

How to Work with an Editor

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Introduction

When you're looking to work with an editor, there are three things to think about:

- Trust
- A positive two-way relationship
- Practical details

The reason is that the author and editor rapport is a collaboration.

Here's a guide to what editors need from you, and how to get the very best out of your work with them.

Trust and relationship

Taking that first step and handing over your project to a complete stranger is a big deal: it's only natural you might be feeling a bit nervous about it.

You've taken time and put an awful lot of effort into your writing, it's your 'baby' – of course you want it to have the best care!

A good editor will understand this. The ideal way to deal with any concerns is to find someone with solid training and experience.

Check out their website. Is it visually clean, typo-free, reassuring?

Does it show their:

- Training and experience
- Professional memberships
- Past and present clients
- Portfolio and projects
- Client testimonials?

If necessary, you could ask the editor to complete a short sample. Some will do this for free, while others may charge, depending on the genre and request.

A few hundred words from a clear brief should be enough to give you a feel for their approach. You can gauge whether a connection is there, and likely to be positive and productive. Also, whether they're the right person in terms of skills and experience.

If you feel a discovery call might help you to make a decision, it's fine to ask for one – it could be over the phone or online.

Many editors are happy to do short calls to discuss your needs, see if and how they can help, and of course for both of you to assess if the fit is likely to be right.

Practical details

Think ahead

This will seem obvious(!), but proactivity plays a big role in avoiding stress and confusion when you're commissioning an editor. You'll find it helpful to think about your requirements well in advance, as editors are often busy and booked up ahead.

If your project has taken weeks or months to put together, it's likely you'll have known for a while that you might need a professional eye.

Call at the last minute, and the chances are the person you really want to work with might not be available.

So, factor editing into your publishing timeline, and book ahead. You can relax, knowing your editor will be primed for your project and ready!

Preparing your editing brief

When approaching an editor, it's useful to think about the following.

Manuscript length and content

Your editor will need to know the scope of the project: an accurate, current word count and type of content.

Do note, though, that word count alone isn't an indication of textual condition, or how much work might need to be involved. To that end…

Provide samples

Your editor is likely to ask to see samples of your text.

Do consider letting them have these, as it helps them gauge the amount and kind of work realistically, and allows them to estimate for you more effectively.

Don't worry: good, professional editors are ethical – they'll treat whatever you send them in strict confidence. It will not go anywhere else.

(And they definitely won't steal your work!)

Type of edit

Before commissioning, it's useful to research and think about the type of editing you might need for your project.

Do be aware that if you aren't an experienced writer, or you have second-language English, your text might need more than just a basic proofread. It really depends on the content and its condition.

If you aren't sure what your needs might be, that's absolutely fine. Just talk them over with your editor,

and have them look at your samples – they'll be happy to walk you through the options and provide solid, practical support and advice.

Agree a handover date

Do set a fixed date for your editor to expect your project, so they can book it into their schedule.

If that date changes, please be sure to let them know as soon as you do, so they can organise their own calendar and availability while your project is still in preparation.

Sign-off and delivery

This one is essential: if you're commissioning copy-editing, be sure to discuss delivery of the final version of your text.

If you're commissioning a substantial or structural edit, where your editor may be rewriting and/or reordering content, you'll still be looking to have taken the text as far as you possibly can first: this is likely to involve self-editing beforehand.

If you're commissioning a development edit, it's understood that your editor will be guiding your script in progress, which is completely fine. Often development is taken on from first complete draft – if

you've already done some self-editing, it can be worked on from that stage too.

If you're co-authoring with others, it's best to collate all your comments and corrections into one document, then send a clean, up-to-date version of it to your editor.

In a co-authoring situation, a separate trail of notes can make it hard for everyone to keep up, or be confident exactly which version they should be working with.

Important decisions about content really need to be made between yourself and your co-authors *before* you send out the text for editing.

So, the time to tie up loose ends, locate missing material or deal with any internal discussions or agreements is definitely before your copy-editor starts work!

Interrogating the text journalistically – checking names, dates, places and events – is key to all good writing, and an essential task before editing.

Your editor will pick up anything obvious during their read, but unless you're commissioning them specifically to fact-check the content, do note that this task is outside of their brief.

Lastly, once you've finished writing, set your text aside for as much time as you can. Give your mind space to detach, then go back over it with a critical eye to ensure you're happy with it.

At that point, make any final revisions, sign it off and let go of it!

Your deadline

This would be the real date the edit needs to be back with you, rather than an artificial construct. Editing is painstaking work. If you know you won't be able to get to your piece until later, please don't pressure your editor to rush the job unnecessarily.

Sometimes things really are urgent, which is fine; but if it isn’t, do allow enough space for your editor to physically and mentally get through the material.

Be sure to set aside enough time in your own schedule to look over the edit and respond to queries too. Similarly, if you aren't going to be available at any time during the process for queries, let your editor know.

Your editor wants to do justice to your writing, because it's important and deserves the very best attention!

Special requirements

It's useful to take a moment to consider the specifics: your styling needs and reference sources.

For copy-editing:

- Is there any company or personal branding you need your editor to follow?
- Do you have a house style, or is there a formal style guide (e.g. *The Economist*, *Chicago Manual of Style*, APA, Harvard, etc.) which your text needs to conform to?
- Any forms or spellings you love or hate?
- How about the dictionary – which one?

One way into this is to ask yourself:

- Who are my audience and market?
- Should the text be in British, American or other type of English?

From there, often the appropriate reference sources will follow.

For example, if you're a fiction writer publishing in the USA, your text is likely to go with *The Chicago Manual of Style*, while your editor might use the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary.

If you're a non-fiction writer – say, in the business genre – you have plenty of options and can select the styling you prefer.

You can even ask your editor to style your manuscript within itself for consistency, and provide you with a sheet recording all the decisions made during the read.

If you're a researcher or academic submitting to a journal or publisher, styling is likely to be the house or publication's own preference.

Again, your editor can always help and guide you.

Get these right at the beginning, and you're set for a fantastic creative alliance with your editor.

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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