

are you

CERTIFIABLE

My certification experience

by Donna Dawson

I remember a phone call shortly after I began freelance editing from someone looking for an editor. I don't recall the project, but after I'd told the caller about some of the work I'd done, he asked, "But how do I know you're a good editor?" All I could do was give him references and tell him that clients seemed happy with my work.

That call, and others like it, including one asking if I had "a diploma or anything," got me wondering how I could demonstrate to someone unfamiliar with editing that I'm good at what I do. Then again, how do I even know I'm any good? I have always suffered from a slight case of impostor syndrome in my jobs—I worry that sooner or later, someone's going to figure out that I don't really know what I'm doing.

At the beginning of my freelance career, most of my clients were (and to a lesser extent still are) individuals who had never had their documents edited; *any* editing seemed good to them. But neither they nor I knew how my work compared with that of a "real" editor.

The question of competence is easy for publishing companies to answer: they can administer a test. But individuals or businesses with no knowledge of editing would find that more difficult. Comparing before and after samples might be useful, but that takes time and skills they may not have. If they check references, they

may not know what questions to ask. I've always thought it would be helpful if editors had some sort of qualification or designation to let people know we have the necessary skills.

So when the members of the Editors' Association voted to move forward with Certification, I was all in favour. Being certified would show potential clients—and myself—that I am a good editor. It would prove that I can meet accepted editorial standards and might encourage prospective clients to choose me over an uncertified editor, all else being equal. I also saw certification as a way to justify a rate increase, and I thought it would look pretty good on my business card and email signature (and my website, if I had one). I planned to take the tests as soon as they were offered.

Being certified would show potential clients—and myself—that I am a good editor.

In November 2006, I wrote both the Knowledge of the Publishing Process (KP) and Proofreading exams, and I'm happy to report I passed both and am now a Certified Proofreader. I wrote the Copy Editing exam in November 2007.

Studying

I knew I would have to study for the exams. I have taken about 20 EAC seminars over the past dozen years,

but that's all the formal training I have. I have never taken a college or university editing or publishing course. I was most concerned about the KP test because I have never worked in-house and have worked on very few books. I felt I knew almost nothing about publishing, even though I'd been an editor for about 11 years.

I started by familiarizing myself with EAC's *Professional Editorial Standards*. I then completed the *Meeting Editorial Standards (MES)* workbook and the practice tests in the certification study guides. The practice tests were helpful because they showed me what I needed to study more. For both the Proofreading and Copy Editing exams, I made mental lists of issues I missed most frequently and made a point of watching for them during the tests.

In addition to completing the *MES* exercises and the practice tests, to prepare for the KP exam I read the sections pertaining to the publishing process in the *Chicago Manual of Style* and the *New York Public Library Writer's Guide to Style and Usage*. Those are the only sections of the guides I read closely—I spent more time familiarizing myself with where to find information.

Studying for the exams did not take over my life. I allocated one day a week for about two months before the tests and did the reading in the evening. I was able to continue

working normally. Studying on my own made it more difficult to mark the practice tests; I recommend finding a study partner.

Test day

It had been about 20 years since I'd written an exam and I wondered whether I would be out of practice, but I had no difficulty getting down to work and remembering how to do it. My experience taking the three certification exams has been entirely positive (and I felt that way even before I knew I had passed the KP and Proofreading tests). I was able to complete all three tests in the time allowed, even though the 2006 KP test was, according to the majority who wrote it (me included), too long for the time allotted. But the tests were no worse than exams I wrote in university.

I didn't find the tests exhausting or draining; I felt upbeat and confident afterwards, though I know that wasn't the case for everyone. To be honest, I'm not sure I could take the tests seriously if most people found them to be a breeze. The atmosphere in the exam room was friendly and relaxed, but professional. I don't yet know whether I passed the Copy Editing exam, but even if I fail, I don't think my opinion of the experience

will change. The exams are not a nightmare; they are survivable.

KP was the exam I was least confident about, but I found that a fair portion of the material pertained to the production of many types of documents—it's not just about books. All editors need to know what happens to a document before and after we deal with it. We all need to know something about type, scheduling, and layout, and about some of the problems that can arise in the creation of a document.

Regardless of the outcome . . . preparing for the tests has been an excellent professional development exercise.

Not every question on every exam was 100 per cent relevant to my work, but I accept this as the nature of an exam. I found the scenarios presented in the Proofreading and Copy Editing exams to be realistic. I've certainly dealt with similar sorts of documents, situations, and problems. The time pressure, too, was not far removed from the we-need-it-by-noon-no-one-else-has-looked-at-it-just-do-what-you-can reality of some of my work.

I also accept that to be taken seriously a certification exam must be invigilated and that there must be certain rules applied to writing it: it has to be clear that there's no possibility for dishonesty. Chartered accountants write invigilated exams; why not editors?

Having now written exams in two different test administrations, I can say that in response to problems with the process identified by test-takers in 2006, the Certification Steering Committee has made concrete changes and clarifications to the test rules. And in 2007, tests were offered across the country—all the way across. So the process is being refined; further improvements could well stem from the 2007 administration.

I will be preparing for the Structural and Stylistic Editing exam next year. Regardless of the outcome of that test, and of my Copy Editing exam, preparing for the tests has been an excellent professional development exercise. Passing the KP and Proofreading tests has affirmed my skills—and I raised my proofreading rate.

My impostor syndrome is diminishing with time. 

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