

How to SELECT the right freelance editor

A variety of editorial consultants are available for hire, but the types of services they offer vary. Here's a handy overview.

By Ally E. Peltier

DESPITE doomsayers' predictions, book publishing remains a big business. Thousands of titles are published every year by hundreds of publishers, but

it takes more than a good idea and clean manuscript to get in the door. These days, would-be authors typically face knee-deep slush piles, editors who only review agented submissions, and agents who accept fewer clients each year.

To get an edge, many writers hire freelance editors in advance to review and edit their book proposals, manuscripts, synopses and query letters. This lets them approach the submission process with pitch-perfect material that will help command the attention necessary for a book deal. But with individuals and companies offering everything from rewriting to reviewing, how does one choose the right editorial service?

First, identify just what kind of service you want. Be aware that both editors and writers use words like "book doctor" and "editorial consultant" very loosely, and that the word "editing" is often used as an umbrella term for various types of editorial work:

Book doctoring. This is an intensive hybrid of editing and rewriting often encompassing several of the following services. Some book doctors will do

whatever is necessary to "fix" your manuscript, rather than showing you how to fix it yourself. This approach is best for those authors who are not up to the task of writing a publishable book (either for lack of time or skill), and whose goal is just to get their story or information out to the public. (See the next article for more on book doctors.)

Developmental/substantive editing. This service examines issues such as plot and character development, dialogue, setting, pace, tone and audience suitability as well as your basic writing skills, grammar and punctuation. You'll get big-picture feedback with this service, the kind you need to tackle the next draft.

Copy editing/line editing. This option addresses your work line by line on a technical level. Copy editors catch and point out inconsistencies, with particular attention to style, organization and clarity as well as grammar, punctuation and other typographical errors. In some instances, "line editing" refers to a more hands-on service that includes rewriting awkward sentences and moving material around for better flow and clarity. Your manuscript will get a good polish with this service, but you won't get a lot of insight as to what's working (or not working) story-wise.

Proofreading. Though sometimes lumped into the editing category, proofreading is traditionally only for material about to go to press, not manuscripts in the submission stage. Proofreading ex-

amines proofs for inconsistencies or errors that were missed in the copy editing/line-editing phase, plus any remaining layout issues such as a wrong typeface or incorrectly aligned margins. This service is useful for self-publishing authors and should be the last round before shipping off files for printing.

What to do next

After determining what kind of service you want, obtain referrals. Do you know anyone in the publishing business? Do you participate in a writers group, workshop or online community? Take advantage of your fellow writers' experiences. If you can't get a recommendation, try searching online databases, such as the Mediabistro Freelance Marketplace (www.Mediabistro.com/fm), the Freelancers Union Yellow Pages (www.freelancersunion.org), and the Editorial Freelancers Association directory (www.the-efa.org/dir). Use keywords specific to your project, like "nonfiction book proposal" or "young adult fantasy," to get the best results.

Once a few listings pique your interest, you must narrow the field. In delving into the backgrounds of your candidates and the types of editorial roles they may have previously had, you need to understand the difference between acquiring editors, acquisitions editors and copy editors. Acquiring editors are skilled at evaluating book proposals and manuscripts—they know what publishers want. They also edit

and oversee projects through to print, often participating in marketing and publicity. Acquisitions editors are similar, but at some publishing companies these “editors” *only* acquire, passing manuscripts on to freelancers or co-workers for everything else.

Always ask specifically about editing experience. Copy editors are masters of language, including basic writing skills and structure, but they have nothing to do with acquisition or any other part of the publishing process; they do not develop manuscripts. Most would-be authors will be better off working with someone who, in a previous life, has actually bought and edited books for a publisher. But if you just want your manuscript reviewed for technical prowess and lingering organization issues, choose a copy editor.

Make sure any potential editor's background matches your needs. For example, if you are an experienced journalist working on your first book proposal, you may need less help with the writing and more help with the format and marketing approach that book proposals require. So, you'll want someone who has experience writing or evaluating book proposals, such as a former acquiring editor or literary agent, or even an author who has written several book proposals leading to actual deals. If you're a novelist and you feel confident in your storytelling ability but your grasp of grammar is loose and you fear you've lost some clarity in all those revisions, you might opt for someone with copy-editing experience.

A few more tips on choosing:

Make sure you're ready. Polish your manuscript thoroughly *before* seeking editorial assistance. Good editing will always improve your work, but if you seek help too early in the writing process you may be paying to bring your manuscript up from a D to a B, instead of a C to an A.

Do your research. Check out potential editors' backgrounds by running Internet searches for their names and company names. Ask for references and make the calls. Check out the Better Business Bureau and the *WritersWeekly.com* forum, “Whispers and Warnings,”

which outs scam artists, neglectful companies, and other services that have drawn complaints. (www.writersweekly.com/whispers_and_warnings.php)

Compare category experience. Get a sense of what types of books your potential editors have helped produce by browsing their Web sites or asking for project lists. It isn't necessary that an editor has worked on a book exactly like yours, but if you're writing self-help and the editor has only edited fiction titles, or if you've written a bodice-ripper and the editor never reads romance, you might not get the right kind of help.

Know your “writer self.” Are you business-like about your writing, or do you need a little hand-holding? Determine your approach and schedule a conversation with potential editors to discover theirs. Spending a half-hour on the phone will give you a feel for the editor's personality and will indicate whether she/he can help you reach your goals without trying to contort your manuscript into a totally different book.

Know what to expect. Get a detailed, signed agreement before you pay (it's common to pay up to 50 percent up front). At the least, make sure the service, total cost, deadline and any caveats are spelled out clearly in an e-mail, and save it. You should retain all rights—work should be “for hire” only.

Getting educated ... will make the difference between receiving great editorial assistance and being disappointed, or worse, getting scammed.

Get a sample or consultation.

Many freelancers will edit a few pages for free or offer a consultation at a lower rate than a manuscript edit. Be realistic about what you'll get—without reading the complete manuscript, editors will be unable to properly evaluate the evolution of plot or characters, and may have little to say if your first few pages are in great shape. A better bet might be to send pages from a problem scene or one that includes your main characters and is critical to the plot. For smaller projects like query letters or book proposals, it's impolite to ask for a freebie, but many editors will send you a “before

and after” sample or give references.

Remember that editors are not fact-checkers. If your book is a historical novel or high-tech thriller, or is otherwise filled with factual information, don't expect your editor to vet it for you. If you are unsure about your research, you need a fact-checking service.

Know your budget. Generally, book doctoring is the most expensive service, followed by developmental editing, copy editing and proofreading. Book doctors and developmental editors with a decade or more of professional staff experience often charge upwards of \$100 per hour. But there are also editors with a bit less experience or living in inexpensive locales who may run you as little as \$40 per hour. (The hourly rate for copy editors is typically \$20 to \$65; proofreaders, \$12 to \$20.)

If your potential editor is charging less than standard, consider what you're giving up to get a lower price. Everything is relative. But don't let price tag alone guide your choice. Trying to publish your work moves you from hobbyist to author, and don't kid yourself—being an author is a profession. You must be willing to invest in it to be successful. (Check out www.the-efa.org/res/rates.php for more on rates.)

Getting educated and asking the right questions will make the difference

between receiving great editorial assistance and being disappointed, or worse, getting scammed. It's important to find a reputable editorial service that meets your needs, but you're not choosing a friend. Employ an editorial service like you would any other professional and you'll greatly improve your chances of getting great service.

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Ally E. Peltier is an editor, writer, and publishing consultant formerly of Simon & Schuster. The recipient of an MA in English and creative writing, she has published in such venues as *Circle* magazine and J3tag.com. She also ghostwrites and teaches workshops. Web: www.ambitiousenterprises.com.