Untangling proofreading
Advice for beginners

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Reality check

I retrained as a proofreader in 2005. For more than a decade beforehand I'd worked in a professional publishing environment, specifically in the marketing department of two international mainstream academic publishing houses.

I knew exactly what proofreading was, and what it wasn't – **or I thought I did**.

Only a few months into professional practice, my understanding of the skillset I'd chosen to specialize in was challenged.

To this day, it's still being repeatedly challenged.

Tangled definitions

Publishers' expectations of what a proofread entails match my training and in-house experience.

Students, schools, charities, businesses, and beginner-novelists sometimes (though not always) have very different ideas.

The term proofreading, far from being straightforward, now appears rather more complicated.

Indeed, how one defines proofreading isn't determined by what one actually does, but rather **by whom one talks to**.

Industry definitions – what a proofreader *does*

National editorial societies tend towards offering definitions of proofreading that accord with publishers' expectations.

This is not surprising given that publishers provide thousands of professional proofreaders with regular work.

So, if I want to be **fit** to proofread for this client type, I need to understand what this client type's expectations are, and I expect any professional body representing me to provide guidance that **reflects industry-recognized best practice**.

Following are excerpts from several national editorial societies' online definitions of professional proofreading.

Editors Canada

'Reading proofs of edited manuscripts. Galley proofing may include incorporating and/or exercising discretion on author's alterations; flagging locations of art and page references; verifying computer codes.

Page proofing may include checking adherence to mock-up (rough paste-up), accuracy of running heads, folios and changes made to type in mock-up, checking page breaks and location of art, and inserting page numbers to table of contents and cross-references if necessary.'

See: Definitions of Editorial Skills
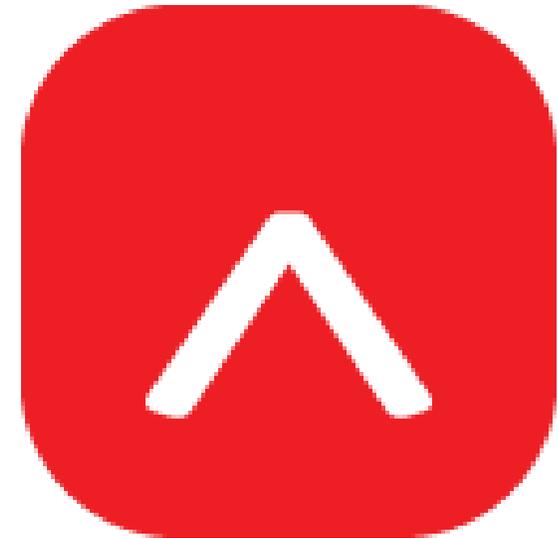
Society for Editors and Proofreaders (UK)

'After material has been copy-edited, the publisher sends it to a designer or typesetter. Their work is then displayed or printed, and that is the proof – proof that it is ready for publication. Proofreading is the quality check and tidy-up. However, some clients expect more than that.

Many proofreaders find they spot more errors on paper than on screen, but proofs may be read and marked in either medium.

Proofreading is now often 'blind' – the proof is read on its own merits, without seeing the edited version. A proofreader looks for consistency in usage and presentation, and accuracy in text, images and layout, but cannot be responsible for the author's or copy-editor's work.'

See: What is proofreading?

Editorial Freelancers Association (USA)

'Comparing the latest stage of text with the preceding stage, marking discrepancies in text, and, when appropriate, checking for problems in page makeup, layout, color separation, or type.

Proofreading may also include one or more of the following: checking proof against typesetting specifications; querying or correcting errors or inconsistencies that may have escaped an editor or writer; reading for typographical errors or for sense without reading against copy; verifying links in online publications.'

See: Proofreading

Association of Freelance Editors, Proofreaders & Indexers (Ireland)

'The proofreader reads page proofs after edited copy comes back from the typesetter or desk-top designer.

The proofreader's job is to make sure that text, illustrations, captions, headings, etc., are properly placed and complete; to check that design specifications have been followed; to check running heads; to ensure that captions and legends match artwork; to ensure that pagination matches the Contents list; to check end-of-line breaks; to proofread preliminary pages and end matter (e.g., the index if there is one); to fix incontestable errors of spelling, punctuation and grammar that have slipped through the net during copy-editing; and to query inconsistencies.'

See: What do proofreaders, editors and indexers do?

Annotation

These excerpts reflect very well the tasks required by the publishers and project-management agencies that procure my proofreading services.

The emphasis is on the expectation that the proofreader will **not be amending raw text**, but **will be annotating proof pages**, post design, either in print or in digital format, usually using industry-recognized markup language.

When it comes to working for publishers, the notion of proofreading is not tangled. Things start to get a little messy, however, when we branch out into the wider world.

Non-publishing clients – what a proofreader *might* do

Some national editorial societies recognize that definitions of proofreading start to tangle when the proofreader's client base extends beyond the publishing industry.

See the SfEP, What is proof-editing?, for a brief but useful introduction to how a proofreader may be asked to work with raw text and intervene in a way that the publishing industry would define as light copy-editing (or another skillset).

Following are some excerpts of requests from non-publishing clients that I've received.

I've tweaked these so that the original request is masked. The point is to give you a flavour of how some non-publishing clients interpret 'proofreading'.

Proofreading a novella

'Would you be kind enough to advise me of the cost of proofreading my science-fiction novella (32,000 words)? I can provide the file in Word format. English is my second language. I need attention to spelling and grammar, and altering any words that don't sound quite right to an English speaker's ear. I'd also like it formatted so that I can upload it to Amazon.'

Proofreading a Master's dissertation

'I urgently need the first draft of my dissertation to be proofread. I need it styled in British English and would like it cut down if possible.'

Proofreading a book of letters

'Please provide me with a quotation to proofread a 150,000-word book in MS Word. The text is not always grammatical because of the way the letters were written, and I would like such instances to be left as is. I am looking for nonsensical errors etc. and general comments on layout and structure and sequencing.'

Proofreading a website

'A new section of our site needs proofreading, approximately 15–20 pages totalling 5,000 words. We would provide you with access to the site and then you can simply go through each page and edit it directly.'

Of note here is that all of the clients want the proofreader to **edit the raw text directly**.

However, they also require a range of **other tasks** that, traditionally, fall well outside the proofreader's remit – structural decisions, rewriting, text reduction, and layout and text styling.

And, in one case, the proofreader would be required to directly amend the text within a content management system.

In fact, there's nothing wrong at all with the proofreader carrying out these tasks as long as they feel competent to do so, and as long as the client and the proofreader have a mutual understanding of what can/can't or will/won't be done as part of the project.

The point is, rather, that these tasks would be far less likely to be requested in a proofreading brief from a publisher. This is the **tangled world of proofreading**, and it can lead to a lot of head-scratching for the beginner.

'But that's not proofreading'

As business owners, we're required to communicate with our clients in a way that makes them believe we can **solve their problems**.

If I want to take on a proofreading job that also involves styling the text in the Word file of an indie author's book so that it's ready for upload to Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing program, and I have the skill to do this, I'm not going to engage the client in a discussion over semantics.

If I want the job, and I can do the job, I'll quote for the job.

If the client wants to call it proofreading, we'll call it proofreading.

In the non-publishing world, definitions of proofreading are tangled, but I know this.

And so what's important is not that I quibble over the definition, but that I **untangle the client's request** so that we are both clear about what is required.

# Marketing your proofreading business

It's all about communicating in a way that clients understand – speaking *their* language.

There's a reason I don't call myself a proof-editor, even though that's exactly what I do for some of the independent authors for whom I work.

It's because **they won't find me**.

When I look at the analytics data for my website, I see that the word that most people have typed into their search engine, prior to landing on my website, is 'proofreader.'

Sometimes I proofread, sometimes I proof-edit, sometimes I copy-edit, and sometimes I line edit. But what I call it and what my clients have searched for are two very different things!
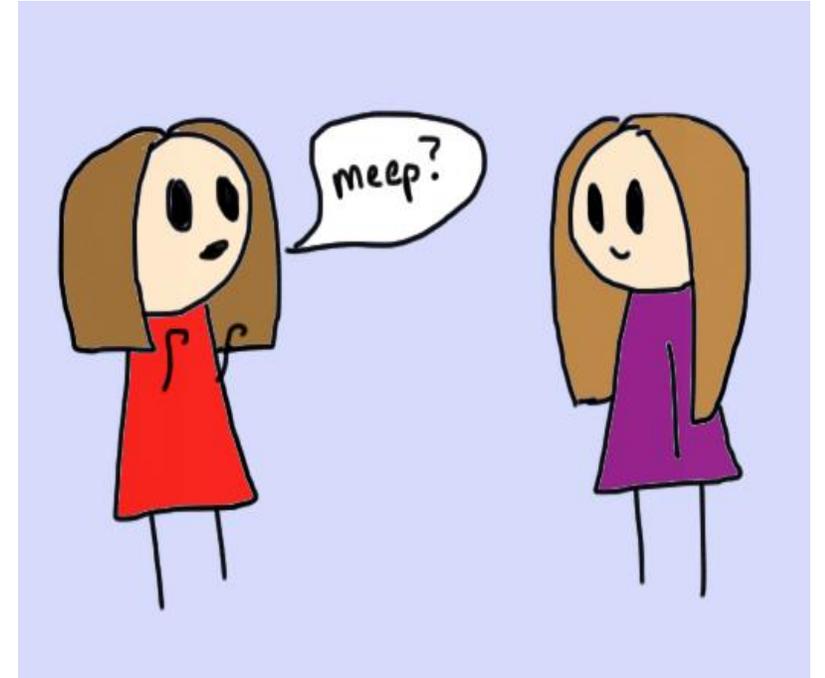
Tangled for whom?

Definitions of proofreading can appear tangled to those of us within the editorial and publishing industries, but, to many non-publishing types, things are perfectly clear!

- Want the spelling, punctuation, and grammar sorted out? Call a proofreader.

- Want Kindle-ready formatting? Ask a proofreader.

- Is English your second language? A proofreader can tackle that for you.

- Is the bibliography in your thesis a disaster? A proofreader is just the ticket.

Actually, sometimes we can help and sometimes we can't. How far any proofreader is prepared to step outside of traditional publishing-industry definitions of proofreading will depend on her preferences, skills, experience, and level of confidence.

But that doesn't mean the proofreader has to stop calling herself a proofreader, especially if calling herself a proofreader is what makes her discoverable to her clients!

Summing up

If you want to be a proofreader, don't assume there's only one set of client expectations about what you will or won't do, or what proofreading is or isn't.

In an **international marketplace** made up of numerous different clients with **widely varying problems**, you'll always be required to spot spelling errors and incorrect punctuation.

But there's a raft of other tasks that you could be asked to undertake, too.

How many hats you wear will depend on **what you're prepared and able to do**, not what you call yourself.