**Stylish Academic Writing - Elizabeth Knoll**

ELIZABETH KNOLL: I'm here to speak as an editor, as a book editor, for the editors and about the editors. This is partly obviously sheer self-indulgence on my part. But it's also because an editor whom you deal with, if you're thinking about writing a book-- and I live in the book world, so that's what I'm talking about-- an editor you deal with or an agent whom you deal with-- and your agent used to be an editor before she lost her job-- your editor or your agent is sort of emblematic of all those readers you want to have whom you don't know.

So when you're writing the manuscript, or writing the proposal for the manuscript, or writing the letter that describes the proposal that you hope that the agent or the editor will read, it's going to be a lot easier to write if you think of that editor or agent as an actual human being. The person is probably an actual human being. The person I'm going to call her she, because lots of us are. The editor of the agent is a person who is very busy, very stressed, necessarily very pragmatic, and she says no a lot more than she says yes.

At least once in the last month, she has woken up and worried about the weakness of the publishing industry at 3 o'clock in the morning. But it's very important to say that editors as a class, as a type of person, are not sour, are not petty, are not hostile, and not bad tempered and not cynical. Because if we were any of those things we wouldn't last a week. Your editor-- this future editor whom you don't know-- is basically an optimistic, enthusiastic, outgoing, sympathetic person. Even the ones who seem most prickly are secret romantics.

The scariest agent whom I ever met has now retired and is spending her retirement taking beautiful photographs of flowers. Just as nobody in their right mind sets out to write a book to get rich, nobody goes into publishing to get rich. We go into publishing because we love ideas. We love new ways of thinking about things. We love to be interested in things. And we'd love to get other people interested in and excited about things.

So as the guy said in the old movie Jerry Maguire, help us to help you. Meet us halfway. Help the agent or the editor, or the entity and then the editors colleagues, and then through them that world of readers you're going to have, to understand the argument you want to make, or the story we want to tell, or the idea that you have. Now, Helen and Steve can't talk. Helen already has talked very, very well about how to express that, how to avoid the clunky language, how to avoid the abstractions how to avoid the almost autistic self referential kind of quality that many disciplines kind of do tend to fall into.

But what I want to talk about is thinking about who's on the other side. It's not enough to talk about whatever it is you have to say in a clear and lively way. You have to think about why it matters. The question that we always ask-- and I say this all the time-- is that any proposal or any kind of book has to answer the Seder question, how is this book different from all other books? That's an important question. But an even more important question is, who cares? So what? Why does it matter?

Many things compete as we all know for people's time and attention. If you've got a TV and a computer you have access to an unlimited stream of entertainment, quasi entertainment, information, quasi information. And it's all basically free. So what is it that you have to say to somebody else that that very busy person with a computer is going to want to plunk down $30 for, and almost even more important, commit three hours of their busy life for.

It sounds daunting. But since editors are optimistic and encouraging, let me offer you a way out. It's not enough that you know more about something than anybody in the world. You probably do. And it's not enough that it's really interesting. You need to think about and make it clear why it's interesting to somebody else. And what it is in what you have to say, the story you want to tell, the argument you want to make, that really answers a need that most people have.

And what most people are looking for, and what they will buy books for, is something that helps them make sense of the world, something that helps them not necessarily get rich, get beautiful-- although that's nice too-- but something that helps them find a thread through the labyrinth, through all this blooming and bulging confusion that we live in. How did the recession happen and when will we ever get out of it? Why are we in Afghanistan? Those are questions that are topical and on the front pages of the paper. But there's many other questions that people care about quite a lot. And if you can answer those questions, can think about how the problem that you are preoccupied with, that you really care about, can be something that someone else can care about, you're already halfway there to writing a letter, a book proposal, a book that someone will care about.

Now, if it's many academics, if you're interested in writing a book for people outside your discipline, outside your subdiscipline, if you're interested in writing a book for nonacademic readers, it's really, really a good idea to know some nonacademic readers. And you think I'm joking, but I'm actually not joking. You're probably aware that most of us do not live in America. Most of us are not really too typical. And most of us have as our friends people who are probably kind of like ourselves.

So know some people who aren't like you. Talk to them about the stuff you care about. See what gives a glint in their eye. Your best friend from high school, the president of your high school class, your college roommate, your dentist, your brother-in-law from Western Nebraska who runs a company that sells heavy duty plastic fencing, and can only fall asleep while watching a football game on TV, but who also always, always has American political history books on his Kindle.

You have to know these people. You have to like them. And you have to respect them. You have to respect the things that they care about and worry about, and the worldview that they have. The all important question is who are you talking to? Are they real to you? And what do you have to give them? It's not just what you want to say. It's what you want to say that they can want to hear.

A few years ago after my father died, my mother gave me the assignment of going through his study and all his papers and organizing everything. And among the things I found in there were the voluminous records of a trip to Europe that he'd taken when he was a graduate student in 1948. I read them, obviously, with great interest, partly because post-war Europe was interesting to read about, but also as you can understand, it's extremely touching for a middle aged person to meet her father when he was young enough to be her son.

There were two kinds of records there. They were his diary and the letters that he wrote to his parents along the way. The diary was very clear. It was interesting, full of description, but it was a little flat. It was sort of lugubrious sometimes. It was clear he was lonely. The letters to his parents sparkled. They conveyed the enthusiasm of the conversations he was having with people. He was trying to describe things he was seeing in ways that would make sense to his parents back in Nebraska. The letters had life.

And I thought not only as a daughter but as an editor, aha, this is the key. A book is not a diary. A book is a letter. A book is written from you to somebody else. And if you can think about everything that you write in your book as your letter to the world, it's going to have the kind of life that you wanted to have, and it's going to make your editor love you.

[APPLAUSE]