



***“Yesterday Mr. Hall wrote that the printer’s proof-reader was improving my punctuation for me, and I telegraphed orders to have him shot without giving him time to pray.”
— Samuel Langhorne Clemens (aka Mark Twain)***

Dear Faithful Reader,

I know exactly how Sam Clemens felt when he wrote that.

The year is 2012. January, a cold snap in New England. I’m running a fever, exhausted, taking a well-earned rest after finished the 130,000-plus-word manuscript for *The Red Circle*, the memoir I’ve written for Brandon Webb. A package arrives: page proofs. I open it and start looking at what the copy editor has done.

You have to understand: Brandon was a Navy SEAL. The narrative style is direct. At times, blunt. I’ve written quite a few sentences that start with “And” or “But.” Which makes them sentence fragments.

Like this one.

And this.

I like the tone it sets. A lot. It works.

And the copyeditor has changed every single blasted one of them.

He’s changed my “Buts” to “Howevers,” jammed pairs of fragments together to make single run-on sentences, added verbs where I’d written none. So help me, the man has gone through the whole damn manuscript and “corrected” every last sentence fragment. Bless his heart, as they say in the South.

I very nearly send our publisher the Mark Twain telegraph.

Fast forward a decade. I’m getting my editor’s first take on the first draft of *Blind Fear*, the third and latest installment in the Chief Finn thriller series. This feedback document is what’s known in the industry as the “editorial letter.” Its job is to tell me what I need to rewrite, revise, delete, or add, to turn this first draft into a final draft. I’ve already done my best. Her task: show me how to do *better than my best*.

And how does she accomplish that? Watch this:

She starts off with a few broad paragraphs, telling me how much she loves this manuscript. Why she thinks of the three Finn books, this is the best one yet. She gets specific. Cites examples. It makes my day.

Then she follows with a dozen or more shorter paragraphs, detailing the things she thinks can be improved, those elements she thinks slightly miss the mark, and the sorts of steps she thinks might possibly address those issues.

The detailed, sentence-by-sentence critique points (“line edits,” in the parlance) don’t even appear in the editorial letter. Those she marks in the manuscript itself, which she encloses as an attachment. Those are, in that sense, the least important.

She doesn’t change a single sentence fragment.

In my coaching program, Writing Mastery Mentorship, we have a rule: “Love first, suggestions second.” I take it seriously, because it makes all the difference in the world.

That’s how a smart editor critiques a manuscript.

Come to think of it, isn’t that how a smart parent critiques their child? Or how a smart manager directs feedback to an employee? Isn’t that how we might approach everyone we know, for whom we have any words of advice to share?

First tell them what you love about what they’ve done. Then offer your suggestions, if you have any thoughts on how they might top their best effort. Remembering that these are, after all, only our perspective.

The word “advice” comes from an Old French phrase, *ço m’est a vis*, meaning “It seems to me . . .”

The next time someone offers you a piece of advice, remember that. All they’re telling you is how it *seems to them*. Not necessarily how it *is*.

My July wish for you: Love first, suggest second. The more you do this, the more people will appreciate what you have to say. And whenever someone gives you advice? Listen for the love; take the rest for what it is: *ço m’est a vis*.



* ABOUT THE WRITER

Samuel Clemens is one of the most beloved (if not *the* most beloved) American writers of all time. He is perhaps best known these days for his legendary wit, especially in the abundance of his pithy hilarities that so easily roll off the tongue:

“Never put off till tomorrow what you can do the day after tomorrow.”

“When I die I choose heaven for climate, hell for company.”

“Suppose you were an idiot, and suppose you were a member of Congress . . . but I repeat myself.”

And, of course, for *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which has been called The Great American Novel and a masterpiece unsurpassed in American literature.

The man who is viewed by some as American’s first stand-up comic, Clemens was also a profoundly deep thinker. While working on *Blind Fear*, which is set in Puerto Rico and puts significant focus on the political and social history of the place and its people, I was moved to find this passage from Clemens/Twain, from an October 16, 1900 piece in the New York Herald:

I wanted the American eagle to go screaming into the Pacific ... Why not spread its wings over the Philippines, I asked myself? ... I said to myself, Here are a people who have suffered for three centuries. We can make them as free as ourselves, give them a government and country of their own, put a miniature of the American Constitution afloat in the Pacific, start a brand new republic to take its place among the free nations of the world. It seemed to me a great task to which we had addressed ourselves.

But I have thought some more, since then, and I have read carefully the treaty of Paris (which ended the Spanish–American War [two years earlier]), and I have seen that we do not intend to free, but to subjugate the people of the Philippines. We have gone there to conquer, not to redeem.

It should, it seems to me, be our pleasure and duty to make those people free, and let them deal with their own domestic questions in their own way. And so I am an anti-imperialist. I am opposed to having the eagle put its talons on any other land.

The 1898 Treaty of Paris established not only the Philippines, Guam, and Cuba as an American possession, but also Puerto Rico. In fact, if you read Clemens’s thoughts and replace “the Philippines” with “Puerto Rico,” they are equally insightful.

As you read the pages of *Blind Fear*, both Finn’s impressions and the views of his deceased friend Tomás, think of Mark Twain.

And this confession: before starting in on the first draft of *Steel Fear*, the first Chief Finn novel, I spent months looking for the right name for the character I was dreaming up. Finally two images converged: a shark’s fin, for that restless SEAL who walks and walks, always on one recon mission or another and can never fully rest his head; and the Great American Novel orphan boy hero who shares his name.

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