

Proofreading for publishers. Do they always pay 'low' fees?

LOUISE HARNBY

In *Freelance Income: Recurring or One-Off?*, Jeannette de Beauvoir discusses the pros and cons of regular vs. one-off clients. She states:

'In general, publishers don't pay particularly well. And working with individual authors can be fantastically fun: nurturing the writer, working with them to bring a great project to publication.'

I agree that working with individual authors is brilliant – they're my primary client group these days – but I question the assumption about publisher pay.

Online discussions among editorial folk often allude to the issue of 'poor' pay when it comes to publisher clients. And while there are some presses who, for various reasons beyond the scope of this article, offer rates that some freelancers consider to be unsustainable, it's not always the case.

I'm a professional proofreader and copyeditor and I've explored several markets in my freelance career. I have extensive experience of working with regular publisher clients and I've worked with businesses, independent academics, students and self-publishing authors, mostly (though not exclusively) on a one-off basis. I've enjoyed pretty much all of the projects I've worked on, but the jury is still out on who pays 'well' and who doesn't.

I'm going to take a look at how working with a regular publisher client contrasts with working for a new non-publisher client. I've chosen to use publishers precisely because they're a group that are often cited as being 'low' payers.

I consider two problems:

-
1. How 'well-paying' is defined
 2. How fee expectations can vary even within, as well as between, client types
-

Proofreading for publishers. Do they always pay 'low' fees?

LOUISE HARNBY

Then I look at the booking phase of proofreading work, and consider how the situation can vary between a regular publisher client and a new non-publisher client, and what this means in terms of creeping costs.

Finally, I consider the additional costs that can creep into the actual editorial stage of a booked-in proofreading project, and the phase after completion – again comparing regular publisher clients and new non-publisher clients.

This isn't to say that any of the scenarios considered here will always occur with each client type on each job. Rather, I aim to show that

(a) extra costs are less likely to creep in with the regular publisher client

(b) this needs to be accounted for when considering which types of client are 'well-paying'.

What's a 'good' rate of pay?

This is the first problem that arises when we make statements about how lucrative particular clients groups are, and it can confuse the new entrant to the field.

Some national editorial societies offer guidance on *suggested minimum rates* (see, e.g., the [Editor's Association of Canada](#), the [Editorial Freelancers Association](#) [United States], and the [Society for Editors and Proofreaders](#) [United Kingdom]). Note, though, that while many new entrants to the field will aspire to these rates, for others they may not be high enough.

Rich Adin, An American Editor, advises using these guidelines as 'a place to begin but not to stop' ([Business of Editing: What to Charge \(Part I\)](#)).

Proofreading for publishers. Do they always pay 'low' fees?

LOUISE HARNBY

I agree with Adin's advice. This is because there are 3 rates we need to be aware of:

-
- What we *need* to earn in order to meet our financial needs – the REQUIRED rate
 - What we *want* to earn in order to fulfill our aspirations – the DESIRED rate
 - What the *client will pay* for a particular job – the MARKET rate
-

In reality, though, there is no precise number that makes pay rate 'good' or 'bad'. What we can do is to construct our own definitions of acceptable and unacceptable rates around our individual business requirements. Thus:

-
- Market rate is equal to or higher than our required rate = good
 - Market rate is equal to or higher than our desired rate = great
 - Market rate is lower than our required rate = poor
-

Consider the following (the figures are for demonstration purposes only):

1. A client offers me a £20ph (the market rate) for a proofreading job. This is lower than my desired rate (£30ph) but higher than my required rate (£17ph). My professional society suggests a guideline rate of £24ph.
2. A client offers me £32ph for a proofreading job. My required rate is £17ph and my desired rate is £30ph, so the market rate exceeds both my required and desired rates. I then find out that a colleague will accept no less than £35ph for any proofreading job. Again, my professional society suggests a guideline hourly rate of £24ph.
3. A client offers me £13ph. This is below my required and desired hourly rates. Again, my professional society suggests a guideline hourly rate of £24ph.

In the above situations, which rates are good, and which are poor? Looking at the above three examples, you'll have your own opinions about what's acceptable.

Proofreading for publishers. Do they always pay 'low' fees?

LOUISE HARNBY

-
- In example 1, £20ph exceeds my needs. For me, it's a good rate. Yes, it's below the figure suggested by my professional society, but it doesn't have to meet the needs of the professional society, because the professional society doesn't pay for my rent, food, and bills. Rather, it has to meet *my* requirements. If your required rate is £25ph, it won't meet your needs so it will be a poor rate.
-

-
- In example 2, £32ph exceeds my required and desired hourly rate, so it's a great rate. It also exceeds my professional society's guidelines, though that has no bearing on my financial situation. My colleague still thinks it's too low. Perhaps that's because she needs to earn £35ph. But her needs are just that – hers. What she needs to earn has no bearing on my financial situation. It's a poor rate for her but it's still a great rate for me.
-

-
- In example 3, the market rate of £13ph is lower than my required rate. I therefore consider the rate to be poor. This isn't because a colleague or a society thinks it's too low, but because it doesn't meet my required rate of £17ph. If I wish, I can still choose to accept the job, if a broader analysis of my accounts tells me that my overall business earnings will compensate for the shortfall.
-

So, if you're a new entrant to the field and you hear someone say, 'Publishers don't pay particularly well,' or 'Businesses offer great rates,' bear in mind that your colleague's experiences may not be the same as yours because the yardstick by which she's measuring rates of pay is different from yours.

What she needs to earn will probably be different than what you need to earn, and what's 'good' for you might well be 'poor' for her. Define 'well-paying' clients first and foremost according to *your* needs, not those of others.

Proofreading for publishers. Do they always pay 'low' fees?

LOUISE HARNBY

Comparing publishers with other client types

Another problem that arises when considering how lucrative publisher clients are is that of comparison. Are we comparing their rates with students, self-publishing authors, academics, multinational corporations, charities?

Even clients from within a particular customer group will have different budgets and expectations (not every academic will be prepared to pay the same fee per word/page/hour for proofreading; not every publisher will offer the same rate for copyediting a 300-page sociology manuscript).

You may well find that 'bad,' 'good,' and 'good enough' rates of pay (as defined by your own needs and wants) can be found both within and between customer groups.

The rates that I earn from proofreading for publishers vary a great deal. I record detailed data for every job I take. This allows me to make some comparisons between clients, and more broadly between client groups.

In my own experience, the income I can earn from *some* publishers is what I consider to be a 'good' or 'great' rate of pay. This isn't just because the fees offered for the jobs are flat-out higher than what's being offered by other clients; it's not just because I've been able to introduce more productive ways of working; it's also because there are, in my experience, fewer creeping costs.

Creeping costs

One financial issue that has often snuck up and tapped me on the shoulder when working with non-publisher clients is that of creeping costs.

I'm not going to pretend it's never happened with publisher clients, but I've found it to be less likely. This is because publishers understand what I do, and I've trained to proofread in a way that enables me to offer them a solution to their problems.

Proofreading for publishers. Do they always pay 'low' fees?

LOUISE HARNBY

This isn't always the case with a non-publisher client.

Some non-publisher clients do, of course, have extensive experience of working with editorial professionals, so the process is well understood, but for many the decision to hire a copyeditor or proofreader will be new:

-
- it's the first time the independent author has self-published
 - the first time a marketing agency has hired a copyeditor to work on its promotional material
 - the first time a business executive has hired a proofreader to check its reports.
-

First-time clients might need a level of support that publishers don't.

Support and clear communication take time – and inexperienced editorial folk can fall into the trap of not building the cost of this time into their quotations.

Creeping costs during the booking phase

When a regular publisher client hires me to proofread for them, the communication goes something like this:

Dear Louise,

Are you free to carry out a hard-copy proofread of the following book: Author/title? The job is as follows:

300 pages; 100,000 words

PDF proofs delivered: xxx (hard copy will arrive two days later)

Proofs to be returned: xxx

Please let me know whether you're able to take on this project.

There's no need for the publisher and I to have a discussion about what 'proofreading' entails; there's no need for me to assess the manuscript prior to proofreading; there's no need for us to agree on how I will annotate the manuscript;

Proofreading for publishers. Do they always pay 'low' fees?

LOUISE HARNBY

the payment structures are already set up and proven to work; and my client isn't asking for a free sample proofread before I get cracking on the job.

We have a mutual set of expectations about how the process will work. It will take me no more than 5 minutes to read the project manager's request, check my schedule, and reply accordingly with a Yes or a No.

The only thing that might extend the conversation is if I want to ask whether there's any flexibility on the deadline, owing to my busy schedule. I can't send the publisher an invoice for those 5 minutes, but we are only talking about 5 minutes.

This contrasts quite sharply with an enquiry from a non-publisher client with whom I've never worked. It's not uncommon for me to receive requests to quote for proofreading jobs without having any idea of what kind of state the writing is in (and thus whether it's ready for proofreading), what format it will be in (paper, PDF, Word), what the required time frame is, what the writer's budget is, what other stages of editing the manuscript has been through, or whether the client knows how to work with Track Changes or other digital mark-up tools.

It's right and proper that the freelancer and the client do have an in-depth discussion about these issues so that both parties are in agreement about the overall terms and conditions of the project. But this is rarely a discussion that will take 5 minutes.

Additionally, a client who's not previously used a freelancer's services might request a free sample proofread so that he or she can assess the supplier's proficiency (for a good discussion of why *free* sampling isn't acceptable to every editorial professional, take a look at Jamie Chavez's [No More Missus Nice Gal](#)), just as the freelancer should request a sample of the manuscript in order to confirm that her skill set matches the customer's requirements.

Proofreading for publishers. Do they always pay 'low' fees?

LOUISE HARNBY

Such negotiations can be lengthy and may even result in the customer needing to find an alternative supplier. All of which is right and proper.

It's therefore essential to consider the bigger picture when considering the degree to which a particular client or client group 'pays well'. Even in the booking phase, there are costs to acquiring business, and these have to be accounted for. Time is money.

Creeping costs during the editorial stage

Here's a fictitious, but likely scenario. Let's put to one side any costs incurred to firm up the job at booking stage.

Regular publisher client, PC, offers me the opportunity to proofread a 61,000-word fiction book for £18 per hour. The client estimates that the job will take 15 hours.

Total fee: £270.

Also in my inbox is a request from a self-publishing author, SP, with whom I've not worked before. It's also a 61,000-word fiction book. I assess the sample of the manuscript that's been provided (it's in good shape and has been professionally edited). I estimate the job will take 15 hours, and quote a fee of £450, which is accepted.

The job for SP looks much more lucrative on paper than the job for PC. I accept both jobs because even though the job from PC will bring in a lower fee, it's still within my own particular required hourly rate.

I do the PC job first. I've worked for this publisher for years. We have a mutually understood set of expectations about what is required. The manuscript has been thoroughly copyedited and professionally typeset. As usual, I receive a clear brief and a basic style sheet. It's a straightforward job that takes me 15 hours (the in-house project manager is experienced enough that he can estimate with accuracy

Proofreading for publishers. Do they always pay 'low' fees?

LOUISE HARNBY

how long a job should take). I complete the work and return the proofs along with my invoice. End of job.

Next I tackle the SP book. It is in good shape and I should be able to complete the proofread in the time I estimated. However, I've underestimated the amount of hand-holding required. This client is a lovely person, but she's a first-time author and she's nervous. She sends me 12 emails during the course of the project, each of which takes time to read, consider, and respond to.

I keep track of the time I spend on these – I put in an extra 3 hours that I'd not budgeted for when I quoted for her. It's also an additional 3 hours of my time, sometimes out of office hours, that I have to find in order to respond – time that I'd rather spend doing other things.

The quoted fee was £450, based on 15 hours of work. This has turned into 18 hours of work. My hourly rate has gone from an expected £30 (cf. £18 from the publisher) to £25. It's still above my required hourly rate and higher than the publisher fee, but the job has not turned out to be as lucrative as I'd expected, and there's been some impact on my leisure time.

I should have quoted a higher fee that took account of the fact that she was an unknown entity to me and that the job might take longer.

Again, it's essential to consider the bigger picture when assessing the degree to which a particular client or client group 'pays well'. With some clients, it's harder to predict how a project will progress.

And with non-publisher clients, especially those with whom there's no preexisting relationship, it's essential to build hand-holding time into the assessment of how long a job will take, and then quote accordingly so that you're less likely to get caught out.

Proofreading for publishers. Do they always pay 'low' fees?

LOUISE HARNBY

Creeping costs after completion of the project

I've been proofreading for publishers since 2005 and in that time the post-project correspondence has tended to go something like this:

Me: Thanks for the opportunity to proofread X for you – I really enjoyed it. Please find attached my invoice and my Notes & Queries sheet. Delivery of the proofs is scheduled for Y. If there's anything else I can help you with, please let me know.

PM: Cheers, Louise. Glad you enjoyed it! Are you free to proofread ...?

That's the general gist of our post-project discussion – it's friendly but concise. We're already talking about forthcoming work. This recent job is closed. My PM's schedule is as tight as mine and we're both keen to move on.

This isn't always the case when we proofread directly for non-publisher clients. The following snippets of post-project emails from clients are fictitious but I've encountered the like many a time. Do they strike a chord with you?

-
- I've just been looking over the files one more time and I'm thinking about changing X ... What do you think? Would that work?
 - Sorry to bother you. I changed the following sentences a bit. Could you just quickly look over them? There are only 25 – no rush. Just when you have a minute. Thanks so much!
 - Do you have any marketing advice you can give me for when the book's published? I know you're a proofreader but wondered if you had any ideas about how I can go about this. It's a whole new world to me!
 - What did you think of the book? Please give me your honest opinion – even if it's negative. Forewarned is forearmed, as they say!
 - Would you mind giving me your opinion of the cover? You did such a great job with the text and I'd really appreciate knowing what you think!
 - I'd really like to approach some agents, now that the book's in good shape. Do you have any recommendations or advice about how to go about this?
-

Proofreading for publishers. Do they always pay 'low' fees?

LOUISE HARNBY

It's not unusual for these post-project discussions to take place. What is less usual is that editorial professionals manage them appropriately. Too often, they become unbillable costs that detract from the project fee.

There's absolutely nothing wrong with a client asking these things and it's not that the editorial business owner shouldn't have these conversations. I actually really enjoy helping indie authors with these types of queries. They do incur a cost, though.

If you regularly build post-project handholding time into your original quotation, all well and good. But if you don't and you're prone to offering free, additional support to your clients, take a step back and ask yourself how much this is impacting on the value of each project, and your required and desired rates.

If you spend an additional two hours emailing back and forth about these extras, that time needs to be set off against the invoiced fee; those hours need to be tracked so that you can work out exactly what the final value of the project is to you.

Controlling creeping costs

Here are some thoughts on how to keep control of creeping costs in editorial work:

-
- Where possible, build a safety net into your quotations for clients. This will help to ensure that hand-holding and other types of support are billed for.
 - At the start of negotiations, make it clear what levels of support, both during and after the work is complete, are available as part of the agreed price, and what will incur additional costs.
 - If you think that you are the type of person who is likely to go beyond your own brief and allow additional costs to creep into your project work, and you're happy for that to be the case, then that's your choice and it's fine. But do be honest with yourself in your accounting process. Only by tracking the time we *actually* spend on a project can we accurately assess which client types are the 'best' payers according to our own required and desired rates.

Proofreading for publishers. Do they always pay 'low' fees?

LOUISE HARNBY

- Create some value-added content that you can refer clients to when they have questions that are beyond the scope of the job. I created a range of resources to help less-experienced authors on their journey and reduce the amount of time I spend on unbillable work.
-

By being aware of ALL of the time we spend on a project with our clients, we can develop insights into the financial health of our business. This enables us to make decisions about who we want to work with and what their actual value is to us.

Summary: 5 things to remember

- The fees we can earn will vary – between clients, and between client groups more broadly.
 - What one person considers 'poor' pay will be acceptable to another, and vice versa. This is because each individual editorial business owner's financial requirements are personal.
 - It is not true that, in general, publishers don't pay well. Rather, some publishers offer fees that exceed my required and desired fees; some offers exceed only my required fees; and some offers meet neither.
 - Nor is it true that, in general, non-publisher clients are always more lucrative. They might be or they might not be. It will depend on the particular client, the project being undertaken, how well the estimation of the project's demands stacks up against the reality, and how much control one keeps over the additional costs that could creep into the work.
 - Keep a close eye on *all* the time that goes into a project. By doing this, you can make realistic assessments of what works for you, rather than what works for your friends and colleagues.
-