

# EXERCISE

## Editing Skills

**How would you improve this paragraph?**

On Jan. 20th, 1960 then-President John Kennedy delivered his notorious Ask Not What You Can Do for Your Country Speech. Kennedy launched not only America's Space Program that sent men to the moon, but stood up to Russia when they threatened the free world during the missile crisis. During his Presidency, Peace Corps was formed; the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was signed by the Soviets; and the Civil Rights Act was passed. (However, he stumbled when, in a speech in Berlin in 1963, he told the Germans, "Ich bin ein Berliner." He intended to communicate "I am a Berliner," but the way he said it meant, "I am a jelly doughnut.") Only 42-years-old when elected, the youngest president, his legacy is a less than three year presidency compared with Camelot."

## Here's what a professional editor did (and why)

President John F. Kennedy's inaugural address on January 20, 1961, is memorable for the statement "Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country," and he answered his own challenge. During his administration, he not only pressed for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration to achieve a manned landing on the Moon by the end of the 1960s but also confronted the Soviet Union over that country's plan to install nuclear weapons in Cuba that would be aimed at the United States.

Also, during Kennedy's presidency, tragically abbreviated when he was assassinated on November 22, 1963, the Peace Corps was formed; the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom signed the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty; and Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The legacy of Kennedy, only forty-two years old when he was elected, is of a brief period of peace and prosperity; indeed, his administration was compared to the glory of King Arthur's Camelot

### ANNOTATIONS (by editor Mark Nichols)

- Note the correction of the style of the month and date, and correction of the year itself.
  - Our thirty-fifth president's name is John F. Kennedy.
  - If I had retained "then-President" before Kennedy's name, I would omit the hyphen and lowercase the name of the office, which because of the modifier *then* becomes an epithet rather than a specific job title.
  - Because Kennedy's inaugural address is notable for other excerpts as well, I chose, in identifying it, to focus on the line — giving it in its entirety — and not on the speech. But if you do refer to a speech, style the reference as follows: "his 'Ask not what you can for your country' speech." (Also, *notorious* is not an apt description for the address.)
  - If I were editing someone else's work, I would query for the writer's approval of insertion of "he answered his own challenge," which I think provides a transition to what would otherwise be merely a grocery list of accomplishments.
  - I corrected the erroneous "not only . . . but also" construction.
  - There is no such entity as "America's Space Program," so the latter two words should not have been capitalized. (And, whenever possible, use the more precise "United States" in place of *America* in reference to the nation.)
- In this context, *moon* is the formal name of an astronomical feature, rather than a generic word for such a phenomenon, and should therefore be capitalized.
  - Although Russia is an informal alternative to "the Soviet Union," it should be avoided in such usage. ("The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics" was the official name of the country during this period, but the two-word version is acceptable.)
  - A nation is a singular entity and should not be referred to as "they."
  - "Free world" is subjective and provocative in this otherwise neutrally written passage.
  - Because of the lack of specificity and capitalization, "the missile crisis" implies a previous reference to the incident. It should be referred to by its capitalized full name.
  - As written, the sentence beginning "During his Presidency" (there is no reason to capitalize *presidency*, by the way) requires only commas, not semicolons. I retained the latter punctuation marks only because I rewrote the list of achievements in a complex form, with internal commas in the second item. I also revised the passive construction to active form.
  - I inserted the phrase about his assassination to provide context.
  - "Peace Corps," like the similarly constructed names of most entities, should be preceded by the article *the*.
  - Several nations signed the treaty, and if any are identified, all should be identified.
  - The phrase "of 1964" is part of the formal name of the act.
  - The "Ich bin ein Berliner" gaffe is a popular myth; residents of Berlin did not, and do not, call jelly doughnuts "Berliner." (Beyond that, even if the story were true, the incident is minor when compared with the other highlights of Kennedy's presidency listed here, and the passage provides insufficient context.)
  - A person's age, when not applied as a modifier, should not be hyphenated (except for linking ones-place and tens-place numbers, as in *forty-two*). Also, I prefer to follow The Chicago Manual of Style in spelling ages out.
  - The first phrase of the last sentence is a dangling modifier; "the . . . president" is incorrectly identified as his own legacy.
  - "The youngest president" is an awkwardly truncated interjection. My more extended parenthetical is only one of several possibilities.
  - The phrase "less than three year," as a modifier for *presidency*, should be hyphenated; I deleted the entire phrase because it seemed to distract from the point of the passage. Also, there was insufficient context for the reference to Camelot.