The Copy Editor and the Author

Gypsy da Silva

Gypsy da Silva is a production editor in the copy editing department at Simon & Schuster, where she began her publishing career twenty-five years ago. She has had the pleasure of working on fiction and nonfiction, both as a copy editor and supervising the work of staff and free-lance copy editors. Although the Chicago Manual of Style on her desk more or less falls open to certain sections, she wishes the University of Chicago Press would publish a thumb-indexed edition.

Ms. da Silva asks and answers the question "What is a copy editor and why do we need them?" in her concise but comprehensive essay on what a copy editor does "to preserve the author's natural voice." She illuminates for the writer the various roles a copy editor plays in perfecting the manuscript first developed and line edited by the acquiring editor. These include, among many more, corrector of spelling errors, grammarian, fact checker, resolver of inconsistencies, fine-tuner of the author's style, sometimes researcher, etc., etc.

Ms. da Silva calms the anxious writer whose work is returned with a blizzard of query flyers by pointing out that "they are a sign that the manuscript has been read closely and with care" and shows how to handle them swiftly and effectively. The query flyer is the way the copy editor communicates with the author, and Ms. da Silva recommends that "the easiest way an author can let a copy editor know about preferences or ask for assistance is to draw up a memo and send it in with the manuscript."

Quite properly proud of the multiplicity of their skills, Ms. da Silva concludes her essay by admitting that "we copy editors know what we contribute—silently, almost always anonymously—to the finished book, but we do not fool ourselves. The author is the hero."
The Copy Editor and the Author

(In affectionate remembrance of Vera Schneider and Pat Miller)

What is a copy editor and why do we need them? A copy editor is that person who, after the author has written the manuscript and the editor has edited it, examines that first sentence, thinking: Would it be better as two questions? What is the antecedent of “we”? Should “them” be “him or her”? Or should I make it “copy editors” so the pronoun agrees in number with its antecedent? And does it matter? All these questions cross the copy editor’s mind because the sum of the copy editor’s task is to help the author (and the editor) shape this book into the best possible expression of the author’s ideas. Yet while deciding whether or not to “fix” the author’s grammar (et cetera), the copy editor must first take care to preserve the author’s natural voice.

The division of labor between editor and copy editor begins with the fact that an editor’s first responsibility is finding and bringing under contract books the publisher deems worth presenting to the public. The editor may then help the author with the general shaping of the book, suggesting some pruning here, some expansion there, perhaps some rearranging of the parts into what the editor sees as a more harmonious whole. Some editors may even focus on the details of finding the mot juste, fixing spelling errors, tidying up grammar and punctuation. But these last items are often left to the copy editor. Some editors send along covering memos with their manuscripts, detailing any special considerations for the copy editor. “Author overuses ‘as a matter of fact.’ I’ve pruned many. Feel free to prune more.” “Author very sensitive. Query all changes.” “This is a British author writing about a British scene. We want American spelling, but stret British idiom unless hopelessly obscure.” Other editors call ahead to alert the copy editor to what is wanted or to discuss the best way to proceed. The copy editor will also double-check the author’s consistency of detail and style, and accuracy of fact.

But in the beginning, there is the manuscript. And every manuscript should be typed double space. An author preparing a work of nonfiction should bear in mind that even quotations from other books, footnotes (or back matter notes), and the bibliography should be typed double space, regardless of the likelihood that these elements will be set in smaller type than the main text. Copy editors need room to work. Double-spaced manuscripts provide that room. The copy editor’s ideal author knows exactly what elements go into a bibliographical entry and how they are assembled, and there’s very little marking the copy editor needs to do. But many authors need help getting notes or bibliographical style into shape. In either case, it’s a lot easier to read double-spaced copy. The copy editor and the designer of the text will also bless the author who provides generous margins on all four sides of the page. The author will see how the copy editor keys (that is, ranks by means of letters or numbers) the various heads and marks extracts, lists, and other elements. But what the author may not realize is that after the copy editor does the keying, the designer who crafts the interior typography also needs room in the margin to indicate the typeface and width to which the element is to be set. What the copy editor labels “A,” the designer translates into, for example, “12/14 Baskerville × 15 pt.” More room is needed for the typesetter to insert computer codes that must be keyboarded with the copy so that the specified type size and style appears in the proofs—and the final book.

Copy editing for consistency of detail may be especially helpful to novelists. Does the author absentmindedly describe the heroine’s hair as blond in chapter 2 and red in chapter 16? The copy editor will point out the discrepancy on a query flyer attached to the manuscript and ask which color is wanted. Chronology can get scrambled sometimes in a novel that covers many years or several generations. The copy editor keeps notes of dates and ages, querying the author about, for example, the aboriginal who rescues the woman who falls off her horse into the raging river. “Could a nine-year-old boy have lifted a grown woman?” Sometimes a copy editor will notice a detail mentioned early in the story that is never used again and might enhance the story in a later reference. A man is trained in techniques of silently dispatching enemy spies. The knowledge gained by the character was never put to use in the story—until the copy editor suggested that when the character later attempts a murder, he reach into his pocket and finger the piano wire hidden there. A nice addition to the suspense that the author incorporated into the action.

Copy editing for style involves attention to matters of spelling, punctuation, and syntax. That copy editors fix spelling seems almost obsolete to some people equipped with spelling-checker programs on their word processors. But copy editors know that the catch with machines checking spelling is that if it’s a legitimate word, the machine smiles, oblivious to whether it’s the right word in context. “Lemon aide”? Well sure. “Lemon” and “aide” are both real words. But can one enjoy a cool glass of “lemon aide” in the garden? The homophone-conscious copy editor gently corrects
the spelling to “lemonade.” Then there are all those bothersome words that are spelled one way in England and another way in the United States. Does the author prefer traveller or traveler? Colour or color? Judgement or judgment? Should the British spellings be Americanized? Punctuation must also be scrutinized. Comma before “and” in a series or not? Omit comma before coordinating conjunction when the subject of the two independent clauses is the same? Cap or lowercase after a colon? Moving to another consideration that must be in the copy editor’s mind: Is the author’s syntax and vocabulary felicitous? The bishop “took off his ceremonial sack.” Does the author mean “his chasuble”? The blond movie star tells us in her memoirs that she was by the pool, lying on her chaise lounge. Should that be “chaise longue”? Whose syntax and vocabulary should be used here? Copy editing involves close attention to detail.

Good copy editors know that when it comes to making sure the author has the facts right, guessing is not good enough. Carry Nation? Or Carrie Nation? Was Trinity Sunday before or after May 1 in 1913? Could the hero have sailed from New York to California to join the Gold Rush on a boat that went through the Panama Canal? The copy editor will want to look up the facts in an authoritative reference. [Change to: Around Cape Horn? (Panama Canal begun in 1883, per McCullough.)]

When the copy editor has found a source that gives a version of the facts different from what the author has stated, good practice requires tact in pointing out the apparent problem to the author. Copy editors try to bear in mind that the author has done the hardest part of the work. This must be respected. An experienced copy editor knows after checking a dozen or so items whether the author has been careful, and the more mistakes the copy editor finds, the more checking he or she is likely to do. Time permitting, and time is almost always a problem. Now that the manuscript is in hand, author, editor, and publisher are eager to get the finished book into the stores. So couldn’t we please hurry?

Copy editors ideally have a broad knowledge of a variety of subjects, but they also have their specialties. Editors know to request someone who has the right stuff for the job at hand. In every case where nonfiction is involved, the author is well advised to supply all the back matter—the appendixes and notes and bibliography—with the text and not wait until later to hand these parts to the editor, because with the back matter in hand the copy editor knows what sources the author has consulted. Copy editors acquire a number of reference books, but they also use libraries to verify information they do not have at hand. It helps the copy editor to know what books or articles the author has used. Copy editors have been known to rent movies from their local video store to check production credits, to call the U.S. Army Office of Information to check the spelling of names of military installations, to hunt down the sheet music to confirm the lyrics of songs, to stand in drugstores jotting down the correct spelling of trade names of sanitary goods, to twist themselves into pretzels to see if the instructions for an exercise can be followed.

Some publishing houses have copy editors on staff who handle at least some of the manuscripts being prepared for publication, but it is also possible that the work of copyediting will be assigned to a freelance copy editor who works outside the publisher’s office. The person who assigns the copy editing work will have the title Production Editor or Manuscript Supervisor or Copy Chief, or some variation on that theme. He or she will examine the manuscript when it comes in and, taking into consideration the subject matter and the schedule, try to find the most suitable person to send the job to. The production editor will instruct the copy editor as needed.

Can the author put in a few words with the copy editor? But of course. The easiest way an author can let a copy editor know about preferences or ask for assistance is to draw up a memo and send it in with the manuscript. Does the dictionary give two acceptable spellings for a word and the author have a strong preference for the second spelling? Let the copy editor know. How about capitalization of titles? Sometimes authors who are used to reading government documents make the assumption that all titles of office are always done with initial capital letters. The Chicago Manual of Style, which is widely used by book publishers, tells copy editors to use caps only when the title appears with the name of the person holding the office. So the copy editor will Style: Secretary of State Baker, the secretary of state. How about pronouns referring to the Deity? Many people assume that they should be capitalized, and indeed, they often are. Now take a look at a Bible: “Then he called the twelve disciples together” (KJV, Luke 9:1). “Then he called the twelve together” (RSV, Luke 9:1). And at Chicago: “God in his mercy,” “Jesus and his disciples” (7.77). Another widely used stylebook, *Words into Type*, recommends using initial capital letters in some instances. An author who can’t live with standard book styling (which often differs from newspaper style) or prefers one stylebook over another should say so before the work begins.

Is there some nagging detail the author tried to track down and couldn’t find? Let the copy editor know, and perhaps he can help locate the missing bit. Is the author worried that when she changed a character’s name from
George to Frank, she may have missed a George or two? Alert the copy editor. Copy editors are there to help the author.

When the copy editor returns the manuscript, the production editor may review the queries raised before sending the manuscript to the editor. The editor may go over the copy editing, answering some or all of the queries. In most cases the editor will forward the manuscript to the author.

An author going through the process for the first time may be somewhat startled at first to see anywhere from a few to many dozens of query flyers attached to the manuscript. One author wrote saying that when he saw how many flyers the copy editor had attached to his manuscript, he wanted to hire a hit man. But as any author who has had good past experiences with copy editors will be quick to point out, there is reason to feel reassured by those pink or yellow or blue slips of paper. They are a sign that the manuscript has been read closely and with care. (The author who initially wanted to hire a hit man confessed that after he had read through his copy editor’s queries, he changed his mind. “I think I’m in love,” he concluded.) If something has been phrased a bit awkwardly, the copy editor will have made an attempt to adjust the words for greater clarity and will be asking if the change is OK. In some cases, the copy editor will not have altered the wording on the manuscript but will suggest possible rewritings and ask, on the flyer, if one of the suggestions would better convey the author’s meaning. Sometimes the copy editor will be querying a spelling that is inconsistent with the author’s previous (or later) version. This kind of query is most likely to crop up where invented or real but obscure names are used. Perhaps it’s a fact that doesn’t jibe with a previously stated fact—or with the information the copy editor has obtained in a reference book or other source. Did the author guess about the spelling of a brand name? The copy editor may have gone to the supermarket and looked at the package, confirming that it’s Reddi-wip, not Ready Whip.

Whatever the queries, it’s the author’s job to read the flyers and answer on the flyers the questions raised. If the flyer says, “OK?” all the author needs to do is put a check mark through the question mark in order to answer “Yes.” If two suggestions are made for possible ways of fixing a single problem, the author need only strike out the one not wanted and circle the one that is OK. Or the author may come up with a third solution, in which case the copy editor’s suggestions should be struck out and the author’s fix written on the flyer. The reason for keeping the dialogue on the flyer is to avoid making the manuscript messy and possibly confusing for the typesetter. If the author wants to make small changes directly on the manuscript, she should use a different color pencil from any used before and let the production editor know what color the new changes are written in.

The Copy Editor and the Author

If a longish passage needs rewriting, the author can type the new version out on a separate piece of 8½-by-11-inch paper and clip it to the original, being sure to put the page number on the new copy. What the author should not do, unless specifically given permission to proceed thus, is re-run the manuscript in whole or in part through a word processor. The copy editor—or the production editor—must have the original version of the copyedited script back from the author. And the flyers should be left attached to the manuscript. Whoever does the final cleanup will then go through the manuscript and incorporate the author’s answers and changes into it.

If there’s not enough room left on the flyer for the author to respond to the query, the author should add flyers of his own on which to answer. Those Post-its available from stationery stores, dime stores, and even some supermarkets are handy for this. Just be sure they are wrapped around the edge of the page and not stuck in the middle of the page, where they might not be noticed by someone looking at the edge of the manuscript instead of turning each page.

If the author has questions about how to deal with queries, he or she should call the editor and ask to speak to the production editor or the copy editor. There is no need to work in a vacuum when help is always available.

Has the copy editor made markings the author does not understand? Pick up the phone! Again, what the author should bear in mind is that copy editors are there to help the author.

A word of caution: A few copy editors will write some queries in the margins of the manuscript even though they may have been told that this is not a good idea because the author may miss these queries. Production editors have been heard to sigh over this habit and maybe even remonstrate with the copy editor. But they may have resigned themselves to the situation because a copy editor’s work is otherwise so intelligent and helpful. So the careful author will look sharp for these notations in the margins.

When the answers have been incorporated into the manuscript and the flyers removed, the manuscript goes off to the production department for type design and markup, and then to the typesetter for composition.

After several weeks, the author will be sent a set of galleys—or page proofs, when the schedule is tight and going straight to pages is possible. The author should not expect to get the manuscript back with those first proofs. He is expected to read the proofs “cold,” that is, without reference to the manuscript. Proofreading the galleys against manuscript is the job of another professional: the proofreader. There’s a good reason for this procedure. Eyes that have been over a manuscript a number of times are not as likely to spot typographical errors as those that come to the work for the first time. The copy editor will have read the manuscript two or even three
times (unless the book is on a supercrash schedule), the editor will have done the same, and the author... So the proofreader’s fresh eyes are what is called for.

Some publishers enclose instructions for marking type proofs when they send the galleys to the author. *The Chicago Manual of Style* explains proofreading, or the author can consult a dictionary for proofreader’s marks. The important thing for the author to remember is that changes in proof must be marked in the margin of the galleys. One strikes out the word being replaced and then writes in the margin (very neatly and legibly, of course) the word to be substituted. Where it is a simple substitution of one or more words for the original word or phrase, there’s no need to make a delete mark first. Writing the new word in very tiny letters squeezed between the lines of type is not how it’s done.

When reading galleys without having the manuscript to check against, the author may be concerned about distinguishing PE’s (printer’s errors) from AAs (author’s alterations); the author, after all, knows that AAs in excess of a certain percentage of the composition cost will be charged against her royalty account. Probably the easiest thing for an author to do is mark corrections of what she believes to be printer’s errors as PEs and attach a note to the first galley, asking the production editor to double-check those items against manuscript. When the production editor is transferring the author’s alterations to the master galleys, he should find that all (or almost all) of the PEs have already been caught by the proofreader.

The best proofreaders do more than read the galleys very carefully, word for word, against the manuscript; they also back up the work of the copy editor. Even the most highly skilled, conscientious, and persnickety copy editor may miss something, whether it’s an ordinary spelling error or some mistake of fact. And just as the wise author hopes to be backed up by a good editor and a good copy editor, the wise copy editor earnestly hopes to be backed up by a first-rate proofreader. It’s just possible that, after the author has returned his galleys to his editor and the editor has passed them along to the production editor, the author may get a call with a query or two from the production editor. The work involved in bringing a book as near to perfection as human beings can make it is a process that begins with the writing and continues through not only the editing and copy editing stages but also through galleys, page proofs, repro proofs, and even beyond the typesetter’s proofs to the printer’s blues, a photographic print made from negatives that will be used to make the offset plates from which the book is printed. The author, however, rarely sees any of the later stages of production and must try to remain patient, confident in the professional efforts of the publisher’s staff in the weeks or months of work to be done before the finished book comes off press.

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**The Copy Editor and the Author**

One additional element of the book may be something for the author to consider: the index. It is possible for the author to make the index. The idea may even be tempting, because the author will have to pay for the index preparation if a professional indexer does the work. The author should bear in mind, when deciding whether to prepare the index, the necessary skills for the job. Indexing is a professional occupation—and an art form. A good indexer may be able to give the interested reader access to the author’s material in ways that would not occur to the author. If the author elects to have his book professionally indexed, he may still ask to see the index manuscript, to be sure it reflects all the most important ideas he is trying to convey to the reader. (Of course an indexer cannot put into the index what isn’t in the text!) The author should also take into account that there are constraints of time and space that the indexer has had to deal with.

Is all of this work made obsolete by computerization? Couldn’t the author just give her disks to the publisher and have the publisher send them off to the typesetter? Wouldn’t that save money? Well, yes, it might save the publisher some money in composition costs. But if the author wanted to make changes in proofs, the money saved could vanish in a flurry of EA (editor’s alteration) and AA charges. Does the publisher really want to hire an amateur typesetter (that is, the author) to do the keyboarding? Does the author want to be paid to be a keyboarde or a writer? Is the author certain that he doesn’t need the help of an editor or a copy editor? Well, maybe the editor and the copy editor could work on the author’s disks. Does anyone want a professional editor or professional copy editor to become an amateur keyboarde? Bear in mind that when the manuscript goes to the typesetter on disk, there are no PEs. If author and publisher find themselves editing and copyediting on type proofs, they may well end up paying more for the composition than if the manuscript had been set from the hard copy in the first place. The examples that can be cited are painful to recall. So far as I know, the copy editors who have been doing the pioneering work in this area have discovered one thing for certain: working on the author’s disks does not at present save time. Think twice on the possibility of sending the disks direct to the typesetter. If the disks are sent, send the hard copy too. Let the typesetter decide what makes the best economic sense. We are all facing a path that may be full of potential but is certainly fraught with potential difficulties. The change from hot metal composition by Linotype to computer setting of equal polish took about a decade, but the change has been made. The change from sending hard copy to sending disks only to the typesetter and getting really good results may take that long or longer. Am I a Luddite? No. But I’ve been in the business long enough to develop a great respect for the professional skills that go into making good books and making books well.
Copy editors are, for the most part, unsung. We do this work because we love ideas, we love language, we love books. We don’t expect to see our names up in lights. But if an author thinks enough of our contribution to mention us in the acknowledgments, it is a kindness we accept with gratitude and pleasure. We copy editors know what we contribute—silently, almost always anonymously—to the finished book, but we do not fool ourselves. The author is the hero.

Line Editing
Drawing Out the Best Book Possible

Maron L. Waxman

Maron L. Waxman is the editorial director of HarperReference at HarperCollins. The former executive director of book development at Book-of-the-Month Club, she has taught editing in the publishing programs at both the City University of New York and New York University and has lectured at many publishing and writers’ conferences.

Ms. Waxman’s clear, practical essay is nothing less than a comprehensive short course in the basic, essential principles and skills of line editing (also known as manuscript editing).

A believer in Maxwell Perkins’s dictum that “an editor does not add to a book. At best he serves as a handmaiden. . . . In the end an editor can get only as much out of an author as the author has in him,” Ms. Waxman offers her own definition of the working relationship between the manuscript editor and the author: “. . . a long and continuing exchange . . . of questions asked and answers given until both author and editor believe they have produced . . . the best book possible . . . the book in which the author says what he has to say as clearly, as forcefully, and as gracefully as he can. It is the goal of all editing, and most particularly manuscript editing, to achieve this end.”

In the course of her essay Ms. Waxman offers sound advice on such vital matters as the difference between editing and rewriting, questions of clarity, coverage (providing sufficient information), organization (presentation of material in a way that can be followed), and tone (addressing the readers who will be most interested in the book). In addition she explains how to handle such technical aspects of manuscript editing as the analysis of the
The Role of the Editorial Assistant

Casey Fuetsch

CASEY FUETSCH began her career as an assistant to three very patient editors at the Literary Guild. She has since become a senior editor in the trade division at Doubleday, where she has acquired and edited a variety of books, including When Heaven and Earth Changed Places, A Special Kind of Hero, After the Ball, and The Sound of a Miracle. She works with novelists Valerie Sayers, David James Duncan, and Sarah Bird, among others.

The answer to the question "What does an editorial assistant do?" is "Everything!" Everything from being first reader of almost all submissions to finding shortcuts through the corporate bureaucratic maze, keeping track of production schedules (and telling the authors about them, too), line editing, locating missing unsigned contracts and misplaced manuscripts, requesting payments for authors, and just about anything else a harried editor might need. In return, a wise editor will train the editorial assistant in the intricacies of building a list until one beautiful day the editorial assistant becomes an associate editor with a list of his or her own.

Wise authors who want to advance their careers should realize that working well with an editorial assistant is just about as important as working with the editorial assistant's boss. "The day I began working for [the editor], seventeen authors called to welcome me. They asked about my background, they said they hoped to meet me soon, and generally they showed me so much respect and consideration that I thought for sure they were mistaking me for someone important. These people were awfully nice.
"It took me a day to realize (was it really an entire day?) that these authors knew precisely on which side their proverbial bread was buttered. I wasn't simply working for an editor; I was working with him. My job was an entity unto itself, not merely an appendage of his important title."

From this master-and-apprentice relationship comes the next generation of editors. And, as Ms. Fuetsch says so insightfully: "As apprenticeships go, the one that publishing offers is, perhaps, the last of the great equalizers. Since experience counts for everything, virtually everyone begins at the bottom." Ms. Fuetsch instructs the editorial assistant how to rise from that bottom to the loftiest of publishing heights in an essay rich in wit, charm, and great good sense.

The Role of the Editorial Assistant

Typical of most editors in the book world, I began my career in trade publishing as an editorial assistant. My first boss was a hip, energetic senior editor who acquired books about popular culture and rock 'n' roll. Looking like the industry's equivalent of Pigpen in the Peanuts cartoon, he was usually attired in an untucked shirt with a badly knotted tie, and traveled in a cloud of creative enthusiasm, leaving laughter and not a little befuddlement in his wake. While some editors were content with publishing fifteen hardcover titles a year, he wasn't remotely satisfied unless he had thirty on his list. If all thirty books had two authors, a free-lance photo researcher, and a foreword written by a major authority (complete with separate contracts for each), so much the better. His was the "fun" office, where ideas were tossed out like coins to be picked up by any colleague or writer who stopped by to chat.

The day I began working for him, seventeen authors called to welcome me. They asked about my background, they said they hoped to meet me soon, and generally they showed me so much respect and consideration that I thought for sure they were mistaking me for someone important. These people were awfully nice.

It took me a day to realize (was it really an entire day?) that these authors knew precisely on which side their proverbial bread was buttered. I wasn't simply working for an editor, I was working with him. My job was an entity unto itself, not merely an appendage of his important title. I was his reader on almost all submissions, as well as office manager, wending through the bureaucracy for the smooth operation of his mini-empire. This included clearing permissions, keeping track of production schedules (and informing the authors of such), knowing the whereabouts of unsigned contracts, line editing various manuscripts, getting coffee, and requesting payments for authors. To his enormous credit, my boss fetched an equal amount of coffee. acknowledged my accomplishments willingly and openly, and, when an author called screaming about a late payment, he never, ever blamed the delay on my inefficiency. He helped me acquire my own projects, too—a time-consuming effort on his part, a veritable boon to my career.

Over time we discovered where our strengths lay, and we shared the labor to the satisfaction of us both. His passion was for photography books and, hence, he cared deeply about each book's "package," the look of the jacket, the quality of the paper. As a consequence, I learned much about paper and binding, the kind of details that are essential even when publishing a novel. My favorite task, however, was line editing, and my boss allowed me to tinker with his writers' prose under his vigilant guidance.

The tradition he was employing, and the one his authors so readily accepted, was that of master and apprentice. As apprenticeships go, the one that publishing offers is, perhaps, the last of the great equalizers. Since experience counts for everything, virtually everyone begins at the bottom.

The number of university degrees earned, the names of the colleges bestowing the degrees, and the extent of world travels or family lineage are only as valuable as they are applicable to the job at hand. Exactly how much responsibility is given an editorial assistant depends heavily on the talents and experience of the assistant, on the work load and temperament of the supervising editor, and on a particular house's attitude toward grooming its employees for the future. Few entrants into publishing—fresh out of school, idealism intact—aspire to spend their days transcribing their boss's editorial letters to, say, Joan Didion. Most would prefer asking Joan themselves whether nausea is an apt symbol for urban angst. But in order to rise to the level of lofty literary conversation over lunch at the Four Seasons (a common myth among the idealists), an assistant must log a lot of hours at the Xerox machine.

The assistants who make the rise successfully to editor are the ones who make the most of their early working years. As parents always say when the chore seems too tedious to bear, "It's a learning experience." Even a duty as simple as calling the inventory department to obtain sales figures can enhance an assistant's knowledge, especially if the inventory controller says something like, "Of course we shipped a lot of copies last week; it was Father's Day. Too bad Mother's Day doesn't sell books." Bits of information that seem inconsequential one moment may be precious later on, when the assistant becomes an editor and the pub date of the new Tom Clancy novel is being decided.
time reading hours the editor and assistant spend discovering the quality books.

Most writers, however, are respectful of an assistant’s job, and it’s to both their benefits. Assistants are part of the reading public whose opinions about a particular character or plot line may be invaluable. A writer need not accede to every suggestion given by an early reader of the work, but a measure of consideration is imperative. An editor, in a headlong rush to sign up a new novel, or see a controversial book to a timely publication, might overlook lapses in a narrative voice or weak points in a thesis. The assistant, however, buffered from direct pressure by a publisher or agent, is in a unique position to see where the emperor lacks the appropriate clothes.

An assistant can be the second strongest supporter a book has in-house. An editor’s job is to thrust the book into the best possible light against the seemingly dark, cold world of the video-watching public. But between the time the editor demands four-color bound galleys and the author flies off on her sixteen-city tour, smaller, significant events may involve an editorial assistant. Recently, a free-lance reviewer called my office to request a catalog. Answering the phone, my assistant buoyantly lauded a novel we’d been editing. The reviewer was so taken by my assistant’s excitement that she placed the book on her “must review” list and, in turn, called a movie producer friend to tell her about the novel. Time will tell whether the phone call amounts to a great review or a lucrative movie deal, but the anticipatory “buzz” has begun. And in the meantime, my assistant has established two new contacts of her own.

Every relationship in publishing, be it writer-editor, editor-assistant, or writer-assistant, is similar to a marriage: the parties come together for a common good, with all hopes resting upon the honeymoon lasting a lifetime. As marriages go, these are passionate unions. The book is, after all, a writer’s creative baby. It is the book—the third, ever-present, all-important entity in each partnership—that must be championed and somehow made better by every move.

Everyone’s career (indeed, everyone’s day-to-day experience) can be made more pleasurable by healthy exploitation and large doses of compassion. Assistants are miserably underpaid for the number of hours they spend working. One of their chief joys is talking with an appreciative writer—an author who respects their opinion of the book; an author who understands that assistants won’t always have the answers at their fingertips but will do their best to find it; an author who acknowledges that he or she is one of many professionals whom the assistant and editor must work with daily.

It helps, too, for an assistant to be reminded, in quiet, friendly conversa-
tions with the editor and authors, that a certain book took five long and torturous years in the writing; that the writer may become anxious and temperamental as the book nears its publication date; that an assistant’s job can, eventually, come to a happy conclusion.

The conclusion, of course, is the promotion to associate editor. The associate editor is no longer responsible for typing other people’s correspondence or answering a boss’s phone. He or she can buy books and shepherd them through publication with a certain degree of autonomy. Although a promotion is terrific public recognition for hard work and talent, it shouldn’t be a jarring move. It’s a gratifying opportunity to shed annoying duties and take on full responsibility for a vocation the assistant has practiced for years. Suddenly, writers may find that the helpful assistant of yesterday is now their editor. And associate editors discover that they did not slave away for naught: they are now on the receiving end of worthwhile submissions from agents and authors who long ago became their admirers.

With experience comes confidence, and confidence allows publishing neophytes and novice writers to finally displace an oft-held but inaccurate assumption: that there exists a huge literary “club” to which everyone who is anyone should aspire to belong. The encouraging reality is that the imaginary club is only the figment of an outsider’s insecurities. Genuine efforts to praise good work, encourage talent, and care about another’s well-being—no matter what end of the business you’re on; no matter what a person’s title is—will always foreshadow a long and fruitful career.

Working with a Free-Lance Editor or Book Doctor

Gerald (Jerry) Gross

Jerry Gross (as he is known in the publishing industry) graduated the City College of New York in 1953 and began his publishing career in that same year at Simon & Schuster as Henry Simon’s first reader. During his years as a paperback and hardcover fiction and nonfiction editor, he created the gothic romance and gothic mystery as mass-market paperback categories and edited Publishers on Publishing (1961) and Editors on Editing (1962 and 1985). In 1987 he became a partner in Gross Associates. From his home in Croton-on-Hudson, New York, he has worked as a fiction and nonfiction free-lance editor/book doctor with authors both published and unpublished, agented and unagented, and with publishers’ editors. When he is not editing or critiquing manuscripts, Mr. Gross gives workshops on various aspects of editing and publishing at writers’ conferences around the United States.

When should a writer consult a free-lance editor or book doctor? What can a book doctor really do for an ailing manuscript? Why has the book doctor become an increasingly important editor for author, agent, and publisher? When would a publisher’s editor assign a manuscript to be edited by a free-lance editor or critiqued by a book doctor? How can a writer choose and work effectively with a reputable book doctor? Mr. Gross provides practical, realistic answers to these important questions in this comprehensive look at today’s new breed of editor—the book doctor—whose skills could help you improve your manuscript and possibly save your career.