EDITING LEVELS

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1. Editing Levels Overview

It has been said that trying to do all the different types of editing at once is like trying to mix a cake, bake it, ice it, eat it, and clean up the crumbs all at once. Alternatively, starting with a proofread or even a copy edit can be a waste of time and money if it turns out your manuscript has some major issues dealing with various aspects of writing. Each time you move, delete, or add something, as well as every rewrite or tweak, can introduce copy editing and proofreading level errors—so it is important to do the editing levels in order. To be effective, do each of the editing levels in separate passes. You are wise to do this as well as you can, with the help of your editing team, before you pass your manuscript to an editor.

Self-editing at each level is a great learning experience for your writing and editing. The different levels or types of editing pay attention to different kinds of problems so they have different outcomes. Knowing what to look for with each self-editing pass will result in a much stronger self-edit, improved writing skills—and quite likely, a simpler job for the editor resulting in a savings in editing time and costs for the writer.

Below is a list of different editing levels. The most common levels are marked with asterisks (**) and you'll find detailed information on each of them in later posts in this series. But the others can be important, too, depending on your particular needs. So consider them all. By the way, you'll notice that there may be some overlap between different levels, and an experienced, skilled editor may be able to do multiple levels at the same time. But as a writer doing self-editing before you hire an editor(s), you're best to go level by level.

Manuscript assessment or critique edit
This editing level provides a broad, overall assessment of your manuscript by reading through it and pinpointing your major strengths and weaknesses. That is why it is a great idea, once you've completed the initial draft of your manuscript, to sit down and read the entire work without actually editing. While you read, jot down strengths and weaknesses you notice. An alpha reader—a writing partner who is the first person to read the manuscript after you've written it and read it through—may also do a manuscript assessment for you. If you find this

kind of assessment very difficult, or you discover so many issues that you feel overwhelmed, you may want to hire a manuscript assessment editor, a writing coach, or an experienced writer on your self-editing team who can do this read-through and point you in the right direction. At this level, general suggestions for improvement will be made and will indicate what self-editing levels (and possibly editing by a professional at this point, if there are very serious issues) need to be done first.

Read-through edit

This is similar to a manuscript assessment or critique, but it is more likely to be done when you are ready to hire an editor, after you've finished all the self-editing you can do with the help of your self-editing team. Many editors, whatever their level(s) of specialty, will want to do a read-through of the full manuscript before deciding on exactly what needs to be worked on. This may be part of an editor's "sample edit" process. Some editors, rather than doing a full read-through, may settle for reading an outline, summary, synopsis, or proposal which provides an overview of the writing project. These are different items, so a writer should be aware of what they are and be prepared to present them to the editor if requested. These items are valuable to the writer as well, and many experienced writers will develop some or all of these even in the early stages of the writing process.

The read-through provides the editor with a clear overview and can show any major issues—including issues that may require a developmental edit, as well as substantive and/or copy edits. Editors may charge a somewhat lower rate for a read-through, but even if they charge the same rate as their other editing, a read-through can really lead to improvements in the manuscript and save on editing time and costs in the long run. It also provides understanding of how many drafts may be needed and how much self-editing and learning the writer may need to do.

Silent changes

While not specifically an editing level, this is something that many editors do as they work through your manuscript. Silent changes tidy up a file without recording the changes with Word's Track Changes editing tool. The editor may skim over the whole manuscript and make simple fixes before actual editing. These are changes that won't affect the writer's style or voice or cause any debate between the writer and editor. Examples are fixing spaces in the wrong place, correcting spelling mistakes; fixing accidental font issues, and obvious punctuation issues such as double periods or commas. The editor will, however, let the writer know what kinds of silent changes have been made so the writer will be conscious of these kinds of issues that might pop up in future writing or self-editing.

Sometimes a writer might have ongoing difficulties with minor issues like confusion between homonyms or how to use commas or how to punctuate dialogue correctly. In cases like this, where the writer decides he or she simply cannot adequately deal with a particular problem,

the editor might be asked to go ahead and make silent changes for the issues in question. But this should definitely be discussed carefully between the editor and writer, and it should be in writing—possibly even in the editing contract. Remember, too, that an important part of being a writer is learning to understand and correct your own writing issues rather than passing them on to someone else to "fix" them. Silent changes may alternatively be made by experienced alpha or beta readers—but should be discussed between these helpers and the writer so it is clear what is to be done.

**Developmental editing (aka project editing): 3 kinds

A developmental editor at a publishing house guides a writer all the way from the idea stage of a writing project, through the initial draft, then through several editing drafts, and finally the final draft. This includes help with content, organization, and presentation. This editor suggests topics, helps with research, verifies facts, and helps plan the manuscript structure. Editing for content looks at the big picture—how the structure works. This type of editing most often occurs in non-fiction works.

Freelance developmental editing is sometimes done by a freelance editor, well before a manuscript is submitted to potential publishers or readied for self-publishing. A writer may have a great story idea and may even have written a full manuscript, but when a read-through, beta-reads, or a sample edit is done, it will become apparent that though the idea is great, the manuscript is going to require some major adjustments in order to really work. Alternatively, the manuscript may be technically (e.g. grammatically) accurate, but is lacking when it comes to story-telling skill. In either of these cases, a developmental edit may be needed before further editing.

A concept developmental editor or *early partial draft stage developmental editor* can help a writer develop an idea for a book. Sometimes a writer may get part way through writing a book, or may go through the planning stages, but either way may feel "stuck" when it comes to writing. The concept developmental editor (or a writing coach, if a writer prefers help from someone who can partner with the writer throughout the writing and editing process) can look over the outline and discuss the overall concept for the book with the writer to help determine the purpose of the book and how it should be approached. This kind of editor will read as much of the manuscript as has been completed, as well as other documents the writer may have prepared including chapter outlines, a synopsis of the book, character lists, and an overall outline—then will help the writer work out where he/she is headed with the piece.

** Substantive editing (aka structural editing)

This editing level examines both the overall story and some important, basic aspects of story-writing. Substantive editing works on things like story elements, plot, characterization, dialogue, scene order, point of view, eloquence of thought, setting, pace, logical transitions

and flow, consistency, and a pleasing resolution. This level may involve reorganizing sections and paragraphs for better flow of content.

Your self-editing team members, such as your alpha reader and your beta-readers, as well as writing-group or Feedback group members, can often point out these kinds of issues for you and help you improve your writing at this level. When you have done several self-editing drafts with your team's help, and feel you are ready to hire an editor, it is possible your editor, based on a sample edit or a read-through, may recommend more work at this level, before focusing on other lower levels.

For non-fiction writing like essays, a substantive editor can help you, the writer, with questions you didn't think of, rebuttals you didn't consider, and flaws in your logic, as well as ensure a strong introduction, conclusion, and well-organized points and details in between. This editor may also check URL links, captions, references, footnotes, and quotes, and check that permission has been granted to use copyrighted material. A structural editor may also work with you on your formatting, page numbers, index, table of contents, and front matter, though that may alternatively be done later by your designer or a specialist in these matters. If it turns out that you have a lot of writing problems, a substantive/structural edit may involve rewriting some chapters or sections—or even rewriting your entire manuscript if necessary—but remember, this is the path to writing an excellent book.

When unexpected writing problems crop up
Sometimes in the editing process, the editor—or indeed, the author and editing team—may realize that some major changes or improvements may be needed in plot, characterization, point of view, and so on. Or the author may suddenly come up with a great new scene or decide to develop a character more deeply or introduce a new character. And while these kinds of changes may indeed improve the story, even one small detail or event can have a cascading effect on the rest of the story. This can mean rewriting and re-editing the entire part that has already been edited and possibly the entire manuscript.

If this happens when you're already working with a professional editor, extra writing time and editing costs will be involved. This may result in creating a new contract, as the details of the original contract no longer apply if the writer decides to make major changes, or if the editor discovers unexpected problems which did not turn up in the sample edit. The latter may happen if the sample was not truly representative of the manuscript as a whole, or if the writer did not want to have the editor spend time on a read-through or did not provide at least a comprehensive proposal or synopsis.

This kind of problem can usually be avoided by going through a thorough self-editing process with the help of your self-editing team—and by being honest with your editor about your writing skills and needs.

** Stylistic editing

This editing level may be included with substantive/structural editing or alternatively with copyediting, but technically it is considered to be a separate level. It usually involves working on the manuscript paragraph by paragraph and sentence by sentence to improve such aspects as word usage, sentence construction, meaning, language, reading level, and rearranging sentences, paragraphs, and chapters for better flow, rhythm, and clarity. It also focuses on the author's voice, the narrator's voice, and other characters' voices. An author's work should usually be reflective of his or her unique voice, personality, and style, and this level of editing examines that, too.

** Copyediting

This is the editing level that many beginning writers think of as "editing"—but actually it is one of the last levels. Good copyediting can help make your work compelling and enjoyable for readers, as it polishes your manuscript by working on grammatical issues: spelling, grammar, punctuation, fact checking, word choice, and other mechanics of style. It makes sure your work is complete and consistent and ready to read.

As you can see, there is some overlap between stylistic editing and copy editing, and often an editor will do both jobs. As a writer, you are responsible, with the help of your self-editing team, to do the best job you can of self-editing at these levels before hiring an editor. Ideally, a copy editor works on a manuscript that already has been edited through developmental and/or substantive and stylistic editing levels, as well as lots of self-editing with input from various editing team members.

A copy editor may also look at aspects of your manuscript such as heading levels, art placement, national/regional spellings, citations, captions, permissions, back matter, cover copy, and CIP data. The copy editor may check accuracy of facts and quotes, though this may alternatively be done by a person who has expertise as a fact checker.

** Proofreader

A lot of new writers, when thinking about editing, have only proofreading in mind, as they think back to the "proofreading" exercises they did in Language Arts/English classes in school. A new writer may think his or her manuscript is well done and just needs someone like a local English teacher or even a friend or family member to find a few remaining spelling or punctuation errors before the manuscript can be submitted to agents or publishers or be self-

published. But in truth, proofreading is an editing level of its own—and it is the very last step in the editing process.

Once every other level has been completed, and the manuscript is as polished as the writer, writing team helpers, and a professional editor(s) can make it, the manuscript goes to a designer to be set up as it will look when published—whether it is a traditional book, e-book, magazine article, or other format, offline or online. The manuscript then goes to the printer who typesets the book and may print out a sample copy or return the print-ready e-file for proofing.

At that point, a professional, sharp-eyed proofreader will read the typeset sample copy or e-file (aka the proof) and look for any remaining errors—often tiny things like typos, spacing errors, small missing or repeated words, occasional spelling errors not previously caught (such as homonyms), errors in bibliographic and copyright information, problems with captions for illustrations, widows and orphans (words by themselves at the end or beginning of a page), and so on. The proofreader, rather than being an editor in the normal sense of a person who improves the text or makes stylistic changes, is a person who can make the book or other writing appear as perfect as possible before it goes out to readers. Thus, the proofreader should ideally be a person new to the manuscript (rather than the editor who has already worked on it) who can look at it with totally fresh eyes and catch as many little errors as possible.

The main editing levels have often been described as being like the house-building process. The developmental editing level is similar to the work an architect and a building contractor do. They plan the building so it will be structurally sound, hire the trades and sub-trades who have specialized skills, and organize the overall planning, deadlines, and so on. The structural/substantive editing level is like the building inspector who examines the foundations and structure of the building, from basement to roof and in-between, including basic, important things like framing, electrical, plumbing, heating and drywalling. The stylistic editing level can be thought of as the designer stage of house building: painting walls, choosing flooring and installing it, choosing kitchen and bathroom plumbing fixtures, and choosing and installing major appliances. The copy-editing level can be thought of as the decorative stage of house building: choosing and installing light fixtures, furnishings, artwork, and all the small details that make a home look and feel finished and ready to live in. Finally, the proofreading level is like the final check and touch-ups before move-in day or before showing the house to potential buyers.

Putting these notes into practice:

Now that we've had an overall introduction to the editing levels, in the rest of this series we will take a look at each of the major levels in detail. You can use the checklists in the following "level" sections to help you self-edit your work—with the help of your self-editing team (alpha reader, beta readers, writers' group, Feedback group, writing partner) as needed. When you, with your team, have made your manuscript as well-written as you can, you can hire appropriate editorial help to polish your work. If you find yourself really stuck at any of the levels while self-editing, you may want to hire a specific level editor to help you with those particular issues before continuing with your self-editing work.

Don't forget to place this exercise in your binder or Duotang.