



HOW TO STAND  
OUT BY BEING  
A SPECIALIST

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# The generalist–specialist dichotomy and the editorial freelancer

Is it better to be a specialist or a generalist? This question often arises in editorial freelancing circles. Actually, answering it isn't straightforward because it depends on how one defines those terms.

One of my colleagues considers herself a specialist. Let's call her Anna. She's an editor who works solely with independent fiction authors, particularly in the field of speculative fiction. She doesn't proofread. She doesn't work for publishers, businesses, students, charities, project management companies, marketing communications agencies, or schools.

Another, Jamie, is a proofreader who works with publishers, independent authors, businesses, project management companies, and students. His focus is on the social sciences, commercial nonfiction, and fiction.

Anna could be forgiven for thinking that Jamie is a generalist because when you compare Anna's range of clients (and the type of material she works on) with Jamie's range of clients (and the types of material he works on), they're worlds apart.

However, I still think Jamie is a specialist because he doesn't provide developmental editing or copy-editing services, and he doesn't work on, for example, STEM (science, technology,

engineering, and medicine) material. When Jamie promotes himself to potential clients, he presents himself as a specialist.

## It's not about us

In fact, it doesn't matter whether Anna, you, or I think Jamie is a specialist or a generalist. All that matters is that potential clients who are searching for someone to solve their editorial problems can find Jamie and recognize his ability to help them.

The question Jamie therefore needs to ask himself is: 'What does the client want to know?'

Imagine the following scenario. Gandalf is looking for someone to proofread an article he's submitting to the *Journal of Ethical Wizardry*.

His paper compares ten different countries' legal instruments for controlling spell-making and spell-casting. It's already been peer-reviewed by some other eminent wizards. Now he needs to get it checked to ensure that the grammar, spelling, punctuation, and consistency are in order.

The references also need checking to ensure that they comply with *The Sorcerer's Bluebook*, which is the definitive international style guide for magico-legal citation.

He searches an online directory for proofreaders and takes a look at the first three profiles in the list. Whom will he pick?

- The proofreader who tells him they ‘proofread anything’?
- The proofreader who tells him they have a politics degree and specialize in working with academics, publishers, project management agencies, and students working in the social sciences, with a particular focus on economics, politics, philosophy, international relations, development studies, and **magic**?
- The proofreader and editor whose website tells him they are a **former practising lawyer** who now specializes in working with academics, publishers, project management agencies, and students working in the social sciences, with a particular focus on economics, politics, philosophy, international relations, **law and criminology**, **development studies**, and **magic**?

Let’s assume that all three of the above proofreaders are experienced, well qualified, and members of national industry-recognized editorial associations.

If I were Gandalf, my first choice would be the third person in the list because they have specialist legal experience (though I would also bookmark the entry for the second person as a fallback).

It doesn’t matter that they offer two different types of editorial service, or that they work on many different subjects, or that their client base is wide ranging.

Sure, some might consider them a generalist. However, even if you do consider them to be a generalist, the fact is this – they’re more likely to spot a citation that isn’t formatted in the

style recommended by *The Sorcerer's Bluebook*, and Gandalf knows this.

## Clear communication

When we market ourselves as generalists, we run the risk of saying nothing. When we market ourselves as specialists – even if those specialisms are many and cover a wide range of subjects/genres – we can say a lot.

Saying you do ‘everything’ or ‘anything’ is problematic for several reasons.

## It's not believable

Specializing is about being believable. If you don't inspire trust in a potential client at the first point of contact, you're unlikely to be hired by anyone with even a grain of an idea in their head about what their chosen proofreader or editor might look like.

Think about it – who really can proofread anything? I'm comfortable tackling a lot of subjects, but veterinary medicine isn't one of them. Nor is electrical engineering. Nor is cardiopulmonary medicine.

And if you're an editor who does feel comfortable working in any of those fields, how do you feel about tackling the third draft of a self-publisher's YA fiction thriller that needs a substantive edit?

I suspect that editorial professionals who can truly proofread or edit absolutely anything are few and far between.

## SEO fail

Specializing is about being discoverable. If you don't take the time to tell your potential clients what you specialize in, whether it's one subject or twenty, your website will be less about SEO (search engine optimization) and more about SEI (search engine invisibility).

When the search engines crawl over your website looking for keywords by which to rank you, they won't find much and they'll move on. Does that matter? After all, you proofread anything.

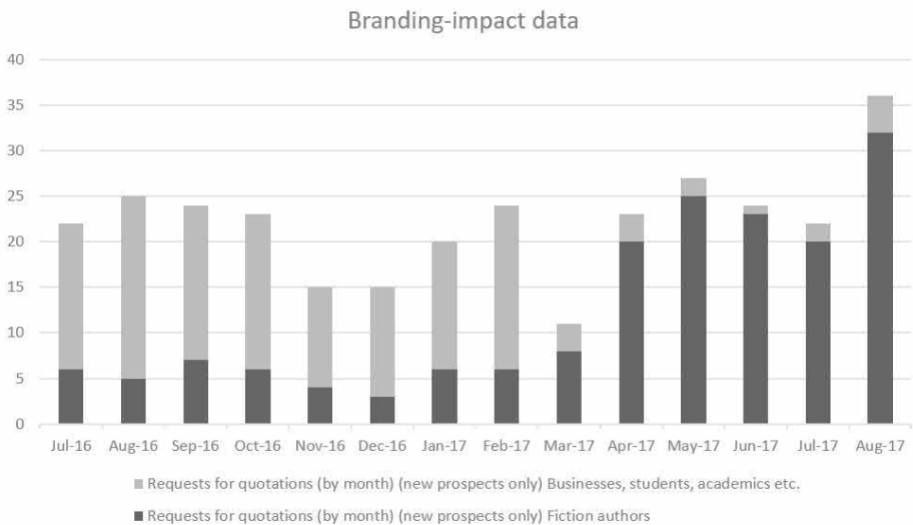
That's fine if your clients are searching for someone who edits 'anything.' In reality, many clients are more specific.

Looking at my Google Analytics data from several years ago, I can see that keyword searches include 'academic editing', 'fiction proofreader', 'dissertation proofreading services', 'proofreading thesis Norwich', 'student proofreading', 'novel proofreading', 'PhD proofreading UK', 'medical proofreader England', 'academic copy editor', 'medical proofreading', 'scientific paper editing', 'CV proofreading', 'legal proofreading', 'self-publisher proof-reading', 'proof read my thriller', and 'proofread journal paper politics'.

Given that at the time I provided services that matched many of those keyword searches, I wanted Google to know that and rank me accordingly.

In April 2017, I made the decision to specialize further. Now I work exclusively for self-publishing crime, mystery and thriller writers. And I say so.

By ensuring that my branding clearly reflected this specialism, I've been able to create a shift in the types of clients who, having found me, choose to get in touch.



## Customer disengagement

Specializing is about being interesting. Saying you do 'anything' is far less interesting than saying you do 'X, Y, and Z'. When we tell a client about our specialist areas, we are demonstrating competence, experience, and knowledge.

Imagine that Jamie sends a letter to a scientific publisher. He's one of five proofreaders who, that week, have contacted the

book production manager with a request to be added to the publisher's bank of proofreaders.

In their cover letters, two of those colleagues have explained that they are *specialists in academic proofreading*; the other two have stated that they *specialize in working with scientific academic material*. In his cover letter, Jamie tells the production manager that he's a generalist and will proofread anything.

Who makes the deepest impression on the production manager? I suspect that Jamie's bottom of the pile in terms of client engagement. He's not presented himself in a way that shows he's interested in what the press publishes. Nor has he presented himself in a way that shows he's interesting.

Whether you work on one subject, with one type of client type, on one type of file, or on numerous subjects with several different client types, and in multiple media, present your narrow focus or your breadth of service in a way that **marks you as a specialist and shows that your shoes fit**.

## The new starter

I always recommend specialization before diversification to new starters. Especially at the beginning of your career, thinking like a specialist helps you to plan your client-building strategy in a targeted manner and focus your marketing efforts on the type of clients who are most likely to give you valuable first gigs that enable you to build your portfolio and gather testimonials.



For example, if you have a degree in electrical engineering, and you identify yourself as a specialist technical copyeditor, you're more likely to be successful in securing your first paying job if you contact publishers with technical and engineering lists.

Engineering students are more likely to be interested in asking you to check their Master's dissertations and doctoral theses.

Engineering businesses are more likely to ask you to edit their annual reports. Your specialist knowledge will count for a great deal, even though your editorial portfolio will be scant.

When I entered the field of editorial freelancing, I deliberately targeted social science presses because of my politics degree and previous career with an academic publisher, marketing social science journals.

I was able to present myself as a specialist proofreader who understood the language of the social sciences. Those factors made me interesting to those presses and gave them confidence in my ability to work with the subject matter.

That doesn't mean you can't expand your specialist areas, or that you have to decline work that comes your way if it falls outside them (as long as you are comfortable with what you are being asked to do).

Even at the start of my own career, specializing made it much easier to get my foot in the door and build my business.

And these days, even though I've been in business for over a decade, specialization ensures I speak directly to my core clients.

## Marketing that focuses on your business preferences

Some of us choose to specialize in very narrow terms. Some of us choose breadth. One isn't 'better' than the other. Rather, it's a business decision.

If you prefer to offer a range of services to a range of clients over a range of media, and you can do this in a way that makes your business profitable, then breadth is better for you. If, on the other hand, you prefer to focus on one or two services to one client type over one medium, and you can do this in a way that makes your business profitable, then a narrow focus is 'better' for you.

Effective marketing will be key to whichever path you choose. If your preferred clients can't find you, it matters little whether your client focus is narrow or broad – if you're not discoverable, you'll be unemployed either way.

## Summing up

When it comes to marketing communications, there's no such thing as a generalist. Rather, there are two types of specialist:

- the specialist-specialist
- the generalist-specialist!

Either way, both are specialists and *talk* like specialists.

Even if you are, for all intents and purposes, quite the generalist – that is, you'll edit and/or proofread a wide range of subjects for a wide range of clients – market yourself as a specialist.

Specialists are **standout**, not **standard**. And in a market where you're competing globally and online with thousands of colleagues, being distinctive has never been more important.

You can present yourself as a specialist in a variety of ways:

- **Relevant training** (e.g. as a proofreader), related career experience (e.g. you used to be a social worker), and educational qualifications in pertinent a subject (e.g. you have a degree in public policy and administration)
- **Industry-specific knowledge:** You might be familiar with particular citation systems (e.g. OSCOLA for legal works), style guides (e.g. The Chicago Manual of Style or New Hart's Rules), markup language (e.g. the British Standards Institute's BS:5261C)
- **Subject matter** (e.g. sciences, social sciences, medicine, fiction)
- **Client base** (e.g. students, businesses, publishers, independent authors, academics)
- **Editorial service** (e.g. proofreading, copyediting, indexing, consultancy)
- **Clear statements of interest:** For example, 'Fiction editing and proofreading for crime, mystery, suspense and thriller writers (Louise Harnby | Fiction editor & proofreader,

England); 'We are a group of highly skilled and experienced editors who specialize in editing nonfiction' (Freelance Editorial Services, USA); 'I specialise in fiction editing, especially for independent/self-publishing writers' (Averill Buchanan | Editor & Publishing Consultant, Ireland); 'I offer specialist legal editing services for publishers, law firms, businesses, academics, and students' (Janet MacMillan | Wordsmith | Editor | Proofreader | Researcher, Canada).

Being a specialist is certainly about the choices you make as an editorial business owner in terms of the kind of work you to do.

However, it's just as much about communicating with potential clients in a way that **differentiates** you and demonstrates **enthusiasm, knowledge, skills** and **experience** – even if you are a bit of a generalist!

## Other resources you might like

- [Branding resource library](#)
- [Marketing resource library](#)
- Editorial business skills: [multimedia courses](#)
- Editorial business skills: [books](#)

## About the author

Louise Harnby is a stylistic line editor, copyeditor and proofreader who specializes in working with crime, mystery, suspense and thriller writers.

She is an Advanced Professional Member of the Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading (CIEP), a member of ACES, a Partner Member of The Alliance of Independent Authors (ALLi), and co-hosts The Editing Podcast.

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