

TIME FOR AN EDITOR

By Norma J Hill (aka Pen and Paper Mama)

© 2021

1. Do I Really Need an Editor?

Do you still need a professional freelance editor if you've gone through the self-editing process with help from members of your team, doing multiple drafts and making your manuscript the best you can? Probably yes—but possibly not. Let's start by defining the role of an editor—first, a freelance editor, and then editors who work for various kinds of publishers. After we have that sorted out, we'll look at when you probably don't need an editor, and then times when hiring an editor is a good idea.

A freelance editor's true purpose

A professional freelance editor is a specialist. What can an editor do that perhaps you and your self-editing team may be unable to accomplish?

- An editor understands that agents and publishers—and readers—are looking for great stories or nonfiction writing that is told well in a unique way and can provide you with guidance that can bring your manuscript to that level. Publishers are seeking manuscripts for which they can take an educated risk financially, trusting there is a good chance the book (or other writing format) will sell well.
- An editor helps you polish and refine your story and direct its focus along a particular course.
- An editor cuts out what is nonessential to the story's purpose, enhances the major points, and draws attention to where you want the audience to focus.
- An editor has fresh eyes and can spot things that you, and even your volunteer team members, may not have noticed.
- An editor provides a fresh perspective.
- An editor can be objective when you're in love with your work and hate the thought of changing anything in it. An editor can help you overcome your emotional attachment to your work, so you will become more objective about your writing and understand why it is often necessary to "kill your darlings...".
- An editor is a communication expert. An editor can clarify your meaning and message for your readers by eliminating wordiness and dead weight that doesn't offer meaningful, necessary details, while still adding variety, emphasis, and coherence to your writing. The

editor can help you tighten up your language so it succinctly tells a clear story or presents a clear explanation, and at the same time can teach you to use vivid, vigorous language that adds energy and attitude.

- An editor can help you share your message successfully so that readers will understand it and act upon it.
- An editor serves not only the writer but also serves the project, the potential publisher, and the readers, with experience and understanding of what these audience members expect and want. An editor brings balance between your writing vision and goals versus the requirements and expectations of publishers and readers.
- An editor loves to read and write and can help you assemble the parts of your manuscript as if they were parts of a jigsaw puzzle, putting them together to create a fascinating picture readers will love to explore.
- An editor has a strong eye for detail, a broad vocabulary, and knows a lot of grammar rules, even odd ones.
- An editor can help with broad aspects of writing, such as organization, purpose, theme, emphasis, and coherence, while also helping with details such as inconsistencies, wordiness, and other writing problems.
- An editor might sometimes seem to be opinionated and even pushy—but that’s because an editor’s goal is to help you make your writing the best it can be. Editors want to make good writing better and great writing outstanding.
- An editor will maintain the writer’s voice, style, and message, while simultaneously helping the writer enhance, develop, and refine his or her writing skills.

What are in-house editors?

A traditional publishing company or an assisted publishing (self-publishing) company employs in-house editors. This type of editor works with authors on the publisher’s behalf, editing books prior to publication. In most cases, these books, in order to be accepted for publishing, will have already gone through several self-editing drafts with the help of a self-editing team, and will have previously been edited by a freelance editor who has worked with the writer to do even more self-editing drafts. The writer may have also had some guidance from an agent.

Reputable traditional publishing companies have in-house editors who the company pays. If a company asks the author to pay for editing by an in-house editor, this is NOT a traditional publisher but an assisted self-publishing or hybrid publishing company (sometimes called a vanity publisher). These are each different types of publishers and it is important to understand the differences between them. If you choose a publisher who asks you to pay for editing and other publishing services, be very careful and research the company thoroughly, comparing its rates, services, and the reviews it has received from independent reviewers.

A newspaper or magazine editor, or website/blog editor might only have minutes or a few hours or days to check or rework a story or article. A novel editor or nonfiction book editor may, alternatively, work with an author for a few weeks or even months, back and forth, through multiple drafts, depending on the amount of help needed. Traditional publishing companies often have several editors who specialize in different levels of editing and may work with you over a period of a year or two.

If you are working with an editor who is part of a publishing company or who works for a magazine, website, or other media, that editor and you must both follow the company's rules, including the in-house style guide and standards, the look of the company's product(s), the company vision, the type of content, their readers' needs and expectations, and publishing house deadlines. Similarly, contests and anthologies also have rules and deadlines. If you are working with a freelance editor before submitting your work to any of these publications, it will be very helpful if you let the editor know your publishing plans.

So: do you need to hire a freelance editor?

Probably not:

- You aren't sure you want to keep on with writing. If you are just self-publishing one book such as a memoir for your family, and aren't planning to write anymore, or if you are just starting out by submitting short pieces to smaller magazines or anthologies but aren't sure you really want to make writing a career, consider sticking with self-editing helpers who can give you free or low-cost help. If your potential impresses your self-editing team and they encourage you to invest in strong, professional editing which you can learn from, which will make your writing shine, and which will build your long-term reputation, then it's worth considering that.
- When you have just finished the first draft of a book, you definitely need to first reach out to your personal self-editing team, and then do more self-editing based on their input. You'll most likely need a freelance editor eventually, but this isn't the time yet.
- Cleaning up the manuscript for your self-editing team: First, do your best writing and personal self-editing before you share it with your team. They are, after all, there to help you improve before professional editing. Hiring an editor before having your team help you is like hiring a professional cleaner to come in and clean your house before you and a friend or two tidy up and clear out the junk.
- If you want to tidy up your minor writing issues before you give your manuscript to your self-editing team readers to check over, that is not an editor's job. Your team members' job is to look more at the "big picture" issues, not focus on the picky little spelling, punctuation, and minor grammar issues. If you really are embarrassed or worried about those small issues, do more self-editing, make use of editing tools and resources, and/or

hire someone with fairly good proofreading skills (such as an English teacher or a fairly experienced writer) to give it a once-over. Until you have completed the self-editing process with your team, it's not time to hire an editor—unless your team has advised you that you have writing and editing issues that go beyond their skills and yours.

- If you want to sound impressive or give your work an extra push to get the attention of an agent or publisher, but you just don't want to put the energy and effort into first doing the best work you can, an editor is not the person to do the impressing. Remember, if your writing can't stand on its own in general terms of a quality story or a strong nonfiction presentation, you need to improve your writing skills and do more self-editing with the help of your team. If you feel really stuck in terms of the overall storyline in a novel, or the layout of a nonfiction work, a developmental editor can help at this point. Then, after more self-editing yourself and with your team, an editor can give your work a final polish and help you with issues you haven't been able to resolve with your team. But if you haven't first done your personal best, the truth about your writing skills (or lack of them) and/or about your motivation and determination (or lack thereof) will almost certainly come out. Either follow the full self-editing process, and then get an editor's help if needed, or think twice about whether you truly want to be a writer. If you really want to get someone else to do your writing for you, hire a ghostwriter, co-writer, or re-writer (but warning: they can be very expensive, and the result in terms of content and style may not be what you had expected).
- When you haven't bothered to research editors and are just planning to go with the first one you've heard about—Stop! Make sure the editor you work with is truly an experienced editor who can help you with your project's specific needs.
- When you have strong writing and editing skills, you may not need an editor, especially with shorter pieces, such as magazine articles, newspaper stories, or guest blog posts. Learn to be a skillful writer, take courses, use good writing tools, get help from your self-editing/critique team, and increase your own self-editing skills. Practice writing daily through journaling, blog writing, and pieces such as letters to the editor. Then decide—does your work still need the help of an editor? How have readers received your guest blog posts and editorial letters? What can an editor do for you that you can't do yourself? Self-assess your work, for example, with the help of the checklists in this book and/or with the use of quality grammar check tools. Then have your team of self-editing helpers assess your work—and even discuss your work with a potential editor after he or she has done a sample edit of your work, but before you go ahead with a professional edit.
- When you are still learning the basics of writing, don't invest in freelance editing. Instead, invest in writing skill development. Work through multiple practice manuscripts. Read voraciously. Make a conscious effort to get in tune with your story telling abilities. Find a local writing class that provides face-to-face learning and personal feedback. Supplement in-person classes with free MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) or courses from the big learning companies online. Read outstanding books (and learn to read like a writer);

listen to writing podcasts and YouTube videos while you jog or commute; join a critique group; find a regular writing and accountability partner; and check out quality posts on websites and blogs.

- For school or job assignments: At school, you're there to learn. Pay attention in class, follow the teacher's instructions, maybe get fellow students to look the assignment over and make suggestions—then hand it in and let the teacher guide you on how to improve. On jobs which require writing, the employer probably hired you based on your writing training or experience as demonstrated in your resume and cover letter—you were honest about it, right? So just do your best, and if the employer wants you to improve your writing skills, take some lessons and get fellow writers at your writers' group to give you a hand, but unless your writing is a total disaster and you can't fix it even with your team's help, you probably don't need a professional edit. On the other hand, if you are writing your master's thesis, doctoral thesis, or a very important paper at university, an edit (by an editor qualified to edit those kinds of documents) could be a good idea.
- When writing for small publications like magazines or newsletters, when getting published isn't a sure thing, or when you won't get paid enough (or at all) to cover your editing costs, usually you should depend on your personal self-editing along with help from your team. Still, if you don't have any writing credits, and writing for that periodical will be good for your writing resume and/or will catch the eye of a lot of readers, especially ones from whom you might get future writing jobs, then the name recognition might be worth the cost of professional editing.

Probably yes:

Now let's turn to reasons a freelance editor could be a good investment:

- Do you want to be seen as a professional writer and/or have a writing career? Whatever kind of publishing you plan to do, ranging from short pieces to novel-length books, and from traditional to self-publishing, be sure to present yourself as a professional. Even in practice writing and publishing experiences such as school or other course assignments, or anthologies for a writers' camp or conference contest, always behave as a professional. It will make a real difference in your success as a writer. An editor can help you with developing your professionalism.
- Story is the basis of a great book—whether it is fiction or non-fiction. If you and your team have taken care of the more technical details, and you have written a strong basic story, your editor can help you focus more on the storyline, your writing style, and other important aspects of writing that result in a great story.
- What advice has your writing team given you? I'm not talking about your mom or the odd team member who is effusive in their praise of your work, but about the general advice

you've received from your team. If they suggest an editor could really help you, they are most likely right.

- Do you have more to learn? Do you consider yourself an accomplished writer since you've already done lots of self-editing with your team? Or do you think you can still grow and learn more? How about guidance from an editing professional who can point out your strengths and weaknesses and provide feedback and training on how to take your writing and self-editing skills to the next level? If you're going to write more books (or other writing) in the future, ask yourself if extra help right now, through working with an editor, could set you on a potential writing career path.
- An unbiased third party is invaluable. Even experienced writers lack objectivity about their own writing. An editor is an unbiased third party who can help cut out unnecessary details or point out where you need to add more details to make your manuscript clear and understandable. Your readers are not mind-readers, so your editor can identify parts of your writing that are unclear and help you provide more clarity for your audience. Your editor can help you write more vigorously and bring a fresh set of eyes to your writing, helping you to ensure your readers will understand your message the way you intend and then act on it. As a writer, you tend to see on your written page what you expect to see, and even quality grammar and spelling check tools are robots, so the nuance and judgment an editor provides is helpful. While your self-editing team is definitely helpful, an editor brings professional expertise to your writing.
- A professional editor has broad training and experience. While your self-editing/critique team has been very helpful, a good professional freelance editor has a breadth of training and experience that your team members may not have. Your editor also most likely understands the publishing industry in more depth and can help you prepare to find an agent and/or publisher or help you make your self-published book the best quality it can be. Editors often have contacts with talented designers and self-publishing companies if you choose the self-publishing path.
- If you've already been seeking an agent or publisher, but have not been having success with your queries, it may be time to ask yourself some questions. Have you received any positive interest, never mind a contract? Has your query been getting you in the door, but then you haven't had any firm offers? Does the feedback you've been getting from agents or publishers not make sense to you, or does it not fit your vision for your book? Has an agent asked you for an R&R (Revise and Resubmit) but you're not sure how to work with the agent's suggestions and requests? An editor may help you with any of these issues. If you've been submitting your manuscript to literary agents and/or publishers for some time and have been getting rejections, a good editor may help you improve enough to get accepted or advise you on other options.
- Do you need a freelance editor if a publisher's editor(s) will take your book through yet more editing and self-editing? A developmental editor, or at least a substantive freelance editor, who understands story craft and who has worked with agents and publishers and

knows what they are looking for, can definitely help you place your book well in a very competitive publishing market. A paragraph-level and/or sentence-level specialist (a stylistic editor and/or copy editor), can tell you how their services will fit your needs and improve your manuscript, based on the self-editing work you've already done. Both authors and editors need to understand the levels of editing and writing, editing and publishing processes. Editors need to be clear about their specialties and be prepared to decline jobs if they know they can't provide the help the writer needs to make the work suitable for presenting to agents and/or publishers. Be leery of editors who say, "I can do any kind of editing well." It's possible, but not likely. Check lots of reviews.

- What about self-publishing? If you are planning to self-publish (especially without the help of a publisher who provides strong editorial support), and you want to build a strong readership and give them good value, you really must present a professional product—and a good freelance editor can help you do that. Your reputation as a writer is on the line.
- Are you an expert in your subject area but not a skilled writer? If you are an expert in a certain subject (usually this refers to nonfiction but can also refer to fictional genres in which knowledge related to the setting and important plot and characters details is essential), but you are not an experienced writer, an editor can make the difference in producing a publishable work. Try to find an editor who has at least a good basic understanding of your subject area and/or genre.

And a couple of important caveats:

There are some things professional editing can't do for you. It isn't a magic fix. There are no guarantees in the editing and publishing business. If you haven't got a good story line or your writing skills are so poor that even an editor is confused and dismayed, no amount of editing is likely to help you get accepted by a publisher. Likewise, no one can guarantee that a book or other piece of writing will be a bestseller. Anyone who says they can make this guarantee is being dishonest. Publishing is a risk-taking business.

While good editing can improve your manuscript, publishers are looking for more than just the quality of your work—for example, they take into consideration what they have already published or have already accepted for publishing which might be similar to your work; what is currently "hot" (and what is already on its way out of fashion); the audience you've already built; your own research related to publishing and marketing and your willingness and ability to do most of the marketing—and of course, how many copies they hope to sell.

Editors can only work with what is already there. Get busy and take courses, attend conferences, study books and style manuals, read widely in your genre, and practice, practice, practice. Work through the self-editing process with a strong self-editing team and do lots of

self-editing drafts. Then find an excellent editor who can help you improve your writing skills even more—think of the editor as a writing and editing coach and guide, rather than simply as a gateway to publishing.

Just being “professionally edited” may not improve your chances. In fact, especially if you’re just starting out, agents and publishers are looking for skilled and creative writers who can deliver a potentially publishable manuscript without too much direct outside help—especially help that is actually someone else doing much of your writing for you (unless you are someone famous or have some other sure-fire “in”). What to do? Focus on becoming an excellent writer who can tell an intriguing and satisfying story (whether fiction or nonfiction—or poetry, academic or technical writing, or whatever format you’re working in). Then seek a good editor who can help you polish your well-written manuscript to attract the attention of publishers. Also, understand the writing and publishing business and be prepared to work hard through the entire process, including marketing your work from when you begin it until long after you have published it.

Some alternatives to freelance or traditional publishing company editors:

In some countries and regions, companies that call themselves “literary consultancies” or “manuscript assessment services” offer critique and editing services (note that you rarely get to research and choose the person(s) the companies assign). They may also offer to evaluate the marketability of your work and suggest where and how to submit it—but remember, there are no marketability guarantees despite what they might say, so if you want to try such companies, focus on using them to improve your writing and self-editing, instead of on their publishing claims.

Indeed, many assisted publishing companies, such as “self-publishing companies” or “hybrid publishing companies,” also offer to provide these kinds of services. While some of these companies may be less expensive than a professional freelance editor—though others may be much more expensive—it’s important to research and check thorough, objective reviews by people who aren’t employees of the company or who are not otherwise connected to the company. While there are a growing number of assisted publishing companies which have a good reputation, there are many, many more that are actually vanity presses or outright scams. Be extremely careful.

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

And now go on to part 2 in this series: What Editor Should I Hire?