



# Information Sheet: Editing

Fi we didnt have editors, our wrok would look like thus.

They're easy to see, aren't they? Typos and spelling errors are easy to spot when you're reading someone else's work. But it's actually quite difficult to edit your own words. Yes, there is spell check, but it won't pick up "thus" in the sentence above, and it won't tell you that you should have written "and" instead of "an". As writers, you'll read what's in your head – what you meant to write – instead of what you've actually written.

This is why editors are worth their weight in gold.

There are many different types of editing and as you embark on the publication process – whether through a traditional publisher or as a self-publisher – there are some terms you'll get to know.

The three types of editing are:

- Structural editing
- Line editing
- Copyediting

There are also proof readers and beta readers. To be extra confusing, line editing and copyediting can sometimes mean the same thing.

## Structural editing

A structural edit is also referred to as a content, developmental or substantive edit. This type of editing looks at the major elements of your book, such as structure, plot, pacing, style, character, setting, voice and dialogue.

Here are some typical questions for fiction. An editor will look at:

- The overall structure: how does it all fit together?
- The scenes, sections or chapters: do they work together in a cohesive way to produce an overall effect on the reader. Do they each serve to progress the story?
- The flow of the story: does it logically hold together? Is it narratively strong? Is there a "saggy middle" in which the plot and characters seem to have lost their way?
- The characters: are they fully developed?
- Is there a logical character arc for each? Do any characters randomly appear or disappear from the plot throughout the story?



- Is there a strong and consistent voice?
- Do you have too little or too much dialogue?

For nonfiction, an editor's approach will be slightly different:

- Does the structure flow clearly and logically?
- Is there any information that should be included, but isn't?
- Is there anything that is unnecessary?
- Is it appropriate for the audience and subject matter?

It is not uncommon for a writer to be asked to undertake structural edits on their book. Sometimes it can even take four or five edits before a book is as strong as it can be.

## Should I hire a structural editor?

If you succeed in signing with a traditional publisher, an editor will be assigned to work on your book. You won't have to pay for this.

If you feel that you need help with the big picture of your book, either before you submit to an agent or traditional publisher or before you self-publish, a structural editor can help you. You will get most value out of a structural edit if you've completed at least a first draft.

## Line editing and copy editing

In some publishing houses, the same editor will do both and the terms will be interchangeable.

A line edit focuses on the finer details of a book on a paragraph-level. It involves rewriting sentences, improving clarity and flow from one sentence to another, shifting sentences and paragraphs around, or deleting sentences or paragraphs. It is about improving the writing and story after the structural changes, but before a final polish.

A line editor will look asks questions such as:

- Is the writing stylistically coherent?
- Are your sentences too long, too wordy or all the same length?
- Does the writing have rhythm and pace?
- Does each sentence, paragraph and chapter convey what you intended or have you gone off track?
- Do you have passages or chapters that serve the same purpose or effect?
- Do you have repeated phrases, overused favourite expressions or clichés that need trimming?
- Have you changed the eye or hair colour of a character midway through the book?
- Have you repeated parts of the plot? (for instance, a character may have the same realisation twice in different parts of the book)
- Have you given two characters the same name, or changed a surname part way through?



## Copyediting

Copyediting involves correcting any errors in grammar, punctuation or spelling, fact checking and point of view issues.

Checklist for copyediting:

- Correct spelling, grammar and punctuation, including styles (e.g. double vs. single quotation marks)
- Proper word usage
- Clarity of sentences
- Repeated or redundant words removed or replaced
- Consistent use of headings, italics and bold
- Consistent descriptions and details
- Remove outdated or inappropriate language (e.g. localised slang, offensive language)
- Fact check

## Proof reading

Proof reading is the final check over a book. The aim of a proof reader is to correct any small errors of spelling or punctuation, in addition to any inconsistencies. It should also catch any formatting errors, like out of place spaces or indents. This is the final stage of editing.

## Beta readers

Beta readers are friends, acquaintances or strangers who read your book like any ordinary reader would. They tell you what works and what doesn't, although they might not have the expertise to fix it.

Who is the ideal beta reader? The person needs to give an honest opinion - even if it sounds harsh. They don't need to be writers and sometimes it's better if they're not. They do, however, need to be a reader of the genre or style of book they are asked to read. Different genres have different reader expectations. Only a fan of romance will know and understand the tropes, plot, pacing and other elements that the readership for that book will want. Similarly with fantasy or science fiction. For this reason, family and friends aren't always good beta readers. They will love what you've written because they love you.

Some writers say the ideal number of beta readers is three to six. This number helps writers navigate what is actually not working in a book and what is personal preference. Beta readers can be found via a writers organisation, writing groups or classes, book clubs, social media (like Facebook or Twitter), advertisements or through friends of friends.

There is no 'rule' about when to use beta readers - or not. Some writers recommend after the first draft, after the structural edit, or even when stuck in the writing stage. It's a good idea to ask questions of your beta readers. This will draw thoughtful and helpful answers from them, rather than easy responses like 'I enjoyed it' or 'I didn't like it.'



### **Here's a checklist of questions writers can use:**

- Were you interested in the story from the beginning? Would you have kept reading if it was lent to you? Why or why not?
- Did you understand who the characters were, what the setting was and what was happening from the beginning of the story? Why or why not?
- How did you feel about the main character? Were they believable? Did you find them interesting or likeable?
- How did you feel about the support characters?
- Was the setting realistic? Why or why not?
- Were there any parts of the story that lagged or in which you lost interest? Why or why not?
- Are there any parts you think should be elaborated on?
- Are there any parts that resonated with you or moved you emotionally? If yes, which parts?
- Were there any parts that stood out to you? Why or why not?
- Were there any confusing or frustrating parts? If yes, what were they?
- Are there any inconsistencies that you noticed (e.g. character details changing)?
- Was the dialogue interesting? Did it sound natural?
- Did you feel there was a good balance of description and dialogue? If not, which parts didn't you like?
- Was there enough conflict or tension throughout?
- Was the ending satisfying?
- Did you enjoy the writing style? Why or why not? Do you think the writing style suited the genre?
- Did you notice any bad writing habits (e.g. repeated words or phrases, punctuation or spelling mistakes)?

## **Critique Partner**

A critique partner is another writer who reads and provides feedback on your work. They are a cross between a structural editor and beta reader. Usually critique partners swap work.

## **Manuscript assessments**

Manuscript assessments are provided by experts - usually experienced writers, editors or publishers. They consist of a report that outlines the structural strengths and weaknesses of a book. This focuses on plot, pacing, style, character, dialogue, setting and voice. They can also assess whether a book is ready for publication, how it fits in the industry, and may advise on the challenges it may face in getting published.

Manuscript assessments may also be undertaken for submission requirements, including a synopsis, cover letter, biography or first chapter.

Writers SA offers a paid manuscript assessment service for members. Find out [more details here](#).



## Tips for self-editing

If you want to edit your work yourself, here are some tips to make sure your manuscript is the best it can be.

**Let it sit for a while.** Many writers finish a book and then put it aside for a while. This may be a week or even a few months. That distance can help you bring fresh eyes to your work: to see it as a reader rather than as the writer. You'll more likely see what is actually on the page, rather than what you envision. Some writers will also change the typeface of the whole manuscript before editing to turn it into something that looks unfamiliar.

When it comes to beginning your edit, it will help to do the steps in order:

- structural editing
- line editing
- copyediting / proof reading.

If you're going to engage beta readers, critique partners or manuscript assessments, make sure you've completed your thorough structural edit. There's no point proof reading a book that's going to undergo major structural changes.

Don't rush it. Editing can be a long and painful process, but it's important to get it right.

Writers should always produce their best work before submitting to an editor. This is especially true when submitting for publication. Although publishing houses provide editors, it is expected that a book is almost publication ready upon acquisition.

## Finding an editor

You may request a sample edit—about 1,000 words to a chapter—to gauge an editor's ability and style. When selecting the sample to send to an editor, it's a good idea to use a section from the middle of the novel (since the beginning is usually the most polished part). A good editor will respect your voice and style but provide professional insight and corrections. They will demonstrate an understanding of the content and knowledge of your vision. A poor editor will fail these tests; they may also introduce new errors.

Editors can be found through:

- Referrals: the best editors are often found through word of mouth, usually through writing organisations, writing groups or workshops.
- Society of Editors (SA)
- Institute of Professional Editors Limited
- [Freelance Editors Network](#)