



# How to Hire an Editor: Testing Candidates

by

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A

RightTouch  
EDITING

Quick Guide

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# How to Hire an Editor: Testing Candidates

When you're looking to hire an editor, whether a freelancer or an employee, one of the most critical questions you need to answer is "How do I know they're as good as they claim to be?" Giving an editing test, especially one that reflects the kind of writing you publish, is one way to try to answer that question.

But editing tests are not as straightforward as they seem. There are good reasons to give one, certainly, but there also good reasons to skip them. And if you decide that giving an editing test is the right solution for you, you'll want to create and administer a test that not only is fair but that will also accurately reveal the best candidate.

At various points in my career, I've taken editing tests for both full-time employment and long-term contract work. Sometimes I passed the tests, while other times I didn't. Mostly I've run into reasonable tests, but occasionally I've been given tests that either didn't accurately test my skills or didn't accurately reflect the work

I would be hired to do. I don't mind failing a test honestly; if I'm not suited for a job, I'm not. But I do mind tests that fail to accurately test me. That's a lost opportunity for me and the hiring agent.

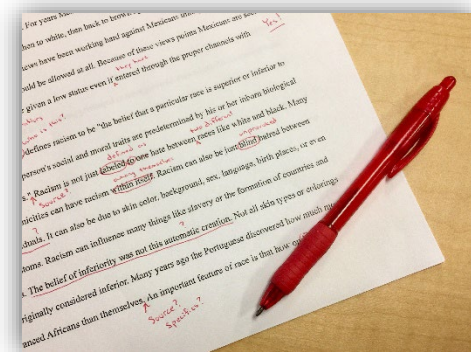
I've also hired editors in the past and do so now. Sometimes I test candidates, and sometimes I don't. Decisions were based on the factors discussed below. When I did give tests, I made an extra effort to ensure the tests told me what I needed to know without unfairly burdening candidates. It was worth the time and care to find the right candidate and protect my reputation as someone worth working for.

I hope that this Quick Guide helps ease the burden of hiring an editor for your next project or job opening.

## Why You Might Give an Editing Test

### To Choose Between Finalists

Companies are hiring fewer editors and sometimes outsourcing the task altogether, whether to a freelancer or to an overseas company. Yet the flow of people entering the editing profession has continued to grow. When I taught in UCSD's Extension School editing certificate program, my courses were always full, as were those of my fellow instructors. Networking groups for editors are



full of all levels of editors, with more joining all the time. And while more editors are choosing to run their own businesses rather than compete for a few employee positions, the number of candidates still far outweighs the number of jobs. Whether you are looking to hire an employee or an independent contractor, you will have a large talent pool to choose from.

Administering an editing test is an effective way to compare two or three nearly identical candidates. You're able to compare editing styles and patterns of errors caught (and missed). Because creating, implementing, and grading takes a significant amount of time, you'll want to narrow your candidate list to a few finalists before testing them.

## To Find the Specialist

Let's face it: it's not uncommon for a hungry job candidate to say during an interview that they know how to do something, such as work in a specific software, and then go learn to do it.

It may be one thing for a candidate to say they're familiar with, say, SharePoint and then go read up on it. SharePoint can be learned quickly and applied immediately.

Editing isn't software, though. It's a craft. It takes time—years even—to learn to edit well. Specialized editing takes even more time. If your content is highly specific, dealing with challenging topics like technology or medicine, you may want to test candidates who don't have a lot of experience but claim they're up to it.

An editing test that represents your typical documents is a good way to explore candidates' knowledge of your subject.



## To Find a Perfect Match

While editing is governed by rules, it's equally governed by creativity. The right editor for you needs to be able to edit not only to ensure grammatical correctness but also to fit your writing style. It's like ensuring an interior decorator not only knows their job but also understands your style and can create it in your home. This is especially important in fiction and literary nonfiction. Giving an editing test can help you determine whether the editor's style works well with your writing style.

## To Hire a Diamond in the Rough

Once in a while, you get a feeling about a candidate. Their résumé doesn't reflect their editing ability, but the interview indicates that they know their stuff. You can more confidently give a newbie a chance by testing them first.

# Why You Might Skip the Editing Test

Testing might not be something you need or even want to do, however. In fact, you might be missing out on good candidates who won't take an editing test (see below for insight on why some editors don't want to take tests). Let's take a look at a few reasons to forgo the editing test.

## Tests Are Time Consuming

I gave editing tests to my editing students for five years, and I can tell you that tests take time. A lot of it.

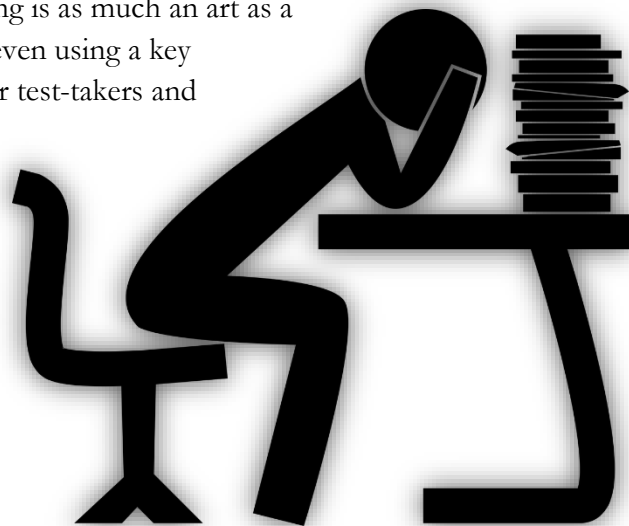
First, you have to create the test. The best tests mimic the real-life manuscripts the editor will work on. Subject matter, writing style, and the quality of writing should all be similar to your work. This is one reason I'm so keen on editing samples: it's a lot easier to give an editor a piece of the raw copy than to come up with something similar but different.

Then you need to create a reasonable answer key, understanding that often there is no one right answer. Again, editing is as much an art as a science. No two editors edit the same way, so even using a key comprehensive enough to make grading fair for test-takers and efficient for test graders, you're going to be making judgment calls (see the next section).

When you actually grade the tests, you'll want to see whether the candidate caught errors you identified. But no one can catch everything, so you'll have to determine if they caught enough errors and whether what they caught were the most important ones. "Important" usually means the errors that cause you the most embarrassment or cost the most money.

Additionally, you'll have to look at the artistic side of the test. Does the resulting copy read well? Does it still sound like the author's voice? Is the level of editing what you were looking for, or did you want something deeper? Lighter?

Reviewing these kinds of questions takes time—just ask my former students. Reviewing one test of approximately a thousand words could take me a couple of hours. Even then, I often went back after reviewing other students' tests, rethinking whether a particular correction was appropriate or not.



## You Don't Feel Qualified to Judge Editing

Your own editing experience can be another hurdle to administering an editing test. It's not unusual for a manager to oversee employees whose job they don't know how to do. But how can you create and evaluate a test on something you don't have experience with?

There are editing tests online that you can administer, but those can be equally problematic. You'll have to decide whether they test for things your editor will need to know. For example, you can have candidates take a Dow Jones editing test. That will demonstrate the editor's ability to edit news copy, particularly in Dow Jones style. But if you're hiring a tech editor, the Dow Jones test won't tell you much. Journalism and technical writing are very different, and passing a journalism editing test doesn't mean you can edit tech copy.

Another problem with outside tests is that they tend to be drills. It's much easier—and not at all like real-world editing—to take a quiz on spelling or grammar knowledge. Such drills can indicate whether someone is a good speller or knows a lot about grammar, both of which are valuable skills in an editor. In the real world, however, editing relies heavily on context. Grammar isn't a set of hard-and-fast rules. Tests without context won't tell you if the candidate can apply those rules to your copy.



## You Have Enough Information Already

You might be lucky and have only a few candidates for the role. Résumés, interviews, and recommendations can be enough for you to choose the right person. Recommendations can be especially helpful because you can ask about the kind of copy the candidate edited and how helpful the edits were. Why make more work for yourself with an editing test?

## Candidates Don't Want to Take a Test

Editing tests taken as part of a job interview are a contentious topic among editors. While some editors have no problem taking them, others are quite vocal about *not* taking them. Their biggest reasons echo some of the reasons you might want to skip the editing test, such as the test not being an adequate test of their skills or the grader not being an accurate judge of editing.

Another reason editors sometimes give to pass on an editing test is that they have been editing for a long time, and they feel their published works and recommendations are evidence enough. However, longevity doesn't necessarily equal skill. Unfortunately, there are plenty of poorly trained—even untrained—editors who have been gainfully employed for decades, doing a poor job. We would like to think that our résumés speak for themselves, but they rarely tell the whole story.

Then there are the “tests” designed to get several editors to edit a project for free under the guise of a test. Many editors have had experience with these sorts of scams and will be wary if you hand them an especially lengthy test (anything that takes more than an hour, really). You don't want your job opening to look like a scam, especially since editors will often inform each other if they suspect someone is trying to get work done for free.

Keep tests fairly short, and refrain from using edits without paying for them first, and you should avoid this problem well enough.

## Alternatives to Giving a Test

You give an editing test to evaluate a candidate's skills. Especially when the pool has been reduced to just a few candidates, a test can be a good way to decide on a finalist. But you could also have candidates work a trial period or edit a sample of your manuscript to get a sense of their work instead. Either option could be free or paid, depending on the situation, but both would help you see a candidate's editing applied to your actual copy while avoiding the downsides of testing.



Early in my career, I applied for a full-time proofreading job. Select candidates were brought in to work in the office for a day (on separate days, of course). We were paid for the day, received preliminary training and oversight, and given some work to do. The employer was able to find out not only what candidates' abilities were but whether they'd be a good fit for the team. Candidates were able to see what the work was like, what

the commute was like, and whether they'd like the team. Plus, they were paid for the day. Not a bad deal all around. (I didn't get the job—a good decision for both parties. I was too inexperienced for them, and I hated the commute.)

If you request a free or paid sample edit on your copy, be sure your sample is a reasonable length. The sample edit should take no more than an hour to complete and be no more than 1,000 words. Earn bonus points by allowing the editors to review the entire manuscript and choose what to edit. Not only will this give candidates context for the section they edit but they can also choose a section that requires a reasonable amount of work.

Whether you give editing tests or not often comes down to your candidate's experience in the industry and your demand for them specifically. You'll likely be fine allowing experienced editors to skip the tests; newer editors may need or even want to prove their skills, however.

## How to Test Editors

If, after all this, you've decided to give an editing test, you want it to be fair and a good measure of a candidate's ability to do *your* editing.

Testing is difficult. Witness the trouble we have in the United States making standardized tests an accurate measure of learning. The last thing you want to do is spend time and money on a test that doesn't lead you to a good candidate. If you're going to test candidates, here's what to keep in mind.

### Know What You're Doing...

Editing is a specialized skill. It's not enough to pick up a document and introduce errors into it and call it a test. Do you know when a sentence is *begging the question*? It's not as straightforward as some might think.

Consider what type of errors most often creep into your copy and what type of errors you want editors to catch. Do you struggle with comma rules? Do your writers have a hard time with dangling modifiers?

Also consider how many errors are usually in your work. Your test should mimic that, maybe with a few more errors, but not much. Putting in too many errors not only isn't an accurate reflection of the work to be done but it will make the test more onerous than it needs to be.

Do you know [what type of editor](#) your manuscript needs? It might need more than just a copyedit; if so, you need a test that reflects that.

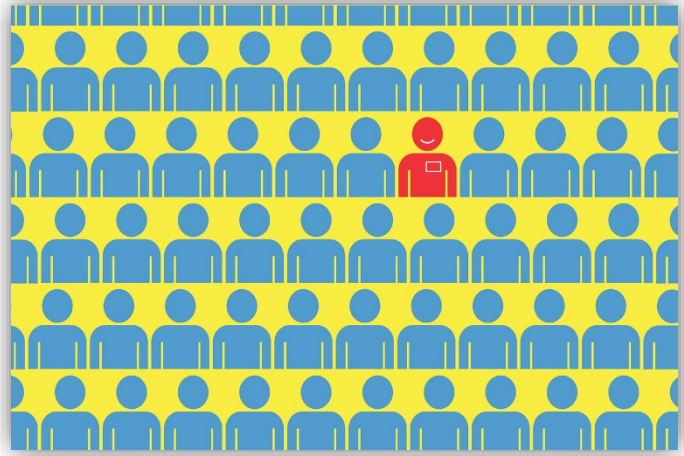
Finally, what level of successful error correction is required to pass the test? In "[A Quick Guide to Dealing with Errors in Editing](#)," I discuss what the expectations are of a full edit. You might consider a slightly lower error correction rate, since this is the candidate's first exposure to your work. Still, you want them to catch most of the errors and be able to guide them on items they missed.

## Or Work with Someone Who Does

You don't have to be an editor to manage or hire one, however. If you're not skilled in grammar and usage, get help from someone who is. If you manage a team of editors (you lucky manager, you), have a senior editor help out. Maybe someone else in the company has the right background to help you out—you never know until you ask.

They don't necessarily have to administer it, either; you or someone in HR can do that.

Alternatively, you can hire an outsider to create and grade a test for you. This might be costly and time consuming, but if you find the right candidate, it could be well worth the effort—especially if your hire saves the company money and embarrassment through their editing.



## Make the Test a Reasonable Length

I hear horror stories about tests that take hours, stressing out the test-takers and creating lots of work for the grader. A longer test won't tell you anything that a shorter test wouldn't. Keep the test to no more than an hour or 1,000 words, and plan to spend at least the same time grading that test *per candidate*.

## Mimic the Real World

Make the test as close to what the successful candidate will actually edit. Sure, you can give candidates a battery of grammar and punctuation tests, but that's not the same as a chunk of text with unknown errors in it. A weaker candidate can ace a punctuation test but may be unable to decide what's wrong and how best to fix it within a larger context.

## Try Editing Samples Instead

An editing sample is essentially a test—one that will show you what the editor will do on the actual copy. If you're testing candidates for an ongoing job, your published work would make a good test.

Go back to a pre-edited version of the published work. If you're afraid candidates will look up the published result, change identifying facts to disguise it. Also, remember that no two editors edit the same. If you get a test back that is exactly what you published, be suspicious.

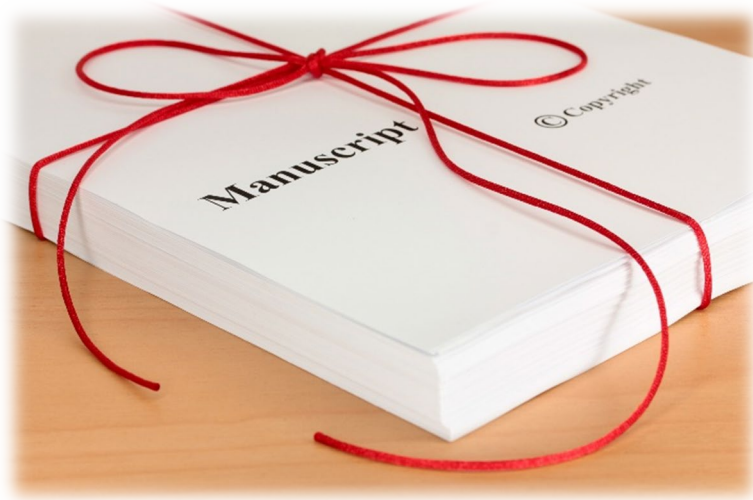


## Final Thoughts

Hiring an editor can be a difficult task. You need to trust they have the skills to do the work you won't see until it's completed; they need to trust that the opportunity you're offering is legit.

Additionally, the editor's style, skills, and experience need to match the work you have. And then there are all the usual considerations when hiring someone: availability, personality, pay and benefit desires, and so on.

Using an editing test to finalize a decision can make you feel more secure, but it comes at a price. Think the process through and be prepared for the costs.



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## 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 the Chartered Institute for Editing and Proofreading. She also provides writer training for private companies, such as Meister Consultants Group, and government groups, such as the city of Raleigh, North Carolina.

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

Contact Erin at [erin@righttouchediting.com](mailto:erin@righttouchediting.com) to help you with your next project!

