Working with a Freelance Editor

I am passionate about helping independent authors to get their stories out, and I feel privileged to work with them. As an indie author, your needs are unique in the publishing industry. When most traditionally published books are going through multiple stages of editing, requiring multiple editors and many months to slowly go through the process, you need a more condensed service that allows you to push your books out as quickly as possible. And with a limited budget, it's sometimes difficult to accomplish this.

Sometimes I'm asked to give advice regarding how you, as a writer, can make my life, as an editor, easier. What should you do to prepare your manuscript before sending it to your editor? What does your editor need so that you can complete it prior to submission? What do most editors require so that you can adequately prepare your work?

I'm going to turn these questions around.

> *In my opinion, the correct question—and the only question—you should be asking is: "How can I get the most value from my editing dollars?"*

It's not about pleasing your editor. They are being paid regardless of the state of the manuscript they receive. It's about getting the most out of them while you have them.

Timing your search

One of the most important considerations when looking for an editor is the timeframe for when you should start looking. Ninety percent of the time, self-publishers don't start looking until their manuscript is complete.

There are a couple of problems with this approach:

Did you notice the misspelling?

(1) Most quality editors are booked months in advance, so if you wait until your manuscript is ready before contacting them, you might not be able to have your project completed for three to six months. If you're not willing to wait those three to six months, you might end up taking whatever editor you can get, accepting pretty much anything as long as they can promise to get your manuscript back to you within a couple of weeks.

(2) You may have to pay a high premium to a quality editor in order for them to do a rush job for you.

Either way, you're not getting the most value for your money.

The time to start looking for an editor is when you think you're about four or five months out from completing your manuscript. One month for locating one (including time for the search, completing sample edits, and to get pricing quotes), and then possibly three or four months waiting for them to be available. This will allow you to closely coordinate the completion of your manuscript with their availability, allowing you to have it edited as quickly as possible after it's completed but without having to pay a premium, or having to settle for a possibly unqualified editor to do the work just because they are available.

> *Planning ahead is one of the most important aspects to getting the most for your editing dollars.*

Don't worry about the exact timing, as most editors will be happy to adjust your date if it becomes apparent that it won't be completed exactly on the date as planned. Give them as much notice as possible, though, so they can move things around as necessary.

Setting priorities

It's very important to set your priorities before you begin your search. Many of you are familiar with the project management triangle, which in our case consists of the budget, the editor's availability, and the quality of the editor's work.

If you want it done quickly, you may have to sacrifice your budget and/or the quality. If you want it done with the best quality possible, you may have to sacrifice your budget and/or wait a long time to get it completed. If you want to spend the least amount possible, you may have to sacrifice the quality and/or wait a very long time to get it completed. There are tradeoffs with any of the choices, and it's not usually possible to get the best of all three. However, since you now know the importance of timing your search months in advance, you can mitigate the "availability" aspect, reducing its effect and limitations on your options.
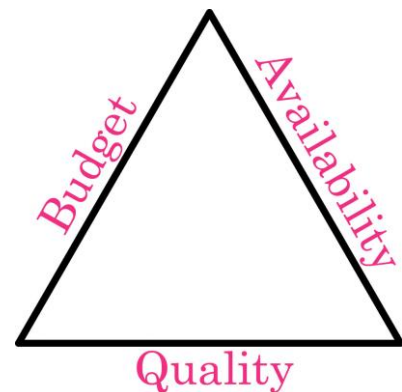
To help you decide what your most important priority is, ask yourself a few direct questions. Pay attention to your reaction when you read the negative aspects you have to "accept" with each priority. Whichever reaction is the least severe is probably what you will be most comfortable with, because:

> *Knowing what you are most uncomfortable with giving up is more telling than trying to decide what you most want.*

(1) Is your budget the biggest consideration? If so, accept the fact that you may have to deal with a potentially poor-quality edit and may have to wait a long time for it.

(2) Do you need the manuscript back immediately? If so, accept the fact that you may have to pay a lot for a rush job and/or it might be a poor-quality edit.

(3) Is quality the biggest concern for you? If so, accept the fact that you may have to pay more than you're comfortable with, and it may take quite some time to get it back.

Know your priorities *before you start your search* so you can focus on what is most important to you.

Resources

In addition to taking recommendations from friends and other authors, you can research well-edited books and look in the Acknowledgements section for editor names. Two other great resources are KBoards and the Editorial Freelancers Association (EFA). KBoards is "a community forum for Kindle owners, with 70,000 members and over 2.0 million posts." Although it is specifically geared toward Kindle users, it offers an amazing resource for authors in general through its Writers' Café forum and directory listing of service providers.

The EFA is a national not-for-profit —501(c)6— organization run by volunteers, that offers a searchable directory of freelance editors. Editors pay annual dues in order to become members of the association and to be listed in the directory.

KBoards: http://www.kboards.com/index.php/topic,123703.0.html

The EFA directory listing search: http://www.the-efa.org/dir/search.php

What type of editor do you need?

Editing comes in all shapes and sizes. Almost all editors specialize in one of several different types of editing services, such as developmental editing, content editing, copy editing, line editing, and proofreading. There are other types of editors, but these are the types that self-publishers and indie authors work with the most. To make things even more confusing, I will tell you that everyone defines these levels of editing differently.

Developmental editing/Content editing

The first step in the editing process is developmental editing. This type of editor will help you to pace your book, offering advice on character development, plot, chapter focus, background story, length of your book, moving chapters around if necessary, and offering other "higher level" advice and suggestions.

Copy editing/Line editing

> *After the developmental edit, the next step would be to have your book copy edited or line edited, which are really the same thing in the self-publishing/indie author world.*

In traditional publishing these two steps are generally separate, but most freelance copy editors also do line editing and for the most part are synonymous for the freelance editor. This stage helps to ensure clarity and flow, in addition to perfecting your grammar, punctuation, tense issues, clearing up any point-of-view (POV) problems, and ensuring style consistency and word usage.

Proofreading

The final step is proofreading, which usually focuses only on a basic final check of spelling, word endings, punctuation and basic grammar.

What to look for in an editor

A hot topic these days is the fact that the freelance editing industry is not governed by any sort of licensing or certification board. As they say, "Anyone can hang a shingle over their front door and call themselves an editor." The result is many authors are leery to approach an editor for fear of being taken by a "fake."

The best way to protect yourself from such a situation is to do your homework. Start your search early (so you're not rushed), set your priorities (so you know what to focus on), and then study your choices closely and carefully.

Some specific things to find out are the editor's specialization(s), their professional background, how much editing experience they've had, their level of education, what their prices are, how many testimonials they have and what they say, the number of books they've edited, how many authors they've edited for, how long they've been in the business, and whether or not they portray a professional image.

Specialization

Most freelance editors specialize in non-fiction, literary fiction, or genre fiction, and many have specialties within each of those categories as well. If you write historical fiction set in Scotland, for example, you will benefit greatly from having an editor who is familiar with Scottish history, Scottish geography, and the Scots language. Whatever it is that you write, try to find an editor who specializes in it.

Once you've compiled a list of editors who offer the type of editing that you need and who specialize in what you write, the next objective is to go through the list with your priorities in mind, to further narrow it down.

Bio

If an editor doesn't have an "About" section at all, that is a red flag. If an editor has an "About" section but all it says is that they read a lot in high school and that they have a poodle, that is also a red flag. What they say isn't as important as what they *don't* say, in other words.

The specific information you're looking for:

(1) Their professional background (where they've worked, what type of positions they've held),

(2) How much editing experience they have (How many books have they edited? How many authors have they worked with? How long have they been in business?)

(3) How much education they have and in what field. If they have a college degree but it's in fashion design, for example, that's not necessarily helpful to you as an author.

> *Most authors will tell you that experience is more important than education, specifically the number of books that they have edited being the most important factor.*

There are no hard and fast rules regarding the answers to the above questions. The most important thing to look for is if the questions are addressed at all, and if you are satisfied with the information provided.

Pricing

After the "About," the next thing to look for is pricing information. My personal opinion is that pricing should be provided up front, though not all editors agree with this method. Some editors prefer to do a sample edit to see how long it takes them based on your writing skill level before being able to give you an estimated cost. One way is not better than another, so it just depends on what you're most comfortable with. If you prefer upfront pricing, just focus on those editors who provide it. If you find an editor who you like but you are not comfortable with their rate, contact them and ask if they would be willing to negotiate. More likely than not, they will.
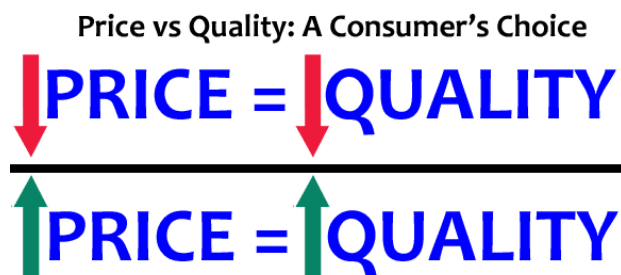
The pricing structure itself does not necessarily have a direct relationship with quality. You might find a wonderful editor who charges a really low rate, or an awful editor who charges a really high rate. Do not assume that just because an editor charges a high rate that they are a highly qualified and skilled editor, and do not assume that just because an editor charges a low rate that they are unskilled or unqualified. There are many considerations that drive pricing, including an editor's overhead costs, their other family income, their cost of living, their target clientele, if they edit part time or full time, or if they have extensive experience or education, to name just a few.

Testimonials

Another consideration after the editor's bio and pricing is the recommendation of other authors, meaning the editor's testimonials that they've received on completed projects. The testimonials should have the author's name listed and there should be a link to make it easy to verify the information. Sometimes it links to the author's website, or maybe to the listing on Amazon. Either way, there should be some way to verify the testimonial and to contact an author if you so choose.

If an editor has a wonderful bio but has no—or few—testimonials, it could simply be that the editor has just started their business and doesn't have them yet. This should not deter you from including them in your list of possible editors, since you may be able to get the best deal from them if they are motivated to get some projects under their belt.

If an editor has dozens or hundreds of testimonials, it could simply be that the editor did a lot of work for free (at least initially), and the resulting testimonials are positive due to the free price rather than the quality of work. It could also mean that the editor subcontracts a large portion of their work out so that they can accept more contracts without having to do the work themselves.

> *The number of testimonials, like their pricing structure, does not necessarily have a direct relationship with quality; it's simply one small part of the overall picture.*

Style guides

One final thing to look for on an editor's website is what style guide they use and what dictionary they use as a reference. There are different recommendations depending on the genre of writing that they edit, and the most important thing to ascertain is if they use one at all. Google can be a great reference, or starting point, but knowledge of appropriate style guides is paramount.

Professionalism

Some authors specifically search out editors who have a very relaxed manner and do not portray a professional image; others, however, find it very important that an editor is professional at all times, judging their Facebook posts, their Tweets, and the way they portray themselves on social media. Some editors are an author's best cheerleader, taking more time to promote the book than they do to edit it. For some authors, this is an important consideration; for others, not so much.

Some editors do not have a website at all, and this should not automatically preclude them from being considered. If you cannot find their information readily available online, contact them via email or phone to get the answers to the questions that are important to you.

Sample edits

Once you've narrowed your list of possible editors, the next step is to get sample edits from them. The sample edit is one of the most important aspects of choosing an editor since it allows you to get a feel for the type of editing they do, how they will communicate the necessary changes and suggestions to you, and how thorough and competent they are at their job.

The best way to compare editors is to send them all the exact same excerpt, which is usually the first chapter or a portion thereof (generally 1,500-2,000 words). Some editors will specifically request a section from the middle of the manuscript so they can get a true feel for your writing style and how long it will take to edit your project; if so, this will still give you a chance to assess their editing style and competency.

There is no 'one right way' to edit, so the purpose of the sample edit is to find an editor who is right for you.

(Note that some editors charge a fee for sample edits, but this fee will usually be deducted from your total editing cost if you eventually decide to hire them.)

Summary of steps

The bottom line is that there is more to finding an editor than taking a friend's recommendation, doing a random online search, or finding the cheapest price. Give yourself plenty of time by planning ahead, set your priorities, use various resources to find editors who do the type of editing that you need and who specialize in your genre, thoroughly research those on the resulting list, request sample edits from those on the final list, and then make your decision from there.

Preparations

After the choice of editor, the proper preparation of the manuscript is the next biggest challenge in order to get the most for your editing dollars.

I like to compare the editing process to working in a quarry. When you first enter, all you can see are the huge boulders and you will never notice the gravel and small stones while the boulders are in the way. In order to get the best value for your editing dollar, you need to remove those boulders yourself and let your editor focus on the gravel.

So how do you do that?

Common errors to look for in your own writing

(1) Dialogue tags and dialogue punctuation

Although there are many common errors that I run across in my daily editing projects, the easiest errors for you to address in your own writing are those that deal with sentence structure. Problems with dialogue tags and the punctuation that goes with them are the most common issues I generally see, and are very easy to correct.

Here are some resources for learning more about these common problems:

http://theeditorsblog.net/2010/12/25/use-and-misuse-of-dialogue-tags/

http://theeditorsblog.net/2010/12/08/punctuation-in-dialogue/

(2) Subject/Verb agreement issues

http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/sv_agr.htm

http://www.grammarbook.com/grammar/subjectVerbAgree.asp

http://www.towson.edu/ows/sub-verb.htm

(3) Proper use of apostrophes

http://www.grammarbook.com/punctuation/apostro.asp

(4) Proper use of hyphens

http://www.esl-library.com/blog/2013/01/10/when-to-use-hyphens-rules-for-multiple-word-adjectives/

(5) Capitalization issues

http://www.towson.edu/ows/capitalization_rules.htm

(6) POV/Head-hopping issues

http://www.scribophile.com/academy/using-third-person-omniscient-pov

Editing software

There are quite a few software programs out there on the market today that claim to help writers edit. Let me assure you, I have tried them all. As far as I'm concerned they are all useless. The biggest help I've gotten from software is Word's "Spelling & Grammar" feature, which does a wonderful job of catching double words such as "the the". Beyond double words, software isn't much help.

Wait between readings

In order to have the best results when self-editing, the best advice I can give is to wait as long as possible between readings. Your brain knows what's in your book—it wrote it. You will read what you meant to say instead of what you actually wrote.

> **The longer the break taken between readings, the better your chance is of reading it correctly.**

Read out loud

Another way to improve your self-editing is to read out loud. The act of reading aloud forces your brain to read every word, whereas it can cheat and skip words (or fill in words that aren't there) if you read silently. Some people also swear by reading backward, which also forces your brain to see the individual word instead of a sentence-unit that may be missing words.

What to send to the editor

In addition to submitting the manuscript, a character list should also be provided to the editor. This list provides the proper spelling of each name, which the editor can use to match against the names in the manuscript. Especially if it is a large book and/or has many characters, this is a valuable tool for your editor. Some authors add character descriptions with this list as well, such as eye color and hair color.

Additionally, if your editor will be coming in to a series already in progress, you should also submit a short synopsis of what happened in the previous books. Your editor can use this information to ensure consistency and to avoid them having to come to you with questions, which takes valuable time away from editing.

It is also important to let your editor know what form of English you want supported in the final document: American English, British English, or Canadian English.

Formatting the manuscript for editing

Each editor will have their own preferences, but in general a Word doc, in a 12-point font, double-spaced or 1.5 lines, with 1-inch margins is your best bet. My personal preference for the font is a non-serif like Word's default Calibri, but many editors prefer a serif font like Times New Roman or Georgia. For an editor who spends the better part of their day reading, receiving projects in different fonts can actually be a relief, giving their eyes a break from the usual format. Some fonts are easier to read online, and some are better for print, so it really depends on how your editor will be reading your project, too.

Interpreting your editor's comments

Suggestion, or mandate?

If you've already had your editor provide a sample edit, the resulting completed edit should not be a surprise to you. Some editors provide general notes in email, while others provide it on the document itself. Some provide edits as PDFs, while others utilize Word. Every editor has their own style and process for editing, but in general, all editors will somehow provide notes and comments for you to review.

> *The most important thing for you to understand when you receive the completed edit is that your editor is speaking on behalf of your future readers.*

Both you and your editor have the exact same goal in mind: to provide the best possible experience for your readers. All comments and suggestions from your editor should come from that frame of reference. As such, understand that each and every comment or suggestion is just that – a suggestion, not a mandate. You know best what your story is trying to say and how your characters will say it, so the final decision is always left to you. Judge each piece of criticism or each suggestion and comment from the shared common goal of providing an enjoyable experience for your reader. It most certainly is not a case of editor against author, so do not take anything they say personally.

Don't feel overwhelmed

Another common reaction to an edited document is the feeling of being overwhelmed by all there is to do, to fix, to address, to rewrite, to revise, to change. Most editors will offer relief from this potentially overwhelming experience by giving you priorities, letting you know which issues are the most important to address, and which are the least important (usually with a range between).

Start with the most pressing issue and then decide if the rest are important to your story. If they are (and if your editor did a good job explaining each issue, *all* issues should be relevant to address), then tackle items in an organized manner and understand that it will take time to make the changes. When you're finished, those changes will have made a huge difference to your potential readers, and if they could see a comparison of before and after, they would wholeheartedly thank you.

*The importance of the testimonial*

Another hot topic in the indie world today is the difficulty with getting readers to leave reviews.

> **Just as an author lives or dies based on their reviews, so does an editor live or die based on their testimonials.**

Don't make the mistake of believing that you have to write an essay on their editing prowess; they will be more than happy with even just a sentence or two thanking them for the job they did and the things they suggested and fixed. Just like with book reviews, a little can go a long way.

The perfection myth

There is no such thing as perfection when it comes to editing. I've read comments by several authors who complained about editors' mistakes, and then they commented about other editors who "literally caught everything" -- but there is "literally" no such thing as perfect editing. The bottom line is that *all* editing is subjective. What is perfect to one person will be flawed to another.
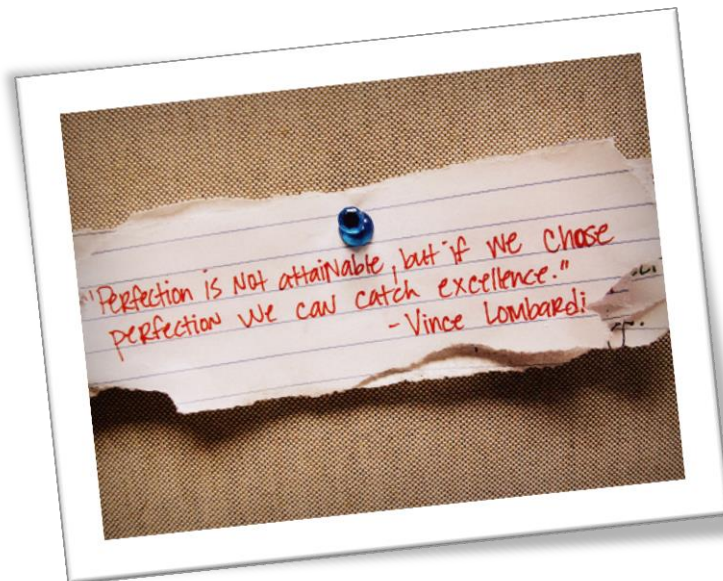
There are two schools of thought regarding language: prescriptivism and descriptivism. If one of your readers is of the mind that there are rules for a reason and they ought to always be followed, then they may be unhappy if your book doesn't conform to their arbitrary idea of what English should be.

So, if you hope to produce a book that never gets one single complaint regarding grammar, style, usage, punctuation, or spelling, you're setting yourself up for disappointment. This means you and your editor should work hard to get your

writing as close to perfect as possible, and then let it go. It's impossible to make everybody happy, so make the majority happy and call that a win.

There is a lot of noise in the indie author world about "lack of editing" or "insufficient editing" or "bad editing," but don't let anyone try to fool you into believing this is only an indie author problem. Traditionally published books are no different, and also frequently have grammar, spelling and punctuation errors, if not worse.

> *There is no such thing as editing perfection, regardless of where a book is edited, or by whom.*

What to do if you just can't afford professional editing

Crowd-sourcing

There is a recent trend of turning to crowd-sourcing for editing. The process is to put a note at the front of your e-book asking readers to alert you of any typos or other errors they find. Compile the problems reported over the span of a few weeks, then fix them all and re-upload the e-book, and then make the paperback version available. If you choose to go this route, I'd advise that you publish at a low introductory rate until the final edited version is uploaded. And remember, of course, that there's no guarantee anyone will tell you about the problems they find.

Crowdsourcing is outsourcing a job to a big crowd

Beta readers

Beta readers can also be a great resource to help you with overall plot, pacing and character development. The trick with beta readers, though, is to make sure they are not your friends or relatives, who are more likely to tell you your work is amazing even if it's not. For true criticism, you need strangers who aren't worried about hurting your feelings.

Proofreading

If you have at least a small budget for editing, you can almost always find a proofreader who may still be in college or is just starting out and most likely would be willing to do the work for free in exchange for a testimonial for their website. One of the best places to search for this type of service provider is on Twitter, by reaching out to the editors you find there and asking for recommendations of those who might be willing to barter.

In summary, the best kind of client is a client who knows what he/she needs and is educated about the process. The steps I've outlined in this report – while seemingly focused on the author's needs alone – help to create that educated client, which makes for a much smoother project for both the author and the editor.

By understanding the editing process, appropriately timing your editor search, setting your editing priorities, finding the appropriate resources, knowing the type of editor you need and the type of editing service your project requires, knowing what to look for in an editor, and adequately preparing your manuscript, you can get the most value out of your editing dollars.

Happy writing!

Let's Connect!

~Lorelei J. Logsdon, Freelance Editor

http://www.LLEdits.com