

## Author–Editor Triads

There's lots of information out there for writers about how to write, and for editors about how to edit. But not much about how to interact with each other. It used to be that authors and editors were separated by a publishing house. These days, more of us are on our own to put a book together, in a direct business relationship that's foreign to both. This is particularly true in fiction, which this article covers.

### *Two Sides of the Same Coin*

Both the writing and editing professions are unlicensed and unregulated, so it's up to us to operate like pros. The fragmentation of the traditional publishing industry has revealed just how much time, just how much work, and just how much cost was once covered by the institution. A small percentage of us ever saw this, and fewer of us will as time goes on.

Authors and editors need to get to know each other better as individual enterprises. While we're still part of the same publishing chain, we're now coming at each other from more directions and playing a game with constantly changing rules.

What hasn't changed is that we are two sides of the same coin whose common goal is to make a novel the best it can be.

While the author–editor relationship is a dyad, their areas of common interest cluster into threes:

- 3 stages of writing: creation, refinement, presentation
- 3 types of editing: copyediting, substantive, developmental
- 3 areas of mutual obligation: communication, trust, respect
- 3 rules of thumb: you're on the same side; you need to let go; both your viewpoints are valid
- 3 channels of publishing: traditional, author service, self
- 3 forms of pricing: hourly, per unit, fixed

### *The Writing Process*

While all writing is about communication and expression, and all writers are invested in their work, nonfiction's purpose is to convey information, and fiction's purpose is to tell a story.

This makes novel-writing a literary art, and most authors have an intense, deep involvement in their work that's hard for some editors to understand. It's likewise hard for some authors to understand that successful art requires mastery of craft—which is where editors are best suited to help.

A novel should be approached from both angles. But before decisions can be made about editing, both parties must recognize where the book stands in the three stages of writing.

1) **Creation** (art; “right brain” thinking)—This is the author’s time: story conception and evolution, establishment of voice, expression of emotion. The process can involve many drafts and revisions. It’s not the time for editing, unless the author needs help and wants a developmental edit (defined in Editorial Services).

2) **Refinement** (craft; “left brain” thinking)—This is the editor’s time: ironing out structural wrinkles and polishing up prose. Line editing and copyediting (defined in Editorial Services) occur at this stage, though developmental editing may be appropriate if the book is stuck. Either way, it’s the author’s time to start learning how the work will be received by others.

3) **Presentation** (formatting and marketing; “right brain” and “left brain” thinking)—Time for business. Here the book becomes a product to be packaged, when the author must commit to a publishing plan and interact with proofreaders, agents, designers, composers, and marketing/publicity people. The editor is out of the picture unless they offer some of these services. While all parties need to think creatively for best effect, what puts the book out there is mainly legwork and rational thinking, conforming to submission or publication requirements.

### *Editorial Services*

A successful author–editor relationship relies on both parties understanding which service is appropriate for the book and budget.

1) **Copyediting**—A nuts-and-bolts exercise that polishes the manuscript for submission to an editor or agent, or prepares it for self-publishing. Copyediting focuses on clarity, consistency, and correctness regarding spelling, grammar, syntax, punctuation, and factual accuracy, involving minimal touching of text by the editor. It’s generally done in one round and the author accept or rejects changes and moves on.

2) **Substantive (line) editing**—Enhanced copyediting, more of a decision-making, quality-imposing process where text is analyzed and revised at the sentence (line) level. The editor often inserts queries pertaining to logistics and scene choreography, appropriateness to genre, story arc and character development, genre conventions, voice, etc. It’s generally done in one round, though it may go back and forth between parties two or more times. No editorial rewriting is done beyond small cutting or consolidating, transition smoothing, or minor paragraph resequencing for clarity.

3) **Developmental editing**—A roll-up-your-sleeves-and-dig-in process that embraces a book’s overall concept, flow, and structure as well as phrasing and all other detail. It’s the most hands-on by the editor, and most interactive between editor and author; it takes the most time, costs the most money, and has the most profound impact on an author’s work. It usually requires at least two rounds of backing and forthgoing. Best done when the author is still struggling with the first draft and harnessing ideas, but it’s also appropriate when a book is stuck.

**Note:** EDITING IS NOT PROOFREADING! That occurs when a book is ready to go out into the world, and is done only to ensure that no lingering bloopers remain after editing and revision. Proofreading is a separate service at a separate price, best done by a separate person.

### *Mutual Obligations*

A successful author–editor relationship comes from:

#### **1) Communication**

Both parties should agree (in writing) on service specifics, schedule, costs, expectations, format for submission and delivery, and anything else of concern before starting the job.

#### **2) Trust**

The author needs to believe that the editor does not intend to price gouge, steal their work, or rewrite it; the editor needs to believe that the author intends to pay and engage in the process with an open mind and positive attitude.

#### **3) Respect**

Both must recognize that editing a manuscript is a business transaction, with one person providing a valid product, and the other providing an expert service.

### *Rules of Thumb*

**1) You're on the same side,** wanting the book to be the best it can be and your talents to be appreciated.

**2) You need to let go.** The rules of language are important for structure and communication, but sometimes need to be relaxed. Fiction, as an art form, is allowed to break the rules if that serves the story. Likewise, not every word an author writes is a precious jewel. There is room for improvement in everyone's work. Editing should be directed toward balancing the artist's voice and vision against reader comprehension. Both parties must remember that perfection is unattainable, and there comes a time when a work is as good as it needs to be and should go out into the world rather than be reworked indefinitely.

**3) Both your viewpoints are valid.** All art is subjective, and what's good and right and beautiful or awful will vary widely between people. The author is the deciding party about content, though a wise author will consider all editorial input before rejecting it, because you both want the book to find its audience and be well received.

### *Publishing Channels*

There used to be only one path to publication (two, if you count the much-maligned vanity presses). Now there are three alternatives, for print and/or electronic publication.

In general: The author owns the copyright, but the difference with publisher types lies in who owns the ISBN, who controls what rights, how much money the author pays out and gets back, quality of the final product, and how much marketing the author has to do.

Independent publishers (a.k.a “indies” —a term used for both publishers and authors) have different criteria, and are where most of today’s books find a home.

### **1) Traditional publishing**

This realm comprises the “Big Five” (Random House, Simon & Schuster, Penguin, Harper, etc.; also, small or niche presses). *The company pays the author.* There may be an advance against royalties; definitely royalties based on sales. A manuscript is submitted via agent or direct to editor. Once accepted, a book is worked on by in-house developmental and line editors, often asking for significant changes, then usually farmed out for production work.

Traditional publishers have been forced by the marketplace to focus on novels that will sell in large numbers, i.e., blockbusters, genre series, and the occasional surprise. These same works are what agents are looking for, because they make their living from sales. Thus, getting traditionally published has become an intensely competitive challenge for authors, and their books must not only meet high standards of excellence but also fit within certain conventions.

The ISBN is in the publisher’s name. Rights are divided and sold separately. Contracts are deep and often tricky. The author has little or no control, but in exchange does not have to do any of the production work or handle the business aspects. These days, unless a star, the author often has to participate in marketing.

### **2) Author-service publishing**

This is what many people mean by “self-publishing.” The author chooses who will publish the novel and either pays the company for services, or loses some of the revenue in fees to the company. Popular author-service companies include CreateSpace, Kindle Direct, Lulu, Book Baby, iUniverse, Smashwords. These may produce e-books only or offer a print-on-demand option, sometimes print runs as well. Generally there are no “gatekeepers,” i.e., people who accept or reject a submission. The author can purchase a full package or separate services, and receives a royalty based on sales, often minus production costs. Performance quality from these companies is all over the map. It’s the least expensive option but contains high risk.

The ISBN is in the company’s name unless the author signs up for a special service (usually for an extra fee). Author control varies per vendor, but the author is in charge of results.

### **3) Self-publishing**

Here the author carries all the risk and gets all the reward by becoming a publishing business. Author owns the ISBN, pays vendors for all production services, or else does them him/herself.

The most common print-on-demand partner is Lightning Source. Some author-services companies offer distribution deals separate from production, so a self-publisher can arrange all the production work then provide a distribution-ready file to the service company. Self-publishing is time-consuming, expensive, gratifying, and potentially lucrative—but not for the faint-hearted.

Authors can use different publishing channels for different purposes. The self-publishing options are great for reviving a backlist or bringing out a book that falls between commercial categories. The decision of which route to take is now a major part of an author's plan for a novel. Editors can help authors make that decision, and/or edit the manuscript with certain publishing parameters in mind.

### *Costs*

Editors price their services differently and present them in different formats based on:

- length and complexity of the manuscript
- number of editorial passes involved
- amount of time anticipated to complete the job
- amount of time available to do the job
- average rates in the professional marketplace
- operational overhead
- level of skill and qualification

It helps both parties to base an estimate on an edited sample (1 to 5 pages) from the book.

Because editing is an open vs. regulated profession, rates charged by individuals run the gamut. They tend to reflect the editor's experience—meaning, super-cheap rates reflect less experience, while the highest rates reflect mastery and author demand. Most independent editors price their services in the middle, within the parameters posted by the Editorial Freelancers Association ([www.the-efa.org/res/rates.php](http://www.the-efa.org/res/rates.php)).

1) **Hourly**—The most comfortable way for many authors and editors to work. However, it can get away from them if the job is not well defined.

2) **Unit**—A way of preventing surprises. It is based on something measurable, such as page length (industry standard is defined as 250 words per page) or word count (most commonly determined by MS Word's counting feature), based on the incoming manuscript—not the edited version.

3) **Fixed**—A project fee arrived at by estimating hours and word or page count, rounded into a fixed amount based on the editor's experience with variables that consume billable time. In a fixed-rate job, any follow-up editing of revised material is either built into the project rate or billed at an hourly rate as a separate transaction, since the lion's share of the work has been done.

While every editor has a preferred method of estimating and billing, most will discuss alternatives if an author has a different preference.

See related article, "The Author–Editor Dyad," on this site.

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