

Editing and Confidentiality How it Works

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Introduction

When clients – especially new authors – are looking to commission an editor, a common question comes up:

'Will my work be kept confidential?'

This mini-guide outlines ethical practice, clarifies the facts around content ownership, and shows how editors handle material generated by others in their work.

Editors keep quiet

In the non-fiction sector, it's likely that the client will be publishing an important story (e.g. biography or memoir) or a practical volume, such as a how-to book. The content might include a programme, training or specialist knowledge from the author's considerable expertise: the result of a great deal of time, research and development.

No editor worth their salt releases any information whatsoever about that to the outside world prior to publication.

The same goes for all associated liaison and discussion during the project: that remains strictly between client

and editor – and is often worked into contracts to clarify and bind the relationship (more on this below).

Many editors reserve the right to mention and/or link to the *published* project as part of their agreement with the client, so as to be able to include it in their portfolio, publish a testimonial or promote their association with it on social media.

Otherwise, silence is absolutely golden.

What's in the project, stays in the project!

Editors protect their clients' work

The same also goes for requests from prospective clients to see existing samples of the editor's work for quality and execution. Some prospects ask for this so they can decide if they want to commission the editor or not.

Good editors refuse to share their clients' edited scripts. Instead, they refer the potential client to their published work and portfolio.

If a prospective client needs to evaluate, they can always download a sample of the published work from an online platform (e.g. Kindle) to look at.

That's usually more than good enough to supply a reasonable picture of the editor's capability, without needing to disclose the nuts and bolts instrumental in achieving the finished result.

Alternatively, the potential client can always ask for a sample edit of their own content: this is a far more useful and productive option.

The reason is that it shows what would be done during a live edit of their specific content, rather than what was done to unrelated material by a completely different author, with what is likely to have been wildly varying project parameters and textual needs.

Samples can be done for free or paid, depending on the amount involved and the editor's practice around sample provision.

It's also worth mentioning that the scripts editors have worked on for clients are *never* shown to anyone else after publication, either. The client has an entirely justifiable right not to have any draft version of their project shared with a complete stranger: worse still, a potential market competitor.

Manuscript drafts contain queries, and likely at least some minor errors. They're a work-in-progress never intended for open consumption.

A good editor appreciates that.

Be assured: an editor will not share your manuscript with anyone else while in progress, or even after your project has been published.

Editors do not steal authors' work

When an author produces content, they automatically have what is called 'right of paternity' over it under copyright law.

This means they own that intellectual property (except, of course, for any content reproduced in their script from elsewhere, which is formally applied for and licensed with permission).

Put simply, if you're an author, you have full rights on your output: as soon as the words are on the page, *you own them*.

This also includes any amendments that an editor might make to the work: editors cannot appropriate rights to content they haven't created themselves.

What is true is that stealing another's work and publishing it as one's own is not only extremely bad, but utterly pointless.

For one thing, the publishing world is very small: industry people are well connected, everyone knows everyone else. Invariably, any kind of nefarious behaviour would be quickly exposed.

For another, the plagiarist or thief wouldn't have the knowledge or experience to promote or defend the work in public, because they haven't created it.

Further still, doing something as genuinely terrible as this would destroy the editor's reputation (and their business). Plagiarism and copy theft are the worst forms of publishing crime – from which there is no return.

No serious editorial professional would even begin to countenance the idea.

Why do editors need to see samples?

Sometimes, clients feel chary about handing over samples of their work for editors to look at, because they fear it might be stolen or not kept confidential.

That's entirely understandable, but the issue this presents is a practical one. Editors need to see samples to gauge the condition of the text, and assess the potential input involved.

It's important, because assessment delivers a realistic idea of timing and cost. Some editors run timed tests on a sample for estimating purposes.

Unfortunately, editors can't really estimate or quote reliably, sight unseen of actual content.

Here, it's worth noting that word count alone isn't an indicator of textual condition, only the actual length of a script. For example:

> A 40,000-word script can be in tip-top condition: written by a skilled and experienced author, needing only a light-touch edit.
>
> Conversely, a 40,000-word script can be written by an author with English as a Second or Additional

Language, perhaps needing extra support with grammar and syntax, idiom usage and so forth.

Or it could be a 40,000-word script by an author who is expert in their field, but needing support to ensure clarity, smooth out style and expression, impose consistency, etc.

You get the picture: all of these scenarios have different needs, and the last two examples are going to be more involved projects than the first. The word count doesn't tell you anything about the actual work involved.

When it comes to quoting, a good editor will not pull a random figure out of the air for expediency's sake, just to secure a commission. It's neither reliable nor good practice, and it certainly doesn't serve the client to be given an inaccurate price that might need to be revised and renegotiated later (usually upwards!).

There does need to be a fundamental basis of mutual trust right from the beginning, as suspicion isn't really the best way to start a publishing collaboration.

Handing over a sample is only a small section of the entire work. It shouldn't compromise the whole project

for an editor to be able to see two or three chapters, purely for assessment and estimating purposes.

If releasing content for assessment is a genuine concern, the client can always ask the editor to sign a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) prior to releasing details.

Often this is unnecessary, as editors treat content confidentially for all the above-mentioned reasons. But if the content is especially sensitive in terms of, say, information or advice for a major international organisation, government or national security, market information or valuable intellectual property vulnerable to competitors, an NDA might be appropriate.

How to find an ethical editor

Clients can feel confident that the editor they're looking to commission operates ethically by checking that they're a member of a recognised industry society.

Editors who are members of formal professional bodies (such as the CIEP, the UK chartered institute for the industry) are bound by a code of practice or conduct.

Most editors include a confidentiality clause in their terms of business or contract as standard, as they assume just how important this is to clients.

If not, clients can always request a clause be inserted in the agreement to seal it.

In sum, a good editor will honour your work. They aren't invested in treating it carelessly. They understand its significance to you as its author, as well as its importance and value in its intended market.

You can be reassured that with a good editor, your writing is in safe hands.

If you've found the advice in this booklet useful and would like more information or assistance with your project, contact me:

 lisa@lisacordaro.com

Connect with me:

 www.linkedin.com/in/lisacordaroedit/