

SAMPLE

The Role of an Editor

Lesson Aim

To explain the different language skills necessary for a specialist editor.

To understand the role of the editor in a managerial or supervisory position.

INTRODUCTION

This course is intended for editors who are already comfortable with proofreading and copyediting, and wish to move into more senior or specialised roles. Senior and specialist editors usually combine specific subject knowledge with project management duties. This requires the editor to be comfortable with language in all its forms, from the "basics" learned in school through to the evolution of language as a living thing.

At this level, most editors work with writers throughout the writing process. This is distinct from working after-the-fact, when an author or client brings their existing draft in for copyediting and proofreading.

Most editorial relationships begin with a conversation. Both parties need to feel each other out – they'll be working closely, and there must be a sense of trust. This conversation serves the editor as much as the writer: if the editor can't clearly understand the client's goals, her work will be subpar.

It's important to remember that most clients don't understand this process. They think editing is a one-size-fits-all type of work, like a higher form of spell check.

The role of the editor

An editor's goals must be in line with the client's goals. The strategies to meet these goals will vary according to roles, but the end goals must be the same. This is often a difficult concept for editors to grasp. They want to rush in and fix all the errors they can see, to make the work clear according to their idea of clarity, and to use language they think is correct.

What you think, as an editor, is secondary to what your client thinks. The editor advises; the editor helps changes along; the editor discusses concepts and structure. The editor does not tell the client what to do.

The editor's work may include:

- goal discussion and setting
- general manuscript assessment
- manuscript corrections based on the writer's goals
- grammatical assessment, including identification of grammatical errors, spelling and punctuation
- structural critique, assessing the manuscript's conceptual flow, ensure sections or chapters work together properly
- fact checking, particularly in freelance and consulting roles
- ensuring consistency across a text
- general project management, especially if multiple authors or subeditors are involved
- training and development

Note that this list is comprised of "may include" items. The editor and writer will work out exact duties in a scope of work or similar document. Editors may also be involved in looking at legal and ethical issues regarding the work.

Good editors:

- are often well-read (and always looking for more to read)
- usually have a background in publishing, editing, writing or similar (though this may vary in niche fields)
- are up to date with industry concerns and changes
- are up to date with trends
- love words and language
- are good diplomats – it can be hard working with authors and other staff at times, so an editor needs to be able to work effectively with others
- treat the author and their work with dignity and respect

It is important to remember that as an editor, you have a choice in taking on a client. If you feel you cannot work with a client for reasonable work issues, you may choose to step back.

LANGUAGE SKILLS AND APPLICATION

In general editing, language skills usually refer to grammar and, in some cases, structure. Editors are hired to clean up a text, but they do not directly influence it.

Advanced and specialised editors influence the text, but in ways that are almost undetectable. They gather together their knowledge and skill sets, then offer these to the writer as perspective. This helps the writer bring shape and voice to their work.

Text Types

There are three major text types, each with different purposes. Examples include:

- factual/expository
- persuasive
- literary

There are many subtypes of text within these overall areas. For instance, factual text types can include:

- historical reports
- manuals and procedures
- recipes
- technical assessments
- documentaries
- academic papers
- general consumer how-to books

During the initial editorial conversation, an editor must determine what the writer thinks the text type is, then check if the project's structure, outline, or existing material conforms to this text type. It is common for a writer's interpretation of text type and actual text type to be quite different.

If the writer and the project are in agreement, you can continue on with the work. If they appear to be out of agreement, you will have to discuss your interpretation and the project's goals with the client.

Voice, Tone, and Style

While these are often used interchangeably, they are discrete concepts. Each affects the next, and all three are implemented in text types in different ways.

Voice

This is unique to the writer. Every writer has his or her own distinct voice. Voice is an individual expression – and it carries across tone, style, and text type.

Editors must maintain the writer's voice. Even if you disagree with the writer's voice, it is theirs, and an integral part of how they create work. Voice, however, can be modulated – a text can be strongly voiced, as in much persuasive writing, or softly voiced, as in much factual/expository writing. The editor can comment on this.

Think of the writer as the chef, and the editor as the head taster in a focus group. They have different roles. The chef decides they want to bake a chocolate mascarpone cake.

The taster might offer different types of chocolate or mascarpone, or suggest using goose eggs over hen's eggs. They might say this is too strong a chocolate, or this is too light a chocolate. They do not, however, change the essence of the dish: the chef is baking a chocolate mascarpone cake. Not a mud cake. Not a butter cake with chocolate frosting. A chocolate mascarpone cake. The taster does not attempt to change this.

Style

This refers to the way in which something is written. It is distinct from text type. In larger works, style is often unifying. Newspapers are factual works; so are encyclopaedias. Each conveys facts in a different way, but the discrete pieces – the articles, the entries – are all written according to the same basic style.

On an individual level, style encompasses voice, but is a bigger thing. Voice is the writer; style is the how of expressing self. This encompasses word choice, language devices (metaphors, rhetorical questions, etc.), syntax, and more.

As editor, you can comment on this. Style is tied to audience response. This means you can suggest stylistic changes to fit a body of work, or note that a particular expression doesn't fit with the writer's overall voice. You can offer feedback on useful word choices. You can suggest shorter sentences. It is essential to remember that you're working within the author's voice, not your own. What works for you as a writer will be different to what works for your client.

Tone

Tone is hard to define. It's like a written mood – something can have a pleasant or happy tone, or it can have a melancholy tone. Opinion pieces and blog posts may have a conversational tone, or perhaps a polemic one. Journal papers have a formal tone, as if the author is making a conference presentation.

Tone, like style, affects audience response. You may advise on this, and help the writer use a specific tone to make their writing more accessible to their audience.

How to work within voice, style, and tone

At this level, editing is about perspective and discussion. You offer insights to the writer and make suggestions, but let the writer work with your ideas for a while. This type of editing always occurs at a distance. While it is tempting to enter into a text and make it sound "right", our conception of right will differ from the writer's.

Discuss this concept with the writer before taking on a work. Set a scope for how much feedback you'll offer on each, and compare this with the writer's goals. When you're doing this type of assessment, keep the list of goals handy. Giving feedback that addresses how the writer's style and tone aligns with their goals will be more helpful than general statements.

Example:

Jamie's goal is to educate parents on how to advocate for their children in hospital settings. Her piece will be part of a book on considering children's issues in hospitals.

The piece is 2000 words. Most of Jamie's sentences are long. It takes time for her to reach a clear point – the work reads as if she's talking up to an idea, as in a conversation. At times, the tone veers into frightening: her examples are full of hyperbole. Her editor, Andrea, writes a letter addressing this.

Hello Jamie,

Thank you for the opportunity to assess your work. In our initial conversations, you stated that you want to educate parents on how to advocate for their children in a hospital setting. Right now, I'm seeing some very strong practical advice. You've listed cases when advocating is appropriate. You've clearly outlined language approaches, and listed point positions for different areas (admissions, emergency staff, nursing staff etc.). This is an excellent start.

Keeping that goal in mind, I think you have a few style issues. The advice you're giving is encased in long sentences. Look for ways you can tighten this up. Most parents don't have the time to read and interpret really long lines. They're looking for short and to the point. E.g.

From the article: When you're walking up to the desk and the lights are flickering and you're surrounded by screaming children and your heart is beating a thousand times a minute, it's really important to focus on the key point: you're here to make sure your child gets the best care every staff member can possibly give.

Tighter version: Walking up to a hospital admissions desk can be intimidating. Even if you're afraid, stay focussed on the key point: you're here to make sure your child gets the best possible care.

Keep the scene setting part for the beginning and the end, and let the middle focus on all your practical tips. Does that make sense?

Tone-wise, you're in the ballpark, but not quite there yet. Your focus is on helping, so you want to keep a helpful tone. Don't use too much hyperbole, especially for scary words. Aim for understanding instead. Things like:

All parents know the belly drop that comes with "we're going into surgery". Work through it by asking questions. Don't be afraid to...

Do you see what I'm saying?

Take a run at these issues, then I'll take another pass and come back to you. Any questions – just drop me a line.

~ Andrea

Andrea addresses the concerns and gives examples, but she doesn't tell Jamie there is only one way to approach the work. Everything she says is clearly tied back to Jamie's initial goals.

Language Use

How language is used directly affects the text. If incorrect language is used, the reader will not take in the material, and the writer will not reach their goal.

The language a text uses is dependent on:

- Subject
- Goals
- Author
- Audience

The language used in a children's novel, for example, will be different to the language used in *The Wall Street Journal*.

An editor must understand the differences in each of these areas, then advise the author on text type, voice, tone, and style.

Let's say a client wants to write a series of how-to articles for children. One of the topics is how to tie shoelaces.

Example:

Subject: *how to tie shoelaces*

Goals: *teach children how to tie shoelaces independently; encourage children to feel independent*

Author: *Sarah J.*

Audience: *children, ages 5 – 8, or prep school to grade 2*

The writer's text so far:

Tying shoelaces requires a high amount of manual dexterity. It is often difficult for the child learner to manipulate the laces effectively, due to a lack of fine motor skills. If this is the case, exercises to strengthen then refine movement will help the child grasp, then more effectively, manipulate the laces. This results in a high ROI for confidence.

Step 1: Select a pair of shoes with appropriate laces.

Step 2: Hold the laces at either end and pull taut then rotate ends around one another to create a slip knot.

The writer's subject is clear, but her language is out of line with her stated goals. Realising this, the editor discusses language with the writer. This discussion is key – if the editor rewrites the text without discussion, they take on the writer's role. Remember: the editor's role is to revise and improve, not rewrite.

In this case, the editor would:

- discuss audience with the writer – who they are, how they speak, words they understand
- give concrete examples of ineffective language and word choices
- give one or two-line rewrites using effective language and word choice
- point the writer to examples of child-friendly material
- make clear the text type is appropriate (factual)
- set a time for the writer to return a small sample of work for checking, and a timeframe for its return

Register

This is a technical term defining level of formality. A high register document uses very formal language and jargon. A low register document uses more everyday language.

Register shifts can occur within the same document. These are used to create specific effects, or draw attention to a concept.

Example:

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) is a neuromuscular disease affecting voluntary movement.

Sometimes called Lou Gehrig's disease, it affect things like chewing, breathing, and talking.

The first line is in a high register. After this there is a register shift downward, into a plain English style. This shift helps the reader feel at ease – a complex idea will be explained in accessible language.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND APPLICATION

Senior editors and freelance editors must get comfortable with management strategies. Even when you're working with a single writer, establishing a timeline and setting realistic deadlines is essential. This is because writing is the ideal discipline for procrastination. Writers are easily trapped by:

- the idea of a creative process

- wanting a perfect first draft/general perfection
- poor writing routines
- lack of discipline
- fear of failure
- unclear goals
- lack of purpose
- lack of precision
- blank pages
- lack of planning/outline/general structure
- inability to prioritise writing
- general distraction – which is often falsely attributed to "the writer's mind"

The antidote to most of these traps is a clear process. By clearly defining goals early, then setting realistic deadlines, the editor makes the writer accountable. As in school settings, this accountability often drives production.

Writers also require reminding that the editor's time is valuable. Many writers forget that editors have multiple clients, and will want the editor to take on the writer's role. This is problematic for two reasons:

- may lead to a general attitude of disrespect, and unreasonable work expectations
- the writer blaming the editor for not meeting their vision, or sounding enough like the writer (remember, editing is distinct from ghostwriting)

Holding the writer accountable will avoid these issues.

General Skills

Most senior editors and freelancers require:

- tact
- an understanding project goals
- timeline management (with some flexibility)
- management skills
- customer service and mediation skills
- appropriate software skills (e.g. project management apps, communication apps, word processing and track changes, referencing plug ins or apps)

If you're working as part of a team – as head, departmental, or subeditor, you'll use these skills every day.

This section deals with management issues specific to editors. In most cases, more general rules of project management and management still apply.

Editors-in-Charge

The Editor in Charge is also often known as the Editor-in-Chief or Executive Editor. The Editor-in-Chief will be involved in –

Managing how the publication works on a day to day basis. This could be a magazine, newspaper, online blog, website, trade publication, academic journal and so on. They may also be in charge of the overall management of various publications, for example, if they work in a literature publishing house, they may oversee various novels and books at one time.

The Editor-in-Chief will also be responsible for overseeing other editors, assistants and other staff.

They will make sure that deadlines are reached and the writing is published on time.

Often Editors-in-Chief start off as assistants, editors and then move up the management structure. They may also have been involved in writing themselves.

The Editor-in-Chief will review articles, photographs, books and so on for any legal issues.

The Editor-in-Chief may be responsible for budgets.

They may generate new ways of doing things, come up with new ideas, find ways to solve problems.

They may create an editorial board.

Editorial Teams

Most editorial teams have a head. This person deals with the overall project management and staffing. They may bring on new writers and editors. After this, much editing hierarchy is very general. If working within a team, ensure your role is clearly defined. This does not mean that you will only ever do work within this single set of duties – most editors must be flexible – but rather that you can ensure you meet all your individual deadlines and communicate with other team members as necessary.

Managing Teams

Always treat your team members as peers. Although editing is a distinct speciality, it has many specialities within in. It's also a very context-dependent field. Discuss problems with team members. Be open to different views of language and grammar.

When working with writers, admit when you're not sure of something, or ask the writer for clarification. Never assume you know more than the people you are working with. This is important because language is a living thing – new approaches, words, and styles are added to language sets every day. No single person can keep up with every evolution and iteration.

Staff Training and Development

Sometimes, an editor's role moves from straight editorial work to teaching technique and frameworks. If you are hired in this capacity, ensure you define a clear scope of work and goals for the training process. Generally speaking, use these goals to develop a set of teaching tools writers can refer back to. Ensure you speak with the writers. Gather their perspectives. Taking this into account during training and development can make your work easier, and reduce unnecessary editorial work later.

SPECIALISMS IN EDITING

Many editors may specialise according to their interests and skill sets.

Substantive or Developmental Editors

These are the most in-depth types of editors. They consider the work from multiple perspectives, and may consult on the initial idea development. Many writers hire developmental editors in the early stages of their work. Unlike other editors, developmental editors may work through the entirety of the project. In some cases, developmental editors cross into ghostwriting. This must be discussed during the initial consult, especially since it is not always appropriate (e.g. in academic writing).

Structural Editors

These editors will bring structure to a work. They look at overall flow of ideas and concepts and ensure each piece of works build upon the last. Structural editors often bring a sense of story to the work. They usually give an editorial letter stating strengths and weaknesses from a structural perspective.

Copyeditors

Copyeditors will read work to check for grammar, accuracy, sense and clarity. They will also check that the work adheres to set standards or guidelines that the writer has been given.

Manuscript Editors

These editors usually do an overarching type of edit, with a focus on the structure and flow of the overall writing. Many give a several page editorial letter after, assessing the manuscript's strengths and weaknesses, and identifying areas that could be better developed.

Specialist Editing

As editors become more experienced they may also become involved in editing in a niche area. For example, they may edit solely in one type of writing or literature. Some focus on a very particular area of writing.

More on the Editorial Board

An editorial board is usually made up of the page editor and editorial writers.

Editorial boards are often used in newspapers, magazines and online writing. Other personnel may be involved as well.

The editorial board will usually consist of experts in the subject area that the magazine focusses on. In larger publications, there may be an editorial board for each subject. If this is the case, there will then often be an Executive Editorial Board to oversee the editorial boards.

Editorial boards can also be used in book publishing, where subject experts are joined together to select manuscripts to publish.

Academic journals also have editorial boards. These may consist of paid and unpaid experts in the field. It is usually an honorary position.

Editorial boards will meet regularly to discuss:

- News
- Opinions
- Trends
- What the publication should say about certain issues

SET TASKS

Set Task 1

Look at the organisation you work for and consider the roles of everyone involved in the publishing process.

If you work in a very large organisation, you may wish to focus on one department only.

Prepare notes.

If you are not sure exactly what a person does within the organisation – find out.

Set Task 2

Research different text types and read examples of each.