

TIME FOR AN EDITOR

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6. Important Notes to Editors (and Writers, Too)

It is not surprising that many writers, especially ones who've never worked with editors before, will come with expectations and assumptions that can cause issues in the writer-editor relationship. But because editors have been doing editing for so long, sometimes they forget the writer needs patience and guidance, and that there is much the writer may not know or expect.

If you are an editor reading this, here are some things to remember, and to discuss with your writing clients, especially when you are working with a writer who has not been in a writer-editor relationship before. Writers will also want to read these reminders.

Editing is a complex process:

Writers often don't realize how complex a job editing really is. Editors need to have sufficient time to do a quality job and can't rush through it to save time and money. They need to take time to be attentive to detail and may need to stop to check a style guide, dictionary, or other reference. They may need to think of, and write out, suggestions of ways the writer could clear up a confusing or awkward sentence. They may need to stop and do some fact-checking of statements made in the manuscript. They also cannot work late when they are tired; likewise, squeezing a "rush job" in can actually take away from the quality of the editor's work.

Maintaining the writer's voice, vision, and style:

Editors want to maintain the author's voice, vision, and style as much as possible, yet still help the writer improve writing skills and craft. These are different aspects of editing, and writers may think that suggested improvements in writing skills are attempts to make the author's voice sound like the editor's voice instead. Be prepared to discuss this if the issue arises.

Emotional attachment to one's writing:

Writers, especially first-timers, are often convinced that the writing they are submitting for editing is already beautifully done, and they may have a deep emotional attachment to it as it may reflect their personal "heart" and "passions." They may therefore be shocked when an

editor suggests that there is a lot of work still to be done on the piece, and thus writers may become very defensive and even offended. The editor needs to be prepared for this kind of reaction. Ways to avoid it include a thorough discussion about editing and about the writer's purpose and writing journey to this point, as well as explaining about the needs and expectations of readers and publishers (to whom the writer wants to sell the work).

Constructive—and encouraging—feedback:

Editors need to think about their advice as giving feedback rather than orders and try to word it in that way. In the end, this is the writer's project, and the writer has the right to decide about potential changes and improvements. It has been said that editors are like "midwives," helping to bring a healthy baby into the world, but the manuscript, in the end, is the author's baby, not the editor's. An editor can, before editing, discuss how confusing writing, inconsistencies, plot holes, and outright writing errors can negatively affect the potential of the manuscript to be accepted by publishers and/or readers, so the writer understands the importance of allowing the editor to provide a "healthy birth experience" resulting in the writer's "baby" being born healthy and continuing to thrive.

Acknowledgements:

Editors can suggest edits but cannot demand them. However, if the writer insists on not following changes the editor thinks may be very important to the success of the writing, the editor can require that the writer not include the editor's name in the book or other piece of writing. This option should be part of the editing contract, and the editor should have the right to look through the manuscript before publishing to make sure he/she is comfortable with it. And, of course, the author has the right to decide whether to include the editor in the acknowledgments (unless the editor has asked to not be included).

Clarifying understanding and ongoing discussion:

Editors need to know as precisely as possible what the author's goals are in relation to the editing job, then clarify it back to ensure joint understanding. They also need to know about the writer's journey so far, as in the list provided earlier in this series. The editor is not being snoop or hard to get along with. The more information the editor has, the better he or she can help the writer with the editing process. There may be times during the actual editing that the editor may need to stop and discuss an issue with the writer before carrying on. The writer needs to be prepared for ongoing discussions and questions. It is wise for an editor to have a list of questions prepared to give to a prospective client, so when the two meet, they can have an effective discussion.

Personal boundaries:

Editors have personal boundaries around what they are capable of and/or will do, how much time they have available for the editing (and when they are available to take calls from the writer), what their working hours schedule is, what kinds of emotional reactions they are willing to deal with, and so on. Writers sometimes do not realize that editors have lives that include other clients, family responsibilities, personal interests, physical and emotional limitations, and so on. Editors need to gently but firmly make these boundaries clear to the writer, and the writer needs to respect them. Of course, the writer's boundaries are also important, and also need to be known and respected.

Writing, editing, and publishing terminology:

Many new writers are not familiar with the technical terminology used when discussing writing, editing, and publishing issues. Editors need to keep this in mind, and let clients know they can ask for clarification about anything they don't understand. It should prepare the editor to explain terminology and processes clearly, in lay-person language.

How editing is done:

Writers often have an idea about "how editing is done," based on their school experiences or on what they've heard from other writers. Sometimes these expectations are far from what professional editors do; sometimes they are simply technical issues such as whether the editing will be done on paper with traditional editing markings or on the computer, such as using Word's Track Changes and Editorial Comments functions. It is wise to discuss these kinds of details clearly before starting the edit.

Rules, purposes, style—and reader expectations:

Writers are often not aware that stylistic conventions change over time, and that what they learned from their teacher in school or even university may not be current. Also, the purposes of school assignments and professional writing are not necessarily the same, and the requirements may differ. Writers also may not be aware that different types of writing require following the rules of different style guides (including general ones for specific writing types, as well as more specific ones required by publishers), and that different genres have particular expectations readers look forward to. It is worthwhile to discuss what style guide the editor will follow—and when it is okay (or not) to "break the rules," since some writers believe they can develop their own style choices for their own purposes, even if it makes it hard for potential readers to follow and enjoy. Writers may need to be reminded that they are to serve their readers, not just themselves.

Editor levels, ghostwriters, co-authors, and other options:

Writers may not be aware there are different levels and specialties of editors, or that there are options such as ghostwriters or co-authors. They may not realize they sometimes might not

even need the help of a professional editor, depending on what kind of writing they are doing. Writers may not even understand that it is necessary for them to self-edit as much as possible (with volunteer helpers) before working with an editor. If, after initial discussions and a sample edit, the editor feels that any of these issues is relative to the writer's work, the editor should be honest about the writer's options.

An editor is not a “fixer”:

Some writers think an editor's job is just to go ahead and “fix” the manuscript. Usually in this case, they are thinking of simple errors like spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. They may even be unaware that there is any more to editing than fixing these types of errors. While some editors are willing to just do these kinds of simple fixes, many editors believe writers need to learn to write properly, and that doing the self-editing after an editor has pointed out errors is an important part of the writing and editing process. An editor needs to be clear about how much “fixing” he/she will do, as well as pointing out that there will probably be a need for more work on the piece beyond these simple mistakes.

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

And now go on to part 7 in this series: Some Editing Reminders for Writers—so You Aren't Surprised!