

# BECOMING A FICTION EDITOR

BUSINESS SKILLS FOR EDITORS: FREE GUIDE

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# Preparing for a fiction editing career

This chapter addresses the shift in mindset that might be necessary when it comes to switching from non-fiction to fiction editing.

## Style and voice

Fiction editors must respect not only the author's voice, but also that of the viewpoint character(s). When we don't, we risk butchering a novel.

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 for whom we edit 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 fiction roundtable hosted by the East Norfolk group of the Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading (CIEP), 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 we want to get fiction editing work, and keep on getting it, we 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 need to be in our toolbox.

## **Read fiction**

If we don’t love reading fiction, we shouldn’t edit it. And if we don’t love reading a particular genre, we shouldn’t edit it. Editing the type of fiction we love to read is a joy, and an advantage. If we read a lot of romance fiction, we’ll already be aware of some of the narrative conventions that readers expect and enjoy.

For example, I started reading crime fiction, mysteries and thrillers before I’d hit my teens. I’m in my fifties as I write, and my passion for those genres hasn’t waned. That stuff is now all I do. Here’s the thing though – my pleasure-reading has supported my business.

I get to see firsthand 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.

## **Learn from writers**

If we want to understand the problems facing the self-publishing author community, we need to listen and learn. The Alliance of Independent Authors is one option. Even lurking in the forum gives us important insights into what self-publishers struggle with, and how we might help.

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

We can listen to published novelists' stories. For example, prior to COVID-19, my local Waterstones hosted regular author readings/signings, including Garth Nix, Jonathan Pinnock and Alison Moore speaking about their writing process. In April 2018, Harry Brett chaired a session on how to write crime with Julia Heaberlin and Sophie Hannah. In May the same year, fellow editor Sophie Playle and I attended 'Why Writing Matters', an event hosted by the National Centre for Writing in association with the Norwich & Norfolk Festival. Tom Shakespeare and Jeffery Deaver were guest speakers. These workshops cost from zero to £12. That's a tiny investment for any fiction editor wanting to better themselves.

At the time of writing, many regional writing festivals around the world have gone online, including Bloody Scotland and Noirwich. These events are as educational as they are entertaining, and they're often free or low cost to attend.

And, finally, YouTube is our friend when it comes to author interviews. Stephen King's there talking about emotional characterization, Iain Rankin and Michael Connelly are in conversation courtesy of Bloody Scotland, and Diana Gabaldon's chatting about writing historical drama. Those are just a few examples among thousands.

### **Summing up**

Reading fiction and watching YouTube both count when it comes to training for editing fiction. In themselves, they're not enough. But professional training isn't enough either. Love it and learn it!

# Types of fiction editing

This chapter discusses the different types of fiction editing, all of which require a different skill set.

## The two primary categories

Fiction editing falls into two primary categories: story-level and sentence-level work. Within each, there are subspecialisms. Some editors offer the lot; others focus on one or several.

- **Story level:** Beta reading; developmental editing, manuscript evaluations; sensitivity reading
- **Sentence level:** Line editing; line critiques; copyediting; proofreading

## Story level

### *Beta reading*

Authors send drafts of their novel to test-readers for 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.

## ***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.

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 the story is tested and revised so that readers want to turn the page.

## ***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.

## ***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.

## **Sentence level**

### *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.

### *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.

### *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.

### ***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.

### **Summing up**

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.

# What do you need to know?

Here are some of the core topics fiction editors pay attention to. Make sure the course you choose fills the right knowledge gaps.

## Story-level editing

- Plot and subplot analysis
- Story structure and pacing
- Author style and character voice
- World building, setting and perspective
- Effective dialogue
- Character arc: Goals, motivations and conflict
- Narration style
- Point of view
- Narrative arc: Beginnings, middles and ends
- Genre and length considerations

## Sentence-level editing

- Authenticity of phrasing and word choice in relation to character voice
- Character-trait consistency
- Cliché and awkward metaphor
- Dialogue and thought expression: style, tagging and punctuation
- Effectiveness of sentence-level narration
- How to use tenses
- Layout conventions

- Point of view
- Narration style
- Pace and flow: special attention to repetition and overwriting
- Told versus shown prose

## **Summing up**

There is some developmental and line-level overlap in the fiction editor's knowledge base. That's because even if bigger-picture issues like point-of-view drops should have been fixed before line work begins, a sentence-level editor needs to be able to spot when they haven't, flag up the problems, and suggest solutions to their author.

# Fiction editing training

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

## **Start with baseline training**

To be fit for working in any editing discipline, fiction or otherwise, training is the foundation. Even if we've been devouring our favourite genres for years, we 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 we'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 bingeing 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 we 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 we need will depend on what services we plan to offer.

## ***Baseline training courses***

I recommend reviewing a range of providers and their course curricula. Then choose what suits your needs. Here are just a few examples to give you an idea of what's available.

- **UK: Essential Proofreading: Editorial Skills One (Publishing Training Centre)**
- **Australia: IPEd accreditation scheme**
- **Canada: Professional Certification**
- **Canada: Queen's University Editing Courses**
- **UK: Copy-editing 1–4 (CIEP)**
- **UK: Essential Copy-Editing: Editorial Skills Two (Publishing Training Centre)**
- **UK: Proofreading 1–4 (CIEP)**
- **US: Advanced Editing Certificate Program**
- **US: Poynter ACES Certificate in Editing**
- **US: University of California, Berkeley, Professional Sequence in Editing**

Refer also to this **list of professional editorial societies** for their training recommendations.

If you need more information, talk to the organizations' training directors.

For readers in the UK, I recommend the Publishing Training Centre and the CIEP for foundational copyediting and proofreading training because they're the two training providers I have experience of learning with. That doesn't mean that other suppliers aren't worth exploring; it's rather that I can't recommend what I haven't tested. Keep an open mind!

## **Invest in 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 prepublication quality control.

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

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

### ***Fiction training***

Explore the resources below (they're in alphabetical order) to assess whether they'll 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.

- **Copyediting Fiction** (EFA; course)
- **Developmental Editing of Fiction** (EFA; course)
- **Developmental Editing: Fiction Theory** (Liminal Pages; course)
- **Developmental Editing: In Practice** (Liminal Pages; course)
- ***Editing Fiction at Sentence Level*** (Louise Harnby; book)

- **Editing Fiction** (Publishing Training Centre; introductory e-learning module)
- **How to Write the Perfect Fiction Editorial Report** (Louise Harnby; course)
- **Introduction to Developmental Editing** (Author–Editor Clinic; course)
- **Introduction to Fiction Editing** (CIEP; course)
- **Switching to Fiction** (Louise Harnby; course: webinar and *Editing Fiction at Sentence Level*)
- **Tea and Commas** (Liminal Pages; course)
- *The Magic of Fiction* (Beth Hill; book)
- **Transform Your Fiction** (Louise Harnby; guides)
- *Write to be Published* (Nicola Morgan; book)

## Summing up

The list of training providers I’ve offered here isn’t definitive, but it’ll set you on the right track. Many indie authors won’t know enough about these providers to assess the value of your training. That doesn’t matter; training is as much for us as our clients. It shows us our strengths, which gives us confidence, and highlights our weaknesses, which means we can improve.

# Working with indie authors

Even if we have extensive experience of working for publishers, there are skills and knowledge we might need to acquire before making the shift.

## **Publishing has its own language**

Fiction copyediting means something specific in a publishing company. It's usually (there are always exceptions to the rule) the corrective work that focuses on spelling, punctuation, grammar, consistency and logic. It's important work – meticulous and detailed. It stops a character giving birth two months before she got pregnant; it spots when your protagonist's eyes have changed colour; it flags up the trigger safety that doesn't exist on the model of gun being described.

In the wider world, 'copyediting' can mean all sorts of things. It will include all the above but might include a deeper level of stylistic work. Some editors will use different terminology to describe their services, such that this middle-level editing – further down the chain than developmental or structural work but higher up than the prepublication proofread – is more intense. Some editors even include developmental/structural work in their 'copyediting' service because their target clients fall into one or both of the following categories:

- They aren't familiar with all the levels of editing.
- They are more likely to search for terms such as 'copyediting' and 'proofreading' even though the big-picture elements of their story might also need some work.

## **The mismatch between language and need**

Some editors work only for publishers. Some work only for indie authors. Some work for both. That messy publishing language becomes problematic when everyone's using one term – 'copyediting' – to mean different things. And if an editor has copyedited fiction only for publishers, but moves into the indie-author market, there's a risk that their knowledge and skills match the needs and expectations of mainstream publishers, but *not* those of indie authors.

Many indie authors are self-publishing for the first time. They'll expect a professional editor to know what they don't. But a fiction copyeditor, just by virtue of having done something called 'fiction copyediting' as defined by publishers, might not know how to handle the stylistic issues in a book. That doesn't mean they're a bad editor. It means they have a specific skill set that might not be what the indie author needs or asks for.

## **Case study: Good editor; bad fit**

### ***The author***

Jo Pennedanovel is navigating the independent publishing world for the first time. She's never gone it alone so she's working from scratch – writing, finding editorial support and a cover designer, building a promotion strategy, and learning about sales and distribution platforms.

### ***The brief***

Jo knows that more than a proofread is required, but she's happy with the big-picture aspects of her novel. She needs something in the middle: 'copyediting', she's heard it called. So that's what she looks for. Jo goes online and searches for a copyeditor, finds someone who has over a decade's worth

of experience of copyediting fiction for some of the big-name publishing houses. If that editor's good enough for them, they're good enough for Jo! Jo hires the copyeditor for her book.

### *The outcome*

Jo's a professional and takes her writing seriously. She knows there will be outstanding glitches that were missed at copyediting stage, so she hires another editor to proofread her book. All well and good so far.

The editor fixes the outstanding proofreading glitches but notices the following:

- There are over 300 viewpoint drops – most are small but still glaring to him because, well, he's studied line craft.
- The prose is sometimes laboured and repetitive – not because Jo's a poor writer but because she's immersed in the storytelling rather than the minutiae.
- A plethora of speech tags tell of mood that's already been adequately conveyed in the excellent dialogue.

### *The fix*

The proofreader could ignore all the line-craft issues. After all, he's not been commissioned to do this work and it will cut into his hourly rate. And anyway, shouldn't the previous editor have fixed this stuff? Still, he's committed to editorial excellence, wants a cracking book in his portfolio, and would like to work with that author again, so he decides that ignoring these problems isn't an option.

He could do one of the following:

- Flag up the issues in a report but elect not to solve each individual problem.
- Go the whole hog, offer suggested recasts so Jo can fix the problems easily, and write off the extra time as a marketing expense. Maybe he can persuade Jo to hire him for the copyediting stage next time.
- Halt the proofread, go back to Jo, explain the problem and try to renegotiate the project brief.

I've done all three in my time. My choice was based on the author, my schedule, and the connection I felt with the project. There's no wrong or right, just informed decision-making.

### **What might go wrong in the editing process**

So what went awry in that case study? This problem arises because of flawed assumptions about language and responsibility.

#### ***Language***

The author and the editor are using the same language to describe different outcomes.

- The author thinks of 'copyediting' as a middle-ground service between developmental/structural editing and proofreading.
- The editor, who works mainly for publishers, considers 'copyediting' a non-stylistic type of work that comes after line editing.

What Jo needed was an editor who recognizes that 'copyediting' could mean something different in the author's head – something like: *Do what's required to make my prose sing! I don't know what those things are, but that's why I'm*

*hiring you.* What she got was a traditional high-quality copyedit as defined by a different client type. It's work that she needed, but not all the work she needed.

## **Responsibility**

A frequent fallback position on the editor's part is this: it's the author's fault because they didn't hire the right service. Jo shouldn't have commissioned a copyedit when stylistic work was required. That's flawed. She hired a professional editor precisely because they're a professional editor. She wanted them to show her what she didn't know.

The situation is complicated further by the fact that editors define their services differently. I offer 'line-/copyediting'. Some of my colleagues offer the same level of intervention but call it just 'copyediting'. Others offer two distinct services: 'line editing' and 'copyediting'. Yet others don't even call line editing 'line editing'. It might be called 'substantive editing' or 'stylistic editing'.

It is any wonder that an indie author chooses to ignore the tangled terminology and focus on collating a shortlist of editors who have extensive experience of working for traditional industry gatekeepers – publishers? That works splendidly when the editors have the skills and knowledge to go beyond what a publisher might expect from a fiction copyedit. But it can fall off a cliff when the rigidity of the terminology restricts the depth of editing required.

## **How can editors help fix the problem?**

Editors must take responsibility for the language they use and the skills they have so that they're fit for a diverse indie-author market. That means learning and educating.

### *Learn line craft*

Fiction editors serving indie authors should learn line craft – the stylistic sentence-level editing that might be required. If we don't understand the likes of show and tell, narrative viewpoint, tense, holding suspense, dialogue craft, and so on, we should question whether we're ready for this market. And if we do still want to serve this market with publisher-defined copyediting, we must be explicit about the fact that we don't offer solutions to stylistic problems in prose.

Still, being able to say we don't offer those solutions means understanding what they are in the first place. Not recognizing them is not an option.

### *Educate authors*

We must go the extra mile to ensure that our online and direct communications with authors explain the different levels of editing and how we define them. A website that boasts of our achievements but doesn't show our understanding of the craft of fiction editing doesn't help a beginner author make informed decisions. It serves only us, not them. That can lead to disappointment on the author's part. And disappointment leads to mistrust, not just with the editor who did the work but with the global editorial community in general.

Editors frequently report that editing is 'undervalued' and 'underpaid'. But value and worth have to be earned. So does trust. When an editor works with an indie author but doesn't have the skills to offer what's required, or is ignorant of the fact that they don't have those skills, it's they – not the author – who is bringing down value and worth in the editing industry.

## Summing up

What publishers expect from a fiction copyeditor is often very different to what indie authors will want or need. If you're an editor who wants to offer sentence-level work for indie authors, think about the following:

- The language you use to describe your service.
- The indie author's expectations.

Even if you have an extensive fiction copyediting background by virtue of having worked for a ton of mainstream publishers, there might still be a mismatch between what's required or what's asked for and your own definitions and experience.

Be prepared to learn, and to show what you've learned when you communicate with indie authors. That's how we build trust, value and worth.

# Working with publishers

This chapter offers some tips on getting fiction editing work with publishers.

## **How get publishers' attention**

The best way to get publishers' eyes on your editing skills is to go direct. Experienced fiction editors are sometimes contacted by in-house editors, but waiting to be offered work never got the independent business owner very far, and never will.

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

Experienced editors and proofreaders who already have publisher clients but from a different discipline (e.g. social sciences, humanities) will 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 our contacts knows someone who works in fiction and, more importantly, will be happy to vouch for our skills. With specialist fiction training, we can leverage that referral to the max.

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**

A cold call to HarperCollins or Penguin is unlikely to be fruitful for the new entrant to the field. The larger presses tend to hire experienced editors with a track record of hitting the ground running. Instead, target smaller, independent fiction presses.

Ask them 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.

If they respond 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 (other publishers and indie authors).

## **Summing up**

Publisher work isn't always the most highly paid when it comes to fiction, but publishers understand what editors do and have their hands raised. They also do all our client-acquisition work for us, which is a plus point for those who are fearful of marketing. They're a core client group for any editor, fiction or otherwise, and worth focusing on.

# Being a visible fiction editor

This chapter offers some guidance on standing out as a fiction editor worth their salt, one who's invested in the discipline. After all, there's no reason for any twenty-first-century professional editor to be invisible! Still, there's no one way to being found so 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 CIEP*

This organization is doing its job properly. For example, I rank high in Google for certain keyword phrases, but it's not always *my* web pages that shows up – sometimes it's my CIEP directory entry. It thrills me to know that my membership sub is providing me with networking, friendship, training opportunities, *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, Reedsy 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 no longer advertise there because the authors tend to want a quicker turnaround than I can offer, but when I was a member I received several requests a month to quote for fiction copyediting or proofreading, and I’ve worked with some wonderful authors.

Entry in Reedsy’s database is free (because they take a cut of the fee from both editor and author) but you must have a certain level of experience to be invited. If you don’t qualify for inclusion, make doing what’s necessary a key goal in your business plan. If you think you qualify, but have been rejected, contact Reedsy. They’re amenable to conversation!

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

Any self-publishing fiction writer looking for editorial assistance is more likely to think we’re wowser if we help them before they’ve asked us to. 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.

If you’re still unsure, think about it like this: Who would you rather buy shoes from? The store where the sales assistant tells you all about her feet, or the store where the sales assistant helps you find shoes that fit *your* feet properly? It’s no different for authors choosing editors.

For example, I've created an Author Resources page dedicated to helping fiction authors. The aim is to show rather than tell my engagement with providing solutions to their problems. Do the same and in time you'll be able to pick and choose whom you work with and what you charge. It's a slow burn and requires commitment, but it's a strategy that works.

### **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?

We don't hire plumbers to do our electrics, or orthopaedic surgeons to do our dental work. Approach your business the same way your approach the wiring in your and the teeth in your mouth!

### **Summing up**

Business promotion is vital regardless of which kind of editing you specialize in. Make time for the work you want to do, and for the work *to get* the work you want to do.

# Is fiction editing right for you?

This chapter helps you evaluate whether you're a good fit for fiction.

## Why fiction editing is a different kind of artistry

Have you ever tried something for the first time and found it difficult? Did someone review your initial effort? Did they outline problems before celebrating your achievement? If so, how did you feel? Most of us have encountered this scenario at some time or other, and it feels just awful. A review of anything that focuses only on the negatives – however kindly those negatives are offered – is a poor review.

It matters not whether we're an editor, a business executive, a marketer, or a parent; if we can't find a single good thing to celebrate in the work in front of our nose, then we've not done the job properly.

When editing fiction, the ability to celebrate first is critical – more so possibly than with non-fiction. Note that by non-fiction I'm referring to academic, technical and journalistic works, not narrative non-fiction (sometimes called creative or literary non-fiction) such as memoir or biography, where the editing challenges are similar to the fiction specialist's.

In a nutshell, editing criminology requires a different touch to editing crime fiction.

## It's personal

Every writer's book is their baby, and most writers will infuse their tomes with their own experiences. But when those

experiences concern matters of love, grief, sex or despair, the process of writing – and of being edited – takes on a whole new level of intimacy.

Many authors have told me they felt physically sick at the thought of contacting an editor, never mind emailing me the file. Many feel vulnerable, exposed, embarrassed. And why wouldn't they? Imagine handing over thousands of pounds to a stranger to look at an image of you and suggest how to make it better – not just any image, mind. You're naked in this one. For many, that's what it feels like to be edited.

And so the fiction editor is charged with a responsibility. And it's huge.

### **Best versus best fit**

Put 10 fiction editors in a room and ask them to work on the same 2,000 words, and you'll likely come back with 10 very different samples. That's because fiction editing is subjective. It's not that the rules of grammar, spelling and punctuation don't apply. It's not even that they apply less rigidly. It's rather that they apply differently.

Furthermore, just a single change to a punctuation mark can affect tension, pace, mood. One of my regular authors has a mantra: 'Keep it lean and mean.' He's a crime writer. It's high-octane stuff. Low on adverbs. Low on conjunctions. Short, choppy sentences. The protagonist looks over his shoulder a lot. And if the punctuation is sympathetic, the reader looks with him.

Compare this with a love story – a woman's search for her exiled family. The tale is one of heartbreak, abandonment, reconciliation and redemption. The author's style is more

fluid, prosaic. The protagonist isn't looking over her shoulder but searching her soul. Every change needs to reflect this.

How each of us goes about reflecting our authors' intentions won't necessarily be the same. It's not that one of us is better at editing than the other. Rather, it's how we interpret those intentions – and seek to mimic them – that's different.

We're not talking about who's the best, but who's the best fit. That's something the author must decide, and it's tricky. How does a writer search for best fit on Google, or in an editorial directory, or on social media? How do they find that elusive emotional responsiveness to their writing? One way is the sample edit.

### **Gauging emotional responsiveness – the sample edit**

Fiction editors don't have a monopoly on sample edits, but there is an added dimension here in which samples really come into their own. Physically working on a piece of text helps every editor get a sense of the writing style, where the problems are and whether they're capable of solving them, how long the job will take and how it should be priced.

For the fiction editor, however, there's something else in play – the feel of it. It's our first opportunity to find out whether we can get under the skin of the author. And if we can't, it might mean walking away. If we can't respond emotionally to the author's intentions – feel our way through the words and into the characters and the world they inhabit – the edit could be impaired. We can't mimic an author seamlessly if we're unmoved by what we're reading.

There's a lot of talk about authorial voice in the editing world. In fiction editing, the concept can be a tad limiting. If I write

a book about the business of editorial freelancing, it'll be written in my voice. The editor has only to worry about retaining the *me*-ness in the text. If I write a speculative fiction novel, the editor will have to consider who the narrator is too. And there will be additional voices – those of the protagonist, the antagonist, a host of supporting characters. None of those voices will be identical.

A sample edit has its limitations, of course, by virtue of size. But it gives the author and the editor a glimpse of whether that emotional responsiveness is present and how it'll be managed on the page such that the fit feels right. Ultimately, fiction editing is as much about the heart as the head.

## **The mindful rules of fiction editing**

Once the author and editor have found each other, the mindful rules of fiction editing will come into play ... during the edit, and in the post-edit summary or report.

- Every query or note should be offered as if talking to someone you care about – firmly, clearly, kindly, and with respect.
- Word's comments function should be used to tell the author what moved you as well as what needs attending to.
- Every report should follow this structure: celebration > problem + solution > celebration.
- Every problem should have a solution attached to it if at all possible.
- Edit with elegance and mimic like a chameleon.
- Be an advocate for the author's right to write, whatever stage of the journey they're on.

- The author should leave the editing studio feeling empowered to move forward, not reaching for a mop because their self-confidence has leaked all over the floor.

## Summing up

Fiction editing isn't for everyone. If you're keen to specialize in this kind of work, ask yourself where you lie on the empathy scale. Many specialist fiction editors I know describe themselves as being a little on the oversensitive side. Terms such as *introspective* or *contemplative* are never far away. I cry at some advertisements, so it's no surprise to me that I ended up in this line of work! This emotionality can serve the fiction editor well, but it's not something that can be learned on a training course.

That's not to say that specialist fiction editorial training isn't worth doing – far from it. But mindfulness is your friend, too – don't be afraid to embrace it in your editorial practice!

## **A selection of free fiction editing resources**

- **Blog post: 3 reasons to use free indirect speech**
- **Blog post: Commas, conjunctions and rhythm**
- **Blog post: Coordinating conjunctions**
- **Blog post: Fiction grammar: Is it okay to start a sentence with ‘And’ or ‘But’?**
- **Blog post: Fiction grammar: Is it okay to start a sentence with ‘And’ or ‘But’?**
- **Blog post: How to write suspenseful chapter endings**
- **Blog post: Rules versus preferences**
- **Blog post: Sentence length, pace and tension**
- **Editor resources library: Booklets, videos, podcasts and articles for authors**
- **The Editing Podcast: Sensitivity reading: Tips from editor Crystal Shelley**
- **The Editing Podcast: Zombie rules we can do without, part 1**