



## Writing with Passion for Quality

Editors for *Interface* solicit articles, work with authors and the ECS staff, deal with administrative issues, attend meetings, and make calls to potential authors, but they also read and write a lot. The skill to read comes from practice and from motivation. If I look in an instrument owner's manual to learn how to set it up, I look for those details and try to ignore the language idiosyncrasies of machine translation. A careful editor for a magazine must, however, look for everything including the unexpected. Timelines and storylines do not show up in scientific writing, but they play

an important role in reports. Thus, even a scientist needs to tell a good story to be well understood.

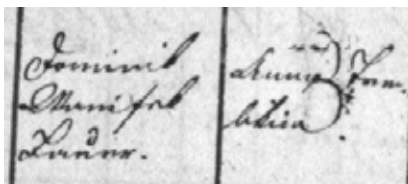
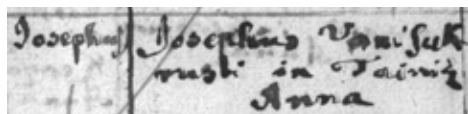
An ECS Student Chapter once reported on their activities and, in their literary effort, they stated, "After the laboratory visit we took BART over the Bay Bridge to enjoy some free time in San Francisco." BART is the Bay Area Rapid Transit system, which one can guess or look up its meaning. But as the editor-nitpicker, I paused over the detail of which way BART is routed. It actually goes under the bay through a tunnel. I could not let that one go.

An error in the text can slow the reader down just like a speed bump slows down a driver on the road. We each have our own research fields to worry about with accompanying jargon to learn. That requires a lot of literature reading, or at least some dedicated scanning that must be fast, without puzzling over the word structure. Then, a good citizen should find some time to read up on present world political and economic issues to find out what the popular media say about science and technology. In our busy world, good luck finding time to read the next Sue Grafton's mystery story, but one should find the time even for some fiction.

With all the reading we do, one would think that the skill to write comes naturally, but reading and writing do not make a reversible pair. Reading can make one a good proofreader, but stringing original sentences together requires other talents including a lot of practice and dedication. In addition, one should take pride in writing and speaking clearly, although not everyone sees this as a daily necessity. Even penmanship, which used to be another pillar of communication, is all but disappearing. Some schools no longer teach cursive handwriting. While I regret this trend, I am part of the problem. Normally, I type. Last Sunday, my German shepherd took a bite off of my keyboard and I had to write most of this editorial by longhand, which subsequently even I could not decipher. Still, if we do not teach the skill of cursive writing, only a few experts will be able to read older documents.

Is attention to detail in communication essential? Do others understand sloppy language? Possibly yes, though the details might be lost and some people may be sidelined. For example, to a foreign born speaker, who learned to read English without sounding the words out, an ostensibly misspelled "thier" does not look anything like "their," and the notoriously confused "there" and "their" have, to him, two different meanings.

So what about "improper" spelling and grammar? After all, the language is continuously developing and what was once the norm is suddenly viewed as obsolete and pretentious. Some changes are for practical reasons, some are driven by fashion, and yet some are designed to push the envelope of what is permissible. The statement, "It's true, I found it on the *Internet*" used to be a joke, but *Internet* authority is *de rigueur* these days. Still, your editor harbors the traditional view that language stewardship contributes to the quality of everything that we as people do. Just like the ocean shore changes over time, so does the language. But there is also a place for the steadfast breakwaters.



Examples of the changing script. The left panel is from the baptismal record (1758) from the Vanýsek family line. The name Josephus Vanisuk is readable. The right panel shows script from half a century later (1811), which lists on the left Dominik Vanisuk. The writing became more fanciful and, for the untrained eye, less readable.

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# INTERFACE



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