

# THE DIFFERENT LEVELS OF EDITING

A GUIDE FOR SELF-PUBLISHERS

*Louise Hamby*  
PROOFREADER & COPYEDITOR

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.

In this booklet, we'll look cover the following:

**Outcomes:** Why editing is worth the bother

**Outcome 1:** The reader is compelled to turn the page

**Outcome 2:** The reader is compelled to stay on the page

**Outcome 3:** The reader isn't distracted

**Outcome 4:** The book is fit for publication

**Editing:** The order of play

**Damp won't do:** Soak yourself in the different stages of editing

# OUTCOMES: WHY EDITING IS WORTH THE BOTHER



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...you get the picture.

One way of deciding what level of editing you need is to think in terms of outcome. What do you want to achieve?



# OUTCOME 1: THE READER IS COMPELLED TO TURN THE PAGE



Good writing – fiction and non-fiction – tells a story of one kind or another. When the reader has finished the journey, they should feel satisfied by the experience of reading your work. If they're satisfied they'll have turned each page (or clicked if they're e-reading).

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, structural, or story editing is the shaping stage** where these plot, character, narration, and pacing decisions are made such that the reader is driven to turn the page and complete their experience.

# OUTCOME 2: THE READER IS COMPELLED TO STAY ON THE PAGE



Good writing acknowledges how readers absorb words. We read in a certain way – in the West 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.

**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.

# OUTCOME 3: THE READER ISN'T DISTRACTED



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.

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 capitalisation and hyphenation are handled, and a hundred other decisions.

**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.



# OUTCOME 4: 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.

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



# EDITING: 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.

Carry out the various stages of editing in the logical order of play:

# DAMP WON'T DO: SOAK YOURSELF IN THE DIFFERENT STAGES OF EDITING



To be effective, the different stages of editing need to be carried out 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. Try to do too much at the same time and each of the editing stages will be shallow. Editing involves soaking ourselves in the job in hand so that the desired outcomes are achieved. Damp won't do!



**Louise Harnby** is a line editor, copyeditor and proofreader who specializes in working with independent authors of commercial fiction, particularly crime, thriller and mystery writers.

She is an Advanced Professional Member of the Society for Editors and Proofreaders (SfEP), a member of ACES, a Partner Member of The Alliance of Independent Authors (ALLi), and an Associate Member of the Crime Writers' Association (CWA).

**[www.louiseharnbyproofreader.com](http://www.louiseharnbyproofreader.com)**