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Breaking into Corporate Editing



by Moira Allen

For many companies "information" is their most important product. Forget the myth of the paperless office; most offices are flooded with research reports, studies, white papers, marketing surveys, analyses, annual reports, reviews -- enough paper to consume a small rainforest.



Ironically, despite the push to present information, many corporations have cut back on the staff needed to present it effectively. Editorial departments are often the first to feel the effects of "corporate downsizing" -- and many corporations have found that it is far cheaper to hire freelancers on a part-time contract basis than to maintain a full-time, salaried editorial staff. That's where you come in. With your blue pencil and an eagle-eye for typos, you can keep the information flowing (and even help make it readable). But first, it's important to know how the corporate "editorial process" works.



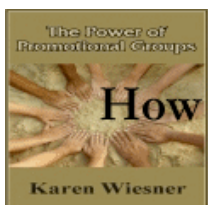
in an ordinary book again



In most companies, a document (such as a report) goes through several stages before it is published. First, a draft is circulated for management or peer review, after which the author may make changes or revisions. In some cases, that's the most editing a manuscript receives; after incorporating management suggestions, the author may simply hand the piece to the nearest secretary to correct and print.



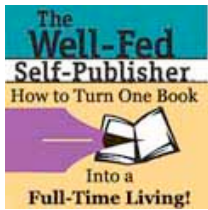
In an ideal world, however, the manuscript will then pass through several editorial stages, including:



Content Editing

A "content editor" addresses issues of content and style. To ensure that a document accomplishes the purpose for which it is written, a content editor usually reviews the material with the following questions in mind:





- Is the material accurate (to the best of the editor's knowledge)?
- Is the material clear and easy to understand? (If the editor has difficulty understanding the document, a reader may have difficulty as well.)
- Is the material covered in sufficient depth? Does it adequately address the questions a reader would ask? Do some items need more explanation? Do some need less?
- Is the material presented in a logical, orderly fashion? Or do some items need to be rearranged or reprioritized?
- Are names and technical terms spelled correctly and consistently? Are the proper abbreviations and acronyms used (and used consistently)? Are technical terms and acronyms explained? (Often, a company may have its own style manual for acronyms, abbreviations, and technical terms.)
- Does the document conform to the company's style manual, if any?
- Is the writing clear and effective? (The content editor may deal with grammatical issues such as awkward or run-on sentences, rambling prose, unclear phrases, etc.) Depending on company policy, the editor may rework sections, or provide suggestions for the author.

In some cases, you may be expected to have some background in the subject area of the document, so that you can determine whether material is presented effectively or accurately. In other cases, such knowledge won't be required (though it's always helpful!).

Content editors may work closely with authors -- and many authors take exception to the notion that their work might need revision. Others are more than happy to dump a mess of incomplete sentences and half-finished ideas in your lap and say "Here, fix it!" Consequently, diplomatic skills may be as important as editorial skills!

Copy Editing

After the revisions suggested by the content editor have been made (or ignored), a document usually moves on to the copy-editing stage. A copy editor usually focuses upon:

- Spelling and punctuation (including hyphenation accuracy)
- General grammar issues, such as sentence structure, noun/verb agreement, parallel construction, etc.
- Correct word use (e.g., which vs. that, imply vs. infer, etc.)
- Consistent spelling (e.g., noting whether an author hyphenates a word

in some cases but not in others, or uses different abbreviations or acronyms for the same term).

- Consistent use of numerical terms, numbers, dates, etc. (e.g., making sure that the author doesn't say "11 PM" in one sentence and "12:00 a.m." in the next.)

Whenever editorial changes and revisions are made to a document, a host of new errors may be introduced. One of the tasks of a copy editor is often to check the "original" against the "revised" document, to make sure that nothing has been inadvertently changed, omitted, or added. Similarly, a copy editor may review charts, graphs, and references for accuracy and consistency.

While it can be frustrating to copy edit a document that obviously needs a solid "content" editing, most companies don't encourage copy editors to make substantive changes or suggestions about content or style. There are exceptions, but check before offering editorial comments.

A copy editor usually isn't expected to have a knowledge of the subject matter. What is needed instead is a firm grasp of grammar -- and the ability to explain (and defend) grammatical changes to the author. So brush off your grammar books, and be prepared to explain concepts such as "dependent clauses" and "sentence fragments."

Proofreading

Proofreading is usually the last editorial stage. Unfortunately, it is also often the only editing many documents receive. Proofreaders are generally expected to check only for errors in spelling, punctuation, and format. Sometimes you may be permitted to correct blatant grammatical errors -- but don't count on it! Proofreaders also check charts and graphs -- and since these are often re-keyboarded by someone other than the author, the proofreader may be asked to verify every number against the original.

A proofreader may also be asked to check a revised manuscript against the original, marked-up copy. Sometimes a proofreader will also be asked to compare two documents word-for-word (whether revised or not). Usually this task is unnecessary, being a holdover from the days when a typesetter would re-keyboard an entire text rather than simply reprinting a file -- but some companies haven't caught up with their own technology!

Proofreaders need no special subject knowledge, but an absolutely perfect command of spelling and punctuation, and a keen eye. You may also be asked to check spellings of technical terms. (If the terms are unfamiliar, try to obtain a relevant dictionary; fortunately, many scientific and technical dictionaries are now available online.) You will also be expected to be familiar with, and use, standard proofreading marks.

The Corporate Mentality

Editing for corporations is not the same as editing a book or magazine manuscript. In business, "quality" writing may not be nearly as important as conveying a particular idea, message, statistic, or product to a selected audience. Often, corporate editing means making tradeoffs in priorities, such as:

- **Quality vs. Deadlines:** Being "well-written" often isn't nearly as important as being on time. Documents must be delivered to the client on schedule, or accompany a product shipment, or be on hand for the next board meeting -- and nothing, including editing, can be allowed to delay that process. Unfortunately, documents are often written at the last minute, which means they may be handed to an editor at the 11th hour. At this point, a content editor may not have the luxury of rearranging ideas or paragraphs, a copy editor may not be able to correct stylistic flaws, and a proofreader may not be able to change significant grammatical errors. If you're a perfectionist, beware: Sometimes the only influence you may have over a document is to make it readable.
- **Author Power vs. Editor Power:** Who has the final say over how a document is written? In some companies, power rests exclusively with the publications division (or a public relations department), which may have the authority to cut, edit, revise -- or even block a publication that doesn't meet its standards. In others, the power rests with the author, who can insist that a document remain untouched -- even if it is riddled with grammatical errors. The ideal working relationship lies somewhere in between -- but few companies are ideal!
- **Soothing Egos vs. Getting it Right:** Corporate officers often fail to understand that titles, degrees, and high salaries are no guarantee of writing skill. In addition, no one (especially someone in possession of those titles, etc.) wants to be told that they can't write. The last thing you want to tell a hiring agent, therefore, is that you're there to "fix" the work of a company's top professionals. Instead, you should present your role as a "value added" benefit: You are there to make the already brilliant work of a company's researchers, analysts, and experts shine even more brightly thanks to your polishing (and your willingness to handle the "menial" tasks of copyediting that those brilliant researchers shouldn't have to worry about). Rates for corporate editing vary widely, depending on the size and geographic location of the company. Rates may also depend on whether you are offering your services as a content editor, copy editor, or proofreader. When pricing your services, therefore, keep the local rates and type of company in mind. Typically, pay begins at \$18 to \$25 an hour -- and some companies don't hesitate to budget thousands of dollars for a large proofreading job.

Keep in mind as well that financial officers have interesting ways of looking at hourly rates. For example, if you are a fast, efficient worker who charges \$50 an hour for five hours, you may be considered "more

expensive" than an editor who charges \$40 an hour for ten hours. One alternative is to charge by the job instead of the hour, or by a more "tangible" measure, such as "per page."

Facts don't speak for themselves. They need someone to speak for them -- and, quite often, someone to edit the words of that speaker. Once you convince companies that you can make them shine by making their prose shine, you'll be on your way to developing a loyal customer base -- and an excellent source of freelance income.

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This article originally appeared on [Writer on Line](#).

Moira Allen, editor of Writing-World.com, has published more than 350 articles and columns and seven books, including [How to Write for Magazines](#), [Starting Your Career as a Freelance Writer](#), [The Writer's Guide to Queries, Pitches and Proposals](#), and her most recent book, [Writing to Win: The Colossal Guide to Writing Contests](#). Allen has served as columnist and contributing editor for *The Writer* and has written for *Writer's Digest*, *Byline*, and various other writing publications. In addition to Writing-World.com, Allen hosts the travel website [TimeTravel-Britain.com](#), [The Pet Loss Support Page](#), and the photography website [AllenImages.net](#). She can be contacted at editors "at" [writing-world.com](#).

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