



THE FOUR KINDS OF EDITING

Choosing the help your manuscript actually needs

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You send an editor your novel and ask for "a good polish." The editor asks whether you mean developmental editing, line editing, copyediting or proofreading.

You were hoping for a cleaner book. You appear to have ordered a small committee.

The names describe different kinds of attention. Understanding them helps you revise in a useful order and discuss professional help without buying a service that solves the wrong problem. They are common categories, not four universally standardized packages. Always check what an editor means by the label.

DEVELOPMENTAL EDITING: DOES THE BOOK WORK?

Developmental editing considers the manuscript's underlying shape and content. In fiction, that might include plot, character development, viewpoint, pacing and whether the ending fulfils the opening's promises. In practical nonfiction, it might involve the argument, missing explanations and the order of ideas.

Suppose your heroine spends most of the novel seeking her missing sister, then abandons the search because a handsome stranger has opened a bakery. The bakery may be delightful. Readers will still have questions about the sister.

A developmental editor helps identify such problems and possible ways forward. Depending on the agreement, you might receive a report, manuscript comments, a consultation or some combination. Do not assume the editor will rewrite the book or correct every sentence. A manuscript assessment may offer broad diagnosis with fewer annotations; ask about the actual deliverable.

Begin this work yourself by summarizing chapters, examining cause and effect, and checking that major choices have believable consequences.

LINE EDITING: HOW DOES THE WRITING LAND?

Line editing examines how sentences and paragraphs create meaning and experience. It attends to clarity, rhythm, emphasis, repetition, transitions and voice. The label overlaps with what some editors call stylistic editing, although service boundaries vary.

Consider: "She experienced a feeling of considerable unease as she became aware of footsteps behind her."

One revision is: "Footsteps followed her. She stopped. So did they."

That version makes the threat immediate. It is not automatically better in every novel. A reflective narrator might need a slower sentence. Line editing should help the book sound more convincingly like itself, rather than make every author sound brisk and slightly alarmed.

Read a passage aloud and ask where its energy falters or its meaning blurs. Do you need a sharper verb, a clearer connection, or room for a thought to settle?

COPYEDITING: IS THE TEXT CORRECT AND CONSISTENT?

Copyediting usually addresses spelling, grammar, punctuation, usage and consistency. An editor may also query unclear wording and apparent factual or continuity problems within the agreed scope.

If a character is Leila in chapter one and Laila in chapter eight, someone needs to decide whether she has changed her name or the author has changed their mind. A style sheet records decisions such as preferred spellings, capitalization and treatment of numbers. For fiction, it can also record names and recurring details.

Copyediting does not guarantee comprehensive fact-checking. Verifying every historical claim, quotation or technical detail may require separately agreed research or specialist review. Tell the editor what your book contains and what you need checked.

For your own pass, choose appropriate language references, record decisions, and investigate inconsistencies rather than accepting every software suggestion. Deliberate dialect and fragments may belong to the voice.

PROOFREADING: DID THE FINISHED PAGES SURVIVE?

In a publishing workflow, proofreading is the final check after editing and layout. It catches remaining text errors and presentation problems: missing text, inconsistent headings, awkward page breaks or a running header announcing the wrong chapter with complete confidence.

A proofreader may catch a copyediting error, but proof stage is a poor place to redesign the plot. Extensive changes can disturb layout and introduce mistakes. For ebooks, check the converted reading experience too; print pages and reflowable screens behave differently.

Someone offering "proofreading" of an unformatted manuscript may mean a lighter text check. Ask whether final pages are included.

WHERE THE JOBS MEET

A repeated paragraph could concern a developmental editor because it interrupts the story, a line editor because it weakens the prose, or a copyeditor because it appears accidental. Editors notice things outside their principal task. What they are contracted to investigate and repair matters.

A useful sequence is structure, language, copyediting, then final proofs. Projects sometimes combine stages. Avoid expensive detail work on material you still expect to replace.

BEFORE YOU BOOK

Describe your genre, length, revision stage, budget and concerns. Ask what is included, how changes arrive, how many rounds are covered and what happens after you revise. A sample edit or consultation, when offered, can help assess fit.

A limited budget does not make you less serious. Self-editing, critique exchanges and a targeted assessment can help identify the next useful step. A partial edit can teach you a great deal, but the unedited remainder still needs attention.

Choose help for the problem in front of you. If the missing sister still needs rescuing, begin there. The commas can wait their turn.

SOURCE NOTE

Editorial stages and final proofs: Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading, "About proofreading and editing": <https://www.ciep.uk/resource/about-proofreading-and-editing.html> . Four-part framework and overlapping responsibilities: Editors Canada, Professional Editorial Standards: <https://editors.ca/publications/professional-editorial-standards/> . Individual agreements determine scope.

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