minority—criticism can feel like a declaration of war. An uppity editor who has the temerity to suggest that an argument is unclear, or that the length of a paper can be reduced, or that a table or figure is unnecessary, may be stepping into a minefield.

My own strategy here is some mixture of politeness, good humor, and occasional groveling. I bear in mind the story of a note that Alexander Gerschenkron wrote to Abram Bergson, asking for comments on a paper. As described in Dawidoff (2002, p. 142) Gerschenkron wrote: “Let me have your criticism, general and particular, and let me have it promptly”; a postscript added, “Criticisms are to be submitted in the form ‘I suggest the following change’ never in the form: ‘This does not make sense’ or similar.” In that spirit, my own comments on JEP papers rely heavily on “I don’t understand,” rather than “this is wrong.” I occasionally preface my comments with: “A question based on raw ignorance here” When a paper has some especially strong elements, or when part or all of a draft is especially well-written, I try to say so, hoping that in the overall karma of my editorial lifetime, some honestly positive words where possible will offset the reality that most comments have an inevitably negative tone.

It’s possible to apply the soft soap too liberally, of course. Academic legend tells of a rejection letter once received from a Chinese economics journal (Bernard, 1990, p. 44, as quoted in Gans and Shepherd, 1994, p. 178):

We have read your manuscript with boundless delight. If we were to publish your paper, it would be impossible for us to publish any work of lower standard. And as it is unthinkable that in the next thousand years we shall see its equal, we are, to our regret, compelled to return your divine composition, and to beg you a thousand times to overlook our short sight and timidity.

But I confess that I have my own versions of this flattering response, albeit in a milder tone—which have the advantage of being true. For example, I can often honestly say to authors that while the terminology or explanation in their current draft would be fine for an audience of specialists, it won’t work well for our readership of generalist economists. That message contains an implicit deference to their authority as a member of the insider community of specialists. In other cases, we are offered ideas for papers that may turn out to be standard economic arguments at some point, but aren’t yet established in the research literature. In that case, I can honestly say to the authors that

while their work is potentially excellent, it isn't yet "ripe" for a generalist journal like JEP.

At its best, content-related editing becomes a kind of partnership, in which authors become comfortable with a fundamental incongruity: They did not write the paper in the way that it finally appears in JEP. Indeed, left to their own devices, they would not have written the paper in that way. But nonetheless, all elements of the final product remain truly and distinctively their own.

The Role of the Editor in Academic Life

No child dreams at night of growing up to be an editor. No graduate student works for a doctorate in the hope of becoming an editor. No class in economics graduate school teaches editing. In the academic triumvirate of "research, teaching, and service," the job of editing is presumably bundled as a subset of "service," together with student advising, membership on the hiring committees, and a willingness to give talks when requested at the local Chamber of Commerce or Kiwanis club. But many economists end up with aspects of editing at some point in their careers, either as journal editors, referees, or book editors. A scan of recent issues of the *Journal of Economic Literature* suggests that about one-third of all books published in economics are edited volumes. Because academic disciplines record their results in journal articles, editors shape what is in those articles and how they are expressed. In the publish-or-perish academic world, editors and referees hold one of the keys to professional success—and even survival.

From the point of view of what I do in editing articles for JEP, much of the academic editing that occurs, whether in economics journals or in conference volumes, seems shallow. The "editing" serves a binary gate-keeping function, separating acceptable from unacceptable, but often does little more. I occasionally see drafts of articles with a few words of comment scattered here and there. The general tone is something like this: "Liked your paper a lot. The third section could be tightened up a little, and I'm not sure about the point at the bottom of p. 19. Hope to see you at the conference next month." This kind of editing is more a polite social interchange than any meaningful attempt to improve the paper. But to be fair, many

of these papers are aimed at a specialist readership. The papers are also receiving feedback from multiple seminars and colleagues, as well as journal referees. The overall effect of this process can certainly work in creating a research paper suitable for publication in a journal or conference volume, even if it would not lead to a paper suitable for a more generalist readership like JEP.

Even after 22 years, I do deeply enjoy my work as managing editor of the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*. For a generalist economist with a grasshopper mind, like me, it's hard to imagine a job with a better-fitting combination of interest, autonomy, flexibility, and security. I remember the early days of JEP when we weren't sure that anyone would want to write for the journal, or that anyone would accept being edited, or that we would be able to produce a stream of issues. Now I meet professors who grew up with the journal as a presence in their lives, all the way from the reading lists of their own undergraduate days to what they assign to their own students today. My professional insecurities aren't about whether I enjoy my work, or whether I'm good about it, but about whether that work has sufficient social value.

One afternoon, after polishing off one manuscript and lacking the strength to start immediately on another, I attempted to provide for myself an economic rationale to justify my salary. There are various ways to think about my social product: for example, because of how much I cut the length of articles, there could be a savings of paper and mailing costs. My editing might simplify the task of professors in putting together reading lists, or provide an easier basis for updating and amending lecture notes. My editing might help readers develop greater understanding for the time that they invest in an article. But as a simple metric, let's say that as a result of my editing it becomes possible for the typical reader to save an hour of time: either because they can read the published articles in JEP more quickly than they could have read the original drafts, or because it saves them time in gathering entries for a reading list or information for a lecture. Let's set the number of readers of JEP for a given issue at 5,000—roughly one-quarter of the circulation—and value the time of the typical reader at \$40/hour. (In keeping with my graduate school experience, we will ignore any benefits to students and count their time as worth zero.) With four issues per year, my editing saves \$800,000

worth of time per year, which comfortably exceeds my annual salary—and indeed is almost equal to the entire annual budget for the journal.

But one of my conceits as an editor is that my work does not just contribute to saving the time and energy of readers in the dissemination of knowledge, but that it also contributes to the development of knowledge itself. Many of us carry around an implicit image of academic knowledge as a ladder, where new discoveries add an extra rung, or perhaps as a mountaintop, where new discoveries make the peak just a little taller. The implication is that the privileged task of creating knowledge is a matter of extending farther, and all else is a secondary matter of filling in the gaps. But a full and mature understanding of any field is not one-dimensional in this way. Knowledge is not a ladder to be climbed—one way up, with a clear sense of how to advance. Knowledge is a terrain or an ecosystem to be explored, and that exploration can be done from multiple angles and perspectives, using different tools and approaches.

In some broad sense, most of economics was in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* back in 1776. But the process of bringing lucidity, clarification, terminology, definiteness and a recognition of the limits and parameters and interconnections of arguments is all part of knowledge, as well. I once read a paper in which the author, in referring to an earlier article on the same subject, wrote: "This point was first made in a virtually impenetrable paper by ____." The sentiment seemed to me just right; give credit to the originator, but also take note that the original exposition was hardly the last word on explicating or understanding the issues.

The economist/philosopher Jeremy Bentham, he of the terrible penmanship, once commented on the process of intellectual discovery in a passage which John Maynard Keynes (1936 [1964], p. 353) would later call Bentham's "finest passage:" "The career of art, the great road which receives the footsteps of the projectors, may be considered as a vast, and perhaps unbounded plain, bestrewn with gulphs . . . Each [gulph] requires a human victim to fall into it ere it can close, but when it once closes, it closes to open no more, and so much of the path is safe to those who follow."

For those of us who live in Minnesota, the unavoidable image evoked by this passage is an ice-covered lake, where drifting snow obscures potential cracks, holes and open water. Knowledge-

seekers—the "projectors" as Bentham calls them—are exploring this terrain. Some move so quickly that they shoot right over holes in the ice. Others barely miss holes, and don't even know it. Some venture into areas where the ice begins cracking under them, and then leave so quickly that they aren't quite sure what was wrong. Still others fall through, but when they do, they help the rest of us understand what path to follow. The projectors deserve credit for reaching out into new areas. But just because an author has taken the first steps into a new terrain does not mean that the ground has been fully explored, or fully understood. As someone who spends his work life confronting academic articles that test and extend the limits of my knowledge, I know all too well that sense of discovery by falling into a gulf, struggling for awhile, and then laboriously climbing out—only to repeat the process a few pages later. If you are an editor, you hope to mark such gulfs clearly, to build over them and to find ways around them, to smooth out rough spots, and create a broader, safer path for readers who will follow.

Notes

1. After I left the Mercury News, I kept a connection there. For a number of years afterwards, especially after I moved back to California in 1988, I wrote 20–25 signed op-ed columns each year for the paper, along with an occasional unsigned editorial. Many signed columns are available at my website at <http://www.timothytaylor.net>.
2. My courses for the Teaching Company include: "Economics: An Introduction," "America and the New Global Economy," "A History of the U.S. Economy in the Twentieth Century," and "Legacies of Great Economists." My textbook, *Principles of Economics: Economics and the Economy* was published in 2007 and is, to my knowledge, the first mainstream principles of economics text that is freely available over the web. We'll see over the next few years if the publisher, Freeload Press, can make a profit with a combination of selling advertising at the website, charging for advertising-free downloads of the book, and charging for inexpensive ad-free paper copies.

For more details on these projects, see my website at <http://www.timothytaylor.net>.

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