

THE DIFFERENT LEVELS OF EDITING

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INTRODUCTION



Every writer needs to edit. Editing isn't a catch-all activity that can take a book from patchy to perfect in one pass. Each of the stages requires a deep and specialist focus. Ensuring you're editing at the right level is essential if you want to be efficient.

Think of the editorial process like a play with several acts: sourcing feedback from beta readers, manuscript evaluation, developmental/structural editing, line editing, copyediting, and proofreading.

Essentially, there are two levels of work going on – the macro and the micro.

- ✓ **Macro:** This is where **developmental editing** (also sometimes called content editing, substantive editing or structural editing) and manuscript evaluations (sometimes known as manuscript reviews or editorial critiques) are to be found. It's big-picture work that looks at the novel as a whole, focusing on how your book works – stuff like structure, plot, flow, point of view, characterization and pace.
- ✓ **Micro:** This is where line editing, copyediting and proofreading are to be found. It's sentence-level work that looks at the text on a line-by-line and word-by-word basis. It ensures your readers don't trip up. Standard grammar, spelling and punctuation are focal

points, but at **copyediting** and **line-editing** levels, clarity and readability are in play, too. **Proofreading** is the final prepublication check to catch any snafus that have been missed during the previous rounds of extensive professional revision.

Some writers will seek help with all the levels of editing. Others will do everything themselves. Most find a halfway house – commissioning assistance with the levels they struggle most with.

The mainstream publishing industry knows a thing or two about bringing high-quality books to market, and so it should – it's been doing it for long enough. Publishers take their books through multiple rounds of editing. The writer who seeks to mimic that process is the writer who's least likely to garner negative reviews, and the most likely to build fans. That's key because fans won't just buy this book; they'll buy the next book, and the one after that, and the one after that.

Some editors offer all the levels of editing. Others specialize in specific services. A professional editor – whatever their focus – should be able to advise an author on the different levels of editing and the order of play.

STAGE 1: BETA READING



Authors send drafts of their novel to test-readers in order to receive feedback on structural issues such as plot, pacing, characterization, writing style and reader engagement. This is not the place for uncovering micro problems with spelling and grammar.

Beta reading may be free (via, say, a writing group or a critique partner) but some professional editors provide paid-for services (sometimes called early reviews) that provide guidance on the next-best editing steps.

It's a good first step for those who want someone else to take their novel out for a test-drive before deeper levels of intensive editing begin.

STAGE 2: DEVELOPMENTAL EDITING



Developmental, structural, or story editing is the *shaping* stage where decisions that affect how the novel works as a whole are made – plot, story arc, structure, pacing, characterization, genre, narrative viewpoint and tense.

Good fiction writing tells a story. When the reader has finished the journey, they should feel satisfied by the experience of reading your work. They'll have been taught what they sought to learn. They'll understand a character's motivations, who or what was blocking them, and how those obstacles were resolved. They'll know why X, Y, or Z happened, who was responsible, and why.

The journey might be bumpy. There are peaks and troughs – action, contemplation, and deduction, all of which are structured and paced so as to engage the reader as the story unfolds.

Someone is telling that story. An external narrator perhaps, or one or more of the characters. The narrative point(s) of view deepen the reader's engagement when handled with care and clarity. The characters have personalities, histories, voices, and their own space and place in the novel.

Developmental editing is where your story is tested and revised so that readers want to turn the page.

Alternative: Manuscript evaluations/critiques

Critiques can be thought of as mini developmental edits. A professional editor provides a report that analyses the strengths and weaknesses of the writing, and what the author can do to improve their book. Unlike full developmental edits, no changes are made to the book file.

They're an affordable first step for any author who wants to learn how to implement their own structural revisions.

Additional: Sensitivity/diversity reading

This is a niche form of evaluation in which a specialist reports on the potential misrepresentation and devaluation of marginalized others. Readers are looking out for cliched, harmful, biased or false content and non-inclusive language.

Sensitivity readers focus on how others' identities are represented in terms of race, sexuality, gender, physical ability, mental/emotional health, political beliefs, religion, age, culture and socioeconomic status. Others identify potential problems with how those who've experienced abuse, trauma, violence, bigotry, illness, bereavement and poverty are portrayed.

They're a valuable addition to the editorial process for authors who want to positively diversify the voices in their fiction but don't have the lived experience of the individuals/groups they're writing about. Identifying goals and selecting a sensitivity reader with the appropriate experience is essential.

STAGE 3: LINE EDITING



Line editing is the *smoothing* stage where sense is checked and flow mastered such that the reader is driven to stay on the page and immerse themselves in the story's world.

Good writing acknowledges that readers absorb words in a certain way – in the West we read from left to right and top to bottom, regardless of the device through which the book is delivered.

Though our brains allow us to take in more than one letter and one word at a time, unless we're scanning we move through sentences from start to finish. Those sentences should say what they need to say, and only that. Too many words, or repetition of what's already known, can make the reading experience boring and frustrating.

Authors can play with sentence length and language style to reflect the historical period, genre, and the mood of a given scene. And punctuation is not about pedantry. It's a powerful pacer that can evoke tension and impart clarity.

If a strong story compels readers to turn the page, line editing is what helps them want to stay on it.

Alternative: Mini line-level critiques

These are mini line-and copyedits. Again, no changes are made to the book file. Instead, a professional editor

provides a report that analyses the strengths and weaknesses of sentence-level craft.

Using examples from the book file, the editor will suggest recasts to dialogue and narrative with a view to improving line-level flow, pace, drama and readability. They'll also offer advice on layout, spelling, punctuation and grammar conventions.

They're an affordable first step for any author who wants to learn how to implement their own sentence-level revisions.

STAGE 4: COPYEDITING



Copyediting is the *correcting* stage where inconsistent or incorrect spelling, grammar, and punctuation are attended to, and where logic is checked, such that the reader is allowed to follow the story without distraction.

Compelling writing makes readers forget that they're reading. It's devoid of that which would trip them up and pull them out of the story. Copyediting removes those distractions.

Style sheets are the author's and editor's friend. They record decisions on the language choice (e.g. American or British English), style (e.g. -is- or -iz- spellings, both of which are standard in British English), proper-noun spelling, character traits, location identifiers, the book's timeline, use of idiom, dialogue treatment, how numbers are rendered, how capitalization and hyphenation are handled, and a hundred other decisions.

Many professional editors carry out line- and copyediting simultaneously because they're complementary processes.

STAGE 5: PROOFREADING



Proofreading is the *quality-control* stage where any final literal errors and layout problems are flagged up such that the book is fit for publication.

Since human beings are doing the editing work, it's rare for a book to get to the prepublication stage without a few snafus remaining.

During the previous rounds of editing, new errors might have been introduced by accident. The design process can cause problems too. Some elements of the book (a heading, a paragraph, a footnote) might be formatted inconsistently and incorrectly ... think about indents, line spaces, end-of-line wordbreaks, page-number chronology, running heads and alignment just for starters.

Proofreading is the final line of defence.

THE ORDER OF PLAY



There's a logical order of play when it comes to editing. Think of it like building a house.

- ✓ Developmental editing is like laying the foundations and building the structure
- ✓ Line editing and copyediting are like plastering the brickwork, painting the walls, and sanding the floorboards
- ✓ Proofreading is where you move in the furniture and fill in any tiny cracks that have appeared

Swap the order around and you'll end up in a pickle. At best you'll waste time; at worst you'll waste money.

Let's imagine you invest in smoothing your prose and eradicating most of the spelling, grammar, punctuation, and consistency problems (line editing and copyediting). Then you discover a gaping plot hole that requires you to move two chapters, rewrite three, and make 75 sentence-level tweaks throughout the rest of the book (structural amendments).

Every move, every deletion, every rewrite, and every tweak brings with it the chance of damaging the line/copyediting work. That's time and money down the drain.

SUMMING UP



Damp won't do; soak yourself in the different stages of editing, and do them in separate passes. Let's return to our building analogy. Think about how difficult it would be to build a wall and plaster it at the same time. It's the same for editing.

The author or editor who's working on the big-picture elements of the novel will not be fully focused on the story if they're also worrying about the flow of each sentence and the placement of each comma.

When we're working at sentence level, we're immersed in the prose line by line, word by word. When we're working at story level, we're immersed in the journey, chapter by chapter, scene by scene.

Immersion is deep mental involvement. If you try to do too much at the same time, each of the editing stages will be shallow.

Don't forget that story-level shaping work always comes first. Only then should you follow up with the smoothing and correcting that line- and copyediting provide. Finish off with quality-control work on the proofs that attends to any remaining errors and layout problems.

WHERE TO FIND EDITORIAL SUPPORT



If you'd like to have a conversation with me about sentence-level editing (line editing, copyediting and proofreading), you can find me at: harnby.co/fiction-editing. Or take a look at the following:

- ✓ Alliance of Independent Authors (ALLi)
- ✓ Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading (CIEP)
- ✓ Facebook: Beta Readers & Critiques
- ✓ Facebook: Beta Readers and Critique Partners
- ✓ Facebook: Professional Beta Readers
- ✓ Google Search
- ✓ National editorial societies
- ✓ Social media
- ✓ Writing-group recommendations