

When to Call the Book Doctor

By Faye Quam Heimerl – Book Doctor/Writing Coach

After crafting a book for months and even years, an author often falls in love with the manuscript—every period, comma, semi-colon, every misspelled and misused word, every ambiguous sentence and awkward phrase, and even extraneous chapters. Sometimes authors sense their books might be “missing something” but they’ve lived with it so long, “what’s wrong” seems normal and changing “what’s wrong” might be too painful.

Yet for the sake of their books’ success, they owe it to themselves to get an objective opinion. This is where professional editors come in. But what does editing really mean and what role do editors play?

What is Editing?

According to the *Random House Webster’s College Dictionary*, Edit means 1. to supervise or direct the preparation of (a publication); serve as editor of. 2. to collect, prepare, and arrange (materials) for publication. 3. to revise or correct, as a manuscript. 4. to delete; eliminate (often fol. by *out*): *to edit out all references to his family*. 5. to prepare (film, tape, etc.) by deleting, arranging, and splicing material. 6. to alter the arrangement of (genes). 7. to modify (computer data or text).

What Role Does An Editor Play?

(These are only a few of the titles and roles of editors, which tend to vary from publisher to publisher and editor to editor. Often, editors switch from one type of editing to another, depending on the author’s needs and the demands of the book.)

Acquisitions Editor – Selects books that the publishing company will publish, distribute, and market. Acquisition editors work (lightly or extensively) with authors to improve their manuscripts before publishing them. Within the company walls, acquisition editors are simply called editors.

Content Editor – Looks at “big picture” issues in the manuscript as well as its organizational structure, tone, characterization, plot, etc. Content editors are also referred to as manuscript editors.

Developmental Editor – Shapes the book as it’s being written instead of working on it after it’s finished. Writing coaches and book doctors also do developmental editing. See section on Book Doctor below.

Copy Editor – Looks for infelicities of language (inappropriate word choices) that the author and (acquisitions) editor didn’t catch. They find inconsistencies in logic and suggest wording changes to clarify, tighten, and smooth out the sentences. They check facts: dates, correct numbers, proper names, etc. They make sure words with more than one form are used consistently and see that proper names, titles, capitalization, etc. are handled the same way. They

correct grammar and spelling errors. Copy editors can be hired by the publisher or by the author directly.

Technical Editor – Reviews the content in the manuscript to ensure that its technical aspects and jargon are accurate. This is usually a subject-matter expert who may or may not be a professional editor.

Line Editor – Reads every line of the manuscript to spot any ambiguity and tie up every loose end. He/she smoothes awkward phrases, suggests a better word if needed, queries any thing that seems unclear or odd, and ultimately strengthens the flow of words in the manuscript.

Proofreader – Provides the final check before a book is deemed “finished.” Copy and line editors always proofread; proofreaders often edit.

What is a Book Doctor?

(aka Writing-process Coach, Writing Coach)

A book doctor is skilled at analyzing the problems embedded in a manuscript and suggesting a variety of cures for what ails the book. This doctor gives advice and also teaches skills the author not only uses with the project at hand but in future writing endeavors.

The book doctor’s goal for **non-fiction** is to get the manuscript in the best possible shape by examining readability, organization, clarity, effectiveness, as it relates to the target audience for the book. The goal for **fiction** is to provide new ways of looking at the novel, short story, etc. to help the author rethink, revise, rewrite, and clear up questions about dialogue, pacing, plotting, and so on.

Some book doctors write a lengthy (often 15 to 30 pages for a 400-page manuscript) in-depth report (critique) to guide the revision process. **The book doctor might line edit the manuscript but only after the author has followed the approach suggested in the report.**

When to Call the Book Doctor...

...when a manuscript is anemic, uncooperative, rejected, or simply needs a checkup from a qualified, objective person who loves to help!

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