

A dreamlike illustration of a library with a sky window. The shelves are filled with books, and a bright, cloudy sky with birds is visible through a large opening at the top of the library. The overall color palette is warm and golden, with a soft, ethereal glow.

# HOW TO GET FICTION EDITING WORK

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# HOW TO GET FICTION EDITING AND PROOFREADING WORK

How do you get fiction editing and proofreading work?

This booklet offers some pointers for newbie freelancers, and experienced editors looking to shift specialisms.

Note that my suggestions for training courses and reading are for starters only. There are other options you can consider depending on where you live, what your professional society offers, and what genres(s) and types of editing you wish to specialize in.

Good luck with your fiction editing journey!



# 1. Start with baseline training

To be fit for working in any editing discipline, fiction or otherwise, training is the foundation. Even if you've been devouring your favourite genres for years, you need to understand publishing-industry standards.

This isn't about snobbery. It's about serving the client honestly and well, especially the self-publisher, who might not have enough mainstream publishing knowledge to assess whether you're capable of amending in a way that respects industry conventions.

It's about the reader too. Readers are canny, and often wedded to particular genres. They're used to browsing in bookshops and binging on their favourite authors. They have their own standards and expectations. One of our jobs as

editorial professionals is to ensure we have the skills to push the book forward, make it the best it can be, so that it's ready for those readers and meets their expectations.

And so if you want to proofread or edit for fiction publishers and independent authors, high-quality editorial training isn't a luxury: it's the baseline.

What kind of training you need will depend on what services you plan to offer.



## Courses

I recommend the Publishing Training Centre and the Society for Editors and Proofreaders for foundational copyediting and proofreading training.

I'm based in the UK, and those are the two training suppliers I have experience of so I'm in a position to recommend them.

That doesn't mean that other suppliers aren't worth exploring. Rather, I don't recommend what I haven't tested. Keep an open mind.

Check a range of suppliers and their course curricula. Then choose what suits your needs.

If you want more information about how the PTC and SfEP courses compare, talk to the organizations' training directors.

- **Basic Proofreading: Editorial Skills One** (Publishing Training Centre. Despite the word 'Basic', this is a comprehensive, flagship, industry-recognized course)
- **Essential Copy-Editing: Editorial Skills Two** (Publishing Training Centre)
- **Proofreading 1-4** (Society for Editors and Proofreaders)
- **Copy-editing 1-4** (Society for Editors and Proofreaders)
- See also this list of professional **editorial societies**; they'll be able to advise you if you live outside the UK.

## 2. Decide which fiction editing services you want to offer

Some beginner self-publishers don't understand the differences between the different levels of editing, which means they might ask for something that's not in their best interests (e.g. a quick proofread even though the book hasn't been critiqued, structurally edited, line- and copyedited).

It's essential that the professional fiction editor is able to communicate which levels of editing they provide, and recommend what's appropriate for the author.

That doesn't mean the author will take the advice, but the editor must be able to articulate her recommendations so that independent authors can make informed decisions.

### 1. SHAPING

This is the big-picture work that focuses on stuff like structure, plot, pace, narrative point of view and characterization. Terminology varies but look out for the following: **developmental editing**, **content editing**, **substantive editing**, **story editing** or **structural editing**.

### 2. SMOOTHING

This is sentence-level work that focuses on flow, form, readability and engagement. You might hear it called **line editing** or **stylistic editing**.

### 3. CORRECTING

This is sentence-level work that focuses on correct and consistent spelling, grammar, punctuation and layout. It might include fact-checking, too. It's usually referred to as **copyediting**.

### 4. VERIFYING

This is the quality-control stage that picks up anything missed beforehand. This is where **proofreading** comes into play. If working on designed page proofs, the proofreader will also be checking that the layout matches the brief.

### 3. Invest in appropriate specialist fiction training

The next step is to gain skills and confidence with fiction editing and proofreading work. As with any type of editing, the kinds of things the editor will be amending, querying and checking will depend on whether the work is structural, sentence-based or pre-publication quality control.

When deciding what specialist fiction editing courses to invest in, bear in mind the following:

- Even if you have experience of developmental editing non-fiction, this skill will unlikely transition smoothly to story-level fiction editing without specialist training.
- Even if you're an experienced sentence-level fiction editor, this skill will not make you fit to offer structural editing or critiquing without specialist training.

#### Ideas for courses and reading

Explore the following to assess whether they will fill the gaps in your knowledge. Check the curricula carefully to ensure that the modules focus on the types of fiction editing you wish to offer and provide you with the depth required to push you forward.

- **Introduction to Fiction Editing** (Society for Editors and Proofreaders; course)
- **Developmental Editing: Fiction Theory** (Sophie Playle, Liminal Pages; course)
- **Developmental Editing: In Practice** (Sophie Playle, Liminal Pages; course)
- **Editing Fiction** (Publishing Training Centre; introductory e-learning module)
- **Introduction to Developmental Editing** (Author-Editor Clinic; course)
- ***Write to be Published*** (Nicola Morgan; book)
- ***The Magic of Fiction*** (Beth Hill; book)

## 4. Get in the right mindset

Fiction editing requires a particular mindset for several reasons:

### **Style and voice**

We're not only respecting the author, but the POV character(s) too. The fiction editor who doesn't respect the voices in a novel is at risk of butchery. Being able to immerse oneself in the world the writer's built is essential so that we can get under the skin of the writing. If we don't feel it, we can't edit it elegantly and sensitively.

### **Intimacy**

Non-fiction is born from the author's knowledge. Fiction is born from the author's heart and soul. If that sounds a little cheesy, I'll not apologize. Many of the writers with whom I work are anxious about working with an editor because they've put their own life, love and fear into the world they've built.

A good fiction editor needs to respect the intimacy of being trusted with a novel. If that doesn't sound like your bag, this probably isn't for you.

### **Unreliable rules**

At the recent fiction roundtable hosted by the Norfolk group of the Society for Editors and Proofreaders, guest Sian Evans – an experienced playwright and screenwriter – talked about how punctuation in screenplays is as much about 'the breaths' the actor is being directed to take as about sentence clarity.

These 'breaths' exist in prose. They help the reader make sense of a sentence ... not just grammatically, but emotionally. And so the addition or removal of just one comma for the sake of pedantry can make a sentence 'correct', or standard, but shift tone and tension dramatically.

The fiction editor needs to be able to move beyond prescriptivism and read the scene for its emotionality, so that the author's intention is intact but the reader can move fluidly through the world on the page and relish it.

All of which is a rather long-winded way of saying that if you want to get fiction editing work, and keep on getting it, you'll need to embrace rule-breaking with artistry!

Fiction work requires us to respect both readability and style. The two can sometimes clash so gentle diplomacy and a kind hand will need to be in your toolbox.



## 5. Read fiction

If you don't love reading fiction, don't edit it. And if you don't love reading a particular genre, don't edit it.

Editing the type of fiction you love to read is a joy, and an advantage. If you read a lot of romance fiction, you'll already be aware of some of the narrative conventions that readers expect and enjoy.

I started reading crime fiction, mysteries and thrillers before I'd hit my teens. I turned 51 in March and my passion for those genres hasn't waned. That stuff makes up over eighty per cent of my work schedule too. Here's the thing though – my pleasure-reading has supported my business.

I get to see first-hand how different authors handle plot, how they build and release tension, how they play with punctuation, idiomatic phrasing, and sentence length such that the reader experiences emotion, immediacy and immersion. And that helps me edit responsively.

Honestly, reading fiction is training for editing fiction. In itself, it's not enough. But professional training isn't enough either. Love it and learn it.



## 7. Learn from writers

If you want to understand the problems facing the self-publishing author community, listen and learn.

Join the **Alliance of Independent Authors**. Even lurking in the forum will give you important insights into what self-publishers struggle with and how you might help.

Take advantage of online workshops aimed at beginner writers. Penguin Random House offers regular free online webinars via **The Writers' Academy**. Experienced writers and instructors take you on whistle-stop tours of setting, dialogue, characterization, point of view, crime-fiction writing, children's books, and a whole lot more.

Listen to published novelists' stories. My local Waterstones hosts regular author readings/signings. I've seen Garth Nix, Jonathan

Pinnock and Alison Moore speak. In April 2018, Harry Brett is chairing a session on how to write crime with Julia Heaberlin and Sophie Hannah.

In May, fellow editor Sophie Playle and I are attending 'Why Writing Matters', an event hosted by the **Writers' Centre Norwich** in association with the Norwich & Norfolk Festival. And Jeffery Deaver's coming to town in the same month!

The tickets for these events range from free to £12. That's a tiny investment for any fiction editor wanting to better themselves.



## 7. Get in front of publishers

The best way to get publisher eyes on your editing skills is to go direct. Experienced fiction editors are sometimes contacted direct but sitting around waiting to be offered work never got the independent business owner very far and never will.

### **Experienced ... but not in fiction**

If you're an experienced editor or proofreader who already has publisher clients but they're in a different discipline (e.g. social sciences, humanities) you'll likely have built some strong relationships with in-house editors.

Publishing is a small world – in-house staff move presses and meet each other at publishing events. It might well be that one of your contacts knows someone who works in fiction and, more importantly, will be happy to vouch for your skills.

With specialist fiction training, you'll be able to leverage that referral to the max.

So, if you have a good relationship with an in-house academic editor, tell them you'd like to explore fiction editing and ask them if they'd be prepared to share a name and email and give you a recommendation.

## **Newbie**

If you're a new entrant to the field, it's unlikely that a cold call to HarperCollins or Penguin will be fruitful.

The larger presses tend to hire experienced editors with a track record of hitting the ground running.

There are two options.

1. Target **smaller, independent fiction presses**. Ask if they'd consider adding you to their freelance list. Be clear about the training you've done and your genre preferences. The fees might not be great, but I recommend you look at this as a paying marketing and business-development opportunity. You'll be able to leverage the experience, the testimonials and the portfolio entries later.
2. If the small press responds by saying that they aren't in a position to hire external editorial work, ask if you might do a **one-off gratis proofread/edit** for them as a way of gaining experience and supporting their independent publishing programme – mutual business backscratching. Again, you can leverage this experience when targeting paying fiction clients (publishers and indie authors).

## 8. Be visible online

There's no excuse for any twenty-first-century professional editor to be invisible. There's no one way to visibility – take a multipronged approach.

### Directories

If you're a member of a national editorial society, and they have a directory, advertise in it as a specialist fiction editor/proofreader.

If you're not a member, become one. It won't be free, but running a business has costs attached to it. If we want to succeed, we need to be seen. That doesn't land on our plates; we must invest.

If your society doesn't have an online directory, lobby for one to be set up and promoted. I'd go

as far as to argue that a professional editorial society that isn't prioritizing the visibility of its members isn't doing its job properly.

- **The Society for Editors and Proofreaders** IS doing its job properly. I rank highly in Google for certain keyword phrases, but it's not always my website that shows up – sometimes it's my SfEP directory entry. It thrills me to know that my membership sub is providing me with networking, friendship, training opps, and visibility in the search engines.

If you don't qualify for inclusion, make doing what's necessary a key goal in your business plan.

- **Reedsy** – despite what you might have heard – does NOT set low rates that encourage a ‘race to the bottom’. Editorial professionals set their own rates and Reedsy takes a cut of the fee.

I receive several requests a month to quote for fiction copyediting or proofreading via Reedsy and have worked with some wonderful authors. Entry in Reedsy’s database is free but you must have a certain level of experience to be invited.

Again, if you don’t qualify for inclusion, make doing what’s necessary a key goal in your business plan.

## **Create content for indie fiction authors**

Any self-publishing fiction writer looking for editorial assistance is more likely to think you’re

wowser if you help them before they’ve asked for it.

Create resources that offer your potential clients value and you’ll stand out. It makes your website about them rather than you. And it demonstrates your knowledge and experience.

Doing this might require you to do a lot of research, but what a great way to learn!

Don’t think of it as cutting into your personal time but as professional development that makes you a better editor.

And think about it like this: Who would you rather buy shoes from? The shop where the sales assistant tells you all about her, or the shop where the sales assistant helps you find shoes that fit? It's no different for authors choosing editors.

I have an entire **Self-publishers** page dedicated to resources for fiction authors. I'm not alone. These fiction editors have resource hubs too: **Beth Hill**, **Sophie Playle**, **Lisa Poisso**, **Kia Thomas** and **Katherine Trail**. There are others but I'm already over the 2,000-word mark!

## Shout out your fiction specialism

Shout your fiction specialism from your website's rooftop. Why would a fiction writer hire someone who doesn't specialize in fiction when there are so many people dedicated to it?



## Related reading

- **The different levels of editing:  
Proofreading and beyond**
- **How do mainstream publishers  
produce books?**
- **What makes a good fiction editor?**
- **Should a writer hire a freelance editor  
before submitting to an agent?**
- **What's a sample edit? Who does it  
help? And is it free?**

# ABOUT LOUISE

Louise Harnby is a professional fiction proofreader and copyeditor. She specializes in helping independent authors prepare their novels for market. Louise worked in-house for two international publishers for 13 years before setting up her editorial business. She has also published several books on the business of editing and proofreading. You can find out more about her at [www.louiseharnbyproofreader.com](http://www.louiseharnbyproofreader.com)

