



So, You Want to Be an Editor

A GENTLE INTRODUCTION to the profession of editing. Excerpts from *So, You Want to Be an Editor* are reprinted below.

"If you do not tolerate a certain level of anxiety over a considerable amount of time (say, an entire career), then you are probably not constituted to be an editor."

-- James Wade and Richard Marek, in *Editors on Editing*

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Editing as a Career Choice

Few people choose editing as a profession. More often, the profession of editing chooses them.

In one sense, everyone edits. Writers who revise even one word in a manuscript have started editing their work. A speaker who pauses in mid-sentence to find a better word or phrase, a manager who revises an instruction or restates a policy, a secretary who clarifies a sentence in someone else's dictation is, for the moment, an editor.

In another sense, editing is a highly specialized profession. It has only one purpose: to improve the quality of communication. Most editors deal with words; some work with pictures, design, production, or management.

Most people become professional editors because they are intrigued with language. They can't ignore mistakes in newspapers. They wince at broadcasters' blunders and cringe when illustrations don't match the accompanying text. A poorly constructed or illogical argument, or an inaccurate use of statistics, offends them. They have a compulsion to

impose order on chaos, to create coherence and consistency. From every sow's ear, editors try to create a silk purse.

If you fit that description, you may have the makings of an editor. But you need more.

As an editor, you simultaneously serve a publication's best and least informed readers. The language, content, and presentation must be accurate enough to satisfy the most intelligent and informed reader, clear enough for even a novice to follow, and interesting enough to catch and hold the attention of all readers. That requires many qualities in an editor:

- facility for and love of language
- proficiency in grammar, spelling, and composition
- broad education, often with specialized technical training, and life-long self-education
- ability to work cooperatively
- ability to work independently and make informed decisions
- elephantine memory for detail
- instinct for recognizing patterns, creating categories, and organizing ideas
- willingness to question assumptions, theories, and facts
- ability to recognize what's missing in content, argument, or presentation.
(Pinpointing what's not there is as crucial as recognizing weaknesses in existing material.)

Ultimately, editors are people who think. No project can be edited mindlessly or by rote. The editor thinks on behalf of the writer, the reader, and the publisher.

Range of Work

Editors perform a variety of jobs as employees or freelancers for book and magazine publishers, governments, corporations, associations, universities, and numerous other groups and individuals. (Editors also work on newspapers, film, television, radio, wire services, video, etc., but their work is not covered in this document.)

The book and magazine editing profession has created specialists: acquisitions editors, style editors, copy editors, and so on. But job titles don't always describe the real work. For example, the duties of a managing editor in one company may be quite different in another company.

One person may do all the editorial work at every stage in the evolution of a magazine, newsletter, book, journal, brochure, or report from initial idea to completed pages ready for a printer. More commonly, though, different editors pool their skills. In a complicated project, such as an encyclopedia or the report of a commission, scores of editors may be involved. A managing or coordinating editor may assign various jobs to both in-house staff and freelance editors on the basis of their abilities and experience.

Here are some of the jobs done by editors.

Acquisitions: Developing ideas for books and finding people qualified to write them; evaluating manuscripts or proposals and making recommendations about them to publishers. (Acquisitions editors may come from the ranks of the salespeople and may not have hands-on experience with manuscripts.)

Developmental work: Coordinating and editing a project from proposal or rough manuscript to final manuscript; incorporating input from authors and others concerned with the final product.

Substantive/structural editing: Clarifying or reorganizing the content and structure of a manuscript.

Stylistic editing: Clarifying meaning, eliminating jargon, and smoothing language.

Rewriting: Creating a new manuscript or part of a manuscript from information supplied by others.

Copy editing: Editing for grammar, spelling, and punctuation; checking for internal consistency of presentation and facts; marking of heading levels; notifying design and production staff of any unusual requirements.

Research: Finding source material for articles or books.

Picture research: Finding suitable photos and/or artwork.

Fact checking: Checking the accuracy of facts and quotes used by the author; related work includes checking references and citations.

Indexing: Producing an alphabetical list of names, places, subjects, and/or concepts with page references.

Proofreading: Reading the proofs of edited manuscript. (A proof is a trial impression of typeset material.) Proofreading may include incorporating author's alterations, checking page proofs, verifying computer codes, and flagging art and page references.

Rough paste-up: Producing a mock-up (a look-alike of the final work) from proofs, and marking proofs for changes necessitated by the mock-up; sizing photos and art; inserting page numbers on contents pages and filling in page cross-references.

Production editing: Providing one or more of a variety of services that integrate design and content to turn an edited manuscript into a published document.

An Editor's Career Path

Some people begin their careers as proofreaders, researchers, or copy editors and still hold those jobs years later (because they're good at their work and enjoy it, or because they're trapped). Others may move from proofreader to copy editor to senior editor to acquisitions editor to publisher. Still others stop at a point at which they feel challenged and content.

Those seeking entry-level positions will find that employers usually choose candidates who have taken some initiative to gain experience. (See the "Education and Training" section of this document.)

Many editors start their careers as employees of publishers or typesetters. Some become freelancers after holding one or more in-house positions. Moving from in-house to freelance to in-house is not uncommon.

Freelance or In-House?

Most seasoned editors have had some in-house experience. Learning the steps in producing a publication, a vital part of the editor's education, is difficult if you have never been on a publication's staff. Smaller publishers tend to provide a greater range of work (but lower pay) to new employees, and some editors say it's the best training. Editors with larger publishers may not be exposed to as much variety, but they may receive more supervision and training.

For those who want more independence, freelancing can be stimulating and lucrative if the editor has talent, stamina, and a little luck. Freelance editors can work flexible hours and reap the other rewards (and fears) of being self-employed. They can often broaden their skills by finding a variety of work from an astonishing range of clients, a range that is burgeoning as desktop publishing becomes more popular.

Unless you've had some in-house experience, however, freelancing may be difficult. People who hire freelancers don't like to take risks; they want problems solved. Schedules and budgets are often tight, so you must be able to provide estimates and deliver work appropriate to the time and money available (as well as to the manuscript). These skills are not acquired overnight. Some jobs (proofreading a flyer) may take only a few hours; others (production editing a textbook) may take two or three years.

Freelancers must also know their own temperaments and expertise to the point of refusing unsuitable projects. Awareness of your editing strengths and weaknesses comes only with experience.

Rewards and Drawbacks of Editing

Editing is not a time-honoured occupation. A century ago it was almost unheard of, and even today few people know what an editor does. Fortunately, the job does have its rewards.

It offers those with a broad humanities education the opportunity to apply that background to their work. Editors are encouraged to read voraciously and think critically, whether they edit in the humanities or in more technical fields. They never stop learning.

Editors who wish to specialize in their favourite subject may do so, but those who want more variety can find it, too. Publishers produce materials that deal with an infinite variety of subjects.

The “Range of Work” section of this document outlines the variety of editorial tasks. This variety allows a wealth of talents to participate in the editorial process. As part of the publishing team, editors may also work with writers, designers, and business people. This environment can be stimulating and a good way to learn about other aspects of publishing.

The editor's work is also relatively free of supervision, after training. Publishers rely on their editors' judgements. Editors who have learned the ground rules and the “house style” are encouraged to use their own discretion in editorial matters. (“House style” is a publisher's stylistic preference in matters such as spelling, word usage, capitalization, and so on.)

But, like any other profession, editing has its downside.

Editors are painfully aware of deadlines. Publishing is a complex process; someone usually works evenings or weekends to make sure the publication gets out on time, and the editor is as likely as the typesetter or printer to put in the overtime.

Another source of stress, especially for manuscript editors, is the need for absolute accuracy. Even minor typographical, grammatical, or factual errors seem, in print, to show up in neon. Instructions that conflict with the examples given, columns of figures that yield incorrect totals, and inaccurate page references often seem invisible until the finished product arrives. Editors have nightmares about these blunders.

Some writers resent being edited; they would rather see their dentist than their editor. As a result, editors must occasionally deal with abuse, whether deserved or not. And they must learn never to reciprocate.

Although some editors may be rich, they didn't get that way by editing. Editors earn average salaries even though they have above-average educations and responsibilities. Editorial positions in book publishing generally pay at the low end of the scale; government and corporate “communications” positions may pay better.

Finally, a point hinted at in this section's first paragraph: good editing is invisible. For those who crave the limelight, editing is probably the wrong career. Senior editors may find their names on a periodical's masthead or in a book's acknowledgements, but junior editors rarely see their names in print or have their labours recognized by the public.

Despite these drawbacks, editing can be a rewarding profession. For those who love the written word and are able to think critically, editing offers a wonderful opportunity to work with language and with others who also love it.

Education and Training

Although most editors have attended university or college, there is no known correlation between academic achievement (or field of study) and editorial excellence. Some people have begun editing careers soon after leaving school; others have joined the field after working in an unrelated occupation.

Most employers value experience and reputation over other credentials, so if you're contemplating editing as a career, consider working on newsletters, magazines, or brochures for organizations in your community. Many such groups welcome volunteers. You'll have a chance to look over someone's shoulder; have someone check your work; test your aptitude, skills, and inclination; and gain experience, which is also what you'll be doing in your first years on the job.

Computers play an important part in the publishing process. Familiarity with one or more systems and word-processing programs can increase your usefulness as an editor. For corporate and technical work, expertise with computer graphics and page layouts will also yield benefits. In addition, the computer screen has itself become a new print medium, with its own editorial rules and requirements.

If you are exploring editorial training opportunities, note that most employers don't provide training per se and that only a few educational institutions and organizations do. Although courses are no substitute for experience, they can acquaint you with some aspects of an editor's work.

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