

STET Stamp Redux

By Holly Lisle

I still have two thirds of **The Wreck of Heaven** to get through, so my writing creativity today is pretty much limited to angle of placement and force of attack with the STET stamp.

Okay – so what is a STET stamp? For that matter, what is STET?

Writers get a final call on what is and what is not changed in their books. Books go through a number of editing processes – the editor reads and marks the manuscript and requests revisions, the writer does the revisions, the editor reads and (one hopes) approves the revisions and sends the manuscript off to the copyeditor, the copyeditor goes through the manuscript looking for continuity issues in-manuscript and in-series, plus spellos, typos, and grammatical errors and makes changes, and the writer goes through the manuscript and checks the changes made to make sure they're acceptable.

Usually, they are. Sometimes, however, you the writer will have a significant difference of opinion with your copyeditor over some general usage issue – I had to deal with a “less/fewer” change made to this manuscript, for example, that I did not like – or with general writing style conflicts (copyeditor does not agree with your comma placement, or cleans up the grammar in your dialogue – these both just drive me **nuts**). In instances where you disagree, you have the right to STET – to mark the word STET on your manuscript over any change you don't approve, saying, in effect, “Leave it the way I wrote it.” You may or may not choose to write outcalls on the manuscript explaining your decision – in the case of “less/fewer”, I did a usage book lookup to make sure that my usage was acceptable. It was – it's been in use since at least 888 AD, when it appeared in an English translation from the Latin by no less notable a personage than King Alfred the

Great. I STETted the copyeditor's change, noting the usage, and the fact that my way sounded less pretentious, and drew a box around the remark so that it did not end up as part of the manuscript proper. Sometimes, as with commas, I just STET without comment, making only a global comma note on the Style Guide that I reserve the right to use commas in a somewhat ungrammatical manner for sentence rhythm, and that the typesetter should follow my lead with this.

I am careful with STETs. I thought I was right in another usage question (a change of imply/infer) and checked my usage guide, and found out that I was, in fact, really wrong. Not just a little wrong, but **really** wrong. Did not STET that change.

I have a couple of usage guides, but the one I like best is **Merriam Webster's Dictionary of English Usage**, which has very nice documentation of all the alternatives. English is never simple, so I have a backup for second opinions – **The Encyclopedic Dictionary Style and Usage**, by Mary A. DeVries. There are other guides; I own some of them, too, but these are the two I use.

Finally, I leave you with these two thoughts before I get back to work:

- Writers don't know everything, but neither do copyeditors.
- It's what you **think** you know that will prove your undoing, so always double-check everything.

Which brings us back to the STET stamp. What is it? It's one of those self-inking rubber deelines that prints **STET** in neat little red letters when you give it a good thump with the palm of your hand. Very satisfying. A STET stamp says, "I'm so sure I'm going to be right at least some of the time that I had a stamp made to celebrate the occasion." Though actually, I didn't. Jim Baen, my publisher at the time, gave it to me for

Christmas about eight years ago. I've never used it until yesterday.

Anyway, now I'm back to thwacking commas. Hah!

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