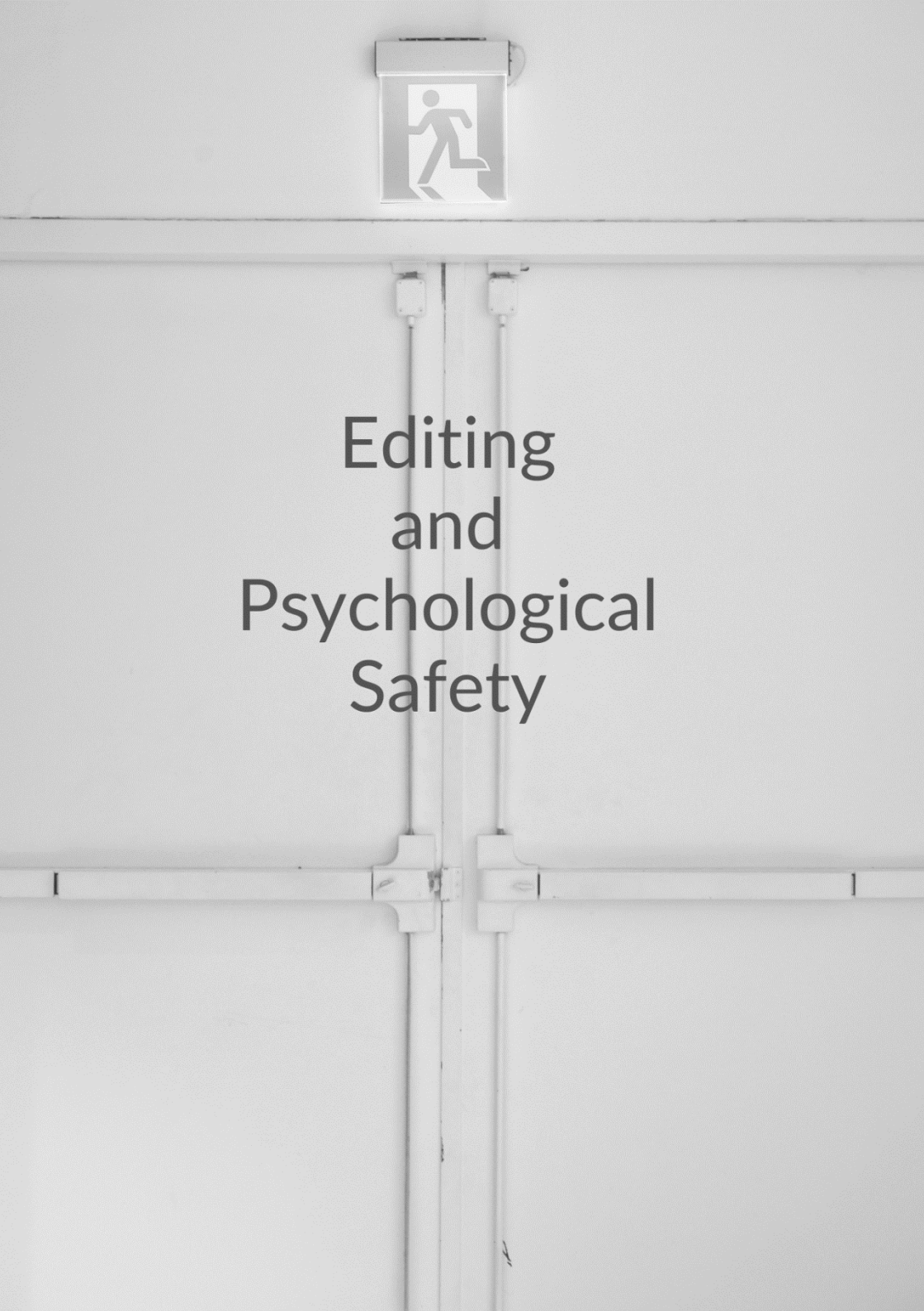


# Editing and Psychological Safety

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If you have been affected by any of the issues discussed in this mini-guide, please seek qualified psychological advice.

# Introduction

If you're looking to commission an editor or would like to know more about psychological safety in the editorial process, this mini-guide explains what it is, why it's important and how to handle editors' approach and queries on this issue during the selection and onboarding process.

## What is psychological safety?

Psychological safety is a term in increasing use in professional environments, both within companies and organisations and outside of them in the contracting and freelance worlds.

It involves understanding and recognising that:

- Good mental health is important in the workplace
- The spaces in which colleagues, clients and suppliers communicate need to be aware of and conducive to empathic, considerate and safe communication

- Individuals have a basic right to protect themselves from exposure to harmful content, should it be mentally injurious to them.

Psychological safety is particularly important to editors because of the kind of content they have to encounter in their day-to-day work. Just to be clear, this isn't a case of 'offence', 'precious' behaviour or 'diva' oversensitivity.

Words are powerful. They can conjure up and imprint strong, indelible images in people's minds. In certain contexts, they have very real capacity to cause mental and emotional harm.

**How can this affect editors?**

Editing is a deeply immersive task and as such, editors can experience first-hand what it is like to live in an author's head directly through their writing.

A book and other longform is extensive and detailed enough to make that immersion full and substantial. (Shorter pieces can trigger too.)

In both fiction and non-fiction, stories, scenes and emotions evoked on the page can be deeply affecting. For example, there may be violence, abuse, accident,

disaster or depictions of people, behaviour or events which might be highly distressing for a professional reader, both to have to deal with and mentally process in the course of their work.

Here are some examples of what can happen to editors when exposed to such content:

- Disturbed sleep, mental images and nightmares
- Finding themselves in tears during reading
- Feeling sickened by graphic descriptions of shocking incidents
- Needing to consult a therapist to help deal with the after-effects
- Inability to read traumatic scenes or watch films with distressing or violent content due to personal witnessing or reporting on such incidents.

This may all appear on the surface to be pretty extreme, but it's key to bear in mind two things.

**Editors are human too**

The first is that editors are not robots devoid of feeling. They read with an appropriate degree of detachment to be able to work with a text effectively, but they also respond as humans to what's on the page.

Moreover, just like anyone else, editors have their own individual life experiences to carry, some of which may have been challenging and left their mark.

As you'll have seen from the list above, sometimes distressing content can prompt memory of personal tragedy, difficult events and actively retraumatise individuals.

It can even cause 'vicarious trauma' – feeling troubled or disturbed by exposure to mention or description of terrible situations, even if they haven't personally experienced it themselves.

**The effect of experience**

The second is that literature can present worlds that have not only been deliberately created for impact (in fiction, murder, horror and gore are typical examples); but in the case of biography or memoir, may well have happened to the book's subject or author in real life.

This can make the content all the more difficult for an editor to process, being aware not only of their veracity, but also of their often-devastating impact on that subject or author.

It’s also possible that what might be casually dismissed as a ‘less extreme’ topic could be just as affecting to an editor with personal experience either of dealing with it themselves, or perhaps of being impacted by that issue due to someone close to them. Typical examples might be alcoholism or substance abuse, disordered eating, psychosis, bipolar and depression.

Sometimes, clients can express surprise (even disapproval) that a topic or content might be difficult for an editor, simply because it isn’t personally uncomfortable for themselves.

With that in mind, it's a kindness to avoid assumptions that an editor can take on any topic regardless of whether it suits them or not, and to approach the issue just with a little extra thought and care.

**How do editors triage for difficult topics?**

When you contact an editor with a project query, some will have already outlined in their outward-facing communication (e.g. directory listings, profiles or website, etc.) the topics they prefer not to take on.

It's also likely that among other discovery questions, an editor will ask as a matter of course if there is any problematic content in the script, as a general triage for safety.

This can be helpful, because if those topics or descriptions might be anywhere in your content, you can re-examine it and choose to do one of two things:

- Disclose its existence and the nature of its appearance in your script – then leave it up to the editor to decide whether they feel it's suitable or not for them to take on. (*Please note: do not share the actual content with them to see!*)
- Make a considered judgement call whether the content is likely to be unsuitable for that particular editor, and continue searching for another who'll be more than happy to work on it with you – that way, both parties can feel completely safe and comfortable with moving ahead.

Here, it's worth noting that some editors do actively take on genres such as horror, murder mysteries, serial killer stories, disturbing dystopian fictional worlds and other hard topics, and absolutely relish working on them.

If one editor doesn't feel a script is suitable for them, it shouldn't be difficult to find another who will love getting stuck into your content.

The most important thing is to be prepared to answer those questions candidly.

Also, do bear in mind that the topics that some editors list for content warnings might appear odd or irrelevant because they aren't usually found in your own sector or subject area; however, they might well be relevant to others' writing.

Editors often work across different genres and subject areas, so they may list all of their prohibited topics for completeness, just to cover the varied project queries they receive from different clients.

**Disclosing potentially distressing content**

As mentioned previously, full disclosure is important because it's easy to overlook the potential effect of distressing content on someone else. What one person might consider perfectly fine for themselves could be a psychological red flag for another.

Still, sometimes that content can slip through the net, even when editors have asked whether it is in the script.

For example: in one case, an editor queried for certain topic content warnings in a biography, and was informed that the text was absolutely fine and free of issues. When the editor began reading script samples, literally within the first few pages they encountered graphic descriptions of precisely that prohibited content.

Once someone has been exposed to this kind of situation, it's too late. That picture is already in their head, very likely doing the damage they had been so careful to protect themselves from and avoid.

Professionals who work on text have a right to be aware of and decide what content they are comfortable with, and wish to accept. Taking on a project is not a given, and openness on both sides is key.

Psychological safety is a process that relies on mutual consideration, candour and trust. It respects both an editorial professional's ability to maintain peace of mind in their work and general wellbeing, and the client's desire to engage the right and most suitable help with their project.

I hope this guide has helped to clarify what psychological safety is and how it works in the client–editor interaction.

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

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