

THE EDITING PROCESS: ADDENDA

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1. Sample Edits

What is involved in a sample edit?

A sample edit is useful for both writer and editor. Some editors provide a free sample edit; others charge a reasonable fee. An editor asks a writer to submit a representative sample of perhaps 7 to 10 double-spaced pages. As editing is the final major step before preparing the manuscript for design and publishing, the writer should present it in the standard publishing industry format: double-spaced, Times New Roman size 12 font—probably in Microsoft Word; the edit will most likely be done using Word’s “Track Changes” and “Comments” editing tools. The editor and writer may instead agree to do the edit on paper or with another word processing program; even then, the manuscript should use industry standards for fonts and spacing and avoid fancy formatting.

The editor may also ask for an outline, summary, or synopsis of the entire manuscript to understand how the sample fits into the overall picture. Send along a copy of the style sheet you’ve developed which shows choices you’ve made such as character descriptions, spelling alternatives, and so on. Some editors want to do a read-through of the entire manuscript to get a big picture view before doing focused editing, but usually a synopsis is sufficient prior to a sample edit. The editor will also require the total number of words to make a time and cost estimate.

Being “representative,” the sample should include at least a couple opening pages of the work, plus other pages that include dialogue, action scenes, character description, and charts or tables not included in the opening page or two. The editor will usually do a “full edit” view of the sample, including multi-editing level comments on big story issues (plot, characterization, logic, flow, style, etc.), and copyediting (grammatical issues, along with punctuation and spelling). Also, as it is a “representative” sample, it should be similar to the writing quality in the entire manuscript. Do not submit a chapter you have “polished,” or a chapter that your self-editing team has helped you with, if the rest of the manuscript still needs much more work.

Based on the sample edit, the editor can:

- make recommendations for issues/levels (both big picture and fine detail issues) that need improvement, give examples on how to make those improvements, and suggest sources to learn to make those improvements (courses, books, articles, etc.).
- show the writer how to make self-editing improvements. The writer can learn from the editor's input and apply this information to the full manuscript before actual editing starts. This will improve the manuscript and save editing time and money while building the writer's skills.
- propose an editing "process" for the writer to follow, including more self-editing with alpha and beta readers and critique group help, plus back-and-forth work with the editor, and perhaps even some guidance on publishing
- estimate how much time the editing will take and perhaps how much time the writer should plan to devote to self-editing during and after the editing process
- provide a cost estimate (with both low-end and high-end estimates, and possibly a cap rate) based on the time and effort needed in the sample, the recommended process (how many drafts may be required, for example, or the particular editing level(s) required), and the total number of words and/or pages. Editing fees vary, and may be calculated by the hour, page, word, or a flat contract rate. They also depend on where your editor is located (which involves local economics, etc.), your editor's experience and qualifications, how much work your manuscript needs, what kind of manuscript you have (technical aspects, especially in nonfiction, can increase the cost), and how many drafts and editing levels will be involved.

Questions the editor will ask during the sample edit process:

An editor usually will not provide a time or cost estimate until he or she completes the sample edit and asks the writer some important questions. The editor may ask for most or all of the following information, so have it ready:

- your manuscript's purpose and target audience
- a synopsis of the story for fiction, or a statement of theme or thesis along with an outline or table of contents for nonfiction
- the number of words of the full manuscript (this is a more accurate measure of length than the number of pages), plus your final word count goal
- special aspects (illustrations and captions, tables or other graphics, specific historical periods or settings that the editor requires knowledge about, assistance you might need with citations or research, questions you have about legal issues, etc.)
- for fiction, the genre (or combination of genres); for nonfiction, the subject and style (e.g. history textbook, car repair manual, self-help book, recipe book, etc.)
- any time deadlines—and any financial issues, including the highest cost you can afford

- problems with your writing which you (and/or other helpers) have identified
- the amount of self-editing (rewrites, drafts) you have already done
- people (alpha reader, beta readers, critique group, writing partner, writing coach or tutor) who have already helped you—and the advice they have provided
- other levels of professional editing your manuscript has already been through
- whether you have worked with industry professionals before—freelance editors, agents, and/or publishers and their editors—either on this project or on previous projects
- the sort of publishing you are interested in: Big Five, mid-size, or small traditional publishing companies; personal/independent or assisted self-publishing; hybrid publishing; agented or direct-to-traditional-publisher submission
- what format you want to publish in: print (traditional books), e-books, graphic novels, audio book, video, workbooks, or a combination
- what level(s) of editing you think you require, including suggestions others have given you. Realize that the editor may suggest higher-level editing than you expected—or may ask you to do a lot more self-editing before and/or during the editing process. This is for your benefit as a writer and improves your chances of successful publishing.

Potential outcomes of a sample edit

- The editor can or can't meet your needs: If, based on the sample edit, the editor decides he or she cannot do the job (does not specialize in the particular genre; has a busy schedule and can't fit the job into the writer's time frame; does not specialize in the editing level(s) required for the work provided; feels the manuscript is not ready for formal editing; etc.), another editor may be recommended or other next steps suggested. If the editor has some major concerns with the manuscript after editing the sample, but still is interested in editing the work, the writer may be asked to allow a complete manuscript read-through followed by a detailed editorial report. The writer will need to pay for this, but it will cost less than a detailed edit, and will inform the writer clearly what is required before the editing process can begin.
- The editor recognizes at what stage of writing craft an author is—beginning, emerging, developing, seasoned—and provides a written report that summarizes the writer's strengths and weaknesses and provides recommendations for the writer on how to further develop his/her/their skills and improve the manuscript before editing.
- The editor and writer build a good basic relational understanding and can work together well. The more willing the writer is to take the editor's advice, such as completing more self-editing before the editing begins, the more likely the editor will try to meet the writer's requests, such as using a different editing process, meeting specific timing needs, and finding financial solutions.
- The writer, after the sample edit, can decide whether this is the editor he or she would want to work with. The sample edit also provides the writer with a strong sense of the process, how long it will take, and what it will cost.

- Having a sample edit encourages a writer to do more self-editing and work with the self-editing team to improve the work so the editor can focus on the key elements that less experienced helpers may not be able to help with. In that process, the writer's skills improve; this contributes to both current and future writing. Becoming a better writer is a lifelong learning journey. Self-editing after the sample edit can also save editing time—and money. The editor may do a second sample edit after this process to see how the writer has improved and to estimate an up-dated time frame and cost for editing.
- The editor might be able to advise on publishing possibilities such as whether the manuscript might be suitable to submit for consideration to traditional publishers, or whether the writer might better consider a self-publishing/hybrid company, or personally take on much of the self-publishing process and contract out parts that are too difficult.

Suggestions for self-editing after the sample edit

A wise writer will consider the editor's suggestions and self-edit as much as possible. Go through the entire manuscript, making the changes the editor has recommended in the sample (assuming you agree with them; if you disagree, talk to the editor about it). Take a course or consult a style manual or other writing and editing source to learn the skills you need. As you fix your frequently repeated errors, you will become a better writer, and you will improve your manuscript before the editor starts formally editing it. This can save editing time, which in turn may save as much as 25 to 35% of the original estimated cost if you really learn from the editor's recommendations in the sample edit.

Meeting personally:

The editor may wish to meet face-to-face, or by videoconferencing, to get to know the writer more personally. This helps both of them decide if they are a good fit, with the personalities and perspectives to develop a good working relationship, especially if a fairly major, multi-level editing process is required. Meeting personally can highlight areas of strong differences or disagreement in worldview and perspectives and also potential relationship issues.

Editing contract basics

After the sample edit is complete, if the writer and editor decide to carry on with the editing, the editor will probably provide a fairly detailed contract which both parties will discuss and agree upon. It will lay out the editing process and is a safety measure for both editor and writer in case difficulties should arise.

Don't forget to place this exercise in your binder or Duotang. And now go on to part 2 in this series: Your Editing and Publishing Timeline.