

Get It Edited!

How to find, vet, and
work with the *right*
editor for you and
your story

The logo for FoxPrint Editorial. The word "FoxPrint" is written in a stylized, orange, brush-stroke font. The letter "F" is replaced by a paw print. A wavy line extends from the end of the word "Print". Below "FoxPrint" is the word "Editorial" in a dark blue, typewriter-style font.
Editorial

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Are You Ready for a Professional Edit?

You finished your first draft. Maybe you've had it out to crit partners and beta readers, taken countless classes and workshops, done subsequent revisions and drafts, and are ready to submit to agents, a publisher, or even self-pub—but you know that a professional edit will take your manuscript to the next level, make it as polished and professional as it can be.

Good for you.

But here are some sobering facts: A good professional edit will cost you thousands of dollars, require dozens if not hundreds of hours of work, and may demand far more blood, sweat, and tears than anything you've done on the story before it.

Hiring an editor before you're ready—before the manuscript is as solid and tight as you're capable of making it—can be a drain on your valuable resources, makes the hard work of revision even harder, and can even have a negative effect on your story (and on your self-esteem as a writer!).

So before you even begin considering finding a good editor, make sure you're at a place with your manuscript where you'll get the biggest payoff for all that money, time, and energy.

Ask yourself:

Are you stuck?

Are you midway through a draft and need help finishing?

Do you have a great idea, and need help writing it?

Do you have a bunch of great material/scenes, but no idea how to knit them into a cohesive narrative?

Have you finished a first draft and can't wait to dive right into a developmental edit?

If you answered **yes** to any of these questions, a professional edit probably isn't the best use of your resources yet. You may need a writing coach, a story consultant, or even just a solid critique group or beta readers.

Have you polished a draft to the best of your abilities, but know it's still not quite "there" yet?

Have you received constructive feedback from beta readers, crit groups, etc., but aren't sure how to incorporate it into revisions?

Have you submitted to agents and gotten no nibbles?

Have you submitted to agents and gotten some interest, but no offers?

Are you self-publishing?

If you can answer **yes** to any of these questions, let's find you a great editor!

Pro tip: The best editors book up early—it's not a bad idea to start looking several months before you may be ready; otherwise you may have to wait weeks or months for an opening.



Types of Edit

Before you start hunting for the right editor, it's important to figure out what kind of edit you need.

- **Developmental/substantive:** This is a wide-ranging comprehensive edit that considers and evaluates all aspects of the story: structure, characterization, pacing, plot, dialogue, character, point of view, etc. This is a deep-dive edit that usually comprises an in-depth overview of your story as well as detailed and

specific notes embedded in the manuscript, to offer you a clear, thorough picture of what's working, what could use a bit more development or polish, and how to approach revisions. Many editors offer this type of edit in single or multiple passes; the latter allows you to make revisions and get further feedback on the story with each subsequent revision you do, often the way publishers work with their authors.

- **Overview Edit (sometimes called a critique):** Similar to the dev edit, this usually comprises the big-picture overview of an in-depth editorial letter without the detailed, specific embedded notes. Good for authors who primarily want to make sure the story holds together, or who may have a more limited budget.
- **Line edit:** This type of edit addresses sentence by sentence the author's style, consistency, tone, echoed words/phrases, awkward or clunky narrative or dialogue, organization, syntax, extraneous words, word choice, etc. This edit takes a microscope to your prose to help you make it elegant, eloquent, streamlined, and polished, but it doesn't address the elements of the story itself or how well it holds together. Good for authors who have polished the story in a developmental edit already and want to make sure the prose is as solid as the story itself.
- **Copy edit:** This edit will check basic linguistic mechanics: grammar, punctuation, spelling, consistency, tense agreement, hyphenation, etc., as well as correct usage and fact-checking (including all names, locations, and trademarks), using industry-standard style (not MLA or AP) and reference books (the most recent editions of the *Chicago Manual of Style* and Webster's Collegiate Dictionary).
- **Proofread:** In the publishing industry this is the final check of your printed galleys, or the typeset pages for publication, against the copyedited manuscript. Generally you will need this type of edit only if self-publishing.





Pro tip: Though a professional developmental edit is a fantastic idea, especially if you're self-publishing, as I mentioned above it's not always financially feasible. But ALL self-published manuscripts should have at least a professional copyedit; readers are eagle-eyed and unforgiving when it comes to errors, and regardless of the quality of your writing itself, you will come across as unprofessional if your book is riddled with mistakes. (If you're seeking an agent or publisher, there's usually no need for a professional copyedit at that stage.)


Where to Look for an Editor

One of the hardest parts of hiring a good, knowledgeable, experienced editor is knowing where to find one. There's no accepted course of study, certification/licensure, or accreditation for editors, so literally anyone can hang out their shingle as a book editor. A Google search is likely going to pull up a lot of those, so look for ways to sharpen your focus when seeking out someone in whose hands you can trust your work.

- **Recommendations:** This is the gold standard—if an author whose book you loved, or a writer you trust, or a respected industry professional can offer you a recommendation, you're starting ahead of the game on vetting an editor's credentials and abilities. Ask other writers, whether in your crit group or at conferences or within writers' organizations you may belong to; or check the acknowledgments of books you love. Agents can also be a wonderful source of referrals—frequently they hear from clients who hired good editors, or they may know reputable ones from publishers or conferences. Be careful here, though—make sure there's no affiliation or kickback between the agent and the editor. (And if an agent or publisher ever tells you that you *have* to hire a certain editor, obviously run...run far away.)
- **Writers' conferences and retreats:** Presenters at writers' conferences have already been vetted by the coordinators, and likely have excellent legitimate credits. Plus by attending their sessions you get to see how they work and get a sense of whether they may be a good fit for you and your story.
- **Editors' organizations:** There are a surprising number of organizations for freelance editors, and often these are great places to start browsing options; often these sites will offer an editor's CV, previous projects, Web site, and other info. Many of these are clearinghouses of sorts where book professionals—including editors—can list their services. Keep in mind some of these are basically just directories; there's no governing body or certification requirements for editors, so it's up to you to do your due diligence.

 [Editorial Freelancers' Association](#) (EFA): The EFA has a free job board where you can post—at no charge—a listing for your project, and you will receive a veritable tidal wave of responses to cull from. Remember, there's no guarantee that any of the member editors are reputable or experienced, so make sure to vet them, as I describe below.

 [Independent Editors Group](#): These are all former senior editors with major publishing houses who now offer freelance editing. Expect to pay rates commensurate with their experience.

 [Book Editors' Alliance](#): Each member editor must have at least 15 years' experience with New York publishing companies.

 [Reedsy](#)



[National Association of Independent Writers and Editors](#)



[Professional Editors Network](#)



[Bay Area Editors' Forum](#)



[The Editors' Circle](#)



[Northwest Independent Editors Guild](#)



[Words Into Print](#)



[Society of American Business Editors and Writers](#)



[Cambridge Academic Editors Network](#)

Pro tip: A number of organizations subcontract with freelance editors, and you may or may not have access to that editor's credentials and experience. Watch out for sites like this that farm out your work. Editing is too important—and too intimate—for you to be assigned to someone you haven't personally checked out; know who you're dealing with.



How to Spot a Good Editor for Your Story

Now that you've found a mother lode of leads on good editors, how do you narrow your choices down? First, focus your search with some key questions:

- This seems obvious, but **does the editor have experience editing books?** Experience in teaching, or journalism, etc., is not the same, and doesn't translate to the different demands, standards, and skills needed in the publishing world. Make sure any editor you're interested in works in book publishing specifically—and specifically in fiction or nonfiction, depending on which your manuscript is.
- **Does he work in your genre?** An editor who tells you he is comfortable with any genre probably isn't a true pro—reputable editors, like good writers, have specialties and know what they're best at. Make sure you pick one with lots of experience in your specific genre.
- **Has she worked on other titles?** A good editor doesn't necessarily have to have a slew of Big Five—published books under her belt, but she should have worked on stories that were published in *some* way, whether small press, hybrid, or self-pub. In any case, check the published works to make sure they are up to standards you want to uphold in your own.

- **Does he offer testimonials/references from authors he's worked with?** Many editors will feature these on their Web page or social media; if not, that can be a yellow flag—but not necessarily a deal breaker. If you like everything else about an editor, ask about previous titles/authors he's worked with. And it's perfectly acceptable to ask whether you may contact some directly. He may or may not be willing to provide contact info—with the author's permission, if course—but you are entitled to ask for names/titles and do your own research, if needed.

Once you have your top contenders, now it's time to dig a little deeper. There are a few forums/sites where authors can post reviews and even warnings about industry professionals, and it's worth checking them to make sure your favorite choices don't have a bad reputation.

- **Writer Beware:** Run by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFFWA), this is a comprehensive forum for checking for horror stories about industry professionals, including editors. It also offers a wealth of other resources, like info about contests and awards.
- **Absolute Write Water Cooler:** Just what it sounds like: a gathering “place” for authors to compare notes and experiences with industry pros.
- **Preditors and Editors:** Once upon a time this was my favorite site to vet agents, publishers, and editors, but it seems to be undergoing a face-lift and staff change, and its future looks a little uncertain. At the moment the landing page offers a place to sign up for future updates.

Now that you've done all your homework and research, you should have a list of a few editors who really stand out or appeal to you. I suggest at this point that you keep it to five or fewer—there are plenty more good editors than that out there, but like going out to eat at the Cheesecake Factory, sometimes too many choices can lead to paralysis. Now you're ready to contact these editors—most prefer initial inquiries via email or online form on their Web sites—and ask a few more specific questions to keep winnowing down your choices.

What Questions Should You Ask?

- **Does she offer a sample edit?** (Again, if the answer is no, I strongly recommend walking away).
- **What other titles has he edited?** If this info wasn't on the editor's Web site or listing, ask for names of specific projects/authors editor has worked on, and whether you may contact any for a reference.

- **What's the editor's average turnaround time?** In other words, once you have turned in a draft to her, how long does she generally take to return the edited manuscript to you?
- **How does he/she work?** Specifically for the editing itself, does he use Word and Track Changes for suggested adds/deletions and embedded notes? (Trust me—you want an editor who does.) Does he offer the embedded notes as part of a dev edit, or just an editorial letter? Does she offer a written contract? If you work together, do you agree in advance on firm deadlines?
- **What is his availability?** As I mentioned, the best editors book up well in advance—often as much as six months or more.
- **What are her rates?** This may also be posted on her Web site, but if not you're entitled to ask (this is not the time to be shy about finances—editing is a real expense and you deserve to know what you're looking at ahead of time). Many editors can offer you a general idea of their rates, but the exact quote may depend on your specific project—for instance, I charge a word rate that varies depending on what shape a manuscript is in and how much work I anticipate will be involved, which I ascertain from the sample edit (another wonderful reason for editors to offer one—to help them appropriately quote the job, and so that authors aren't paying a one-size-fits-all rate).
- Finally, there's one last crucial question—this one for you to ask yourself:

The Uber-question

Is the money you will spend on a professional edit disposable income? If not, **DON'T do it.** Don't default on your bills, mortgage your home, or go into debt for an edit—or anything having to do with your writing. The hard reality is that most authors don't make a living off their writing. Many don't make any significant money at all. I always give authors thinking about spending money on a professional edit the same advice financial advisers give clients: The money you spend must be money you can afford to lose. I hear too many authors planning to “make back their investment” when the book is published, or to retire on their publishing money. The [vast bulk of writers earn less than \\$5,000 per year](#). You may be the lucky sliver whose ship comes in—but if not, you don't want to gamble your security on an uncertain outcome.

But don't worry—even if the expense of a professional edit isn't within reach at the moment, there are other great options for getting objective feedback on your manuscript to help you edit:

- Trading edits with a writing partner
- Beta readers
- Critique groups (I could fill a whole other guide about finding a good critique group—a bad one can harm your story, your writing, and your self-esteem. [Here's a great article](#) on how to NOT find a good crit group.)

Once you narrow down your list based on the above criteria, then it's time to ask your top two or three choices for sample edits. Again, **I strongly recommend not working with any editor who won't offer a sample.**

A professional edit is a major investment. You wouldn't consider buying a car without a test drive. And not every editor is the right fit for every manuscript and author—just as authors shouldn't hire an editor they haven't personally checked out, a good editor should be discriminating about which projects she takes on. Editing is an enormous undertaking for the editor as well as the author, where we will spend many, many hours working on a project we may read as many as five or more times. An editor needs to fall a little in love with every manuscript she works on, and the only way to know whether she will is with a sample edit.

Evaluating the Sample Edit

Once you narrow your options down even further—I suggest at least two but no more than a top three (be respectful of the editor's time as well; a sample edit can take at least an hour and often more)—it's time for the sample edit. Most editors who offer a sample will let you know what to send and how much of it. But even if the editor doesn't specify, I suggest sending an excerpt from a midpoint of your manuscript. First pages tend to be the most well worked, and the editor's feedback on these more polished pages won't give you the clearest idea how she works, what type of feedback she may offer, and whether she's a good editorial "fit" for you and your story.

Pro Tip: Formatting your sample pages professionally—double spaced, first line indented, no extra space between paragraphs of like types (e.g., the same section), and one-inch margins all around—shows you're a savvy, serious author. Writers who haven't familiarized themselves with industry standards for submissions may come across as not ready for a professional edit.



Once you get the editor's work back on the sample, it's time for you to evaluate it. To no one's surprise, I have more questions to ask yourself.

- **What kind of feedback does the editor offer?** Do you get an editorial letter plus embedded notes in Track Changes? What is her approach to feedback—hands-on and meticulously thorough, or more general and loose? (And which do you prefer?) Does he offer a big-picture overview as well as more detailed and specific notes? Does the editor clearly indicate how he will work in the actual edit, if it's different from the sample—and if so, does he explain why the sample is different?

- **Do the edits “resonate”?** This is a little amorphous, but a crucial element in picking the right editor—perhaps the most important one: How do his edits and feedback *feel* to you? Does she “get” your voice and your story and intentions? Does the feedback give you a resounding feeling of recognition, of the editor having put her thumb on what part of you knew wasn’t quite working, of a big internal “yes” to her comments? Do you like his editing style and personality? Does the feedback make you excited to dive in and start tackling revisions, or are you feeling deflated, discouraged? The right editor will rejuvenate your passion for your project, even if you know it may be a lot of work.
- **Does the editor try to take over your voice/story, or help you express *your* vision?** This is your story, and a good editor should respect that, as well as your voice, not try to impose his own. Many editors may suggest alternatives to plot developments, character choices, etc., but any editor who acts as if his suggestions are the only right ones isn’t an editor I suggest working with. Publishing is as capricious a business as there is; even the most experienced, successful editor can’t say what will make a story sell (just ask [these authors](#) who received painful rejection letters from editors and agents on what became their blockbuster books).
- **Is her feedback respectful, positive, constructive?** If not, this is a firm deal breaker. Editors don’t exist without authors, and no editor should ever, *ever* diminish, belittle, or insult an author or her writing. Negative, harsh feedback is counterproductive to a writer. Creativity responds only to the carrot, never the stick. Good editors can give truthful, realistic, even pointed feedback without denigrating or dismissing the author. There’s a vast difference in how an author responds to, “This is ridiculous” rather than, “This may strain reader credibility.” In any creative endeavor, consideration matters.
- **Does the editor offer solutions, or just point out problems?** It helps to know what may not be working as well as it could, but a great editor will help you find ways to address it. That doesn’t mean she’ll painstakingly lead the way in revisions; just that she offers a road map for finding it. For instance, with the above example, a good editor might say something like, “This may strain reader credibility; perhaps she does try to call the police but for some reason she can’t reach them or they don’t respond?” The onus is on the author to find a way to solve the problem, but the editor has suggested a direction he might look in.
- **Does the editor provide a firm quote in writing?** Editors’ rates vary, as does the way they figure them; some use a word rate, some a page rate, some hourly. I’m a big fan of a word/page rate, so the author knows ahead of time exactly how much money they are looking at, based on what they turn in. If an editor you like has an hourly rate, though, you can still ask for a firm quote for that rate, and an estimate (a range is fine) of how many hours he anticipates this job taking. I also recommend asking for a clause in your contract that over a

certain amount the editor will contact the author for approval before proceeding, and explain the unexpected additional time. This is also a good time to ask about how payment is made—via check, credit card, PayPal? All at once up front or in installments, or after completion? I ask for half the total amount up front to hold the author's slot and the remainder due upon completion, the former to safeguard my investment of time in holding a schedule for that author, and the latter to safeguard the author so she knows I don't get fully paid until she gets her edited manuscript back as promised.

- **Does she offer a firm schedule and deadlines in writing?** I've heard horror stories of authors who hire an editor and hand over their manuscript...only to fall into a black hole with no idea when they might get the work back. This is a professional service you are contracting, and you have the right to know when you can expect the work to be done.
- **Does he offer a written contract?** I strongly recommend you **do not work without a contract** that clearly spells out what is expected of each of you, including the rate and deadline(s), any other expectations and requirements (i.e., format, when you will turn in your passes, etc.), a cancellation clause that delineates terms and conditions, and what recourse there is for breaches, signed by both you and the editor.



Pro tip: This is probably the most important tip I offer—if an editor's feedback is rude, harsh, or discouraging, **it's about the editor, not you.** In 25-plus years in this business I've never seen a manuscript that was trash. Editors work with writers of all levels—just because you may not be as experienced or accomplished as a more established writer doesn't mean your work is without merit. An editor who tells you that your manuscript is garbage, or shouldn't see the light of day, or that you should stop writing (all real horror stories I've heard from authors, and all of which break my heart) is a bad editor.

A good editor helps you find the parts of your story that are working or have promise—even if it's just a nugget—and figure out how to develop and polish them as effectively as you are able, no matter what stage of your writing career you're in. That's what editing *is*.

What Should It Cost?






Editing rates vary almost as widely as editors themselves. [This chart](#) from the Editorial Freelancers Association offers a guideline, but you can find editors who work well below these rates, as well as extravagantly above. I suggest doing your homework on this—

through editors' sites and talking to other writers who have hired editors—and pick an editor who falls somewhere in the meaty part of the bell curve or winging out just a bit toward its edges. Often—but not always—you get what you pay for with an editor, so while a rock-bottom bargain rate may be cause for a raised eyebrow and some healthy skepticism, if on the other hand you pay significantly more than the average, make sure you're *getting* more, in the way of experience, reputation, etc.

What Can You Expect from a Good Editor/Author Relationship?

- Respect—of your work, your voice, your story, and you as a person
- Constructive critique, encouragement, a positive approach
- Professional conduct and demeanor; clear guidelines and expectations that are met
- Level of contact varies—editor should be open to discussing your preferences (but keep in mind that much of an editor's work takes place independently of the author). An author has the right to expect (or ask for) a moderate amount of follow-up time built into the contract to allow for questions, clarifications, etc.
- Method of contact varies; an editor should attempt to accommodate your preferences (within reason)

A good editor:

-  Will not just point out problem areas, but explain why something isn't working and suggest methods for addressing it
-  Won't push her vision onto your story or her voice onto your prose, but respect yours and find ways to help you make them shine
-  Will be free of ego in his feedback; an editor's job is to bring the benefit of his knowledge and experience to help you develop and polish your manuscript, but it's the author's decision what feedback is right for the story she wants to tell
-  Will ensure your prose is not just correct, but precise: saying exactly what you mean and free of flab
-  Will deliver when and as promised

Holding Up Your End of the Bargain

If you want an editor to treat you with courtesy and respect, make sure you're also bringing those qualities to your relationship. You've (hopefully) worked hard to find just the right editor who is qualified, experienced, and a great fit; now step back and let the editor do her job. Just as you wouldn't micromanage a master craftsman as he built your

custom furniture, don't expect to look over the editor's shoulder at each stage of the process. Usually once you turn the manuscript in for editing, the next time you will see it or talk to the editor is after he finishes the edit.

Honor your own professionalism and the editor's by turning in a professional product—meaning your manuscript is formatted to industry standards (as specified above), and as polished as you are capable of making it on your own, not just in the story but in its mechanics.

Don't argue or attempt to explain your intentions in response to an editor's comments or feedback. You don't have to convince an editor; you have to convince your readers. An editor's job is to help you see whether you have done that—whether what you think you've put on the page is actually there. This is a subjective business and you may not agree with your editor; in that case you can disregard the feedback that doesn't resonate for you, but don't berate, harangue, or defend.

Above all...enjoy the process! Editing and revising can be demanding, frustrating, maddening, discouraging, and incredibly difficult—but it's also oftentimes where the story really comes to life and takes on dimension and depth. If you put the same kind of effort and dedication into finding the right editor and the revision process as you did into drafting the story, you'll likely find your story grows in ways you may never have imagined—and so does your writing. Good luck, and happy editing!