

## *Everyone Thinks They Are An Editor*

After over fifteen years in this business, I've come to a few simple truths. I'm shocked at how many people label themselves as editors. Even friends who are avid readers insist they can edit and proof any book. You will read how important it is to have your work "professionally" edited. But what does that mean?

Books do need a good editor and a good proofer. Living with a manuscript for months if not years, a writer gets "text-blind" and can't recognize the problems in the work that's before their very eyes. Often they can sense there is a problem, but can't pin it down. The *intent* of the paragraph is in the writer's head, but doesn't always translate to the written page. It takes a second pair of eyes (or more) to judge if a story makes sense, or has plot holes big enough to drive a truck through. It's a rare animal that can focus on what cripples a piece and treat it much like a physician does a patient. Only deal with what doesn't work. Leave the rest alone. Personal taste shouldn't apply.

At the end of the day it may well come down to "opinion."

Give a manuscript to twelve different editors and you might get twelve different opinions of what needs fixed, what needs deleted, what needs to be added. By the end of the process, the manuscript can become so "sanitized" it has no life left in it.

Some editors dig right in without reading the whole manuscript through. Here is the problem with that. You'll have notations or questions that get answered in the upcoming pages. Had it been read through, those notations would have been avoided and not left the author with a sense of confusion and failure. With novels, you can't answer all the questions in the first ten pages. If so, it would be a short story with lots of after-fluff.

The reality is that editors have prejudices they bring to the table that the writer may be unaware of. For example, if the editor hates the genre they are editing, they are far more apt to gut or skip pages. Personal tastes, world views, politics—they all factor into the final outcome of what's done to the manuscript. Yeah, I know, they say it isn't so, but it is. It's a human reality. An editor may read a story with a gruesome scene and they skim or skip that part altogether due to a weak stomach. I've had it happen. I've had a manuscript come back with negative comments just to find out later that the story-line was too close to that person's real life of unresolved issues. Someone with ADHD may feel a section goes too slow because they get bored, but someone else reading the same

section, may think it goes too fast and needs to slow down. Then there are those who if they don't know what a word means, cross it out and never bother to look it up. Fine if you're writing for first graders.

I have found these problems consistent regardless of whether the person was paid or not. The whole process is like walking through a field littered with landmines. It's a learning process for the author. Finding an editor that is a good fit is much like finding a medical specialist for a health problem.

As the author, you have the final say of what goes and what stays. It can come down to a simple "gut" feeling. Try to look at the editor's recommendations objectively. Does it make it better? Worse? No real change? Most problems are a simple fix, just a word or two, or a rearrangement in the paragraph to make it clear, or deleting a weird sentence. But if they want you to delete a paragraph, a character, or whole chapter, will that create a plot hole they didn't even consider?

You know the work. Did they miss a point, or were you not clear making the point? There's a difference. You can't be responsible if they skipped or glazed over a section when it is clear. I go in after the book is edited with a red pen and edit the editor. If they've written questions, I'll write the answers. If I can't answer their question, then I have a problem in the book that needs work.

Editing is global term, but it has many levels:

A Critique is having someone (with critique experience) to read the manuscript through. This is to find out where the weaknesses are from a "reader's" point of view. They can articulate what works for them (positive feedback) and what is a miss (constructive criticism.) This is different from editors who focus on construction and line editing. It's important to know the difference between the two. It's important for the editor to know the difference also.

Proofing: the hard core rules of the word kingdom. Think *Stunk and Whites: The Elements of Style* or *The Associated Press Stylebook*. Rules that don't change much no matter what you write. With the exception of dialogue.

There are many good websites and blogs on the differences in editing. All it takes is a simple Google search to familiarize yourself with each.

A reputable editor or critique specialist should be able to offer a two or three-page sample of their work for free. Get three different editing opinions. Some editors give copious notes, others don't. Some editors like a one on one with the

client while others prefer to do the whole process online. Find the one that suits you. Beware, just because someone "wrote a book" doesn't make them an "editing professional."

There is a list of questions to ask before the commitment:

1. Do you read the whole manuscript through first?
2. What is your favorite or least favorite genre? (Fit the editor to the genre.)
3. What type of manuscript do you edit? (This is important because the rules are different. Do they know the difference between technical editing and editing fiction?)
4. If you don't understand a word or term, do you look it up or just cross it out?
5. Can you articulate why something doesn't work? (Just crossing a whole section out and noting it "doesn't work" or "isn't necessary" isn't good enough.)
6. Are there areas you won't be able to handle? (Violence, language, sexual content, religion, etc.)

It's pointless to expect someone to edit what they are uncomfortable with. These questions need to be asked. For the author, having a piece come back redlined due to personal prejudices can be devastating. The person doing the editing may not even be aware of what they've done, but the outcome is the same no matter what the reason. It can destroy a writer's confidence to go on.

It is up to you, the writer, to do your due diligence. Like publishing, there are sharks in the water waiting for an arm to slip below the surface.