PEN PROFESSIONAL EDITORS NETWORK NETWORKINGNEWS

In the Spotlight: Tekla Szymanski

Tekla Szymanski is the founder of **Content + Design** LLC, a one-stop shop for content design, editorial services, and content-first web development for mission-driven nonprofits and creative personal brands with a story to tell and a mission to share. Before that, she was a foreign news editor and held senior editorial positions with international and domestic newspapers, magazines, and radio. Tekla has worked on three continents in five languages. After spending her childhood in Florence, Paris, and Berlin, she started her career in Tel Aviv. Since 1995, Tekla has been based in New York City and works remotely on far-flung, agile, diverse editorial teams spread across several time zones.

What led you to editing as a career choice?
I started my career as a journalist at the mercy of editors. But I quickly realized that a writer could bring much to the editing process to help fellow writers. I wanted to become that person. Every writer needs a good editor, and every editor needs to be a writer at heart.

What is your editorial specialty?
I edit long-form nonfiction about visual arts, literature, politics, 20th-century European and US history, exile, and emigration/ immigration. I focus on fact-checking (my journalist alter ego), content editing, line editing, and copyediting. Most of the copy I work with is used on websites, so I specialize in adjusting its content flow to digital platforms.

What has surprised you most about editing?
As a seasoned writer and editor, I was surprised how much I rely on another editor's eye. I thought I could do it all, but no. I encourage every editor who writes to find another good editor to keep her ego in check and let go of her words.

Which PEN events and aspects have been especially helpful?
I just joined and look forward to PEN's recorded resources, engaging with members on its discussion board, and virtually exchanging ideas with other editors. This is especially important now, when many of us work alone in silos, and

our work is threatened by AI, undervalued, and sometimes dismissed.

What is the best career advice you were given?
A writer once remarked to me that if someone were to edit her work, she would need to feel respected, and that harsh edits would be great as long as they were purpose driven. I took her remarks to heart.

Which project are you most proud of?
Looking back at my work, what stands out are multicultural and global projects where my edits needed to be contextualized and localized. I especially enjoy editing translated works or copy written by a non-native speaker. These are challenging because it is not just about polishing and finding the right words; it is about expanding their reach and adapting them to a new audience or another culture.

What are your go-to resources for professional development?
I use a few online editing and grammar tools but don't rely on them, and I take every suggestion with a large grain of salt—especially when they alert me to avoid the passive voice; good writing includes the passive voice!

I recommend the following tools:

- **Lose the Very**: Combine the word very with a simple adjective and find a more precise word.
- **Related Words**: Search for near synonyms related to a specific word or phrase.
- **Recabulary**: Build up your vocabulary and store discovered terminology for future reference.
- **Reverse Dictionary**: Search for terms by their definitions.

I am also a member of the Editorial Freelancers Association, the National Writers Union, the Society of Professional Journalists, and PEN America. I rely on these networks to keep me informed, grounded, and connected.

What editing tip do you have for other members?
I remember my first job as a reporter, which seems a hundred years ago. An editor rewrote my entire article in her voice. She took my research and ideas, made them her own, and ran with them. I believe editors help writers become better communicators, but they should never change a writer's tone or hijack her story. I wouldn't want any writer I work with to sound the same as I

do. So, when working with client copy, I edit for content flow and accuracy, overall structure, grammar, and spelling—and I always respect the author's voice.

What has changed most since you started editing?

It seems we now live in a world where everyone can create content, everyone can design websites, and AI can do both for us. Editing is a sentient approach that shouldn't be left to online tools. We still need good, human editors, no matter the writer.

What do you do when you aren't working?

I recharge my batteries on Friday evenings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan when all the tourists are gone for the day. I enjoy feeling intimately alone with great art. Art is my sanctuary, and my fondest childhood memories are of my parents and their creativity (my mother was a painter and my father a sculptor), seeing them work, smelling paints and clay everywhere, our art-filled home, spending hours in galleries/museums/foundries. I also love to read domestic and international historical fiction set in the 1930s and 1940s in New York or Berlin—preferably in hardcover. I love the smell and feel of new books.

What is the most surprising thing about you?

I can edit in many languages, but I prefer writing in English, even though this is not my native tongue.