

sfep FAQsheet 1: Copy-editing

What does a copy-editor do?

e'ditor *n.* One who prepares the work of others for publication

Concise Oxford Dictionary

'Prepares' in this context covers a multitude of tasks. Copy-editing is not just about dotting the 'i's and crossing the 't's. Professional editors will:

- correct errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation, style and usage
- eliminate inconsistencies and repetition and apply house style (where applicable)
- clarify ambiguities and inaccuracies with the author
- ensure that the text is structured logically and coherently
- mark up hard copy with conventional symbols or edit files on-screen using word-processor styles or tags if required
- organize illustrations and ensure that labels and legends are consistent with the text
- have the technical knowledge needed to communicate with the designer and typesetter, to minimize costs and maintain schedules
- identify legal issues relating to copyright, libel, obscenity, blasphemy or incitement to racial hatred (but responsibility for them lies with the author).

The copy-editor's role is to help the reader grasp the author's ideas, to prevent embarrassing errors and to ensure that the typesetter can do a good job.

What does a copy-editor not do?

- Ghost writing
- Developmental or substantive editing, which is concerned with rewriting and restructuring the text in more depth
- Proofreading, which has a different purpose (see *SfEP FAQsheet 2: Proofreading*)
- Text or cover design
- Indexing
- Research, beyond basic fact checking
- Seeking permission to use copyrighted material.

Many professional editors have the skills to perform these services, if requested, but they require separate negotiation and briefing.

Why do I need a copy-editor?

You, the author, may have been crafting your work for a long time – you know it better than anyone, and the idea of some stranger altering so much as a comma may be anathema. Your very closeness to and familiarity with the work may be blinding you to its flaws, however. You hold the work in its totality in your mind; you have developed the ideas sequentially to its conclusion – you can't now put

yourself in the reader's place by 'unknowing' the facts. A copy-editor will bring a fresh mind to your text, helping you to reveal the concepts in a logical order.

You can break every grammatical and syntactical rule consciously when, and only when, you have rendered yourself incapable of breaking them unconsciously.

Bernard Levin

You may be less than confident in your use of grammar (and it is unwise to rely on spelling and grammar checkers). Perhaps you know what you want to say but find it hard to put into words. A copy-editor will be sufficiently detached from the writing process to spot mistakes and inconsistencies that distract the reader. Above all, he or she can add a professional finish to your work that puts it a cut above the rest.

How much does it cost?

The Society for Editors and Proofreaders cites recommended hourly rates on its website (www.sfep.org.uk). The National Union of Journalists (www.nujbook.org/freelance/) lists similar rates. You will be able to find editors who will work for less but they may be untrained or inexperienced. The dictum 'Let the buyer beware' is as true for editorial services as it is with any purchase.

Can I do it myself?

It is difficult to edit one's own work because of the factors outlined in 'Why do I need a copy-editor?' above. However, the following guidelines will take you part of the way and will simplify the job of the copy-editor if you commission one.

- *Know your audience* – check that you have pitched your language at the right level; do any terms or abbreviations need explanation?
- *Extent* – is it too long/short? Look at a similar book and work out roughly the number of typeset words per page, then calculate how many pages your text will make. Add preliminary pages and don't forget to allow for illustrations, if present, and other paraphernalia such as footnotes, glossary, appendices, index.
- *Content and structure* – is anything missing or redundant? Is the order logical? Headings break up the text and make it more readable: do you have enough? If you have more than four levels of sub-headings, you probably need to rethink the structure. Are those footnotes essential? Could 'supporting material' go in an appendix? Does it need a bibliography?
- *Sentence and paragraph length* – again, bear in mind the readership but, in general, keep sentences short. Paragraphs introduce new ideas and break up the page. Keep in mind that the line length will change when typeset: particularly when set in two or more columns, introduce more paragraph breaks.
- *Consistency* – keep a list of your decisions about alternative spellings and hyphenation; the proofreader should also refer to it to double-check consistency. Check that illustrations and tables agree with the text and captions; cross-check chapter headings with the table of contents.
- *Illustrations and tables* – 'a picture speaks a thousand words' but ensure that your illustrations support the text and have an appropriate legend. Text referring to tables should comment on the data, not simply repeat it. Make it clear roughly where each figure and table should appear in the text – the designer will have the final say when the pages are laid out. You will need to ensure that artwork is suitable for reproduction, especially if in electronic form.
- *Style* – George Orwell's six rules in *Politics and the English Language* (1946) are a good starting point:
 - 1 Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech that you are used to seeing in print.
 - 2 Never use a long word where a short one will do.

- 3 If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- 4 Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- 5 Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- 6 Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

Common mistakes include the overuse of exclamation marks and emphasis (in italic, bold or capitals); very long sentences with little punctuation; changing between first and third person.

- *Accuracy* – don't guess; check facts and spellings of names, dates, quotations etc even if you think you know them. Some general reference works are listed at the end of this sheet.
- *Copyright* – permission should be sought from the copyright holder (the publisher and/or the author) for illustrations and tables taken from other sources.

The publisher ... must also be taken to task, for their (lack of) editing – there are several errors in the book that have nothing to do with writing style, but everything (apparently) to do with allowing one's computer spell-check program to act as an editor.

customer review on amazon.com

Redrawing does not affect the situation; the item has to be significantly changed before copyright does not apply. Quotations that constitute a qualitatively significant part of a work, even where this is not a large part, require permission. Be aware that using even a single line of poetry or of a lyric can be expensive. If in any doubt about whether copyright applies, play safe and seek permission. Remember that authors have moral rights: to be identified (which must be asserted), to object to distortion or mutilation of their work, and not to have work falsely attributed to them. With the exception of Crown Copyright (which lasts longer), copyright in

a literary, dramatic, musical or artistic work expires 70 years after the author dies, or 70 years after it was first published if the author's identity is unknown. For more information, visit www.intellectual-property.gov.uk.

- *Handing over files* – provide hard copy that is *identical* to the files supplied, number all pages, list illustrations separately, include a cover note listing what is enclosed/missing and provide contact details. Supply additional information where relevant: title page, foreword, preface, acknowledgements/dedication, lists of abbreviations/illustrations, glossary, appendices. There is no point in preparing an index (if one is required) until the book is in page proof, as pagination will change.

Where can I find a copy-editor?

The best place to look is the Society for Editors and Proofreaders' *Directory*, available from the society's office or website (www.sfep.org.uk). You can search the *Directory* free online or use the indexes of subjects, skills, media, software and location in the printed version. Inclusion is restricted to members who have demonstrated an acceptable level of skill and experience. Other online and printed directories are listed in 'Where can I find more information?' There are also several online agencies that offer freelances' services but not all of these vet editors' abilities with sufficient rigour.

What should I look for in a copy-editor?

- *Training in editing* – ideally by the Society for Editors and Proofreaders or the Publishing Training Centre, although other courses are available.
- *Editing experience* – preferably in your subject area.
- *Specialist knowledge* – important if your text is aimed at professionals.
- *Communication skills* – editing requires tact and sensitivity as well as an eye for detail.

- *Knowledge of English* – not only ability in spelling and grammar but also an awareness of the evolving nature of English.
- *Good judgement* – the ability to assess when to be flexible in applying house style. This is where experience shows.
- *Restraint* – in not re-writing in their own style; willingness to ‘let the author’s voice come through’. (Writers aren’t necessarily the best editors of others’ work.)
- *Punctuality* – major queries should be raised and answered without delay; minor queries should be handled as convenient to both parties but in sufficient time for the editor to return the job by the agreed date.

What should I tell the copy-editor?

You may discuss the work initially by phone or in person. If so, follow up by email or letter right away with what you’ve agreed. When you send the job to the editor, include the following information:

- *List* – of enclosures and of outstanding material (and date expected).
- *Tasks to be performed* – give guidance about the depth of editing: is minimal intervention, restructuring or rewriting required? (More information about levels of edit can be found in the Society for Editors and Proofreaders’ Code of Practice at www.sfep.org.uk.) Is the editor required to prepare preliminary pages, running headings and cover copy (except blurb)? Should electronic styles, codes or tags be used?
- *Important features* – who is the target audience? Is the book in a series? Is there a house style or design specification (enclose, if so)? Are there any exceptions to the house style? Is the work to be published in electronic form? Have files been virus checked?
- *Instructions for presentation and listing of illustrations* – are labels on line drawings to be edited? Should photographs be scaled or cropped? If any are copyright, has permission for reproduction been obtained? Are any acknowledgements needed? Is the editor required to compile a list of artwork?
- *Relevant background* – are there any specific requests, e.g. from expert readers? Has anything been decided of which the editor should be aware? With whom should the editor liaise over queries (give all contact details)?
- *Agreed dates, fee, expenses* – when is the edited material to be returned? What is the agreed fee (hourly rate with estimated hours, page rate or lump sum)? Which expenses will be reimbursed (e.g. postage, copying, phone, travel, printer consumables)? Ask the editor, on sight of the job, to confirm any estimate given in advance and to contact you immediately if unforeseen problems come to light that might affect the schedule or budget.
- *Administrative requirements* – is the editor required to produce handover notes for the artist, designer, production manager or typesetter? You should insure against loss or damage to original material, such as artwork, but the editor should keep copies of electronic files and correspondence for at least six months after publication.
- *Payment period* – arrangements for payment (including instalments if appropriate) should be agreed with the copy-editor before work begins, and the editor should be paid promptly and in full, in accordance with the agreement. The Late Payment of Commercial Debts (Interest) Act 1998, amended and supplemented in 2002, applies to agreements made between businesses.

Read over your compositions, and wherever you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out.

Samuel Johnson

What if it goes wrong?

If you are unfortunate enough to have a bad experience with a copy-editor, take a step back and ask yourself why. Re-read your brief: was it clear and complete?

A woman, without her man, is nothing.
A woman: without her, man is nothing.

*Anonymous example of the power
of punctuation*

If the editor has been over-zealous in applying house style, say, or you disagree with his or her punctuation or hyphenation decisions, ask for an explanation. If the changes cannot be justified to your satisfaction, negotiate a re-edit or do it yourself – many can be changed with a global search or a general instruction to the typesetter. Do not withhold payment unless you can prove negligence on the editor's part.

What if it goes well?

The editor would appreciate *constructive* feedback, positive and negative.

Everyone has always regarded any usage
but his own as either barbarous or
pedantic.

Evelyn Waugh

Where can I find more information?

Finding a copy-editor: online

- Society for Editors and Proofreaders
www.sfep.org.uk use Directory link
- National Union of Journalists
www.freelancedirectory.org
- Publishing Training Centre
www.train4publishing.co.uk use Freelance Directory link
- Electric Editors
www.electriceditors.net use Members' Links (not searchable)

Finding a copy-editor: in print

Note: In the list below, only the SfEP *Directory* is solely devoted to editorial services (including but not limited to editing and proofreading).

- Society for Editors and Proofreaders' *Directory*
(SfEP, Riverbank House, 1 Putney Bridge Approach,
London SW6 3JD. Tel: 020 7736 3278; email: administration@sfep.org.uk)
- *Directory of Publishing: United Kingdom, Commonwealth and Overseas*
(Continuum International, The Tower Building, 11 York Road,
London SE1 7NX. Tel: 020 7922 0880; email: info@continuum-books.com)
- *Directory of Publishing in Scotland*
(Scottish Publishers Association, Scottish Book Centre, 137 Dundee
Street, Edinburgh EH11 1BG. Tel: 0131 228 6866;
email: info@scottishbooks.org)
- *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook*
(A&C Black, 37 Soho Square, London W1D 3QZ.
Tel: 020 7758 0200; email: customerservices@acblack.com)

Copyright and intellectual property

UK Patent Office Intellectual Property Portal
www.intellectual-property.gov.uk

Style

Plain English Campaign free guides
www.plainenglishcampaign.com/guides.html

Writers' Resources Style Guides
www.ability.org.uk/writers_resources_style_guides.html

Elmore Leonard's 10 Rules of Writing: 'Easy on the Adverbs, Exclamation Points and Especially Hooptedoodle' (fiction writing)
www.greggsutter.com/ExpressionEngine/index.php?features/elmores_rules_of_writing

Effective Writing: Improving Scientific, Technical and Business Communication (2nd edn)
 C.C.R. Turk and J. Kirkman
 Spon Press, 1989

The Elements of Style
 W.I. Strunk and E.B. White (eds)
 Allyn and Bacon, 1999

Good Style: Writing for Science and Technology
 J. Kirkman
 Spon Press, 1992

Simple & Direct: A Rhetoric for Writers
 J. Barzun
 University of Chicago, 1984

The 38 Most Common Fiction Writing Mistakes
 Jack M. Bickham
 Writer's Digest Books, 1997

General reference

A good dictionary – Oxford, Chambers or Collins

Chambers Biographical Dictionary
 Una McGovern (ed)
 Chambers Harrap Publishers, 2002

Fowler's Modern English Usage (Oxford Language Classics Series)
 Henry Fowler, Simon Winchester (Introduction)
 Oxford University Press, 2002

Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors
 Robert Ritter (ed)
 Oxford University Press, 2000

Oxford Dictionary of Quotations
 Elizabeth Knowles (ed)
 Oxford University Press, 2004

Oxford Guide to Style
 Robert Ritter
 Oxford University Press, 2002

Usage and Abusage: A Guide to Good English (Penguin Reference Books)
 Eric Partridge, Janet Whitcut (ed)
 Penguin Books, 1999

Roget's Thesaurus – many editions available

Copy-editing guides

Copy-editing (3rd edn)
 Judith Butcher
 Cambridge University Press, 1992


 The logo for the Society for Editors and Proofreaders (sfep) features the lowercase letters 'sfep' in a large, elegant, serif font. The 's' and 'f' are connected, and the 'e' and 'p' are also connected. The letters are black and set against a white background.

society for editors and proofreaders
upholding editorial excellence

Society for Editors and Proofreaders (SfEP)
 Riverbank House
 1 Putney Bridge Approach
 LONDON SW6 3JD

Tel: 020 7736 3278
 Fax: 020 7736 3318
 Email: administration@sfep.org.uk
 Web: www.sfep.org.uk