# Communicator

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# An editor's view

*James Bartley, a multi-lingual technical editor, describes his work.*

As a technical editor, the meat of my work is to review technical documents. Like many technical communicators, I am the user advocate, ensuring that everything they need is present, correct and easy to find. In contrast with authoring, my role is to analyse the document itself and offer constructive, objective criticism about almost every aspect of the document, as necessary. As you can imagine, it requires a strong working relationship with the author.

Because I work in a specialist, non-technical domain, the authors themselves vary in their technical capacity, which is why the role of technical editor is such a useful one. I not only advocate for the user, but I provide support and education around technical communication to the authors as well. Fortunately, this often means that authors are grateful for my input; the technical documents I work with are usually sold as a final product in their own right and the authors are aware that user satisfaction is key to their income.

So, let me be more specific before I go into any detail of my day-to-day work life. Hi, my name is James, and I'm a multi-lingual technical editor of knitting and crochet patterns. While I hope that the reader is able to recognise a knitting or crochet pattern as a technical document, I still find it fascinating to think of it this way.

For example, it fits all five topic types of DITA, requires careful analysis of processes, and is intended to communicate detailed information in a clear and digestible manner.

My day involves jumping between different tasks that form the lifecycle of an editing project, as I progress work for many different clients within a single day. This varies from receiving a query from a potential client, through negotiating and completing the work, to sending invoices and receiving payment. Some of this is simply due to being self-employed, but the parts that are specific to being an editor fall into two parts: the actual edit, and communicating the work.

The editing itself is based on reading through the document and flagging any area that requires attention. For some clients, I will make changes directly into a text document, but mostly I annotate a PDF document with notes, suggestions and corrections. As well as checking the accuracy of what is there, I also check if anything is missing. At one level, this can be a simple heuristic approach, however I also think about how I respond to the document as I read it. Do I feel reassured and confident? Am I confused by anything? Does my eye track the page clearly from one point to the next in a sensible order? Is reading this document pleasurable? I don't know if the latter question gets asked often in other people's work!

When it comes to making annotations, this in itself is a form of technical communication and one that I have had to practise. There are copy editing conventions that help, and sometimes I will add explanatory notes on the page or in an accompanying email. Being able to draw on the page is very helpful, especially with diagrams, and for this reason, most of my editing work is done on a tablet.

My computer is mostly used as a spreadsheet, where I will check that the instructions work, and will result in the desired outcome. I have never used my maths degree as much as when checking the shaping of a sweater, crocheted cowl, or bias-knit shawl! Since the instructions are creating a three-dimensional object, it can be quite a fun challenge.

> " *I always aim to preserve a designer's style in anything I write.* "

If an edit is particularly involved, I may end up suggesting a rewritten phrase or a few sentences. I try to avoid anything more than that, as then the advantage of having an objective view of the work is lost and it isn't playing to my strengths; I'm an editor, not an author (or in this case, designer — since it is usually, but not always, the designer who writes the original pattern). A healthy respect for the designer's work is important in editing, and I always aim to preserve a designer's style in anything I write.

Rewriting is most often a result of either unnecessary adherence to a particular convention (such as emulating the extremely abbreviated style suited for printed patterns in magazines, when the pattern is going to be made available electronically) or to assist with clear and accurate



'Themyscira', a shawl design by Jill Chapman. James edited the pattern then knitted this one for his sister.

> *Working in a non-native language can highlight issues with the information design and architecture.*

phrasing when English is not the designer's first language. The latter is most common for me as I specialise in working with this group of designers.

These designers offer me the additional challenge of reviewing their patterns in multiple languages, which gives a fascinating view of the documentation. Working in a non-native language can highlight issues with the information design and architecture, that you might otherwise not notice in your native tongue; our brains are so used to filling in the gaps for us as we read. These lessons are then brought to my work in English too, making me a better editor.

I am a big advocate of learning a second language as being a boon to improving communication in your native tongue. When you have had to go through the struggle of trying to understand 'simple' sentences, you gain

a heightened empathy for those who rely on our words. It also helps you to question conventions that are no longer serving you. When you realise that not everybody does things the same way, you can find yourself being open to trying something that is more effective, even if it isn't as familiar.

Once I've completed an edit, there may be some feedback that is most easily given by writing it in the email itself. Here, I can include discussions about the minutiae of pattern writing, as well as its philosophy. Are the written instructions to be read on their own or in conjunction with the charts? Is the pattern aimed more at a US or European audience (and so which gets priority when writing and converting units)? How should the numbers be rounded? Where should the abbreviations list be placed? Can this document serve the interests of both beginners and advanced makers? Should it try to? Which font is appropriate for this paragraph?

This can lead to some wonderful discussions that, while they may not be crucial to the success of any one pattern, are great sources of learning

and have resulted in changes to how I edit. I am always grateful to my clients for being so dedicated to the art and science of technical communication.

> *I take great pleasure in knowing that I am helping people to enjoy making things, all around the world.*

For me, this job is a dream come true. It requires me to be myself, fully sensitive to the nuances of communication, and I am paid to let people know where things could be improved. Then they listen and act on my advice! (Most of the time.) In the end, the designer is in charge of what gets published, but I am extremely proud of my work and take great pleasure in knowing that it is out there helping people to enjoy making things, all around the world. **C**

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