

Writers, understandably, have mixed feelings about having their work copyedited, and they are curious and sometimes nervous about the process. They would like to know what they can do to prepare for it and what to do if they disagree with the changes. And since one of the main points of this book is to welcome writers into our club (and since, as a writer, I sometimes sit on the other side of the desk myself), it seems right to think about things from the author's point of view.

Occasionally a writer handing in work will suggest skipping the copyediting stage, offering assurance that the work has already been read several times. Some of my authors have noted that they even paid for freelance editing before submitting their work. Although it is true that some manuscripts are in excellent shape, in my experience the likelihood that a given project will need no editing bears little relation to the number of times it has been vetted by colleagues, employees, or children of the writer. I would go further and venture that if I were to pluck any published book or magazine article from the library shelf and have it scanned into typescript format for editing, most copy editors would still find a fair bit to meddle with.

How can this be?

First, the habits and standards and style manuals of publishers vary. Even more to the point, the preferences and knowledge of copy editors vary. A lot. Comma choice alone leaves so much room for discretion that it would be nearly impossible for two editors working independently to punctuate a work of some length in the same way. A certain amount of editing is optional and subjective. What one editor considers acceptable is incorrect to another. One reads with his eyes, another with her ears, and they edit accordingly. Some concentrate on logic and flow; some are sticklers for grammar; and some, like an indulgent mother with a sticky toddler, let everything but the most obvious and egregious messes slide by.

Even if all editors were of the same sensibility and training, editing is by nature multitasking, reading at several levels simultaneously—in fact, it's common for editors to read more than once, concentrating on big picture issues in one reading, details in another. Inevitably, we are distracted as we read by the issues that interest us the most, and inevitably we overlook or dismiss some matters as unworthy of attention.

My point is that a work will never be edited the same way twice, and it will never be considered perfect, no matter how many times it's edited—probably not even by the last person who edited it. (An assigning editor at a famous children's magazine told me of her exasperation after one of her staff had copyedited the same text in three revisions and kept finding errors. "Stop looking for mistakes!" she yelled. "Think like an editor and just let it go!")

The second reason that copy must undergo copyediting regardless of its state at submission is that it must be prepared for typesetting. Although a writer under contract is usually given guidelines for formatting and organizing her work, it's the rare author who follows the guidelines closely. A certain amount of the copy editor's time must be spent in removing pretty font and type styles, redoing weirdly typed block quotations (the kind with tabs at the beginning of every line), and cleaning up whatever else the writer did while trying to be helpful in spite of the guidelines. Writers are endlessly inventive when it comes to word processing. In the early days of personal computing, a colleague showed me a book manuscript that consisted of 350 Microsoft Word documents; the author had started a new file each time he reached the bottom of a page. Today, citation builders are the copy editor's nemesis. Although

their potential is thrilling, very few writers know how to use them; the result is more often than not a perfect—though consistent!—mess. But even if writers were to follow every instruction, guidelines for writers aren't intended to produce a production ready document; they merely eliminate part of the cleanup.

So when you submit work—even if it consists of previously published material—be prepared for someone to find something that needs changing. When we talk about not taking editing “personally,” realize that this is why. A good amount of copyediting has nothing to do with how great a writer you are.

If you work in a specialized area or with unconventional content, prepare to be edited by someone who is not an expert in that area—or a mind reader. If you're lucky, she will have experience editing related books or articles, but if she hasn't, she will welcome a page from you with explanations and preferences. (For example, “The term *improvisative* should not be corrected to *improvisational* or *improvisatory*”; or “Please don't change the spellings of place names without asking; it's a political issue.”)

Whenever you are about to be edited, feel free to ask questions about who will edit your work, what kinds of things they'll be looking for, and how much feedback and negotiation to expect. If you have fears or concerns (other than “Incompetent editors terrify me”), expressing them up front might make a difference in the approach your editor takes.

In light of all this, is it worth the time and money to hire a copy editor in advance of submitting your work? That depends. On the one hand, if you feel that your writing is in pretty good shape, there's little point in paying someone to copyedit to a particular style only to have your publisher redo it to a different one. On the other hand, if your readers have been marking a lot of typos and writing “huh?” in the margins here and there, your work might benefit from a pass specifically addressing those kinds of issues.

There are other good reasons to get professional editorial help before submission. If you are required to identify sources and you aren't confident that your notes and references are complete and conform to one of the commonly accepted styles (Chicago, MLA, APA, etc.), a copy editor can put things right. If you are trying to break into a field of writing and your work is being done on speculation, small sloppinesses can land your work in the rejection pile. An editorial eye will spy the remaining flaws.

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