

What's the difference between proofreading and copy-editing?



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I get asked this question a lot and it's an important one. The simplest answer is this: copy-editing is an initial stage of work on an author's text, and proofreading is a final check. That's the process in traditional publishing, which involves other stages in between, where new errors can creep in. The copy-editor works on a raw version of the text, whereas the proofreader tidies up a largely finished product. Think of the copy-editor and proofreader having their own set of tools as well as 'shared

implements'. The crucial point about the common items is that the copy-editor gets to use them first.

Independent publishing

Outside the publication industry, where a client engages an independent editor to check through written material, the different stages of editing and checking can blend into one. But there is still a distinction between copy-editing and proofreading. What's the difference now?

Again, to keep things simple, the basic difference is that copy-editors get more involved and 'hands-on' with the text than if we are just asked to check for errors alone. We *do* check for errors, grammar and punctuation, but, additionally, we look at issues of stylistic consistency (hyphenation, use of initial upper case, abbreviations, numbers or figures, date style, etc.). If there is no style guide, a copy-editor might extrapolate one from the text and present it to the author as a useful reference for the current work and future projects. This has to be negotiated, however, as part of the client's brief.

Content

There's also an element of 'improving' the text, which does not occur in the final proofreading stage. This doesn't mean re-writing and changing the author's voice and identity; far from it, but it's more like bringing out the best of what's already there.

This can involve checking for sense and consistency within the story, thesis or brochure; whatever the material is. It's so easy for a writer to decide to change or adapt the name of a character (or product) during the creative process and forget to cross-check it earlier on in the work. Similarly, details such as the colour of eyes or the use of 'props' in a story can get confused and it's the copy-editor's job to spot this.

Fact-checking is, surprisingly, not actually part of the copy-editor's remit. That is ultimately the responsibility of the writer who is the expert in their subject. Of course, if there is a glaring error of fact that leaps out to the editor's eye, we will, of course, query it. It would be wrong not to. But extensive checks of every fact and source would impact hugely on the work's cost, so it is only right that the boundary stops there.

Technical issues

Technical areas of concern to a copy-editor include the coding of headings, titles, quoted matter, website links and lists. This is only done if the material is going on to a typesetter, so it's not always a process that independent clients require. It's possible that Word Styles may be applied to your file, but that is a matter for prior consultation and agreement.

For a proofreader working with a publisher, technical issues would involve checking for isolated last words of paragraphs

left on one line, running headers, gapped or tightly spaced lines, justified or non-justified text: all quite visual and technical really, isn't it? None of which a copy-editor would be concerned with, so these are the separate tools of the two trades.

Safeguarding

One important service from copy-editors that is distinct from proofreading is the identifying of potential libel and inappropriate language. We have to let clients know if anything in their material could risk causing offence or even lead to legal action. It's also good form to help writers with the ongoing evolution of English, which seems to change faster than anyone can keep up with. Part of the copy-editor's job is to alert clients to language developments that, understandably, they might not yet be aware of.

Permissions

Checking you have permission to use quoted materials, photos, graphics, tables and statistics from other sources and anything in copyright all falls within the remit of the copy-editor, in- or outside a publishing house. However, the writer must obtain this permission, not the editor; it is just a 'flag-up' issue.

Visual elements

A copy-editor assigns numbers and labels to tables, illustrations and figures, and a proofreader checks that these are right. Artwork design is done by neither editor nor proofreader. For that, clients must either go to a designer or do it themselves.

Comparative costs

Copy-editing takes longer than proofreading and inevitably costs more. But without it, the independent writer would lose out in credibility, trust, and could potentially end up being sued in court!

Don't be daunted by the differences and crossovers of the two disciplines outlined here. As an independent client working with an editor, you get to ask for what services you really need, and a good editor will help guide you in this.

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