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MISS GRIMES GIVING THE "CORRECTED" COPY TO THE PRINTER

guide to editorial excellence

Every book, however well written, can be **made better** – and ensuring your text is properly **edited and typeset** is essential. Here's a quick guide to the **types of editing**, and some tips on what you should consider before sending it to an editorial supplier...

Editors are a strange breed. On the one hand they can be forensically pedantic, which requires a certain sort of intellectual confidence; on the other, they are typically shy and would prefer not to attract attention. And in fact that's what good editing is all about: not attracting attention. The ultimate goal of a good editor is for their presence in a book to be undetectable, invisible. (You can also say the same of a good typesetter – the aim is not to 'snag' the reader's eye.)

Nobody really notices when a book has been well edited – all they see is the clever, engaging prose of the author, and that's how it should

be. But people certainly notice when a book has been badly edited, or not really edited at all. In fact, it's one of the most common reasons for a book being given a bad review on Amazon. Sometimes the reviewer makes that explicit – 'the book is riddled with typos and grammatical mistakes,' they grumble. Sometimes it's more subtle: 'This book doesn't make any sense.' Or even: 'It started well but the middle was too dull to make me want to read to the end.'

All of these criticisms reflect badly on the author, and their sales figures – but in most cases they could be avoided with good editing.

What is editing?

There isn't actually one answer to this – if you're serious about getting a great book published, you should know that there are different types of editing. Most traditional publishers actually put a book (and its weary author) through three stages, and there's no reason why self-publishers committed to Getting It Right shouldn't do the same.

First is **development editing**, also known as structural editing. This is the process of taking an author's completed manuscript and looking at what makes the story tick, or what makes it stick.

What if it's non-fiction? That's not necessarily different: a memoir, a history or a biography, for example, is still a narrative, and the reader will get much more out of being taken on a journey. Even a 'how to' book has a rhythm to it, and will have some potential structures that make more sense than others.

Does a book have too many different points of view? Are there too many scene breaks, or not enough? Does the author spend too much time 'telling' rather than 'showing' their story? All of

these considerations come at the structural stage.

Sometimes the 'dev edit' involves tearing a book into chunks and rearranging them. Sometimes surprisingly subtle tweaks here and there can make a book sing in tune when it seemed tone deaf before. It might mean simplifying the story, or conversely elaborating it.

The second stage is the **copy edit**. This is where the grumpy pedant is let out of their cage to maul the manuscript. More specifically, this typically means three things:

- Issues of **style**. Does the author string sentences nicely together, or do they get their words in a tangle? Most authors have their own tics – phrases they overuse, clichés they reach for, bad habits they may have got into.
- Issues of **consistency**. This can affect a number of aspects of a piece of writing. It includes continuity errors – a character is wearing a red shirt in one scene and then a blue one in the next, or their age varies incorrectly – but also picky stuff such as whether the author used 'window-sill' in one place, 'window sill' in another, and 'windowsill' in a third. There

could also be changes in the consistency of tone. In non-fiction, there may be technical terms which need to be presented consistently (and explained if a general readership doesn't necessarily know them).

- Issue of **accuracy**. If the commas are in the wrong places, the meaning can get confused for the reader. People may not know grammatical terminology, but it's often obvious when a sentence hasn't been constructed properly. And accuracy can affect the content, too, especially in non-fiction, where the author's credibility is important. An experienced copy editor will possess good general knowledge, which really helps with spotting potential clangers (and makes them good at pub quizzes!) – but will also check the facts rather than assume they're OK.

(Note: some people, particularly but not exclusively in the US, also refer to **'line editing'**. There are different interpretations of this term, but it is typically used to describe a hybrid of development and copy editing, where the editor goes through the text line by line, suggesting how the

writing can be improved. This is perhaps of most value for writers still learning their craft.)

All of this, it should be said, is a collaborative process – it's not a grumpy editor issuing edicts from their throne to the cowering author. We work together to make your book a better one – though it will take work on both sides!

The third stage of the usual editorial process is **proofreading**, which traditionally occurs only after a book has been typeset, in order to pick up new mistakes which have been introduced by the formatting ('widows and orphans' – short lines stranded at the top or bottom of a page, which just look wrong – being the classic example), and have a final sweep for any last textual errors. It's all too easy for a book to reach this stage and still have the occasional word missing, a sneaky typo or repeated words like 'the the' (unless referring to the British post-punk band, obviously).

Imagine your words being passed through finer and finer sieves. The structural edits pick out the biggest lumps; the copy editor picks out the medium lumps; and then at the end the proofreader finds the tiniest remaining ones.

Make an editor your friend

So we've seen some of the things that go through an editor's head: 'What would make this book flow better?', 'Why does this author use the word "desperately" 57 times in this book?', 'What year did decimal currency come in?', 'Why don't I have any friends?'

But what happens in the pedant's cranium at that first point of contact with the author? This bit is very much up to you! Here are three common reactions from the editor when a new manuscript plops into their inbox:

- Excitement: 'Fantastic, I love spy thrillers/self-help books/Welsh anime, bring it on.'
- Confusion: 'Why didn't the author actually finish the book before sending it to me?'
- Dread: 'Why is the punctuation completely wrong?'

And of course sometimes it's a mixture of all three. Here, though, are a few pointers:

- **Don't just come to us (or a publisher, an agent, a marketer or anyone else, in fact) with an idea.** Ideas are easy to come by, it's the hard graft that goes into embodying them in book form that matters.

- And don't come to an editor with half a book, either: **finish your first draft!** We need to see a whole to see the holes. **Planning your book** carefully beforehand will make all of this easier.
- Don't duck the donkey work: you should at least have taken the time to **learn how to use punctuation properly and how to construct varied, interesting sentences.** (You'll be wasting your own money if you don't at least take some care over the basics – and if an editor has to spend long hours fixing every sentence, they'll have less time and headspace to get a proper overview of a book, where some of the best editorial insights can come.)
- But you **don't need to be perfect** – everyone makes mistakes, and can learn more about their craft. Sometimes, in fact, a manuscript which shows great promise but has clear flaws can be the most rewarding type to work on. For an editor it can be hugely satisfying helping to 'midwife' a great story into a healthier piece of writing.
- And **don't be afraid:** editors don't (usually) bite, and what we want most of all is to help your book

fly. Ask us questions – and indeed disagree with us if you feel strongly about something.

There's no substitute for taking professional advice. It's all about investment, in both yourself and

your book. If you treat your self-publishing project like a business – planning your book's content, your route to publication (including editing!) and then your marketing – you've given yourself the best foundation you can.

Top tips for the typesetting stage

- Think about **existing books that you like the look of**, and do tell us if you have some favourites – this can feed into how your book is designed.
- For non-fiction, think about **structure and taxonomy** – do you have too many levels of subheadings, or too few? Could some of your text be put in boxes or reworked into bullet points to aid the reader?
- Please **don't embed images in your Word document** – or, at least, only do so for reference. Word has a habit of chewing up image files, and in any case, the typesetting process, regardless of the software used, needs images as separate files. (They should always be high resolution for print output, ie at least 300dpi – if you're not sure, do ask and we will always check anyway.)
- It's fine – and indeed helpful – to **mark up a Word file with styles**, for example for body text and different levels of headings, though try to avoid vast numbers of them; and don't assume that what falls in a certain way in the Word file will end up looking quite the same in the typeset file.
- **Don't bother 'laying out' a book in Word**, with running headers and footers, indents or paragraph spacing, and so on: all this will be lost or changed anyway. When a Word file is imported into InDesign, say, the distinctions between styles can be preserved as well as formatting such as bold and italics, but most other things are likely to change. Ultimately the key thing is that the file distinguishes things semantically: the content is sacred, but the form will change.

How we can help you

- ¶ We offer a variety of services to authors (as well as independent and mainstream publishers) including, where required, a **structural edit, copy edit and proofreading**. We do this for **fiction and non-fiction**. Every book is different, of course: if you only need one or two of these stages, that's fine too!
- ¶ We can also **typeset your book for both print and ebook output**. We offer an extremely cost-effective, template-based system – or we can provide bespoke typesetting for more complex projects. (We don't do cover design as that's a specialist area in itself, but we can recommend designers and illustrators.)
- ¶ We offer **free advice on routes to publication** – every book and author has different needs. We keep up with trends and platforms for self-publishing via print-on-demand, and can recommend traditional printers, for example.
- ¶ We keep our overheads low so we can pay our extensive, ever-growing and **carefully vetted network of freelancers** well. And this also means, of course, that we can offer great rates to our clients.



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“I’m proud to be one of your clients” – Valerie Mendes

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