

## TRANSCRIPT

### The Editing Podcast, Season 1, Episode 6 What is a sample edit?

**Denise Cowle:** Hello and welcome to Episode 6 of the editing podcast. So this week is all about sample edits – what they are, how they can help, and who they're useful for.

**Louise Harnby:** That's right, and we're going to approach this from two angles – the author and the editor, because both of us use them and both of us benefit from them. So first of all, let's just clarify what a sample edit is and how it helps an author. Denise, do you want to explain?

**DC:** Yes, so many independent authors want to see a sample of an editor or proofreader's work prior to signing a contract for editorial services. The sample will usually be around 1,000 words, ideally taken from the middle of a book.

The edited sample gives the author the opportunity to compare the work of several different professionals and to assess the editing or proofreading against the price being quoted.

**LH:** That's right. And one thing we should mention is that it's important when asking several editors for a sample to give them the same section of the text. Only that way can you make useful comparisons about the way in which each editor's approached the project. So let's look at proofreading samples first.

**DC:** Right, so when a writer asks for a sample proofread, the intervention should really be limited to dealing with any remaining snafus that were missed during previous rounds of deeper editing – micro issues such as spelling, punctuation, grammar errors and inconsistencies ... that kind of stuff. And these samples help the author to compare technical competence and ask, 'Who's the best?'

**LH:** Now, With line editing and copyediting samples, the intervention will be much deeper, involving not only micro corrections but also suggested recasts that smooth out and tighten up writing that's disfigured by repetition, wordiness and awkward syntax. Here, we're still working at the sentence level, but there's a much higher degree of subjectivity involved.

The editor needs to be sensitive to the author's style, the characters' voices and the mood of the scene such that the soul of the writing remains intact. Samples help the author to compare editors' technical competence *and* their emotional responsiveness to the text.

In this case, the question is not so much ‘Who’s the best?’ but ‘Who’s the best fit?’

**DC:** Yes, that’s a worthwhile distinction. So that’s really good for helping us understand what’s in it for the author. So let’s talk about why editors love doing them. So the first reason comes out of the tangled terminology that abounds when it comes to editing. Definitions of the different levels of editing vary widely from client to client and editor to editor. What one person calls proofreading, another might call copyediting.

**LH:** Yes, good point, because you and I have talked about this before – I offer a service that I refer to as line and copyediting, whereas you do the same kind of thing but you just call it copyediting, don’t you?

**DC:** Yes, I do. And it’s not only about different definitions. Those differences in language bring different expectations. Working on a sample enables editors to assess what’s required – regardless of the words being used to describe that service.

**LH:** And I know someone who includes what I would call developmental editing in her copyediting service. So the sample really helps to focus on the job rather than the language.

**DC:** Yes, exactly. Now, the second reason is one of timing. Doing samples helps us work out how long a project will take. If we know how long it will take to edit 1,000 words, we can estimate how long it will take to edit 80K words. And that means we know how many hours the whole edit will take, and whether we have space in our schedule.

**LH:** So an example might be a 100K-word novel that needs copyediting for spelling, punctuation and grammar errors and inconsistencies, and only a little tweaking for clarity. That might take 35 hours (or one to two weeks); but a novel of the same length that requires a deeper line edit might take 80 hours (or three to four weeks).

**DC:** Indeed. So another benefit for the editor is the price factor. Once we’ve got a sense of how long a job will take, we can price it appropriately. And that applies whichever model the editor uses in their quotations – so you offer clients prices based on pounds per 1,000 words, whereas I often describe the fee in terms of hourly rates. But at the end of the day, we’ve both understood how long we think that work’s going to take.

**LH:** The other issue is one of fit. Authors want a good-fit editor. We editors want that for them too. And I guess we’ve all faced this at one time or another, but there’s nothing worse for an editor than landing a project on their desk only

to find that they feel way out of their depth or can't get into the work, or don't understand the writing, perhaps because it's too specialist.

**DC:** Or sometimes if you haven't seen a sample you might find that, actually, the project needs a much deeper level of edit than what was requested. And then you can end up working for below minimum wage.

**LH:** And the flip side to all of that is when you do a sample and you get that feeling. Like you've immersed yourself in a story or piece of text and it really resonates with you. And that sample has shown you that you can engage with the story, or in fiction with the world and the characters that an author's drawn. For me, that sample is where I reassure myself that I can improve and complement the original writing rather than rubbing up against it.

**DC:** Exactly, though it's worth saying that this isn't always the case, is it? Sometimes we're just not a good fit – there are times when it's just not obvious how I can put the *oooh* into the writing. It's not that the amendments I'm making are technically incorrect but rather that I'm not able to find that emotional responsiveness that the client needs.

**LH:** Yes, I've had that too, and when that happens, it's time to thank the author for the opportunity to do the sample and provide a quotation, but recommend they work with someone else.

**DC:** So should we talk about pricing now, because samples aren't always free, are they? How do you handle it, Louise?

**LH:** So I usually charge a set fee of £50 for a sample of 1,000 words. I know not everyone chooses to do that but there are reasons why an editor might charge for samples. And the first is that our time has a cost to it.

**DC:** Yes, so every minute that we spend doing free editorial work is a minute we could be spending on paid-for work for clients or maintaining our business's visibility (which is what leads clients to us in the first place).

**LH:** The second reason is scheduling. Many editors – like us two – are booked up months in advance, and that means there's no space in the schedule to fit in additional work that isn't paying anything.

And actually, I was curious as to whether potential clients would object to my charging for samples. But in fact I've found that most of my clients have been more than happy to pay a small fee for a sample because they see the value in it for them.

**DC:** Yes, I agree.

So the last issue is one of filtering. Now, there have been cases, though they're rare, where a client has asked 20 or 30 editors from our professional editorial society for a sample edit, and the chapters offered are all different. And it seems that the author is looking for a backdoor to a free complete book edit, farming out bits and pieces here and there. It's called a Frankenstein edit, where you're cobbling together different edits by different editors. And we all know that story didn't end well!

**LH:** I know. It is rare but it does happen now and again. I think some authors don't realize that there's a really strong global online network of editors and we talk to each other! So, yes, please don't do that!

Still, not all editors charge. And there are benefits to some editors of the freebie.

**DC:** And there are some perfectly legitimate clients who expect a small sample to be edited for free on the understanding that an hour or two of gratis work is acceptable if there's a good chance the editor will secure the full project.

**LH:** Yes, and that's fair enough. And some newbie editors offer free sample edits because they want to do everything in their power to secure a job, particularly since they're not likely to be as visible online. In this case, I think the editor is perfectly justified in regarding free samples as part of a marketing strategy. I think this is a valid argument. In my start-up phase, I didn't charge for samples for that reason. It was a price I was willing to pay.

**DC:** Also, the newbie editor might have more space in their schedule, so I guess in this case it's an issue of opportunity cost. Finding space to do samples doesn't cost you, whereas a busier editor would have to do free work in their free time,

**LH:** Another way of looking at samples is as a form of continuing professional development or CPD. So you're doing the work for free but it's a way of developing experience. You can apply what you've learned in training to live test cases.

**DC:** And finally there's the issue of a sample being a safe space. So when I started up my business, the one thing that worried me was the element of surprise. What if the proofread I'd been commissioned for turned out to be a complete nightmare? What if in only reading the text, rather than actually working on it, I'd vastly underestimated the speed at which I could work and therefore undercharged?

Doing samples is a great way for any editor to get a good sense of what they're taking on, but in a safe space with no obligations. And because no money's changed hands, there's no chance of a client feeling let down if the editor turns out not to be the right fit.

**LH:** You know, there's one other factor. Sometimes, it's just not worth charging. Our international editing community is diverse, and we do a lot of different things for many different client types. I remember our colleague Erin Brenner talking about how she works with a lot of corporate clients who have multiple stakeholders. And charging for a sample means getting signoff from all of those people, and getting an accounts department involved. Whereas if you're working one on one with an indie author, that won't be the case. That author will be the only stakeholder.

**DC:** That's a really good point. It just shows that there are as many good reasons to charge for them as to offer them for free. It really is down to the individual editor. So, writers, don't be surprised which way it goes. You might have to fork out a little bit but most editors will deduct your sample fee from the final invoice if you give them the project. You do that, don't you?

So now it's time for Editing Bites – our weekly feature where we recommend a tool or resource to help your writing journey. So, Louise, what have you got this week?

**LH:** So my bite is FutureLearn's free writing courses. There are two that I wanted to focus on. The first is Start Writing Fiction with the OU, and the second is An Introduction to Screenwriting with the UEA ... two really well-established universities offering free courses. I've done a few FutureLearn courses and was really impressed by what I got for free. They do try to encourage you to pay a little more for some additional content, but the baseline free stuff is, well, free. What's not to like?

**DC:** And I'm going with the SfEP's Directory of Editorial Services. We've mentioned the SfEP before, and it has four levels of membership, from entry-level up to advanced-professional. Only the top two levels – professional and advanced-professional – can take out a directory entry, and at this level members have had to demonstrate extensive training, references from clients and evidence of CPD. So you can be confident that you're getting an experienced, trained professional. The nice thing about the directory is that it's searchable by keyword, so it's easy to refine your search to just those editors who work in your niche.

**LH:** 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.

**DC:** Please share with your writer friends, your editor friends, your business friends ... basically anyone who writes!

**LH:** 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!

**DC:** And don't forget – all the links we've mentioned are in the show notes. Thanks for listening.