



## NONFICTION EDITING 201

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### Lesson #3

### Three Levels of Copyediting

Welcome to Lesson 3 of Nonfiction Editing 201. Let's not waste any time and just plunge into this week's lesson.

This lesson addresses copyediting; we will break down the levels into light, medium, and heavy. Future lessons will deal with proofreading and developmental edits. Nonfiction Editing 301—available as a [Group Course](#), [One-on-One](#), [Lesson Pack](#), and [Lesson Pack Bundle](#)—is all about substantive editing.

At a local Creamery Picnic, one of my sons-in-law joined a team in a contest to catch and confine a greased pig. What a wild and fun show! Finding a definitive description of a light, medium, and heavy copyedit can be about as difficult, and frustrating, as trying to latch on to that greased pig. Just when you think you have grasped what each level entails, another “expert” says that a light copyedit is proofreading and a heavy edit is line editing or developmental editing or substantive editing . . . and everything you thought you knew slips away. The reason for the differing definitions is because you will be hard-pressed to find universal definitions. I've combed trustworthy websites and several books on editing. What I offer below is my compilation of findings.

For our purposes in this course, we will use the following breakdown and definitions of the various edits a manuscript can go through on the journey to publication.

#### Developmental Editing

Developmental editing begins with identifying the scope of the project. The developmental edit includes consulting with the author, agent, or project manager (PM) before the manuscript is written. The developmental editor sometimes helps plan the organization, content, and other aspects of the manuscript. Developmental editing is not concerned with spelling, punctuation, usage, and other mechanics.

#### Substantive Editing

Like developmental editing, substantive editing does not worry about the mechanics of writing.

Unlike developmental editing, it digs into the already-written manuscript and is concerned with content, structure, and logical presentation of ideas. The editor may rearrange sections to improve flow or clarity. Chapter titles, heads, and subheads might be renamed, or added, to reflect the subject (and, depending on the manuscript's tone, to make them catchier, more dramatic, humorous, or whatever is appropriate).

A substantive editor will flag areas where the author states an opinion as fact; uses inappropriate language; inserts a tone that is argumentative, demeaning, preachy, or in some way puts off readers; or has left out information the readers need or want.

This level of edit typically includes a close working relationship with the author.

## Copyediting

Copyediting can be divided into three levels: light, medium, and heavy. You'll find some overlap between the levels. Following is a common delineation of those levels:

### Light

- Mechanics (spelling, usage, punctuation, capitalization)
- Consistency in list formats
- Accurate numbering of footnotes or endnotes, tables, figures, etc., as well as cross-referencing
- Correct format of footnotes or endnotes and bibliography
- Correct grammar errors
- Flag wordiness, ambiguity, jargon, clichés
- Query factual inconsistencies and contradictions
- Flag any elements requiring permission to use
- Flag for possible plagiarism, libel, invasion of privacy
- Ensure manuscript adheres to appropriate style manual as well as house style

### Medium

All the tasks of a light edit plus:

- Flag redundancies, echoes, pet words
- Flag where the author's meaning is unclear
- Flag shifts in tone or unnatural phrasing
- Correct run-on and fragmented sentences
- Query terms readers may be unfamiliar with
- Suggest revisions to items flagged as wordy, ambiguous, or jargon
- Query any facts that seem incorrect
- Query lapses in logic or faulty organization
- Change, or at least flag, passive voice to active
- Smooth transitions and move sentences to improve the flow
- Adjust heads and subheads for logical structure

### **Heavy\***

All the tasks of a light and medium copyedit plus:

- Correct all errors in grammar, syntax, and usage
- Rewrite wordiness and eliminate ambiguity
- Verify and correct any incorrect facts
- Query or fix faulty organization and lapses in logic
- Make changes that improve the pacing of a passage
- Rewrite or suggest more precise wording

\*The main difference between heavy and medium copyedits is the level of editorial judgment and rewriting. In the heavy copyedit, rather than simply querying or flagging areas that need attention, the copyeditor will rewrite or revise to correct the problem where possible.

### **Proofreading**

Proofreading is the final editing stage before the book is published. It is typically done on galleys and edits for egregious errors the copyeditor missed, as well as errors introduced by the typesetter. Proofreaders also check the layout for any errors.

### **Determining the Level of Edit**

A question comes to mind: How do you determine which level of edit a manuscript requires? Well, the answer is easy . . . and complicated.

In truth, all manuscripts require all levels of editing, from developmental to proofreading. It's a matter of how much of the editing work the author has already done before the manuscript is passed on to a professional editor.

In a perfect world, the level of edit would be based on the writing quality and the target audience. Period. But in the real world, other considerations affect the decision.

In my many years of professional editing, I've learned by experience a few unspoken "rules" that help me determine what a manuscript needs. I'd like to share them with you in hopes that it will guide you as you determine the level of edit a manuscript requires.

### **Manuscript Condition**

Of course, the condition of the manuscript is of major concern. It can be a mess of punctuation but perfect in the organization, flow, and usage, so it probably needs only a light edit. Or it gets an A for structure but F for ambiguity and redundancies and could use a medium edit. Sometimes you can identify these kinds of problems by reading only a chapter or two.

When doing a sample edit for a potential client, I request a couple of chapters that are typical of the entire manuscript, and I ask the author if I should look for any particular difficulties he or she

may have had while writing it. Sometimes I request a table of contents in hopes it will offer clues about the organization, but I don't put too much weight onto it because the titles don't always tell enough about the chapters' contents to get a feel for flow or structure.

The more problems a manuscript has, the more editing it will need, which will take more time and thought. If you note faulty research, pretentiousness, opinions stated as fact, or rehashed arguments that have already been resolved, you are looking at more than a light edit. If the word count is 150,000 but the topic is how to set goals, you've got your work "cut out" for you (sorry, I couldn't resist!). Can this be realistically divided into three books? If it is packed with redundancies, unrelated information, rants, and more, plan on a heavy edit—and prepare your client.

When you return your bid/sample edit to your prospective client, include a brief assessment of the manuscript sample. This helps the author understand the nature of the edit and how it will benefit the manuscript.

### ***Audience and Book Market***

The target audience is, of course, the intended reader of a particular book. The tone of the manuscript, the theme or topic, and the language must all conform to the needs of the targeted readers. The target audience of a book about real estate investing will likely not be YA, nor will it be "all adults." Too broad of a stated target audience is just about a guarantee the author will miss them all. Asking your clients to answer the following questions will help them identify their audience, which will then guide you as you edit the manuscript:

- Who is the primary audience for this book?
- How much do readers typically know about this subject?
- How will readers use the book?
- What other similar books are on the market? What is their reader profile?
- What do these readers want/need to know?

If the book is a crossover (e.g., sci-fi–mystery), sometimes creating a Venn diagram helps to further define the audience.

The book market includes trade, scholarly, textbook, reference, business, legal, and so on. Knowing the book market lends information about how and where the book will be marketed and shelved, and it adds a layer of information about the audience and their expectations. That's important.

If a manuscript's audience is, say, church planters and the market is church and pastoral, the tone should be professional—not comical, satirical, cynical, etc. The manuscript should contain facts and statistics, along with the author's experience and advice. The author could probably use just a bit of jargon that directly relates to the audience and topic. It's okay to use a bit of humor, of course . . . as long as it is appropriate and does not detract from the author's message.

Another example is scholarly works, which are directed toward specific readers who understand, even prefer, their field's jargon. They also expect footnotes or notes and bibliographies, which

all must be edited to conform to a particular style.

### **Budget and Time**

Let's be frank. Editing is not cheap. Therefore, your client's budget might determine what level of edit the manuscript will receive. In these instances, you will have to decide if you will do a lesser edit on a manuscript. If the manuscript requires a heavy edit but the author wants you to do a light edit, can you put your name on a manuscript that will obviously not be its best? In other words, will your business reputation be harmed by doing the edit the author budgets for?

Every once in a while, a potential client contacts me about editing his or her manuscript. When the price is high but I love the manuscript, I add a note toward the end of my bid in which I encourage the author to discuss with me any questions about my sample bid, turnaround time, price, etc. Of course, I don't know the author's financial condition, but if I believe in the manuscript, I am open to negotiations to help the author while not giving away my time (I am my sole support, so I'm limited in doing gratis work). I might offer to do a critique, which is much less expensive than an edit and can reduce future editing costs. Or I might offer to do just a one-pass edit instead of my normal two, advising the author that I'm not going to catch everything. In this one pass, I'll bring to the author's attention any recurring problems, explain how to spot them, and offer suggestions as to how to correct them. Essentially, I create a priority editing list, making sure the most important items are covered.

Deadlines can also dictate the level of edit. Short deadlines can mean the difference between a manuscript going through a heavy edit, which it might be calling for, or a light edit. When submitting a bid for a project, I generally add an extra day or two to the time I figure I'll need to do the required edit. Then if the client says they need it sooner, I've got a little breathing room.

I'm sure we can agree that a manuscript should receive the edit it requires to make it the best it can be, to bring out its full potential. Unfortunately, sometimes the demands of the publishers come first since they are many times footing the bill. In the case of self-publishing, the same can be true. An author may set an editing budget of \$1,500, but to edit her manuscript according to what it needs can easily exceed her figure. She will likely scale down the level of edit, or find an editor willing to work on it for \$1,500 . . . and she will get what she pays for. Either way, it's a compromise.

I recently turned down a project from a major publishing house because of the deadline. The manuscript was approximately 150 pages, and the turnaround was one week. That doesn't sound horrible unless you factor in that they wanted a hardcopy edit (who does that anymore?). That meant at least one day for FedEx (overnight service), but that weekend happened to be a three-day weekend. I'd have only *two days* to edit the manuscript. First, I didn't have the time, but even if I did, two days to edit 150 pages? The potential for missing errors, and even introducing some, was too great. I apologized that I couldn't do it and let it go.

I came across this editing level prioritization (next page) set by a publisher when time and money require the quality of editing to be compromised. It's a common-sense approach when you can do for a manuscript what it requires.<sup>1</sup>

Priority	Editing Level
1	Correct errors in punctuation, grammar, and spelling
2	Make sentences more effective
3	Correct improper word usage
4	Make formatting changes
5	Reorganize contents

## Defending Your Edits

You determined what level of edit a manuscript needs. You discussed it with your client and agreed on what the edit will include, the project fee, and the turnaround time. You did everything you said you'd do, and now your client is questioning many of your edits. How do you respond?

You are a professional, so you will respond with the utmost professionalism.

Editing a manuscript is more than just rearranging, deleting, or replacing words on paper. We work with people who have shared a part of themselves—sometimes hurtful or traumatic experiences. Some clients have spent years working on their manuscripts, sometimes at great cost to themselves and their families.

Whenever you make a significant change, whether it's a short rewrite, rearrangement of paragraphs or chapters, or deletions, I suggest you use the comment feature to explain your edit. This shows respect for the author's work while also explaining the edit and how it benefits readers. Your word choice must not be demeaning or preachy. Be positive: "This is a great thought. I moved it to the end of the chapter for greater impact." "I deleted this sentence because it breaks the flow. I'll see if I can find a better place for it." "Although this cliché fits the situation, we want to try to avoid them because they are, by their nature, overused. Can you find a better way to express your thought? Something like: [offer a suggestion]."

Of course, it is too time-consuming to explain every single edit. And some edits are obvious: missing apostrophes or periods, misspelled words, and incorrect verb tense, for example. If your client questions you on these issues, simply refer him or her to your source for grammar and punctuation issues.

For most edits, you'll simply cite your authority, and that will likely satisfy the client.

How you communicate with your client is of utmost importance—out of respect for him or her and for your professional reputation. We never want to embarrass our clients, speak down to them, or not take their inquiries seriously.

I had a client come back to me with about five pages of questions about my edits! This author was very knowledgeable about his topic and writing. Most of the questions were about grammar, punctuation, and format.

The format questions stumped me because where he referred me to in the document, I found no such issues. After I questioned him a bit more about his word processor program, I discovered that his program and mine had some incompatibilities. Problem solved.

The more difficult task was to answer his numerous questions about issues of grammar and punctuation. He was an older gentleman, and rather than simply direct him to a grammar handbook or *CMOS*, I chose to explain the “rules” I went by. I actually had to answer only five or six questions because he asked the same questions whenever he encountered the same edit. So when I came to a question about an edit on page fifty-four, I just had to refer back to my answer to his question on page twelve.

I guarantee you’ll encounter one of my pet peeves about defending edits. Here’s what happened: I edited a manuscript and returned it to the author. She accepted all of my edits then gave the manuscript to her best friend to proofread it. Now she’s coming back to me quite angry and upset that her friend found so many “errors” I had either missed or introduced.

I asked her to send me the current manuscript. Then I compared documents. This shows me what changes were made after I returned the manuscript to her. I noted those, for I am not responsible for any changes once it leaves my hands. I figured that her best friend was not the best choice for a proofreader. She may be a voracious reader, but it takes more than that to be a skillful editor. I contacted my client and explained clearly but diplomatically that my edits were correct, and I cited my authority. I pointed out that someone had made changes to the manuscript after I returned it to her, and that because I did not make them, I cannot answer for them. I certainly didn’t want to damage her relationship with her best friend. I mustered all the kindness and graciousness I possessed and explained that I am a trained and experienced editor with a bookcase full of reference books on editing and years of experience. I said that it was very nice of her friend to offer to help, but she probably doesn’t have the skills required for a professional proofreader.

Let me stress again, all of this must be said with the greatest professionalism and carefully chosen words, using a tone that conveys respect and sincerity.

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## Notes

1. Bruce O. Boston, ed., *Stet!: Tricks of the Trade for Writers and Editors* (Alexandria, VA: Editorial Experts, Inc., 1986), 79.

## LESSON #3 ASSIGNMENT

*To receive a Certificate of Completion, you will need to complete one assignment from each lesson. For this lesson, I recommend doing both assignments.*

Please access the Word file Nonfiction Editing Lesson 3 Assignment.