

TRANSCRIPT

The Editing Podcast, Season 1, Episode 3 Why you should work with an editor

Louise Harnby: Hello, and welcome to Episode 3 of the Editing Podcast. This week, we're looking at the reasons why you might want to invest in hiring someone else rather than doing all the editing yourself.

Denise Cowle: Yes, and there are several reasons why you might not want to take on the full editing mantle, the first of which is: it could be a massive undertaking that you just don't have the time for.

LH: So think about how long it's taken you to write your book, and go through the various drafts. There's absolutely nothing wrong with deciding to hand over the reins to someone else so that you can crack on with doing what you love doing best – at that's writing.

DC: That's right. Working with a third party might well free you up to explore other writing projects, or just other stuff in your life that you want to get on with. Life's just sometimes about delegation.

And we're not daft. We do realize this is going to have a cost to it, but like a lot of things it's about balance ... because we all sometimes make choices to pay someone else to do things on our behalf rather than doing it all ourselves.

LH: Balance is right. Like me trying to cut 10 feet off the leylandii in my back garden. And I tried, I really did. But balance was NOT what was happening which is why I ended up in the tree. But, anyway, the point is that I realized I'd rather be doing something else with my life so I hired a tree surgeon! And it's the same thing with editing. So have a think about what your priorities are, and how you want to spend your time.

DC: I'm glad you're not my gardener, Louise. I'm saying nothing more! So let's talk about goals. Not all writers have the same end goal. Some people want to hone their writing craft and, while they might well be intending to actually publish the book, first they want professional help so that they can learn to write better.

LH: That's right. So it might be that the editor you work with in the first instance is someone with developmental editing knowledge –someone who can help you with story craft. And this isn't just about fiction, because as you've said before, Denise, business, educational and academic writing tells a story too. Just because no one falls in love or gets murdered doesn't mean there isn't a story there.

DC: Well, I've worked on a few pieces of non-fiction where those things have happened, but yes, it's still storytelling, isn't it? Some authors choose to work with book coaches, and that type of editing isn't just about sending the file, having the editor work through one pass, and then returning it. It's a longer-term relationship.

LH: Yes, it might take months. So, in fiction, this could mean that the author and editor work together as a team to really develop the story arc and character development. And it *will* mean a lot of back and forth. But the end result is a skills base that the author can take

forward to every other book they write. So working with an editor is about learning, not just getting a book to market.

DC: That's so true. And you can get loads of instruction like this from books, and free blogs, and writing groups or courses. Some of you might want more one-to-one coaching that's tailored to *your* particular writing style and your particular subject or genre.

So now let's talk about mojo, because sometimes a writer just loses it, don't they?

LH: Yes, and that's the same as anything else in life. You pour your heart and soul into something and it starts out as exciting, and you're really fired up because it's new and fresh. But it can become a burden. I know when I wrote a business book for fellow editors back in 2014, I was completely hyped about it for about 90% of the project, but I was so sick of that damn thing by the time I was on the home straight. It's like I'd read it too many times and I couldn't wait to hand it over to my copyeditor and say, 'Okay, I've gone as far as I can with this. I really need to let it go now.'

DC: And that's the thing. Your editor is there to support your writing and take some of the burden away from you. But this reminds me of something ... I think it's worth just chatting quickly about how some authors are put off working with particularly developmental editors because they see it as cheating. So one of our colleagues last year wrote a blog post about how one of her author's had believed this.

LH: Oh, yes, was that Molly McCowan, wasn't it?

DC: Yes, that's it. So it was like because the writer was getting help, he was lying to his readers. We'll make sure there's a link to that in the show notes, shall we?

LH: Yes, we will. It's a great article. And it's not cheating at all. Molly pointed out how lots of well-known authors are edited. And we just have to think about the how the mainstream publishing process. They always always make sure books are structurally sound and then they put them out to editors and proofreaders like me and Denise. So don't worry that it's cheating to hire an editor. All you're doing is mimicking what the big-name publishers do. It's a team effort to make a great book that's going to satisfy readers. And few of us start something by being brilliant at it. Writing's no different. We need to learn the craft of it.

DC: Now, there is a caveat because there are cases where you need to be cautious. If you've written a dissertation or thesis, make sure you check your university's guidelines before you hire professional editing. Most have quite strict rules about what levels of intervention are acceptable, and usually it's only a final tidy-up proofreading that's allowed. There are serious consequences if students breach the policy, so do talk to your supervisor.

LH: That's really good advice. I know some unis, like Keele in the UK, are looking at banning the hiring of pro proofreaders altogether but are looking to train up their own internal editorial staff. But policies vary from college to college, so just check.

So let's talk now about freshness. Because the fact is that it doesn't matter how many times you check your own writing – when you stare at it for the 75th time, it's like you've got your goggle eyes on, isn't it? And you start seeing what you want to see rather than what's there. I find that happens when I blog. I always miss something. And it's not that I don't know what I'm doing; it's just that I'm almost too close to the work.

DC: That's so true. I'm the same. I'd even go as far as to say that there are diminishing returns. So when you're writing you'll always find the most problems during the first round of self-editing. But you become less effective the more you look at it because you're too familiar with it.

That's why editors use editors a lot of the time when they write. So even if you've worked really hard to eradicate most of the errors, chances are there are still plenty remaining but you just can't see the wood for the trees.

LH: Yes, plus fresh eyes means a fresh perspective. So you might not have noticed that a sentence is a little clunky because you know exactly what you mean – because you wrote it. But actually, it's not clear to the reader. There's a great quote from D Bnonn Tennant in an article that's all about how most writing could be much, much better. And Tennant says something about attention to the finer detail taking writing from pretty good to magnificent. And that's what an editor's doing – they're helping you up your game and make your writing the best it can be.

And that's really important because, after all, writing is about communicating, isn't it? When you put words on paper, or online, you're no longer just a writer – you're also a messenger.

DC: Indeed, and every error you make distracts your reader from that message. The more mistakes you make, the more your message becomes clouded. And on the flip side, every error you *don't* make allows your reader to sail, rather than stumble, through your text.

LH: Sailing really is the best way. You want readers to kind of 'feel' the message in your words, absorb it, rather than having to pick their way through it.

DC: So think about what you've written. Maybe it's a novel that entertains, or a thesis that educates, or a business report that informs, or a website that's selling a product. Or even a job application form that you're using to persuade someone to hire you. All those words, in whatever form, need to work for you. They need to be understood.

BUT, where there's a message there's an **audience**. And some aren't forgiving. And so when you decide to add an editor to your writing team you're acknowledging your audience – your reader, your Kindle owner, your website visitor, whatever.

LH: That's absolutely right. And the way I think about it is in terms of sound levels. So it often seems like correct or standard is quiet, but wrong or non-standard is loud! So when you get your dialogue punctuation just right, no one says, 'Wow, that perfect punctuation literally smacked me in the face. Amazing.' No one sings your praises when you ensure that all your tables and figures are numbered correctly. No one celebrates a word that's spelled like it's listed in the dictionary. But the howlers, the typos, the jarring stuff, they seem to leap of the page, screaming, 'I'm over here – look at me!'

DC: I know! And at best they irritate; but at worst they generate a lack of interest or disengagement. So when we're writing we do really have to think about whether your audience will tolerate any mistakes, or whether it's worth keeping the grumpy pendants happy. And let's face it, it's not like the old days when grumpy readers just threw a book at the wall!

LH: No, now they're docking Amazon stars and saying mean stuff in the reviews. And other potential readers are going to be influenced by that whether we like it or not.

DC: So an editor is like a buffer between the author and the audience.

LH: Yes, we've got your back.

So ... shall we talk now about what other experience and knowledge an editor can bring to the table because I think it's important to remember that many of us have trained to do this job. Not all, for sure, but many of us have. And that means we're specialists and we're experienced.

DC: Yes, that's it. This is what we *do*. So using a qualified editor with the appropriate specialist experience means you're bringing in someone to your writing team who can do stuff that you can't. Not because you're not capable but because you specialize in doing other stuff.

LH: So for example, one of my author clients is a therapist and a writer. It's not that he's not perfectly capable of becoming an editor, just like I might be able to be a great therapist with the right training. But he does his thing and I do mine. If I was having a tough time emotionally, I'd hire him not you, Denise, to help me out. Not that you're not incredibly empathetic, but you get my point. If someone needs therapy, they hire a therapist. If your electricians have busted, you hire an electrician. And if your writing needs editing, an editor's the perfect person for the job.

DC: An editor can also guide you on the different levels of editing. So it might well be that you don't need to use a third party for everything, just for the types of editing that are your weakness.

LH: So you might be a great world-builder but a poor punctuator, which means you can do your own structural editing but you'll get help with copyediting.

DC: Yeah, or you might be great at the nitty-gritty, but have problems shaping your book, so you'll find it an advantage to get help with developmental or structural work.

LH: Denise, before we wrap up, I really want to talk now about something that you wrote a brilliant article about – it's about that issue of how people are sometimes nervous about hiring editors because they think we're pedants – or the so-called **grammar police**. And that is absolutely not what editing is about, is it?

DC: Absolutely – and this is something I know you and I are both really passionate about – I know you've written about mindfulness in regard to fiction editing, haven't you?

LH: Yes.

DC: So the nub of it is this. A professional editor will *not* be butchering your writing to make it conform to what they think is correct regardless of *your* voice, *your* style, *your* story, *your* message. Mindful editing respects all of those things. It's not about pedantry and zombie rules. It's about what we talked about earlier – communication. A good editor will work with you to make your writing the best it can be, but it's your book and the editor who doesn't respect that isn't behaving professionally.

LH: And that means allowing, say in fiction, idiomatic phrasing, non-standard grammar in dialogue, and regional and dialectical forms of expression to remain in a book, because they can add depth and authenticity to the story. Even in our language, there are loads of different Englishes that need to be celebrated and embraced. Books aren't about homogeneity, and professional editors respect that. We're not butchers.

DC: And in non-fiction it's the same. Even though there might be certain conventions in your subject area, that doesn't mean your individual voice shouldn't sing from the pages. Your editor shouldn't be making a single change to your text unless they can justify it. Louise, you're right – it's not about butchery, but it's not about policing either. It's about helping you get your book where you want it to be for your intended audience.

LH: That's a lovely way to wrap up. So we've been so busy gassing we haven't done Editing Bites yet. So this is where we each recommend a tool or resource that we love. So what have you got for us this week, Denise?

DC: So my bite this week is by one of my favourite writers. As you know, Louise, I love a bit of horror, and Stephen King had been my go-to in that genre for years. But he also wrote *On Writing*, and loads of writers and editors recommend it as a great insight into the process of writing.

LH: So as my bite, I'm going to offer my list of global editing societies. If you do decide you want to hire a pro editor to help you on your journey, these will help you in your search. You don't have to work with someone from your own country, and some of them, like the Society for Editors and Proofreaders, do have an international membership. Now there are other ways of finding an editor, which we cover in Episode 10, so have a listen to that too, but if location is important to you, I think you'll find this list useful.

DC: That's a great resource to end with. So that's it for this week. Thank you so much for listening to The Editing Podcast. You can rate, review and subscribe via your podcatcher.

LH: And don't forget to tell your writer friends, your editor friends, your business friends ... basically anyone who writes!

DC: And if you have any questions please do 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 resources and articles we've mentioned are in the show notes.

Thanks for listening.