



Unraveling the Mysteries of Editors' Titles

by

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The internet has made publishing fast, easy, and cheap. Anyone can become a publisher. If you produce white papers, blog posts, and content marketing, you are a publisher.

Advertising, research papers, and company reports are all published works; they're just not all *public* works.

Publications don't all have the same process, nor do they need to. What works for book publishers won't work for a marketing department trying to reach its ideal customer. However, the more an independent publisher defines its publishing process and assigns people with the right skill sets to do the job, the better the published content will be.

A key task in any publishing process is editing. At various stages, editing ensures the manuscript is organized in a meaningful way, represents the writer's ideas clearly and concisely, follows an acceptable writing style, and is as error free as any human can make it.



Titles vs. Tasks

When it's time to hire an editor, you may be overwhelmed with all the types of editors out there. Adding confusion is the fact that an editor's title may bear no relation to their role. As my fellow editor Levi Bookin points out:

Doctors and nurses both work in the field of health. There are some functions that either might perform, such as injections, but each must have a certificate relating to the individual vocation.

Editors, copyeditors, and proofreaders all work in the field of preparing a manuscript for publication, but none has to provide a certificate relating to his occupation. Any may do all the work of any or all of the others.

In publishing, the role does not have to match the title. "Senior Editor" doesn't even hint at what kind of editing someone might do. It could just as easily be a video editor's title as a text editor's.

Another part of the problem is the type of publisher we're talking about. Publishing has never been limited to just books and periodicals.

Titles notwithstanding, what do editors *do*?

Developmental Editors

At the start of the publishing process is the **developmental editor**. They might be called executive editor, editor in chief, senior editor, assigning editor, even editorial director. In general, this editor helps authors develop their ideas better and structure and organize the manuscript.

For periodicals and similar publications, the developmental editor assigns story ideas and decides what goes into the publication. The editor has an idea or an outline for an article and assigns a writer to it. When the writer turns in the assignment, the editor may ask for big changes, such as to structure or argument, so the article better fits the original idea or the purpose of the assignment.

In book publishing, the publisher can assign a developmental editor to a project. Maybe the writer is struggle with how the story should grow or what order the action should be in. The developmental editor helps work out those issues.

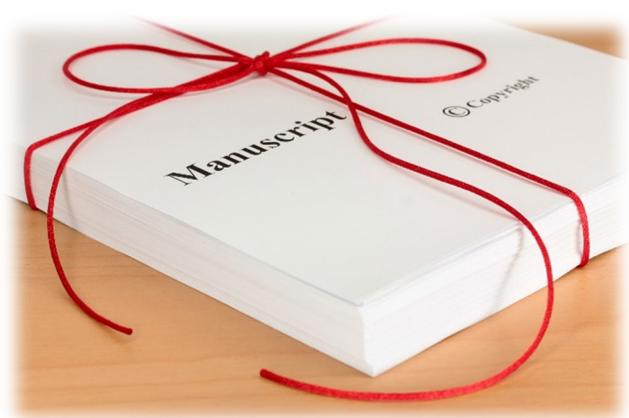
Within the marketing department, the CMO or other senior manager might act as a developmental editor, working with the writer to develop the content.



Substantive Editors

Once the writer has told their story and feels the structure and argument are good, it's time to polish the piece. Depending on your particular publishing process, there could be an editor to look at the document as a whole and section by section, another editor to look at it at the sentence level, and still another to look at it letter by letter.

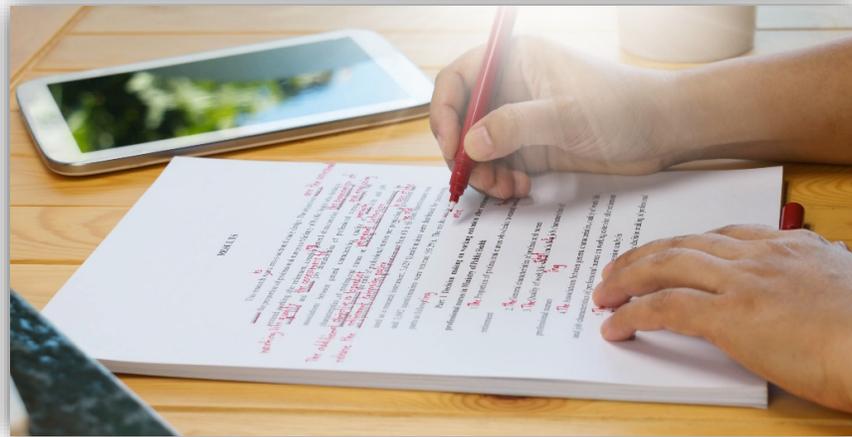
For those with the time and money, a **substantive editor** is an excellent way to ensure the content is solid and the writing style consistent and refined. Again, titles abound and usually have nothing to do with job function: senior editor, editor, and associate editor are common titles. However they are labeled, substantive editors look at the organization and structure of the piece, transitions (between chapters, sections,



paragraphs, etc.), redundancies, jargon, sexist language, awkward constructions, excessive use of passive voice, wordiness, logic, tone, and so on.

Copyeditors

Many publishing processes cut the substantive editor from the process and go straight to the next step: copyediting. The **copyeditor** looks at sentence order and structure, sentence and paragraph length, grammar, word usage, punctuation, spelling, and style.



If substantive editing has been cut, the copyeditor may also correct for awkward transitions, redundancies, and other of the substantive editor's duties. This might be called a *heavy copyedit*. Note, though, that copyeditors rarely correct for organization and structure of the whole piece. They may point out the problems, but by this stage, it's usually too late to rip apart the entire manuscript and start again—a good argument for adding a developmental or substantive editor earlier in the process.

If the editorial process doesn't include a separate fact-checking phase, the copyeditor may check basic facts as well. The list varies but generally includes names, addresses, phone numbers, URLs, dates, other numbers, and common facts (e.g., President Obama was the 44th president of the United States). When hiring a copyeditor, be sure to ask how much, if any, fact-checking they do.

In web publishing, copyeditors may upload the copy to the content management system and perform search engine optimization tasks. Copyeditors can be asked to write article titles and captions, as well.

Proofreaders

Proofreaders are the end of the line, ensuring the finished project is correct. It's tempting to skip this last step in the editing process, but that can be a serious mistake.

In most publishing processes, the manuscript is designed and laid out only after copyediting. Proofreaders ensure not only that the text is correct but that design elements are the right color and

size and are in the right place. With copyeditors actually creating some of the copy, someone should be checking their work, as well.



There are two main types of proofreading. Traditional proofreading compares *dead copy* against *live copy*. That is, proofreaders compare the last approved version of the manuscript with changes marked against a new version with the changes made. They ensure that all changes have been made and the two versions otherwise match.

Editorial proofreading skips the dead-copy part. The proofreader does a *cold read*: reviewing the latest version of the manuscript. They correct spelling, grammar, punctuation, and style and check design elements.

Define the Tasks, Not the Titles

These are simplified descriptions and there are many more types of editors, but these are the most common.

It's easy to miss an error in a piece you've read two or three times already. Your brain knows what comes next and your eyes will skim the sentence, allowing your brain to remember what's supposed to be there rather than seeing what's actually there. And the longer the list of possible errors is, the more opportunities there are to miss something.

In the end, you don't need to know all the industry jargon to hire an editor. You just need an idea of what your manuscript needs, and then let your editor guide you the rest of the way.

Every manuscript's needs are different. It makes sense to have an idea of what the different levels of editing are, what the editor can do to help the copy, and what the editor's skill set is. Then, no matter what the role is called, you know what your editor can do for you.

Still Not Sure? We Can Help!

[Contact us today](#) to review your manuscript, free of charge. We'll advise you on the best editing plan for your manuscript.



About the Author

An award-winning copywriter, [Right Touch Editing](#) owner Erin Brenner has been providing high-quality writing and editing for clients since 2005. Before running her own company, she worked for ClickZ, IDC, and Epsilon, which gave her a deep understanding of business publishing. Clients includes SAP, O'Reilly Media, Dictionary.com, and numerous independent authors.

Erin shares her expertise in communications and business by speaking at industry conferences, such as those for ACES, Editors' Association of Canada, and MagsBC. She also provides writer training for private companies, such as Slipstream and Meister Consultants Group.



She is the author of [Copyediting's Grammar Tune-Up Workbook](#), [1001 Words for Success: Synonyms, Antonyms, and Homonyms](#), and [Quick Study Dictionary of Commonly Confused and Misspelled Words](#) (with Steve Berner), as well as hundreds of articles and blog posts for Copyediting.com, [Visual Thesaurus](#), and publications. Read more of her work on [Right Touch Editing's blog](#).

Contact Erin at erin@righttouchediting.com to help you with your next project!