



HOW DOES YOUR READER DANCE?
DO YOU NEED PROFESSIONAL PROOFREADING
AND IS IT ENOUGH?

Louise Harnby
FICTION EDITOR & PROOFREADER



Do I need proofreading and is it enough?

Fiction writers have budgets. Deciding how best to invest that editorial budget can be tricky for the novice self-publisher, especially if they're not familiar with publishing-industry conventions, reader expectations, and the editorial process.

In this booklet, I explore which levels of editing are required for the independent fiction writer preparing a novel for market – in particular whether proofreading is required and if it's enough.

The first step is to get to grips with the **different levels of editing**.



The different levels of fiction editing

Stage 1: Developmental editing (also called structural, content and substantive editing). This is the big-picture stuff – plot, pace, characterization, narrative point of view, narrative flow, and audience relevance.

Stage 2: Line editing. This is sentence-level smoothing that focuses on clarity, readability, flow, structure, and phrasing that's respectful of narrative and character voice.

Stage 3: Copy-editing. This is sentence-level correction that attends to consistent and correct spelling, punctuation and grammar, within a framework of accepted/preferred idiomatic and regional variations.

Stage 4: Proofreading. This is the final prepublication quality-control check that looks for minor omissions in the previous rounds of editing, and ensures that the various elements of the book are designed consistently and according to the brief and industry-standard conventions.



I believe it's possible to do stages 2 and 3 together but that 1 and 4 are separate passes. I know of a few editors who offer 1, 2 and 3 simultaneously.

However, I know of no editorial professional who states they can proofread at the same time as carrying out the other levels of editing and that the book will be ready for publication when they're done.

Your plot pops, but your sentences suck and your punctuation poops. If that's you, you've nailed the developmental work. So do you need a line editor, copyeditor or proofreader?

Hugh Howey is a great self-editor though even he now uses a pro to help polish his prose. In 'A question about editing' (*The Wayfarer*, 2015), he states:

'[T]he primary onus is certainly on the writer. They should have respect for what they're doing. But if I had to pick between a great storyteller who lacked precision of language and a perfect writer with no story to tell, I'd take the former every single time. We teach too much prose to writers and not enough plot. Plot is king. Prose is pawn.'



I genuinely love Howey's support for the indie fiction author's right to write. I respect the fact that he chooses 'to fall in with a slightly different step and enjoy the diversity of experience' and not get 'hung up on discrepancies of spelling and punctuation (which used to abound), but allowing the words, in all their variability, to form pictures in our heads'.

Back to the question: even though you've nailed the plot, do you need a line editor, copyeditor or proofreader? I think it's the wrong question. Instead, the self-publishing fiction writer needs to ask the following: **How does your reader dance?**

How does your reader dance – Howey or no way?

Howey acknowledges that many readers 'expect perfection. Not a hiss or pop of static or a missed note'.

If your book is flailing at sentence level and your readers are Howey dancers, you'll be okay. If they're not dancing to his tune ('No way!') – and even he thinks most aren't – you'll need to make an informed choice about what you'll get help with and what you'll do yourself.



Imagine you've written your first novel. Remember: your plot pops, but your sentences suck and your punctuation poops.

Reader 1 buys it. They do the Howey dance. And because they love it, you haven't just acquired a customer with that sale; you've acquired a fan who's bought that book and is in the mindset to buy every book you will ever write.

Reader 2 buys it. They do the no-way dance. They're frustrated because they've noticed problems – spelling, punctuation and grammar errors and inconsistencies; repetitive and awkward sentence structure; and inconsistent layout.

They loved the idea of your book and you nearly had them; they could have been a fan but now they're a grumpy customer who leaves a crabby review and ditches you. One sale and then it's crickets.



The magician proofreader

Even with your popping plot, the proofreader is tasked with an impossible job if they're presented with a file that hasn't been through stages 2 and 3 (line and copy-editing). If a paragraph needs work to make it readable, it's not quality control that's required but a deeper level of editing. **Proofreading won't fix the problems.**

If you're happy for your proofreader to do the best they can within the agreed budget and a proofreader's remit, you'll both come out of the experience satisfied. Your no-way readers still won't be happy, but if that's the way you've chosen to dance, so be it.

If, however, you want the no-ways on side, you'll need a magician proofreader – someone who can pull line and copy-editing skills out of a hat along with the rabbit.

You might get lucky. Your proofreader might well have those additional skills. But even if they have, they won't be able to complete those extra levels of editing simultaneously. Even if they could, it would take much, much longer and would cost a great deal more. Most importantly, if they were to do those three editorial passes at the same time under the rubric of proofreading, **they would NOT catch everything.** I guarantee it.



That's why the mainstream publishing industry takes its books through different stages of editing – publishers know that just a proofread will not be enough to achieve the desired quality.

Summing up

If you decide not to commission professional sentence-level editing for your novel, that's your choice. I believe you still have the absolute right to publish; there's something rather wonderful about Howey's approach of the storyteller trumping the stickler.

The important thing to remember is that **not all your readers will be Howeys.**

If you decide to tackle the sentence-level work but hire only a proofreader, be sure to go in with your eyes open and with realistic expectations of what's achievable in one pass.

Whether you choose to dance to the tune of the Howeys or the no-ways, I wish you the very best of luck on your self-publishing journey!

