

What Does “Editing” Mean, Anyway?

A quick overview of terms and best practices for writers

What is *editing*? This should be an easy question to answer, shouldn't it? But the word is used so loosely and in so many different contexts, it can become very confusing, especially when you're thinking of hiring an editor for your work.

Three in One

Generally speaking, there are three different kinds of “editing” that a manuscript can undergo:

- Developmental Editing
- Copy Editing
- Proofreading

Each step has a different purpose and requires different training. Whenever anyone offers to “edit” your manuscript, your first question should be, “What kind of editing?” and if they don't mention some version of one of those three terms ... beware.

(To further complicate matters, different people use different versions of these terms, but they should be well-acquainted with these “most-common” labels.)

First: Developmental Editing

Developmental Editing is the most ambiguous term of the three, and the one that does not always take place. If it does take place, it happens early in the writing process. A Developmental Editor will work with the writer on the very basic elements of the story: the plot, the details and interactions of characters, how the story unfolds, pacing and point of view, and all the other “parts of the machine” that go into telling a story as effectively as possible. This can happen before the actual writing begins, during brainstorming or outline phases, or after the writer has finished a draft and wants an informed and experienced set of eyes (and attached brain) to help them tell their story more effectively, logically, and completely.

In the old days, editors at publishing houses often fulfilled the role of Developmental Editor. Sometimes that is still true. Your literary agent, if you have one, may serve as your Developmental Editor as well. Often, however, especially if the writer is self-publishing or working with a small publisher, it is the writer that decides if they wish to engage the services of a Developmental Editor at this early, often crucial stage.

Many writers, both experienced and new, do not feel it necessary to get a Developmental Editor involved. They are confident in their structuring and storytelling abilities. And finding good Developmental Editors can be a challenge (though obviously we offer Developmental Editing services here at Monique Happy Editorial Services).

If you wish to use a Developmental Editor, be careful about your choice. Ask for references (in fact, getting referrals from other writers whose work you admire or from other established professionals is a great idea). Make sure the Editor you choose is experienced in the genre you're writing – horror, science fiction, romance, literary fiction, whatever. You should be able to have an initial conversation with your Developmental Editor at no charge, to agree on what services they will provide. Some – as we do here at MHES – will even read the manuscript or a portion of it free of charge, to get a sense of just how large, complex, or challenging the assignment might be.

Ultimately, you should receive an estimate for services, preferably one based on the full assignment, not on per-word or per-page rates (not for Developmental Editing). Often those fees are paid in installments based on milestones: one when work begins, another at milestones along the way, and a final portion upon completion. Though a formal contract isn't usually necessary, some kind of letter of agreement that specifies the tasks, the fees, the schedule of payments, and any other important details should be created by the editor or the writer and signed by both. This is more a tool of clear communication than legal obligation, but it is extremely valuable.

A note about reading fees

For both writers and editors, time has value – monetary value. Editors shouldn't waste your valuable time, and you shouldn't waste theirs. With that in mind, qualified editors *may* ask for a fee to compensate them for the time it takes to read a book-length manuscript and evaluate it for further action. If the work is particularly long or the assignment extensive, this is not necessarily a deal-breaker, but it should be clear exactly what you will receive for that fee (a written report, a verbal analysis, a written estimate only, etc.) **This is only acceptable, and only in some cases, when it comes to a *freelance* Developmental Editor. It is *not* an acceptable business practice for publishers or editors employed by publishers. Ever.** Publishers who ask for “reading fees” by any name, before they have committed to actually *publishing* your work, are not “real” publishers at all; they are untrustworthy “vanity presses” and should be avoided at all costs.

Second: Copy Editing

Copy Editing takes place when the writer has completed and polished the complete manuscript (whether or not Developmental Editing has taken place). The Copy Editor’s job is to help the writer polish and improve the final manuscript at a *presentational* level rather than a *structural* level. The Copy Editor will closely read the manuscript and look for inconsistencies in storytelling, naming, and logic. This can and should include consistency in the spelling of names, issues of continuity, and the quality and grace of individual sentences and paragraphs. Copy Editors will usually not address the larger issues of story structure or characterization, plot or theme. Those are developmental issues. On the other hand, if a scene begins in broad daylight, lasts ten minutes, and then characters exit into darkness ... the Copy Editor is often the one who will point out the “time of day” issue. They will also be on the look-out for the over-use of individual words or phrases, clichés and inaccurate or misguided word usage; they will confirm the accuracy of at least *some* facts (e.g., the story takes place in Kansas City, Missouri, not Kansas City, Kansas; a Beretta M4 fires only six shots, not seven). Though Copy Editors are not proofreaders, many typographical and grammatical errors will be caught in the Copy-Editing process as the book is closely read, but that is a happy side benefit. Having a book thoroughly and professionally Copy Edited does not mean the author should skip the Proofreading step, described below.

How do “Beta Readers” figure into this process?

To be brutally frank ... they don’t. Developmental Editors, Copy Editors, and Proofreaders are trained, experienced professionals. You can trust them to be thorough, brutally honest, and exacting (if they’re not, they don’t deserve to be paid). Beta Readers, on the other hand, are often well-intentioned, but they are not trained or experienced evaluators of your work – at least not reliably so. They can be friends, family members, enthusiasts, even fellow storytellers ... but they are not professional editors who have the training and experience you need to make your story as good as it can be.

That does not mean that Beta Readers have no value. Sometimes important insights can be gained from their reactions; they can certainly be helpful in created “buzz” and building up your flagging motivation. But they are of limited value in actually improving the work, and they should never take the place of professional Developmental Editors, Copy Editors, or even Proofreaders.

Generally speaking, the Copy Editor will make these changes and give notes explaining the reasons for the changes in a single manuscript (most Copy Editors use the highly valuable “Track Changes” and “Comment” functions in Microsoft Word to accomplish this). In all cases, these are *suggestions* made by a valued professional, but they are *only* suggestions. The writer has the option of accepting or rejecting each of these suggestions, or working with the Copy Editor to synthesize a third, even better solution to a poorly written sentence or an unexpected plot hole or logic issue (e.g., “How can Brenda know that Steve is her brother on Page 50, when she didn’t know on Page 25 and no one told her after that?”).

Copy Editing may be priced on a per-project basis or on a per-page or per-word basis. Payment is usually made in two parts – upon commencement and upon final acceptance – or even all upon completion. Here, too, the exact costs, deliverables, and payment schedule should be agreed upon in writing before work begins.

The final deliverable from a Copy Editor should be a polished and complete manuscript that both the writer and the Copy Editor are pleased with – something that is ready for the next and (nearly) final phase of the editorial process: Proofreading.

A word on manuscript formatting

Though it should go without saying, when editors make an estimate based on “pages,” they are basing it on a fairly strict standard: a 12-point Times New Roman font, double-spaced, on an 8 1/2” x 11” sheet with 1-inch margins. The last name of the author and the title of the book should appear at the top of every page; a page number should appear at the bottom of each page. There is really very little variation allowed. Some editors will accept 11-point sizes, some different fonts or 1 1/4” margins, but it is best to get into the habit of always presenting your manuscript to Editors (and agents and publishers) in this format. No exceptions.

Third and Final: Proofreading

The Proofreader takes one final look at your manuscript prior to design and formatting. The Proofreader is not, usually, checking for larger structural or plot-based issues, or even issues of logic or consistency. They are focusing exclusively on spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Even though the writer and earlier Editors may have put this story through multiple drafts, some typographical, punctuation, and grammar errors will have gone undetected or slipped in along the way. A final pass, from a fresh set of eyes, will assure the final product has a completely professional “look and feel.”

Sometimes Copy Editors will serve as Proofreaders as well, but this can be risky. This process deserves a look from a professional who has not worked on the project until this stage. At Monique Happy Editorial Services, we may take on both roles, but “trade off” between team members to make sure the Proofreading is as complete and accurate as possible. You should expect the same from any editorial service.

Proofreading, like Copy Editing, may be charged on a per-project, per-page, or per-word basis, and may be paid in two parts – usually at commencement and upon completion – or all at the “back end.” A single paragraph letter of agreement will make it clear what the deliverable is, what the cost will be, and when it will be paid. (Letters of agreement, even if just in e-mail form, are always a good idea when specific tasks and money are involved.)

The final proofread manuscript then goes to book designers for the creation of the e-books and print-book files. The writer will then have one final chance to look at the book – in PDF and/or e-book form – before it is published and/or printed. But that’s a subject for another day.

A few final words...

The Developmental phase may or may not be part of any given project. Where once it was always the purview of the publisher, in this new age of self-publishing and small publishing it is often overlooked and undervalued. Still, we believe that many – *most* – stories would benefit from Developmental work early on, in the Developmental phase, but it is not essential. It’s the writer’s decision.

Copy Editing and Proofreading, on the other hand, are *essential*. It is obvious even to the casual reader if there are typographical errors or inconsistencies in storytelling, and it is virtually, even neurologically impossible for the writer to effectively copy edit or proofread their own work. Even if the author has chosen to forgo Developmental Editing, Copy Editing and Proofreading by professionals is required for the presentation of a final, professional-quality product.

Finally: be aware that all three of these editorial roles require professional attention. Training and experience are very important. If you want to be proud of the final product; if you want your self-published book or the manuscript you submit to publishers or agents to be respected and taken seriously, it is worth investing in – at the very least – Copy Editing and Proofreading. And think seriously about working with a Developmental Editor, to some degree, in some context, early in the process.

Your work deserves it.