

TRANSCRIPT

The Editing Podcast, Season 1, Episode 1 What are the different levels of editing?

Louise Harnby: Hello! And welcome to our inaugural episode.

Denise Cowle: So because this is our very first episode, we thought we'd start at the very beginning ...

LH: It's a very good place to start!

DC: You're not going to go all Julie Andrews on me, are you, Louise?

LH: Erm, no?

DC: Good! So, yes, we thought we'd begin with the baselines and talk about the different levels of editing. Because there is more than one!

LH: That's right, and whether you're an indie author who's going to be self-publishing or you have a contract with a publisher, your book's going to go through various stages of ... let's call it constructive interference.

DC: Constructive interference! I like that!

And, actually, that applies whether you're doing the work yourself, or a professional editor's on the case. Because the fact is, every piece of writing needs editing. And I think the key thing to be aware of is that 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.

LH: Yep, I agree. So let's talk first about why editing's worth the bother, because I think that can be really helpful when a writer's deciding what kind of editing is right for them.

DC: That's true. I think it's worth looking at the mainstream publishing industry because it certainly knows a thing or two about bringing high-quality books to market. And so it should – it's been doing it for ever! So publishers take their books through multiple rounds of editing and I think that the indie author who seeks to mimic that process is the one who's least likely to garner negative reviews, and the most likely to build fans.

LH: And that's key because fans won't just buy this book, they'll buy the next book, and the one after that, and the one after that, and that one after that!

DC: That's a really good point. Louise, why don't you kick off and talk about developmental editing?

LH: Okay, so the first thing to say is that this level of editing is called different things – story editing, developmental editing, structural editing ... and it can be thought of as a kind of SHAPING stage. In fiction, it's where things like plot, characterisation, narration, and pacing decisions are made. And when a story has a good shape, the reader will feel satisfied once they've come to the end of the book. 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 this or that happened, who was responsible, and

why. Now, the journey might be bumpy. There will be peaks and troughs where there's action, contemplation, and deduction.

And in fiction, another key point is that someone is telling that story. It could be an external narrator, or one or more of the characters. And getting that narrative viewpoint right will help the reader immerse themselves in the story. All of that stuff needs to be structured and paced so that it engages the reader as the story unfolds.

DC: And, actually, I should say that much of that applies to non-fiction too. Even non-fiction tells a story ... takes the reader on a journey that has a beginning, a middle and an end. And if that structure isn't right, the book won't fulfil its promises.

LH: I like that – thinking in terms of promises. That's a really good way of looking at it. Before we move onto the next thing, can I just talk quickly about fiction manuscript critiques? So these are sort of mini developmental edits that look at the big-picture stuff like plot, pace, characters, voice. What the editor does is review the book and create a report – so the issue here is that they're not changing anything in the novel's file, which they would be with a full structural edit. The critique is an evaluation and it discusses what the author can do to improve the book. The report levels vary depending on what the editor finds but I know that our colleague Sophie Playle's reports are around 10 to 15 pages of A4 so they're pretty detailed.

So after that comes line editing. Denise, go!

DC: Right, so line editing is like a SMOOTHING stage where we check sense and flow. So every sentence should say what it needs to say, and only that. Too many words, or repetition of what's already known, can make the reading experience really boring and frustrating. And that's something that applies just as much to evocative non-fiction writing.

LH: And what I would also say is that punctuation comes into play here too, especially in fiction. It's not just about grammar, and certainly not about pedantry. It's a powerful pacing tool that can evoke tension and bring clarity to sentences. Plus, in fiction, authors can play with sentence length and language style to reflect the historical period, genre, and the mood of a given scene. So line editing pays attention to that too. You don't want your Victorian character talking about picking up the kids from school, or saying 'awesome' ... well not like people say it now!

So, Denise, I wanted to ask you ... I often do my line editing at the same stage as copyediting, because they're a good fit within fiction editing. Is that the same for you?

DC: Yes, it is. Although I tend to refer to what I do as copyediting – for me that encompasses the elements of line editing and copyediting, and I actually find it hard to separate the two! I find that I instinctively do both at the same stage. And as many of my clients generally aren't aware of these definitions – they just want editing – it's more helpful for them to discuss what it is I can do for them than what it's called! Does that sound reasonable?

LH: Yes. So let's talk in more depth about copyediting. Copyediting is the CORRECTING stage, where inconsistent or incorrect spelling, grammar, and punctuation are attended to, and where logic is checked so that readers don't get distracted.

DC: Now, I want to talk quickly here about a copyeditor's style sheets because they really 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.

LH: Indeed. Let's talk now about proofreading. So this is the QUALITY-CONTROL stage, and it's where any final literal errors and layout problems are flagged up. Now, it's rare for a book to get to the prepublication stage without a few mistakes remaining. We're all human. Even editors are human!

So sometimes errors get introduced during previous rounds of editing, or the design process causes problems.

DC: And some elements of the book – like a heading, a paragraph, or 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.

LH: Yep, so shall we talk now about the order of play because there is a logical order when it comes to editing? I think it's kind of like building a house.

DC: Yes, it is! Developmental editing is like laying the foundations and building the structure

LH: And line editing and copyediting are like plastering the brickwork, painting the walls, and sanding the floorboards.

DC: And proofreading is where you move in the furniture and fill in any tiny cracks that have appeared

DC: And when you swap the order around you can end up in a pickle. So let's imagine you do line and copyediting. So you smooth the prose and eradicate most of the spelling, grammar, punctuation, and consistency problems ...

LH: And 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. That's all structural stuff, and every move, every deletion, every rewrite, every tweak brings with it the chance of damaging the line/copyediting work.

DC: Yes, and that's just a load of time and money down the drain. So let's do a quick overview of the key points. Plan your editing logically, starting with the big-picture and moving to more micro levels.

LH: Yes, do your developmental or structural editing first. That's the shaping stage where you do the macro or story-level stuff.

DC: Then follow that up with the smoothing and correcting stages of line and copyediting. Here you're working at sentence level.

LH: Then close off with your final quality control – the proofreading stage.

DC: And don't try to do everything at once, and please don't ask an editor to do it all at once. You really need to make time for several different passes.

LH: So there's just one more thing. We thought that we'd wrap up with a regular section called Editing Bites. And, no, that's not where Denise gets all Dracula on me!

DC: Well, not in the first series anyway, though I am a fan of horror stories so you never know! So these are handy resources that we both love, and every week we're going to offer you one each.

LH: So I'm actually going to give you two this week because one is just a free booklet that I've put together and it covers everything we've talked about in this episode. It's called 'Which level of editing do you need?' and it focuses on how to choose editing bases on the outcomes you want to achieve.

And then the second bite is *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers: How to Edit Yourself into Print*. This is a book by Renni Browne and Dave King – a really great resource, almost a tutorial, for big-picture work, especially if you want to make your book more attractive to an agent.

DC: Yeah, that sounds great so be sure to check that out. My editing bite is actually a blog article by Joanna Penn, on her website The Creative Penn, and the article is called 'Self-editing a non-fiction book'. In that article she outlines her own self-editing process, and I think it's always helpful to see how others approach a particular task, even if we don't follow their method exactly. The blog's actually an extract from her book called *How to Write Non-Fiction: Turn Your Knowledge into Words*.

LH: That's great. She's such a prolific writer of non-fiction and fiction, so that's a great thing to check out.

That's all for this week. Thank you so much for listening to The Editing Podcast. You can rate, review and subscribe via your podcatcher.

DC: And don't forget to share, share, share! Tell your writer friends, your editor friends, your business friends ... basically anyone who writes!

LH: Yes, we'd love to hear from you – so if you do have any questions just get in touch.

DC: You can get in touch with us via The Editing Podcast Facebook page. If you ask us, we WILL answer. That's a promise!

LH: And don't forget – all the links we've mentioned are in the show notes.

Thanks for listening.