

## Writing Reconnaissance: What Editors Look For in Your Text

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As a writer, you're undoubtedly familiar with the processes of rewriting and revision. You do these things almost automatically, when you're at your keyboard—or you do them in a disciplined setting in the workshop environment. But getting your well-revised manuscript ready for publication is usually a job for the heavy hitter, the Special Ops forces of language. Yes, The Editor.

The editor looks at your work through an entirely different lens than you do. Several lenses, in fact.

Take the copyeditor, for example. It's the copyeditor's job to prepare your work to withstand the criticisms of an anonymous population of readers *before* it reaches their hands. Do you have a weakness when it comes to their and there, you're and your, its and it's? (Oops, did you catch the three problems in this passage?) Is dialogue your downfall? Do you get tense over verbs?

Good editors are trained to save you from these and other pitfalls. Here's a checklist of items an editor might use when working with your manuscript:

### A. Structure

Read the passage for overall flow, logic, and effectiveness of argument. (Put more technically, these are matters of *rhetoric*.) Can you point to specific weaknesses? Perhaps these can be summarized for the author, or perhaps they can be noted at the specific instances where they occur.

- \_\_\_ Are there entire passages or sentences that could, or should, be left out?
- \_\_\_ Has the author overlooked something that should be covered or mentioned? Is there a section that needs more information or more extensive treatment to be parallel to others, or to be clear?
- \_\_\_ Are there sections that would be more effective if rearranged?
- \_\_\_ Does the author's pattern of sentence structure seem to fit the aims of the text?

### B. Language

Reconsider the passage, this time with an ear for "good writing" (this is a bit more challenging and subjective; put more technically, these are matters of *diction*).

- \_\_\_ Does the author's literary style seem cohesive, understandable, engaging? If not, how would you revise it—or advise the author to revise it—without doing harm?
- \_\_\_ Do the author's tone and voice seem appropriate to the subject matter and the aims of the text? If not, how would you revise it without doing harm?
- \_\_\_ Does the author's vocabulary seem appropriate to the aims of the text?
- \_\_\_ Are there words that appear to be left out, or are there words that should be cut?

### C. Grammar

Most good writers instinctively spot egregious violations of grammar. But the editor's challenge goes deeper: the editor must strive to spot *all* grammar problems—and must be able to diagnose and categorize them in order to (a) repair them effectively and (b) defend revisions if they're questioned. Here are a few of the most common groups of grammar problems.

- \_\_\_ Faulty subject-verb agreement
- \_\_\_ Wrong verb form; tense shift
- \_\_\_ Dangling participle \**This is the sneakiest grammar problem I encounter these days.*
- \_\_\_ Dangling/misplaced modifier
- \_\_\_ Faulty pronoun-antecedent agreement
- \_\_\_ Wrong case of pronoun/noun
- \_\_\_ Lack of parallelism, in structure as well as at the sentence level
- \_\_\_ Faulty formation of adjective/adverb

#### D. Mechanics

You might be surprised to learn that mechanics are often matters of opinion—there’s really no one right or wrong approach to these items, so for the purpose of consistency they’re agreed on by convention, which may seem capricious to non-editors. And conventions—you guessed it—vary depending on the medium, the publisher, the nationality, and the purpose for which the text is being edited.

- \_\_\_ Punctuation
- \_\_\_ Spelling
- \_\_\_ Compound words: open, closed, or hyphenated? \**This is one of the toughest areas to keep up with, since it changes frequently.*
- \_\_\_ Capitalization
- \_\_\_ Treatment of numbers and numerals
- \_\_\_ Treatment of quotations
- \_\_\_ Treatment of abbreviations, acronyms, and symbols
- \_\_\_ Treatment of tables, graphs, and art
- \_\_\_ Styling of documentation (notes and bibliography)
- \_\_\_ Treatment of structural elements (front and back matter, title, headings, etc.)
- \_\_\_ Paragraph or character formatting

#### E. Proofreading

You’re almost home free. Once all edits have been integrated and a clean text (or typeset text) is printed out, you (and/or another reader) will need to check for the following:

- \_\_\_ Review the edits one by one against the last marked text, to make sure they were correctly entered (this process is known as *collating*)
- \_\_\_ Read through to spot any lingering problems missed in copyediting
- \_\_\_ Also look for typographical errors or introduced errors
- \_\_\_ Look through page proofs for typesetting problems that can only be fixed at the very end: faulty line-end hyphenation (word breaks), widows and orphans, bad page breaks
- \_\_\_ Repeat the collating step with clean pages until all corrections have been checked

If any of the terms in this checklist give you trouble (high-school grammar and sentence diagrams were a long time ago for most of us, after all), consult a standard college English handbook and the *Chicago Manual of Style* for clarification.