Editing and the Creative Writer
Or, Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Manuscript

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That little verb *edit* is a slippery one for us poets and writers.

Like its cousins *type* and *print* and *copy,* here in the digital millennium it's taken on a multivalent array of meanings—even switch-hitting as different parts of speech—to the point that writers aren't sure anymore what the concept of "editing" entails.

Some writers think it's easiest just to ignore what goes on behind the editorial curtain. Do your best writing, submit your finished manuscript, and the publishing wizards will wave their magic wands and everything comes out perfect and ready-for-prime-time. At the other extreme, the control freaks want to make certain not a single comma gets changed, not a space gets shifted, from the way they wrote it. After all, we're creative writers—not reporters or scholars or secretaries. Our writing is *art,* and who's to question that? Who knows better than we do how our work ought to appear in print?

Oops, there's one of those slippery words again. *Print.* Are we talking about the ink-on-paper pages of a book or journal? The virtual world of the Web? A piece of limited-edition framed art? An original lithograph? Or that action we take when we send the file to the LaserJet?

You get the point.

The business of editing lies out there in that foggy, fuzzy, unfamiliar space beyond the manuscript. To clear the fog a bit, it helps to break the process down into discrete steps—yours, and the editor's.

First, the things you will do *before* submitting the work for an editor's consideration.

1. *Write.* This is the creator's near-exclusive territory. In most cases you'll need to complete your manuscript—story, poem, essay, an entire book—before sending it to prospective publishers.

That means *all* of the planning, drafting, outlining, researching, typing. You'll eventually be called upon to supply the book's acknowledgments, preface (as opposed to a foreword, which is generally contributed by someone else), dedication, epigraph, illustration captions, and the like, as well.

(One exception is the nonfiction book on a particular topic—a how-to book or cookbook, for example. You might succeed in persuading an editor to sign a project like this before you've even finished it.)

It might be worth realizing, if you don't already, that at this point—in fact from the very beginning of your first draft—you own the work you've written. Your copyright belongs to you from the moment of creation, and you don't have to register it to make it so. (If this seems like a minor point, consider that until as recently as 1977 an American writer could lose his copyright for failure to observe certain conditions of registration.) The legally recognized right of a writer to exercise exclusive control over her work—to decide when and how it may be published, sold, displayed, or copied—is a great privilege and a valuable intellectual and economic asset in our society.

You need not worry that you're risking your copyright when you submit your work to respectable editors; their modifications won't affect your ownership. Your text and even your title are very likely to

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change along the way. Editing is by nature collaborative and social, dependent on the give-and-take of multiple viewpoints—so you shouldn't be surprised when you're asked to rewrite any portion of your work or to accept suggested changes.

A healthy resiliency, and the ability to step outside your own work and look at it as other readers might, will help you take best advantage of the editorial process. But that's still a ways off. Let's go back to the writer's tasks.

2. *Revise.* This, too, is the writer's personal responsibility—the often wrenching and intimidating task of revisiting, revisioning, rethinking, and rewriting that yields an improved version of your text. Though the terms *revise* and *edit* are often used interchangeably, revising more accurately refers to something you do to your own work, while editing is what someone else does to it. If you have followed the oft-repeated advice to "kill your inner editor" and free your writing in early drafts, you'll need to resurrect an "inner reviser" now and put everything on the table for reconsideration.

3. *Workshop.* Hey, wait a minute—that's a noun. Although the craft term *workshop* entered literary parlance in the first half of the twentieth century, when universities started adopting it for their fine-arts studios, its role as a verb is a recent phenomenon.

You won't find *to workshop* in the *OED.* But it usefully describes what happens when you submit a working version of your manuscript, or part of it, to a likeminded group of writers for their response and advice. It's the central activity of an apprenticeship in creative writing. And we don't have a better word for it, so the noun just has to do double duty. Workshopping gives you the advantage of feedback before you send your work out to a thumbs-up-or-thumbs-down editor.

Dedicated, unbiased readers can spark entirely new ideas or help you spot weaknesses. Under their scrutiny you and your work grow stronger.

4. *Vet.* No, this one isn't a noun. But it's an important task that can save you a great deal of anguish down the road.

The aim of vetting is to *get it right.* If your writing involves special subject-area information, ask an expert in the area to read and review it to identify errors of fact. Does your novel take place in nineteenth-century Paris? Have a historian look it over. Does your story involve contemporary politics, law, medicine, or military maneuvers? Ask a professional who knows the turf and the lingo to go over it carefully. Are there living relatives of your characters who might raise a fuss if you didn't get the details right? Discuss things with them first to defuse possible objections. If you suspect that something in your work may cross the legal boundaries of libel, obscenity, privacy, or someone else's copyright, you'd be wise to vet it for those reasons—a responsible editor surely will.

5. *Check* your final draft. Print it out and look over the pages: make sure it's the right version of your file, that it reflects all the changes you meant to make, that it's properly headed (with title and page number on every page), and that no pages are missing.

Copy it—hard copy and disk file (you've been backing up all along, right?)—and keep the "insurance copies" in a different location. Name and organize your drafts in an orderly fashion; your editor is eventually going to want a word processing file that matches the manuscript printout you submitted.

At this point you're officially handing your baby over to the guardians who will nurture it to maturity. They'll have their responsibilities—and you'll have yours.

So, what will the editor do after receiving your work?

6. *Read.* Publishing houses look at thousands of manuscripts each year or each month, and they employ first-pass readers to winnow down the stack to a few that suit their needs and standards.

If yours is among them—and eventually singled out—an acquisitions editor will work with you on your publishing agreement, your deadlines, and suggestions for revision. You'll be offered a contract, which you should read carefully and consider wisely. Every contract is subject to negotiation: educate yourself and obtain trustworthy advice before you sign. You'll be expected to provide a revised, completed manuscript "acceptable in form and content" to the publisher by a deadline spelled out in the contract.

7. *Review.* Your editor, or editors, will go over your manuscript to ensure that it's free of legal problems or factual errors. Although typically only nonfiction is formally vetted or fact-checked by outside experts, publishers have good reason to verify that any book that will appear over its imprint is free of outright mistakes, libel, invasions of privacy, infringement of copyright, and similar problems. You may be required to modify some passages, provide source information, or obtain releases or permissions. Obtaining and paying for for permissions and artwork are generally the author's responsibilities.

8. *Edit.* If your acquisitions editor or project editor does any work on your manuscript, it will generally involve suggestions regarding structure or organization, cuts or additions, or other substantive matters. But this sort of attention to developmental or line editing is increasingly rare. Count yourself lucky if you have an editor who's invested in your writing at this level.

The project editor will add front matter and other structural elements of the book. The publisher supplies the ISBN number and Library of Congress cataloging information. In due time, the publisher also works with you on matters relating to the promotion and marketing of your book.

9. *Clean up.* It's generally the editor's job to clean up the computer formatting to prepare for electronic copyediting and page layout.

10. *Copyedit.* Copyediting involves matters of mechanics (capitalization, hyphenation, italic/roman/boldface styling, treatment of numbers, and the like), as well as spelling and grammar. The copyeditor will make these changes on your word processing file or (less often these days) a hard copy of your manuscript.

Copyediting is the process of applying consistency to a text so that the author's meaning shines through most clearly—like polishing a lens so that no distracting flaws or dust remain to impede the view. Copyeditors strive for consistency on three levels: with the established conventions of language and culture (usually standard American English); with the established conventions of the publishing house (usually based on the *Chicago Manual of Style*); and with the work's own internal purpose, discipline, and vocabulary.

When you've finished reviewing the copyedited manuscript and returned it to the editor, the editor (in most cases) will incorporate your final corrections into the computer file and turn it over to a designer for typesetting and page layout.

The author's responsibilities go hand-in-hand with the editor's right up to the moment the book goes to the printer—and beyond. These are the things you will do along with the editor:

11. *Approve.* At each stage of work on the book, you'll have a chance to review and okay the edits, and to revise further if needed—all on a rigid schedule of deadlines. Missing a deadline for returning a copyedited manuscript or set of proofs may throw the entire publication schedule off.

Most editors are trained professionals with many years of experience. They're right more often than not. But not every editor is adept at dealing with every author's unique material—and editors do make mistakes. If you detect something that doesn't sound right, discuss it with your editor, and if you find something improperly changed, the term to know is "stet"—*let it stand.* It is your manuscript, after all. You should be able to trust that your editor is widely read, detail-oriented, and sensitive to the subtleties of your voice and particular style.

12. *Proofread*. Don't confuse this step with editing: proofreading involves checking typeset page layouts that, except for mistakes that have been overlooked in copyediting or have crept in along the way, are ready to be printed. The arrival of page proofs is *not* the time for revising—F. Scott Fitzgerald's legendary rewriting of *The Great Gatsby* in printer's galleys notwithstanding. You should familiarize yourself with, and use, standard proofreader's marks for clearest communication. As with earlier corrections, the editor will take responsibility for entering changes in the page layout file.

For a nonfiction book with an index, this is the time to create the index as well. It's often the author's responsibility to produce the index or to pay an indexer to prepare it; your contract should indicate if this is the case.

13. *Enjoy the finished product.* As you look back over the weeks and months it's taken to reach this point, congratulate yourself. You've navigated a complex, collaborative process, and *your* words, *your* sentences have been scrutinized and shaped and dressed up for public display. Your readers will expect no less.

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