

UNDERSTANDING THE EDITORIAL PROCESS – LEVELS OF EDITING

WHY EDIT?

Each year, more than a million books are published in the United States, joining thousands of previous titles on bookstore shelves. To compete in such a teeming market, all professionally published books undergo a multi-level editing and design process. The goal is to produce a handsome book that readers will find clear, compelling, and as free of errors as possible.

Even the most accomplished writers rely on editors. A good editor catches mistakes, suggests improvements, and helps the writer reach his or her readers, yet remains invisible by preserving and reinforcing the author's distinct, original voice.

THE EDITING PROCESS

The project editor shepherds a book through the entire production process, but other editors tackle specific tasks such as **substantive editing**, **copyediting**, and **proofreading**. Typically a different editor performs each of these tasks so a new set of eyes is reviewing and polishing the text at each step as it goes through the process. The author is given copies of the changes suggested by the editors and proofreader for review and approval. The author may also need to respond to editor queries about specific content issues (for example, fact-checking, peculiar spellings, etc.). Once the text is approved by the author, a designer is given the final edited text to begin the layout and design of the interior pages and cover. Sample spreads are provided to the author for approval prior to the whole book being laid out. The author is asked to review and approve the fonts and format used throughout the book. After the final layout is approved, some books are also **indexed**. The final proofs are then given **one last review** by the project editor and author before going to the printer. The printer then sends a set of final press proofs for review and approval before starting the actual print run. We review and compare the press proofs against the proofs approved by the author. The printer then uses the approved press proofs as guides to ensure accurate color matching and layout.

To produce the best possible book, we encourage our authors to take advantage of the full menu of editing and design services offered by Sweetgrass Books. Some authors, however, choose to combine or omit certain steps. Authors are able to review and approve all changes as the manuscript moves through the editing and design process.

LEVELS OF EDITING - A MENU OF SERVICES

For many authors, the editing process seems mysterious and worrisome. Briefly, here is what editors do during each step of the process.

- **SUBSTANTIVE EDITING** focuses on content, organization, language, style, pace, and presentation to ensure they suit the book’s purpose and audience. At this stage, the editor looks at the overall structure and substance of the piece, ensuring that themes advance logically, noting gaps, cutting random detours, and tightening the narrative as needed. The editor may suggest cutting text, writing new text, reordering paragraphs or larger sections, and otherwise reshaping the narrative. The editor also creates a project style sheet (or adds to a style sheet provided by the author) that documents spellings and usage conventions peculiar to the work in hand. The author then reviews the substantive edits and works with the editor to resolve any questions and prepare the text for the next step.

- **COPYEDITING** focuses on making sure the text is accurate, clear, and consistent. The copyeditor ensures that spelling, grammar, punctuation, and other usage elements conform to the style guides (we use the current edition of the Chicago Manual of Style, Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary, Farcountry’s house style guide, and the project style sheet). This may involve recasting sentences, reducing the use of pet phrases, and suggesting clearer word choices. The copyeditor also corrects any errors in lists, graphic elements, footnotes or endnotes, and bibliography entries. The project editor reviews the copyeditor’s corrections, approves or rejects them, and addresses any loose ends. The copyedited manuscript then goes to a designer for layout in book format. (The project editor often makes design suggestions and reviews a draft layout to ensure that the design aligns with the book’s content and target audience.)

- **PROOFREADING** focuses on making sure the final layout galleys are free of errors. The proofreader double checks all of the details covered in the copyedit and also ensures that images, illustrations, captions, and other layout elements are error free and correctly formatted. The proofreader also checks for bad line and page breaks (including “widows” and “orphans”), hyphen and word stacks on right-hand margins, lingering typos, and any other errors. The project manager reviews the proofreader’s marks, and the designer makes the corrections on the final layout files.

- For some books, an **indexer** develops an index of key people, places, and themes. Indexers sift through the book, typically using software to scan for every instance of each indexable term. For this reason, they may catch a handful of typos (such as spelling inconsistencies) missed by others. The project editor edits the index and spot checks its pagination against the actual pages, and the designer adds the index to the final layout.

- A final pre-press proof is done to make sure all critical details are error free: ISBN, price, barcode, pagination against table of contents, overall layout, and more. When everything is correct, the project editor and author give the go ahead—the books are printed, bound, boxed, and shipped.

The levels of editing often overlap to some degree. For example, a substantive editor will correct obvious misspellings and punctuation errors, and a copyeditor may suggest moving a paragraph for better flow. Fact-checking tends to occur early in the process but continues at all levels as fresh eyes are brought to the text.