



## Should Editors Be Writers Too?

By Rosemary Shipton  
Freelance Editor and Writer

The term *editor* covers many different roles. The editor of a newspaper, magazine, journal, or newsletter is the person in charge of the direction and contents of the publication. The editor of a collection of essays, poems, or short stories is responsible for selecting the authors to include in the volume and steering the various texts through the publication process. Senior editors at a book, journal, or magazine publishing house make choices about which manuscripts to acquire from the myriad submitted by literary agents and writers themselves. Finally, hands-on editors working on staff for publication companies or freelance editors running their own small businesses need many specialized skills, ranging from proofreading and technical markup to structural editing and copyediting. None of these definitions, however, include the ability to write. Realistically, though, should editors be writers too?

### Trade-Book Editors

If you're a lead editor at one of the large multinational trade-book publishing houses, the Big Five as they're called, it certainly helps to be able to write. Contracts there are often signed on the basis of a proposal presented by the author's literary agent, with the completed manuscript slated to arrive several months later. When that day arrives, the quality of the manuscript sometimes falls far short of the promise in the proposal—it may be rushed, incomplete, unfocused, unpolished, a first draft in every sense of the word. Meanwhile, the publisher's publicity team has gone into overdrive, raising huge expectations for the book and scheduling promotion events. The book, moreover, is crucial to the firm's balanced seasonal list and to its bottom line. There is no way that title will be delayed or cancelled.

In this scenario, it's time to bring in the “book doctor”—the editor who can not only edit but write too. This editor becomes a partner with the author in completely reorganizing the manuscript, fixing the pacing, deleting the repetitions, filling in the gaps, and writing an opening scene that will grab readers' attention and an ending that will leave them feeling satisfied. It may take several weeks, even months of concentrated work, but you don't give up until you know you've got it right. You want bestseller sales figures and positive reviews—and, if you're fortunate, nominations for literary awards too. Your author will love you, bond with you like a patient to physician, and insist you edit the next manuscript too.<sup>1</sup>

### Scholarly Editors

The expectations are quite different in the scholarly publishing world. The mandate for all academic book and journal publishers is to make a contribution to knowledge. Their authors are faculty members, graduate students, and researchers primarily—as are their readers too. Print runs are relatively small, and many of these publishers rely on grants to enable them to produce certain titles. They understand their market well and communicate with potential buyers directly through the Internet and occasionally through advertisement in journals. Most of their books are sold online or in campus bookstores. All these factors influence what scholarly editors do.

If you work in-house as an acquisitions editor, you'll rely heavily on peer reviewers and manuscript

1 Rosemary Shipton, “The Mysterious Relationship: Authors and Their Editors,” in Darcy Cullen, ed., *Editors, Scholars, and the Social Text* (Toronto & Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 44–66.

review committees in making decisions about what to publish. Obviously, if every new text is expected to make a contribution to knowledge, only other experts in the area will be able to assess it. So you'll spend much of your time communicating with peer reviewers, granting agencies, and potential authors and in attending publication meetings.

If you're a text editor, you'll need to have superb copyediting skills and be adept at all the scholarly apparatus of notes, bibliographies, tables, graphs, and all sorts of arcane knowledge. It will also help greatly if you've got a graduate degree in the subject area in which you're editing, not only to help you understand the texts but to give you confidence in dealing with your authors.

Because academic authors have all been well trained in writing theses, they generally follow the dissertation model in their own writing too, whether articles or books. The opening surveys the relevant literature, providing context and allowing writers to pinpoint the particular contribution their text will be making to existing knowledge. The ending fits the conclusions nicely into the overall framework in the field. These authors can assume that their readers are familiar with the subject at hand: they make allusions to people, events, and theories without describing them in full; and they use jargon and terminology that only other initiates will know. Above all, they realize that they have a captive audience—their colleagues must keep abreast of the literature in order to keep their jobs and earn respect.

Academic authors therefore write for each other. Most of them get time for research and writing as part of their positions—and they are far more interested in consolidating their reputations with their peers than in trying to attract a general audience. They want their editors to “tidy up” their manuscripts for publication, not to question their content, organization, or presentation.

Scholarly manuscripts also arrive at university presses or journal offices in much better shape than those “first drafts” at the trade-publishing houses. Knowing that their submission will be peer reviewed encourages academic authors to prepare their texts to the best of their ability. Even then, most reviewers suggest revisions, so the authors

have a second chance to revise their manuscripts before they go to the hands-on editors. Scholarly publishers claim that the peer review replaces the substantive editing part of the publication process, and they use this justification for appointing only one editor to work on the text. Large trade publishers, in contrast, always have two editors—a substantive editor to do the macro editing of structure and style, and a copyeditor to look after the micro editing of correction and consistency.

### Editors as Part of the Communications Industry

However we define ourselves, editors are part of the communications industry. As such we all have to write as we perform our jobs—lay summaries of journal articles; jacket copy, catalogue copy, and other promotional materials; letters and emails to authors and other members of the publishing team. If our writing lacks clarity, misunderstandings will happen. If it lacks fluency, we lose the respect of our authors and colleagues. Some of us choose to write beyond the requirements of our job descriptions and contribute to newsletters, blogs, Facebook posts, and formal publications too.

In 2015 it's time to drop all the distinctions among different types of editing and regard ourselves simply as professional editors. The detail of what we do will vary depending on the culture where we work—whether in the trade, scholarly, government, corporate, or burgeoning self-publishing worlds. Most publications today have only one hands-on editor—and the edit that person provides will be the only edit that text gets. The decisions surrounding what to do and how far to go should surely emanate from the needs of the particular author and manuscript, not from prescribed rules or individual editors' abilities. If a trade writer submits a superb manuscript, leave it as it is. Your reputation as an editor doesn't depend on how much you do on every manuscript you touch. If an academic writer needs structural and stylistic editing after the peer review, give him all the assistance he needs within the time you have for the edit.

Professional editors, then, should be full-service editors, able to provide all levels of editing to

their authors—substantive (or structural) editing, stylistic (or line) editing, and copyediting.<sup>2</sup> Don't be bound by the Chicago Manual of Style and other association stylebooks, which cover only copyediting matters. If you realize that your talents lie at one end of the spectrum only, at least know enough about the other types of editing to recognize when your author needs them and make a referral to another editor whose skills complement your own. That way you'll serve your own writers well—and also enhance the reputation of editing as a profession.

Should editors also be writers? Not necessarily, except for those auxiliary tasks we all have to do. Beyond that, many excellent editors never write at all. If you have the yen, though, the ability to write is a great addition to your portfolio—one that enables you to work in a wide range of publishing and communications areas and with authors of all stripes and abilities.<sup>3</sup>

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2 Rosemary Shipton, "What Should an Editor Be?" *Editors' Weekly*, January 7, 2014. <http://blog.editors.ca/?p=1581>.; and "Twelve-Step Editing," *Editors' Weekly*, November 4, 2014. <http://blog.editors.ca/?p=2383>.

3 Rosemary Shipton, "Should Editors Be Able to Write?" *Editors' Weekly*, April 28, 2015. <http://blog.editors.ca/?p=2751>.

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