



TRANSCRIPT: SEASON 2, EPISODE 9
WRITING AND EDITING FOR THE WEB, WITH GUEST ERIN BRENNER

Denise Cowle: Hello and welcome to the editing podcast. So this week we're going to be talking about writing and editing for the web.

Louise Harnby: But why just have two editors talking about the subject when you can have three! Plus, it didn't feel complicated enough to do recordings with Louise in England and Denise in Scotland, so we decided to pull in an American!

Erin Brenner: Hello, ladies!

Louise: Erin tell us a little bit about who you are, where you are, and what you do!

Erin: Well, where I am is in Haverhill, Massachusetts, which is about an hour north of Boston, and no one ever knows where it is. But it's a nice little city, which makes me a New Englander. I'm 20 minutes from the ocean, an hour from the mountains, we have lots of small farms around us, lots of lots of trees, lots of parkland.

I run Right Touch Editing. I launched it back in 2005 and went full-time in 2010, so I'm coming up on a decade at this point. I run it as an editorial agency. I offer writing, editing and corporate communications training but I use subcontractors as often as I can to try and grow the business and give other editors some work, which I love to do.

Louise: And I suppose it means that because certain people have different specialisms in terms of corporate comms you can pick from that pool of talent and make sure that your clients get the right people on the case.

Erin: Absolutely. It means I get to say yes more often, which I really like doing. And that's why I branched out that way

Louise: It's a thing! The whole scheduling thing around editing is tricky because you can only scale so far and there are only so many hours in the day.

And no matter how you bill your clients, you are selling your time, which is something I really emphasize when I speak to other editors. And there's a lot we can do with efficiency and good planning. But there's an upper limit to that, and I've got more than a couple of clients who will say, 'Well, I have this project. Can you do it by tomorrow? Can you do it in the next couple of hours? So I like to be able to say yes. And if it's not me then it's one of my teammates. It's about knowing who's available and being able to plug the right person into the right slot.

Louise: And you speak as well, don't you?

Erin: I do. I've spoken at quite a few editing events now – SfEP few times, and at ACES, EFA and Editors Canada and events where there are magazine staff. So I'm talking to managers, writers and editors, and it's a great opportunity to get in front of potential clients and to get my message out to more people. I think that's a really good way.

Denise: I think that's something that editors should do more – something that Louise and I have both done – as well speaking outside our industry to raise awareness of our services.

Erin: I think it's something that editors could do an awful lot more of, just to raise awareness of editing itself, apart from finding more clients.

Louise: That's a really good point. Industries, like the kind of clients you work with, Denise, and the kind of clients for I specialize in and Erin specializes in, are not necessarily using the same terminology when they need help with their writing; they're not necessarily calling it the same thing. And so raising awareness is really important so that people know what they can get from us and how we can help them.

Denise: Erin, could you start off by telling us why working with web content is different from working with writing on the page?

Erin: Sure. At its base it's about learning another writing style so it's not hugely different. I think there's a misconception that web writing doesn't follow rules, that it's the Wild West of publishing. I've been involved with web publishing for about 20 years now and it's really not. The rigor that editors like is out there so in that sense it's not different. What's different is knowing some of the tasks that go with web editing, like SEO.

It's also about knowing how the web is read. We're all really good at reading the printed page. We've got the model down – white paper, black ink. But on the web, reading is really difficult. We have this light shining into our eyes. People don't always follow the best layout so you might get a dark screen with

light text, which can be really slow and it tires our eyes. That's something editors know a lot about. And also thinking about how when people are reading web content they're not always in the best environment – there might be poor lighting behind or to the side that can affect the way you engage with that.

So editors and clients need to be thinking about that. Maybe you're reading it on a big monitor; maybe you're reading it on a little itty bitty mobile screen. But there's also so much on the web. When you're looking at a printed piece, that's it; there's nothing else to draw you away from it. But online, everything is the same distance apart and that's one click away.

Denise: It's a rabbit hole, isn't it?

Erin: There's so much to distract us and we'd much rather go play a game or look at Instagram or Facebook than whatever it was that brought us to the web in the first place. So what we tend to do is scan rather than read. We'll look for keywords, which is why keywords are so important. We're looking for the right words that tell us that tell us: this is the right message. And we're spending most of our time on that first screen full of information – what they call above the fold – and we're scanning, looking at headlines, bullet lists, bold terms ... scanning in a pattern until we know that what's there is what we're looking for.

And if we get enough information, we're not going to bother with the rest of it.

Louise: That's a good lesson, isn't it? Businesses who are self-editing need to be putting their key stuff at the top.

Erin: Absolutely. So web writing style looks for the most important information in the top paragraphs. But it's also about top-loading your paragraph, which means that first line, that first sentence, your most important information, should be there in a sentence. You want to front-load your information so the most important idea is at the front.

Denise: I find that whenever I add new web copy or copy that's going to be read on screen, it's often that I'm deleting the first paragraph. It's like throat clearing, getting rid of all the stuff you don't need. Because otherwise you've lost your reader before they've even begun.

Erin: Absolutely. It's one of the big points I make when I teach this stuff. In school, we're taught to write essays where you have an introduction. You tell people what you're going to tell them; then you tell them the thing; and then in your conclusion you tell them what you told them! You have to throw out most of that in web writing. It's much more like fiction in that regard, where you open up page one of a novel and you want to be engaged right away ... an emotional connection. Web writing has to do the same thing. We have to grab

people as soon as possible and we have to write in a way that means they don't have to read every word to get the message, because they're not going to do it.

Louise: And are there any other patterns we need to think about when we're writing my web copy?

Erin: The most common one is the F pattern. So something catches your eye, like an image or the headline, and then you will read a line of text and that's the top bar on the F. And then you scan down the left margin, reading the first few words of a sentence or paragraph until your eye latches on to another line. And you'll read left to right, maybe not as far as the right margin. And then you go back to the left margin and you're just scanning down so that your eye has made an eff pattern.

Louise: That's useful to know. That's quite interesting because I've seen various things over the years about these different letters but that makes most sense, especially if you live in the West and you're reading English. That's the way you're used to moving.

And what about on mobile? Do people behave differently with that?

Erin: So on mobiles, people will skip words if they can. I mean they will not read if at all possible. If an image will tell them what they need to know then they will skip the words entirely. I do this all the time – I go to Amazon on my phone to look for something. Oh, that picture is the something I want. I'm not going to read the description; I'm gonna press the Buy Now button, because it is so hard to read on that small screen.

Denise: I suppose for businesses it's getting away from this idea of having big blocks of texts that are off-putting and perhaps using infographics and visuals much more to convey their message in their information. Because we all know how off-putting these big blocks of texts can be.

Louise: And anyone who's got a website should be checking the mobile version of their website because I know when I built my website I built it on a large screen. My website host sort of converts that into a mobile friendly thing. But it's about making sure that the way I've laid it out on the big screen is actually working.

Erin: Yeah, it doesn't always happen automatically or do it nicely, and that's really more of the technology end of it. As editors, we're usually just responsible for the words but a company should be ensuring that no matter what device and what platform a user is using, they can get at your website. Because there's nothing more frustrating than then wanting to get information and not being able to because of poor web design. And people will go elsewhere.

Louise: And they can. They can go quickly.

Denise: And you really don't have very long either to grab their attention before they're off. They make these decisions really quickly.

Erin: It's just a couple of seconds and then people are gone if they don't get what they need from you. So one thing that separates web editing from other kinds of editing, especially editing for print, is you need to be aware of SEO – search engine optimization. Whether or not you have been tasked with creating some of the SEO elements such as your metadata and keywords, you want to know what your clients' keywords are; you want to know what their audience is like so that you can make sure those keywords are in the copy but they're not overwhelming the copy. Because even though we're writing for people – and we must always write for people – we also have to write for the search engines.

The search engines have the same goal as the publishers, which is to give readers the information they're looking for, so you have to deal with that kind of middleman, middle-computer and technology thing going on and consider how search engines read your site. When they come to your site, they will look through to find out whether these keywords answer the question that readers have. So if a reader goes to Google and plugs in 'cheap flights', and your website has a page talking about how to find cheap flights, you certainly have to use that phrase 'cheap flights'. But you want to give them enough information for the reader to be able to do something, and your search engine's going to pick that up. They're better these days at understanding context and synonyms, so you don't have to do what's called keyword stuffing.

Denise: I was just going to ask about that and why it's not a good thing.

Erin: So keyword stuffing is using a keyword over and over again on a page. As an editor, if you read it you'd say, 'Why didn't these people use a pronoun or a synonym once in a while?' I think editors are really good at sniffing this stuff out because it's bad writing. You don't have overuse a keyword in order for search engines to know that your page is about cheap flights or whatever!

Denise: There's a recipe website that I really like but I really wish somebody would tell them that they don't need to do this because they do all the time. So you'll find a recipe for low-fat chicken korma and they'll say, *This low-fat chicken korma recipe is really great because it uses low-fat ingredients and the low-fat chicken korma that you're eating is going to be much lower in fat than other standard chicken korma. So, how to make this low-fat chicken korma.* And there are literally pages and pages of this and I find it so off-putting. And yet it's a fantastic website – they just don't need to do it. Some people don't seem to have moved on from that approach, which is such a shame

Louise: That's a really good point though that Erin's made – the technology has become more sophisticated; the algorithms have become more sophisticated. And so we can write well for the web; we can use keywords well.

Denise: There is such a thing as too much low-fat chicken korma! So that was really useful, just thinking about the technical aspects of writing web content. Can I ask you where do you think people would be creating the content – directly in their website or somewhere else?

Erin: It really depends. If you're starting a website from scratch then most likely you're gonna start writing copy in Word or another word-processing program. That's how I prefer to work because we have all our lovely tools in Word! And then you have all the copy in one file and you can catch inconsistencies, go through all the subheads and be more efficient in your writing and editing.

But if you're just doing a couple of pages, or if you're doing blog posts or news stories for a website, then it's likely that your writer will be working right in the website ... in the content management system. It may be something we're familiar with like WordPress, something homegrown that you're afraid to look at! I have one client ... I don't know where this CMS comes from but, oh, just don't look at it cross-eyed because it will go down! But if you're doing just blog posts or quick changes, that's probably where you will be working. It will depend on the actual project but there are times where I'm still working on a lot of copy in the CMS, I'm going to dump it into Word and work on it there and then copy it back, because I like my tools and having a backup copy. And I don't worry about losing everything.

I worked in a website today – I proofread three news stories a day for a website – and one of them, my last one today, and I hadn't pressed the SAVE button. I had to redo everything.

Denise: So that's why we like working in Word because we can recover things.

Louise: And why we recommend that any writer to use Word in particular but or, more generally, word-processing software. It's about using those efficiency tools, and safety.

Denise: So, Erin, at this stage, before uploading to CMS, what sort of things would somebody writing web copy be checking? I'd imagine a lot of it's similar to any writing but is there anything specific for the web that you would be looking for?

Erin: Well, certainly. I like to emphasize the point that as a copyeditor you're always checking spelling, grammar, usage and style; these things don't change.

But I'm also looking at the structure of the paragraphs. Are they dense because then I'll break them up and make them shorter so that we have more white space on the page. Are sentences overly long? And I don't like to see too many embedded clauses in a sentence in web copy, so I'll pull them out and simplify sentences.

Louise: That's a really good point because I've noticed even when I'm checking my own website copy ... even though I think the sentences are quite lean on the bigger screen, as soon as you hit mobile you're looking at walls of text. And the rules that you apply if you're writing a nice A4 or a US letter-sized piece of text – sort of essay style with longer paragraphs of work ... or if you were reading a journal article or something like – that doesn't work on a website.

Erin: Right, it just looks it just looks overwhelming and so those are things I look at particularly.

Denise: I just wanted to pick up on a point that Louise mentioned there ... even though she felt her writing was lean, that it still didn't convert well to mobile ... it's something I think some people might have trouble with when perhaps they're a personal brand or a solo business owner, and it is just them, and they like to write in quite a personable or conversational tone, which can itself be quite relaxed, quite circuitous, with quite long sentences with embedded clauses or where they go off at tangents here and there. How do you deal with that? Because obviously you want to find a balance.

Erin: There's an argument that people will read more online when it's engaging, that they'll read longer copy. So first and foremost, you have to make sure the copy is engaging. And then I might start pulling back parentheticals and removing stuff, simplifying. Or can we break some of the paragraphs up and have long copy, have a thousand words, have 1,500 words, but break up the paragraphs. Can we throw in some subheads?

Louise: And what do writers need to check once their content's actually posted online? In addition to all that structural and grammatical stuff, Erin, what else do we need to be thinking about?

Erin: When you start to pull a page together, you might have images. So do they have captions? Even if they don't, they should *always* have alt-text, which is a description of what's in that image that screen readers will read out to, say, a visually impaired person to describe what's in that image. You want to make sure you always put in your alt text for images, audio and video; they all give you the little options and the CMS to put in your alt text so that those who are using screen readers, for whatever reason, are included in what's on the page,

especially given that the web is so visual. If you've got a visitor who doesn't get any of that information, how much are they missing from your page, how much of the message is gone?

Denise: Do you have any specific do's and don'ts for how you write alt text because I think it's quite a neglected area that a lot of people miss out, perhaps because they're not sure about what level of detail to get into, or what they should or shouldn't be including in it.

Erin: If it's an image just to pretty up the page it's okay to say it's a decorative image and leave it at that but if there's text in that image you absolutely want to make sure that that's what your alt text says, and to be as descriptive as possible within the whatever character count you get. Sometimes it takes a little playing with to see how much space do you have and how much information people need to get the message that's in that image.

Louise: That's where copywriting skills are really going to come in, creating potentially rich but short descriptions, so it's not just about editing but about writing. How about links?

Erin: So you have two kinds of links:

1. Internal links (the link goes to another page on that website). These are looked at very favourably by the search engines because it means you have more stuff to share with readers. But it's also good for keeping readers on your site, which is often the goal: how long can we keep readers on our site? How much can we get them invested in our site? If you have a blog you want them to read more than one post, so leading them off to more content on your site is really valuable.
2. Outbound links/external links go to other sites, and this is where you want to be careful because you are essentially sharing their reputation. Whoever you link to, it's like hanging out with them in real life. So quoting and linking to the *New York Times* is great – the search engines will see that as a positive you'll see that as a positive.

Louise: I've got a great story about that, like a really good example of a negative! A few years back one of the British newspapers was doing a feature on essay-writing mills and talking about the problems of plagiarism. And there was a discussion around foreign-language students seeking language assistance and about the blurry line between assisting with grammar, spelling and punctuation, and how that might feed into actually helping them ... sort of colluding in content creation, which for someone's doing a degree is not acceptable. So what the newspaper did though – and it was the *Guardian*, a

massive newspaper in Britain – and they quoted a few editors. And they wouldn't put a link into my website. Do you know whose website they did link to? They linked to one of the essay-writing mills! They were criticizing these essay-writing mills for basically helping students to cheat, and then actually provided outbound links to these organizations' websites! And I said to them, 'You do realize what you've done there, don't you?' And they just didn't get it.

And I'm only mentioning this because if that can happen ... I'm sure that wouldn't happen now. I mean it wasn't that long ago but it was a good few years ago ... but you're absolutely right, Erin. When we're linking to external content, we're endorsing it in a sense; we're sending traffic their way. And so if you don't endorse what somebody's saying, you need to really think carefully about whether you should be putting valuable link juice.

Denise: And an essay-writing mill having a backlink from the *Guardian* ... I mean, that's like gold dust!

Louise: They may as well have said, 'We love you.' Anyway, great point, Erin. Thank you for making that. It's really important that any business, editor or writer with a website needs to be thinking about reputational links.

Denise: And what about metadata, Erin? How carefully do you look at metadata? I'm thinking very carefully!

Erin: Yes! So your metadata will be the title of the page, a description of the page, and it may include keywords and even categories. It depends on the CMS. This website I worked on earlier today, they're hooked into two or three different services that help to send out their metadata to help get readers in. Make sure that the titles are accurate because you have human readers who are taught not to trust links or websites, so you want them to know what they're getting. But you also want it to be interesting enough to get them to actually click through ... not so much clickbait but to be click-worthy.

Denise: I really like that I like that ... it's the positive site of clickbait.

Erin: And your description should be like any good teaser, any good news story lead. You have to let people know what they're getting so they have an idea of whether or not this page is going to answer their question. And the meta description is what ends up on your search-engine result page; you get your title, and that little description underneath is your meta description. It should be engaging and intriguing, but it should be accurate.

Louise: You nailed it there – it should answer the question. Because ultimately we are creating content that solves problems, aren't we? Whether you're selling something on a website or selling a service or providing information ...

whatever you're entertaining ... you're solving a problem for somebody, cheering them up because they're miserable, or you're selling a product that will help them do something better.

Erin: We always go online for a *reason* and so a website's job is to fulfil that need, that desire.

Denise: There there's a lot to think about beyond just the actual copy itself, and with all these additional things, what about quality control? A lot of people self-edit their content. Do you think it's worth always bringing in fresh eyes to have a look at it and edit or proofread, or are there only certain circumstances where you would think that would be necessary?

Erin: Well, I've had a website for years and I've had other editors say, 'Hey, I've found an error on your site,' and I never want someone to find an error on my site! So to me, if it's worth sharing something, publishing something so that anyone can see it, and if you are looking to do this because you're making money or you have a message to get out there, then making it the best it can be is a really a good investment. I think it's always a worthwhile investment.

Louise: This kind of goes back to something Denise was talking about earlier – I'm still surprised by the number of companies who go to all that trouble to build a website and then you see some business websites that are just so sloppy that it's really off-putting. And that's made me, possibly unfairly, judge that business negatively. And by not investing, compared to their overall capital flows, a relatively small amount in making sure that their message was really sharp. And it's a real shame because there is evidence out there – I've seen studies though I can't quote any off the top of my head – showing that how damaging having a poorly rendered website is.

Erin: It's true. I mean, we're told not to judge a book by its cover but it's exactly what we do; it's our shortcut to whether or not we can trust somebody or we can trust a business. And, yes, we will absolutely judge a company based on the quality of its website and that will include its writing, its graphics, long it takes the page to load, whether we can get it on our phones or laptops. All of these things are or potential barriers to people trusting us and it is so easy to go find somebody else.

Louise: We keep coming back to that, don't we? But it's so true ... it's really important to run this home because if I go into the city and decide I'm going to do a bit of shopping, it might require a bit of effort to go from one big department store to another. It takes me seconds, milliseconds, to do it on the web. So easy to just bounce out.

So do you have any guidelines for how many passes you think web content needs prior to publication? I know we can edit published content but I suppose it is that fear of what the impact will be of that one thing that slipping through.

Erin: Well, there's what we think should happen – the ideal – and there's what actually happens. I'm totally in favour of having something copyedited, and then once it's put in the CMS having it proofed. And I've worked with clients who do that, who are very scrupulous, and who care a lot about quality. We get to do those two passes.

But I've worked with so many more clients where it's one pass. And if I only get one pass I hope they're giving me access to the CMS because at least there I can look at the preview pages and see how things are rendering. I can click on links to make sure they're working, which is a huge deal, and I don't see it enough. If you're working with web copy and you're at a point of being ready to publish and it's in the CMS, make sure you look at the preview pages and click on each and every one of the links because it is so easy to mistype something; you might have errant code in it. And make sure the links work; they need to go to the pages you expected, and the pages need to be related to what readers were reading about. It has to be appropriate.

Louise: There's nothing more frustrating than ending up on an irrelevant page or a 404 page. That's the page you end up on when it's all gone wrong.

Erin: The worst thing is when you go to a page that is no longer owned by the previous host and is now a porn site or something. That happened a lot in the early days when sites went up and were killed immediately. And then somebody else took them over and, oh, you got an eyeful!

Denise: That's not a good relational link, is it? The other thing I would suggest as well is, make sure your link goes to the exact page of a website. I hate been sent to the home page of a website and then have to find the page that they're talking about myself. I want the link to go directly to the blog post or the service page, or whatever, that they want me to read. I don't want it to go to a generic home page that I have to navigate from. That puts me off completely.

Erin: I agree. It should go to the closest source it can.

Louise: We're back to this trust issue again. If I feel that I've been sort of manipulated into looking at content that I wasn't interested in, that immediately makes me less trusting of the site. Whereas if somebody says, *Here's an article about low-fat chicken korma*, I want to go to that recipe, not a general cookery

So, Erin, can I ask you about fact-checking and authenticity? Because one of the things I've noticed about some web content is that inexperienced writers can fall

into this trap of making broad-brush statements that serve to make themselves or their businesses more credible, but it's just a bunch of platitudes and truisms that sound good but can't possibly be substantiated. And I just wonder what your take is on this in terms of when we're editing content. I guess I'm talking about that trust issue again

Erin: I've seen the same thing. You always want to put yourself in the best light, of course – if you're online to promote yourself, you're going to put things in the best light – but you need to be factual. We've all grown up in this era of marketing and sales. It's a constant in our lives and we have really good BS detectors!

And I think a good copyeditor would do this in other places as well. Are we being factual? Do we have supporting evidence for the statements we make? We should be as specific as we can in our advice to our writers when doing the editing, but we should help them be factual; we should help them understand when they should link to supporting evidence; and just help them write in a way that, yes, is promotional but isn't a load of hooey.

Louise: Yeah, I remember a while back I was chatting with The White Paper Guy – Gordon Graham – and he talks about how when he's writing white papers, which he publishes online on behalf of clients, there are several things that he looks for when he's creating his content, but two pieces of advice were to think like a lawyer but also like a journalist. And, again, it's that stuff that you've talked about, Erin, about being engaging ... so writing like you might expect a journalist to be, trying to draw the audience in, but at the same time thinking about whether you're telling the truth. Are you building that trust? Are you thinking with a legal head on, not because you think somebody's gonna sue you but because it's about representation. And so I think that's such a good issue to think about – that concept of just holding that notion of being truthful.

And when we were talking a while back about this stuff, you were talking about failures and wins and honesty. Do you want to say a little bit more about that?

Denise: Well, actually, I think talking about past failures or our difficulties does a lot to build trust; it brings out the human side. It's all linked to storytelling, isn't it? And being open and honest with people. And I think we can do that in a way that actually builds our credibility when we can admit to failures and how we've worked through them rather than pretending that we're absolutely perfect, which is almost less credible really. I think I don't know what you feel about something like that.

Louise: Although, when I see people going on too much .. you don't want it too woe-is-me.

Denise: No, definitely not!

Louise: That's another thing I've seen – a lot of marketing-style or marketing-business approaches to getting attention with web content is by trying to get the sympathy vote almost.

Erin: The sympathy vote works in non-profit. So if you're raising funds for kids with cancer then the sympathy vote works. It's telling that story of this child and always making it personable – an individual that people can connect with, and wanting to help them. You're appealing to people's better natures. But, yeah, if you are there to promote yourself, and all you can do is talk about failures, talk about the woe-is-me, people are going to be turned off by that. We feel our defences go up, like there might be a scam behind it. Or we feel that it's too much of an emotional connection. We need some distance from that. So you're looking for a balance. It is good to share some past failures because it shows you as human and it means your readers, your audience, can say, 'Okay, I can connect to that. I can relate to that.' But you want to show them a way out, a solution: 'I made this mistake but here's how I overcame it. Or here's where I am now and so it could be that way for you too.'

Denise: Did either of you read Vanessa Plaister's blog post for the SfEP last week? It's terrific and it's about exactly that, about the difficulty she had with a client and how she overcame it. And it was a very, very difficult situation. I think we should put a link text in the show notes. She's very honest about her role in it, in perhaps not identifying red flags earlier on, but then she goes into detail about how she worked through it and dealt with it in order to preserve her relationship with her project manager. It's very useful, and good for other editors to see that, but also for writers to see that as well ... about where the relationship broke down a little bit and how they moved through that. So I think that was where that sort of honesty really worked very well, showing how professional she was in dealing with it.

Louise: Do you think there's an order of play when it comes to editing web content, Erin?

Erin: I think there is but it's up to the individual editor. It's always more efficient to chunk your work – to do like things at the same time. So it might be looking at the title and looking at the subheads first. You catch more errors that way. But I think it's going to be what you're most comfortable with. As long as you have a solid routine.

And it could change from project to project. So I keep coming back to the client I worked for earlier today, but they have a very fussy CMS, and so I have a very

specific order for reviewing the article and the SEO so that I don't forget anything. a

Denise: Checklist approaches! Now, can we talk about style sheets? Louise and I use these all the time when we're working on non-web content, so how do we factor them into web work? Similar principles, I'm assuming.

Erin: Absolutely, similar principles. And, again, it's going to depend on the project, so if your job is to copyedit the blog posts on a regular basis you might have a running style sheet, which I do for several clients, where it's based on the house style and I'm adding to it on a regular basis. But it's only one sheet for the whole site. Whereas if I'm working on a big project, I have some clients who publish what we call ebooks ... long articles that may be published as a PDF. And I look at those as distinct projects, and styles might change between them, and so I'll have distinct style sheets for them. But I always use style sheets – I love them. Who can keep all that information in their head?

Denise: Exactly! Especially when you've got multiple clients who have different requirements. It's just it's a no-brainer really, isn't it?

Louise: Kind of related to style is audience. So Denise is a Scot, I'm English, you're American, and yet despite our national identities we all work for clients from all over. Web concept's the same – the audience is global. How does that affect decisions you're making when people are writing and editing for the web?

Erin: Well, it's going to depend on the website. You mentioned the *Guardian* earlier. That uses British English. The *New York Times* uses American English. So we're going to have different style sheets for those two sites. So it's really important to talk to your clients about their specific audience. Is it going to be accessible by everybody in the world? Who are they aiming it at in general? You're probably not always aiming it at every English speaker; you might be aiming it at North Americans or people over in the UK in Australia, and you're gonna bring in style for those regional Englishes.

Louise: I was thinking how I grew up on a diet of American TV and I think I'm pretty good at translating anything that's not immediately obvious, or at least learning through context what things might mean. So although there are some things that I might come unstuck with ... I don't know soccer and football I don't have a problem with – if I hear an American talking about football I know they're not talking about what I mean by 'football'.

Erin: It really does come down to knowing your audience, which a web publisher can get at with their web analytics – who is reading their site? Where are they coming from? – and then addressing their needs. When Laura Poole

and I ran Copyediting, we had editors from all over the world reading our site but it was primarily North American editors coming to the site, and so we used American English. And only if an idiom or a reference would be really opaque to those outside of North America would we work to smooth it out or to make it more universal.

But if you've got an audience that's really mixed, yeah, you're gonna want to use a more global English; you're gonna want to really think about your idioms, your cultural references, and you're gonna want to keep that style guide tight ... follow it closely, make some careful decisions about not just spelling but grammar and usage, which can be really different between the different Englishes, surprisingly so. But it does still come back to audience. It's really knowing who your audience is. And if most of your traffic is coming from one geographic area then those are your main readers; those are the ones you're probably going to build your style around.

Louise: I'm just thinking too about things like place names, for example, overlapping city names, and how it's important to be clear about those. So which Boston do you mean? The one in Lincoln or the one where you live?

Erin: Right, and I think you really have to do that no matter who your audience is. I think you have to really be clear about that. Personally, I tend to lean on the *AP Stylebook* because they have their Dateline entry – which cities in the US and globally need a state or our country after them.

Louise: We'll put a link to that in the show notes so that if people want to mimic you they can lean on that too.

Erin: It's a great list. If the city isn't on that list it doesn't need a country or a state, and they don't update it very often so they're usually spot on with that and I like to follow that.

Denise: Great! It's been really useful advice. So now it's time for Editing Bites. Mine is a book called *They Ask, You Answer* by Marcus Sheridan, and I think it's a must-read for anyone who wants to write honest, transparent content on their website in order to create trust and build a great relationship with prospective clients. And I've been lucky enough to attend several workshops run by Marcus and he is an incredible teacher. The book is chock full of really useful advice for you.

Louise: Brilliant. I've heard you talk about him so and the workshops you've done, so that's cracking. Now, I love a checklist so my Bite is Erin's free Web Style Checklist – a thoroughly useful one-page PDF that you can use to remind you of all the things you need to check before you publish your written web content.

Editing bites

Erin Brenner's Web Style Checklist: <http://bit.ly/2ZtVRaK>

They Ask, You Answer by Marcus Sheridan

Other Resources

Erin Brenner, Right Touch Editing: <http://bit.ly/2T1XCtH>

'Customer service: A cautionary tale of red flags and safety nets' by Vanessa Plaister on the SfEP blog: <http://bit.ly/2GJLiJC>

The AP Stylebook (Associated Press): <http://bit.ly/2T0Ktkv>