

June 2012

Elizabeth Manning Murphy JP, BA(Hons), FCES, FSBT(UK), AFAIM, DE is a trained linguist, a consultant in communication skills, an editor and a trainer in effective writing. She holds a teaching certificate from the Commercial Education Society of Australia, was a member of the CESA committee for many years, including five years as President. She is based in Canberra, Australia, but works worldwide with clients in the UK, the USA, South Africa and Japan, as well as Australia. She worked for many years as a teacher in the Australian technical and further education arena, and in commercial colleges in the UK, and as a management consultant in Australia and Fiji. She has taught at the Australian National University, the University of Canberra and the Australian Catholic University (Signadou campus, Canberra). She is the author of a number of books, the most recent being Working words, and including Effective writing: plain English at work and The job-hunter's guide; and she edited The Australian secretary and co-authored Letter writing simplified. She has also written radio drama scripts that have been broadcast by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and commercial radio. She is the 2012 President of the Canberra Society of Editors and has had her own editing business in Canberra since 1979. Her current interests include academic editing and the encouragement of excellence in editing, and in travelling as often as possible to the UK to visit family and friends.

The Pursuit of Excellence

Elizabeth Manning Murphy

In memory of the late Tom Cooper, General Secretary, who stood firmly for the pursuit of excellence.

For as long as I can remember, I have never been satisfied with second best. I have always wanted to do the best I could at everything, and I have always encouraged others to do their best too. These days my efforts are concentrated in the editing profession, and I am about to travel to South Africa to run some seminars which I have entitled "Master editing"—yes, there is some deliberate ambiguity there! In one sense, I'm asking people to master their editing skills and the conventions that go with editing at any level in order to be considered editors at all. In another sense, I'm saying that these seminars are about the level of editing skill that real masters of their craft need to understand and practise in order to be considered the best editors in their field.

A good deal of the editing I do is in the academic field: editing theses and journal articles for scholarly publications. Sometimes the theses are written by people for whom English is not their first language, and one such is worthy of note. I was confronted with a thesis written by a qualified medical practitioner, with two university degrees already, now going for a PhD. This person is from an Asian background, so I fully expected to have to fix all the misuse or absence of articles *a/an* and *the*, put prepositions into the text where appropriate and sort out verb tenses. I wasn't prepared for the plethora of ambiguous and incredibly long sentences—the thesis was indecipherable in its current state. So I had no option but to get it completely rewritten before I attempted to edit it. To his credit, the author quickly saw that he needed help, so I took off my editor's hat and donned my teacher's hat and gave him a few lessons in grammar and plain English. He has now started to send me chapters of his rewritten thesis—they contain sentences of reasonable length, with no ambiguity any more, and a bit better control over the use of articles, not to mention the many other grammatical conventions that were totally foreign to him and to the grammar of his first language. When I asked him how he felt about rewriting everything, he told me that he was no longer satisfied with the standard of his writing in English, but wanted it to be the best English possible, and he was prepared to work at it to reach that excellence that he aspired to.

How do our home-grown students stack up against such dedication? The world of the young student in Australia, as in almost any other part of the world, is seen through the computer screen, the electronic book reader, the mobile phone and other electronic devices. I sometimes wonder if they ever have conversations (except in the telegraphic form of the text message), or write letters to their mothers when they travel, or know how to write an essay in a form that the rest of us can understand. Everything they want to do can be done online—no need for phone calls, letters, cheque books. They can live entirely inside their own heads, sitting all day at a computer, both for work and entertainment. The so-called 'Gen Y' has a reputation for being notoriously bad at relationships, living in a 'me first' world, caring not a jot for working at a project—wanting everything 'now'. But every generation goes through some sort of rebellion against societal norms—they all eventually grow up, and, like my PhD candidate, realise that there is something better 'out there' than what they'd been satisfied with.

Enter the pursuit of excellence! The Commercial Education Society of Australia has always espoused the pursuit of excellence in commercial education. The candidates for our certificates of achievement in a number of subjects aren't satisfied with being labelled merely 'competent'—they want to know whether they have performed to a credit standard or are worthy of a high distinction for their effort. It is personally satisfying to have tried hard and been rewarded with a high grade after an examination. It spurs you on to even greater efforts at work and in your personal life. It can even be the winning edge in the fierce competition these days for jobs.

No wonder CESA has been doing what it does, and surviving where others have disappeared, for over 100 years. CESA itself has always pursued excellence—excellence in the setting of relevant examinations, excellence in the example it sets for other educational bodies around Australia and the Pacific, excellence in its own administration of itself, and excellence in the personal qualities of the teachers, writers, administrators and so on who have had the good fortune to be part of it. I have been part of CESA for more than 50 years, part of that time as President, and several years when I was involved in getting the 'excellence' message across to people in certain Pacific countries. During that time, I have written a number of books on aspects of commercial studies, writing, editing and job-hunting. The latest is *Working words*, published in 2011 by the Canberra Society of Editors. The influence of CESA is evident in everything I do, including in that book, which is now in a second printing in South Africa where I will continue my own pursuit of excellence and try to encourage it in the participants, all working editors, who are booking up for my seminars in that country. After all, doesn't the idea of 'master editing' include 'pursue excellence in editing'?

Elizabeth

Elizabeth Manning Murphy JP, BA(Hons), FCES, FSBT(UK), AFAIM, DE (Distinguished Editor, awarded by the Institute of Professional Editors, 2008)