

Self-editing: Choosing the Right Editorial Service

By Richard Sheehan, presented at the Self-Publishing Conference, 27 April 2019

Introduction

I receive many manuscripts from authors asking for an 'edit' or a 'proofread' or a 'final polish' because 'it's pretty much ready to go'. My reading of a sample often reveals that the manuscript actually needs something quite different and I then have to convey this to the author in as diplomatic a way as possible. One of the problems I come across is that the word 'editor' has become a catch-all for a whole range of jobs across different forms of media. As my little niche of 'editing' is housed within the realm of literature, or publishing, what I intend to do today is to try and clarify the different types of editing that are available to authors, to show how editors work on manuscripts, and also to give some advice on common problems that we encounter and how writers can improve the quality of their manuscript.

Until quite recently, when an author had written a book, their options were quite limited. They could send the finished manuscript to an agent or publisher in an attempt to be published in what's considered the traditional manner, or they could seek out the few companies who dealt with self-publishing, or what was referred to then as 'vanity publishing'.

If they were successful with traditional publishing, their work would progress through the editorial process in a time-honoured fashion until the book was published months, or even years, later. If they took the vanity route, their book might, or might not, go through an editorial process, and if it did, it would certainly be paid for by the author, which quite often dissuaded them from spending very much money on it. As a result, it was often very easy to pick out the self-published works on the bookshelf, bound as they were with poor-quality covers and littered with a sprinkling of typos and formatting errors.

With the recent explosion in e-book publishing and the rationalisation of the editorial workforce within traditional publishing, matters have become somewhat more complicated. It's no longer looked down upon if authors follow the self-publishing route; in fact, year-on-year, more and more authors see this as a viable way to earn a living. A whole industry has grown up around servicing the needs of authors, be that cover design, editorial, typesetting, marketing or distribution. In addition, a lot of the editorial staff of the big publishers have gone freelance and now work not only with their old employers but also with the new army of self-published authors.

For authors who have been used to working in the traditional way, the editorial process is something they're used to, and they know the different types of editing they require in order to get their work in tip-top shape. However, for new authors, excited by the prospect of the world of the author entrepreneur, there are a multitude of terms to get used to and to understand in order for them to produce works that will take their place alongside those of the much bigger publishing operations. Not only that, but due to the new globalised environment we live in, we can trawl the world for the services we require, and quite often, different terms have different meanings depending on where we're looking.

In order to detail the different types of editing available, I'll first of all describe the traditional publication process and where editing sits at each stage, and then I'll describe the process in self-publishing.

Traditional Publishing

The Author

While it might seem odd to start here, there are many things authors can do when it comes to editing. There are many books and courses that deal with self-editing (see resources later). I would also recommend that authors join writing groups that critique their members' work. The quality of groups can vary, so I would recommend checking groups before joining. Check whether they have members who are published or whether their members are all self-publishers. Check to see if groups put on special events (author events or meetings with industry professionals) or have workshops in writing skills. It can sometimes be difficult to find good-quality writers' groups, so if this proves difficult you might consider online groups or forums that have critiquing groups. Beta readers can be very helpful and many professional and famous authors use these before they send their novels to their agents or publisher. These stages could be equated to the manuscript critique or assessment.

The Agent

Let's now jump ahead a little and assume that you've gained agent representation for your novel. These days, publishers ask that submissions are in the best possible state before they are sent to them, so a lot of agents work with their authors prior to submission in a sort of developmental editing process to polish the author's work as much as possible.

The Publisher

Publishers have lots of editors, and lots of editorial roles. At each stage, it's quite possible that the author's manuscript can go back and forth between the author and the editor many times.

Commissioning Editor

A commissioning editor is responsible for curating a list of authors for the publisher. They also work with their authors to refine their work to try to get it to fulfil its potential. This is sometimes known as developmental editing.

Developmental Editor

Sometimes this stage is carried out in-house but increasingly developmental editing is outsourced to freelance editors (who quite often used to work for the publishers who are now their clients). The manuscript can go through several levels of developmental editing, and sometimes several editors, before it's ready for the next stage: copy-editing.

Copy-editor

Copy-editing is still carried out in-house; however, it's another stage in the process that's being outsourced to freelancers, many of whom, again, used to work for the publishers who are now their clients. The number of copy-edits can vary depending on the budget and the demands of the publisher.

Proofreader

After the final copy-edit, and the return of these edits from the author, the book is sent to be typeset and galleys of the book are created. These are then proofread, using either a hard copy or a PDF of the typeset document, or both if software is employed in part of the process.

Self-publishing

There are aspects of the editing process in self-publishing that are virtually the same as those in traditional publishing. However, the process can be quite different because the author is in control rather than the publisher. A lot will depend on an author's budget, but for the sake of completeness I'll assume here that an author has a large budget and wants to use the full range of editing options.

So, after an author has completed half a dozen to a dozen drafts (hopefully) and is completely happy with their manuscript, the first point of editorial contact may be something along the lines of a manuscript assessment. In the self-publishing process, this attempts to replicate the role of the agent or the publisher and the assessing of the author's work.

Following an assessment or critique, an author will get their manuscript back and will work on it again, fine-tuning it and refining their work, taking on board (or not) the recommendations given to them. If more work is required, perhaps to help an author with specific problems – which may require longer-term help – then a developmental editor could be employed. This can be a one-off session or can include continual work over the period of the completion of the manuscript, and it replicates, to some degree, the work of the publisher or commissioning editor in the traditional publishing process.

Once the developmental work has been completed, the resulting manuscript should be ready for copy-editing.

After copy-editing, the author will receive their manuscript back to work on. Depending on the work required, it's sometimes not unusual to have an additional copy-edit to fine-tune the author's work.

Once the author is happy with the manuscript, it can be typeset or formatted so that it's ready to be transformed into a printed book (perhaps using print-on-demand technology) or an e-book. This stage would normally then be followed by proofreading, but these days, depending on the form of publication chosen, this may not be possible because the manuscript has to be uploaded to be formatted prior to publication and so is not ready to be proofread properly. Self-publishing organisations sometimes create a print-on-demand book for the author to proofread, but this can also be difficult to proofread in the more traditional sense. This has led to proofreaders being asked to work on either PDF versions of a manuscript or Microsoft Word versions, in a similar way to the copy-editor. Proofreaders are able to do this but because the resulting documents can be easily amended, there is always the possibility that errors can creep in after proofreading has been done.

Due to budget limitations and the blurring of the distinctions between copy-editing and proofreading in self-publishing, a form of editing called 'proof-editing' has evolved that combines the two to a greater or lesser extent and enables the editor/proofreader to tailor the work to best suit the author's needs.

Types of Editing

Even though traditional publishing and self-publishing are quite different processes, the actual editing process remains quite consistent between the two. I've listed below the different forms of editing you may come across and what each of these includes.

Manuscript Critiquing/Assessment

It could be argued that a manuscript critique is not a form of editing at all, but for our purposes it will serve as one. It's basically where a reader, or readers, reads through a whole manuscript, or a part of it, and gives an assessment of its weaknesses and strengths in areas such as overall story, plot, themes, characterisation, structure, etc. Obviously, the value of this can be down to the talents of the reader(s), so it's worth discovering the background of your reader(s) beforehand. Also, the more readers you have, the better, which is where writers' groups can be useful.

There are a number of ways in which critiques or assessments can be done, but they can all be extremely useful for an author.

- Writing groups
- Literary consultancies
- Beta readers
- Online forums

Aspects of manuscript critiquing and assessment

- 'Big picture editing'.
- Consists of general feedback rather than going into detail on specific issues.
- The editor usually supplies an editorial letter with feedback. The editor will deal with the matters that the author is dealing with successfully and then move on to areas that may need more work, giving ideas on how the problems can be corrected.
- Among the areas looked at are genre, intended audience, writing style, structure, plotting, characterisation, setting, pacing and readiness for publication.
- Can be used on full or partial manuscripts.
- Usually the least expensive form of editorial work.

Developmental Editing (sometimes called Substantive Editing, Structural Editing or Content Editing)

This form of editing takes a more detailed look at the big picture of the manuscript compared to critiques and assessments and can be done in a one-off way or as part of the continual development of the manuscript. The editor will look at the manuscript overall, chapter by chapter. In fiction, the editor will look, in particular, at areas such as the structure of the novel, characterisation, content, plot, pace and point of view. In non-fiction, aspects such as theme, structure, audience, argument, timeline and voice are also examined. The purpose of this type of edit is to develop the manuscript with the writer, and this is similar to the work carried out by a developmental editor in a traditional publishing house. Developmental editors can also be called upon to work on specific areas if a writer feels they have a weakness in their work.

In the self-publishing world, this work can be carried out by freelance editors who offer this service and also by companies such as The Literary Consultancy.

Aspects of developmental editing

- 'Big picture editing', but it goes into a lot more detail than a critique or assessment.
- Fiction: structure of the novel, characterisation, content, plot, pace and point of view.
- Non-fiction: theme, structure, audience, argument, timeline and voice are also examined.
- It usually begins with one or two read-throughs that result in an editorial letter detailing the strong points of the work and then leading on to where there may be issues. The editor will then offer ideas about how to fix the issues.
- If the work is to be on a continual basis, the editor will work with the author over several drafts in order to improve the manuscript.
- The work can be done on a completed manuscript or a work in progress.

Copy-editing and/or Line-editing

I've put these two forms of editing together. They are often confused and are sometimes used interchangeably. I've noticed that in America and Canada sometimes something that resembles copy-editing is referred to as line-editing and the definitions seem to merge.

Both forms of editing are concerned more at the language level. The editor works with the manuscript in a raw form (usually in Microsoft Word) before it is typeset. In fiction, the editor will look at structure, grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalisation, hyphenation, use of UK or US English, consistency, style and accuracy. In non-fiction, the editor will also look at the format of illustrations, graphs and tables, facts, legal issues, references, footnotes and the bibliography, among other things. Depending on the demands of the manuscript, the editor may also address some aspects of developmental editing.

Aspects of copy-editing

- A copy-editor works at the paragraph, sentence and word level in order to make the text flow and make sure it's accurate and suitable for purpose.
- Makes sure the text is laid out correctly, ready for the manuscript to be typeset. In non-fiction, this can include working with illustrations, graphs and tables, footnotes, references and bibliographies.
- Checks for spelling, grammar and punctuation errors. A copy-editor will also check for consistency in style, hyphenation, capitalisation, italics and the presentation of quotations.
- Clears up ambiguities in the text and may carry out fact checking.
- May read the text several times.
- Mark up text with Track Changes in MS Word, though other applications such as Open Office can be used.
- Provides the author with a style sheet and editing notes.
- In fiction work, a copy-editor may also check for plot holes, for consistency in character description, sudden changes from first to third-person point of view, and for errors in timeline. In non-fiction, they may check for aspects that may not have been covered in developmental work, such as structure, argument, timeline and voice.

Proofreading

Proofreading is traditionally carried out after the book has been typeset and is concerned with accuracy, quality and consistency. A proofreader will check for typographical errors, spelling, punctuation, grammar, capitalisation, hyphenation, layout, use of italics, how quotations are displayed, headings, pagination, front and end matter and anything that may not have been on the manuscript that was checked by the copy-editor.

If your book is going to be published in e-book format only, you may not have typeset proofs, but it's highly recommended that the copy-edited manuscript should be read by a professional proofreader after the copy-editor's queries have been addressed and you have made your final edits.

These days, proofs come in hard copy, PDF files or MS Word.

Aspects of proofreading

- A proofreader checks the work after the author, copy-editor, designer and typesetter have worked on the document. It's usually a final check of the document before it is sent for printing.
- The proofs can be compared with the edited copy or read 'blind' (i.e. without the edited copy).
- Apart from the traditional checks, such as spelling, grammar and punctuation, the following must also be checked: page numbers, headers, footers, contents page, chapter titles, page layout and page breaks. Illustrations and tables must be labelled correctly, and end matter must also be checked – appendices, index, etc.
- Proofs can be marked up using Track Changes in Microsoft Word or using British Standards Institution (BSI) marks on hard copy.

'Proof-editing'

The increasing use of self-publishing by authors has resulted in a sort of hybrid of copy-editing and proofreading where the skills overlap. This is particularly the case where books are only released as e-books. The editor may provide a proofread but with more editorial intervention than would normally be the case.

This can also be the case for organisations and companies that aren't seen as traditional users of copy-editors and proofreaders. They may require a mix of skills to prepare their documentation, and editing professionals can help them with this.

Tips for Writers

I've gathered together some tips for authors. These include things I come across a lot in my work and are quite easily fixable. They can also help an author to save money, so if you're going to work with an editor or proofreader, I'd suggest doing the following *prior* to that.

1. Check the formatting of your manuscript

- Make sure you format your manuscript in line with the guidelines of the specific agent/publisher.
- Make sure that paragraph indents are used rather than tab marks. This saves time for copy-editors, proofreaders and formatters, and you may well be charged less if you've done this.
- Make sure you don't position text using the space bar. This is a pet hate of editors. It can play havoc with the formatting of a document when it's uploaded to document formatting programs and during some document conversion routines. Similarly, make sure that only single spaces are used after a full stop and before a new sentence.
- Make sure that the font type and size is consistent throughout the manuscript.
- No extra line spaces between paragraphs.
- Do you use single or double quote marks? In the UK we use both, but don't mix them up.

2. Check that different aspects of your manuscript are consistent

One thing I almost always notice in a new manuscript is the inconsistencies within it. Here's a list of the sort of things to check.

- Are your initial capitals consistent? For example, do you use 'village' on some pages and 'Village' on others?
- Do you use the same format when referring to something of significance? If you refer to 'World War Two' in your manuscript, is it that way throughout, or do you also refer to it as 'World War II', 'Second World War' or 'WW2'?
- Are your time formats consistent? Do you use '8.00 am', '8:00 am', '8.00 a.m.', '8.00am', or anything similar? If you do, they're all okay, but be consistent. Also, if you're using 'o'clock', always use words; so, 'eight o'clock' not '8 o'clock'.
- Is your usage of italics consistent? *Hart's Rules* (Oxford Style) has a lot of information about what should be put in italics, but if you use italics for thoughts, make sure this is consistently maintained. A common error is to use italics for thoughts in one place and no formatting in others.
- If you have headings in your manuscript, is the formatting of them the same throughout? I often see multiple types of formatting for chapter headings and sub-headings.
- Are names spelled the same throughout? Or does 'Johnathan' become 'Johnathon', 'Jonathon' or 'Jhonathan'?
- How are numbers shown? Are they in words or numbers? One standard is to have 0 to 100 in words and above in figures. This is often further refined so that multiples of hundreds or thousands are also in words. So, it's '1,536', but 'fifteen hundred'.

To make sure consistency is maintained throughout a manuscript, a lot of editors use an application called PerfectIt from Intelligent Editing (www.intelligentediting.com). It's only one of the many functions offered by the software, but it's a vital one.

3. Spell check

Run the spell checker in Microsoft Word. It's not perfect, but it will pick up some obvious typos.

4. Purchase a good style guide

For the UK market I would recommend *New Hart's Rules*. This has great sections on grammar, punctuation and many other aspects of writing and preparing text.

5. Read the manuscript out loud

You'll be surprised how errors that you didn't know existed will appear more clearly when read out loud.

6. Point of view

Point of view is an integral part of any novel. Learn to use it properly and well. I often find point of view problems in the manuscripts I work on, and this results in a lot of work for both me and the writer. I don't mind – it's part of the job, after all – but it can be an additional cost for the writer when money might be better spent on a good cover, for example.

The point of view problems nearly always occur when a writer has used multiple third-person point of view to tell their story. When doing so, you have to be careful how you structure the use of the different point of views. There are conventions that say that you should use one specific point of view per chapter, which is fine, if a little inflexible. A chapter may include multiple scenes and each scene might require a different point of view, so a convention of having different points of view for different scenes is more realistic and section breaks can be used to give an indication to the reader where the new scenes, and the changes in point of view as a result, occur.

There are also techniques for switching point of view within scenes, but these can be difficult to do and require a lot of work to get right. For more advice on how to do this, I would direct you to the area of writer and editor Emma Darwin's website called 'This Itch Of Writing' (<http://emmadarwin.typepad.com/thisitchofwriting/>), where she discusses this under topics such as 'psychic distance' and 'circles of consciousness' as well as discussing free indirect style, a style of third-person narration that uses some of the characteristics of third-person along with the essence of first-person direct speech.

See also: *The Power of Point of View*, by Alicia Rasley; *Points of View*, edited by James Moffett and Kenneth R. McElheny.

8. Too much telling and not enough showing

This is quite a common error, and the reverse should also be watched out for – where writers avoid using 'telling' at all and end up using too much showing. Either technique is fine as long as they are used correctly; it's all a matter of judgement (and developmental editors should be able to help with it).

One thing related to this that I see a lot of is the overuse of exposition. This is something more commonly associated with science fiction and fantasy novels, where writers explain how their fictional world works and some of the history that led to the beginning of the story. This can work occasionally, but more often than not it doesn't, and instead it delays the reader's entry into the story and increases the chances of them not proceeding. Editors and publishers tend to recommend beginning novels *in media res*, which means 'in the middle of the narrative', and while this doesn't work for every manuscript, the principle of getting into the action as early as possible and gripping the reader's attention is a pretty good methodology to work by.

9. Dialogue tags and dialogue formatting

I often see problems with dialogue. There are lots of ways of writing dialogue, but I tend to see the same sorts of mistakes.

Dialogue tags. Lots of writers feel that using tags like 'said', 'replied', 'answered', etc. is repetitive and that readers don't like it. As a result, they begin using tags like 'he laughed', 'she smiled', 'he cringed', 'she breathed', 'he hurried', 'she rhymed', and so on. These aren't speech tags. People don't 'breathe' words. It's best to stick with the more familiar dialogue tags. There has been research done which suggests that when readers see words like 'said' they automatically register the dialogue and ignore the repeated use of the tags. Of course, if there are lots of short bursts of dialogue with 'he said', 'she said', this can have the opposite effect. As with lots of things in writing, it's about judgement.

I see quite a lot of dialogue formatted incorrectly. The errors tend to all boil down to the following:

'Hi.' She said.

It should, of course, be:

'Hi,' she said.

There are plenty of websites (and style guides) that will show the correct way to format dialogue (and you don't have to use quote marks if you don't want to, but be consistent if you do this, and read some Ali Smith or Cormac McCarthy to see how it's done). A fine resource for 'dialogue mechanics' is the book *The Magic of Fiction* by Beth Hill.

10. Dangling participles

This is a participle phrase, usually found at the beginning of a sentence, that seems to modify an element of the sentence other than the one that it was supposed to modify. For example: 'Driving the car, it began to rain.' It's not clear which noun is being modified here, and that's because it hasn't been included. To correct this, you need to add the noun that you want modifying, so you could do something like: 'As he was driving the car, it began to rain.'

Also, the use of -ing constructions (and 'as' constructions for that matter) can bring about impossible situations by describing simultaneous actions that can't happen together. For instance: 'Going into his room, he got dressed.' Or, 'Walking across the lobby, he pressed the button for the lift'. The character can't be doing the two things at the same time.

11. Adjectives and adverbs

There are many writing guides that advise that 'less is more' with regards to the use of adjectives and adverbs in prose writing. However, many people take this to an extreme and advocate going through your text and removing all of them in order to improve your writing. I regularly see discussions on online forums and groups anguishing over their usage. I think the most sensible course of action is to use these in the same way as any other aspect of writing: use them when they're necessary, but don't overuse them.

12. Active voice vs the passive voice

As with adverbs and adjectives, I often see writers proclaiming on message boards or forums 'Thou shalt not use the passive voice!' and they give examples, at which point their whole argument falls down because they use sentences not in the passive voice to demonstrate what they mean.

For a start, the passive voice has its place. I think the origins of the 'No passive voice' argument goes back to a quote from George Orwell, 'Never use the passive voice where you can use the active', or maybe it was Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, with its section on the passive. Either way, neither of them advocates getting rid of the passive voice entirely.

So what is it? There are a number of different forms of the passive voice (see Geoffrey K Pullum’s series of articles on YouTube for an in-depth look at it), but, in its most basic form, it’s all about the structure of the sentence. If the object of the active verb becomes the subject of the passive verb and the subject is expressed as an agent introduced by the preposition *by*, then it’s the passive voice.

For example: Simon drove the car – This is in the active voice (object, verb, subject).

If that sentence was changed to: The car was driven by Simon – This is in the passive voice.

There are occasions where the passive is preferable: when the doer of the action is unimportant or unknown, or when the activity is more important than the performer. However, it can often be wordy in comparison to the active voice and so this is where it’s probably got its reputation.

13. Unnecessary capitalisation

The conventions for capitalisation have changed over time. It used to be accepted that ‘important’ words were capitalised, people’s job titles were in capitals, that sort of thing. However, that’s now not so much the case, though context is still important in determining whether to capitalise or not.

So, ‘The Managing Director killed the Company Accountant’ looks a little heavy on the capitalisation these days.

Words that I find that are regularly capitalised incorrectly: prime minister, police, church, managing director, manager, law, judge, king, queen, etc. Of course, there are contexts where these are capitalised: Prime Minister May, Leicestershire Police, the Catholic Church, King Charles, etc.

14. Inconsistent hyphenation

This is a common problem because hyphenation conventions vary considerably. However, the consistency of the hyphenation is something that can be watched for in a manuscript. A general rule is that if a compound adjective precedes a noun, then it’s hyphenated. If it follows the noun, then the adjective remains open. For example: ‘He was a well-known local personality.’ Or, ‘He was a personality who was well known locally’.

15. Order of adjectives

The order of adjectives seems to be a well-hidden secret that even lots of writers have never heard about. I think this might be because a lot of what it describes feels quite natural to native English speakers, but even so, I still see quite a lot of mistakes made when multiple adjectives are used to describe a noun. Basically, the convention is that if you use multiple adjectives in a sentence in front of a noun, there’s an order that should be observed. That order is: quantity or number, quality or opinion, size, age, shape, colour, proper adjective (often nationality, other place of origin, or material), purpose or qualifier.

So here are some examples.

Determiner	Quantity or number	Quality or opinion	Size	Age	Shape	Colour	Proper adjective	Purpose or qualifier	Noun
A		gorgeous		vintage			Italian	sports	car
	Four	beautiful				gold			rings
A			big			blue			box

As you can see, if you were to switch some of these around, you would get some very strange sentences.

Resources

There are lots of great books for writers that deal with aspects of editing. Here are a few that I think you might find useful.

The Power of Point of View

Alicia Rasley

Writer's Digest Books

Reading like a Writer

Francine Prose

Harper Collins

Stein on Writing

Sol Stein

St. Martin's Griffin

Self-Editing for Fiction Writers: How to Edit Yourself into Print

Renni Browne and Dave King

Harper

The Magic of Fiction: Crafting Words into Story

Beth Hill

Title Page Books

New Hart's Rules: The Oxford Style Guide

Oxford University Press

The number one style guide for UK English editing. I recommend this for writers as well.

New Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors

Oxford University Press

I use this book a lot and find it just as useful as the *OED*. This seems to highlight a lot of words that are used incorrectly by writers.

Fowler's Dictionary of Modern English Usage

Edited by Jeremy Butterfield

Oxford University Press

A must-have, in my opinion. It gives a wonderful breakdown of usage for areas of dispute in word and grammar usage.

Oxford A–Z of Grammar and Punctuation

John Seely

Oxford University Press

A good, brief grammar guide that's very useful because of being arranged alphabetically.

Penguin Guide to Punctuation

RL Trask

Penguin Books

Another very useful quick guide to punctuation.

Websites

This is a list of websites that are useful either as resources for writers or editors, or for getting more general information on editing.

www.oxforddictionaries.com – The website for Oxford Dictionaries. It also has a subscription service with access to other resources (*Hart's Rules*, *NODWE*, *Fowler's*, etc.).

www.collinsdictionary.com – The website for the *Collins Dictionary*. This also includes additional online resources.

www.chicagomanualofstyle.org – The website for the Chicago Manual of Style, one of the premier US style guides. It's essential if working on US English style manuscripts, but I've also found it very useful more generally when searching for a specific usage. There's a very good forum and a superb Q&A section.

www.sfep.org.uk – The website for the Society for Editors and Proofreaders.

www.publishingtrainingcentre.co.uk – The website for the Publishing Training Centre.

literaryconsultancy.co.uk – The website for The Literary Consultancy.