

The Author–Editor Dyad

Everyone who creates a work of art, literary or otherwise, needs an editor. Why? Because creation involves different mentalities than craft; and rare is the artist who has the left brain/right brain balance to be creator and audience at the same time.

All the arts employ someone whose job is to complement creative talent. In film, for instance, there's a person who makes sure that there's no telephone pole or jet contrail behind the actors in a period movie, and ensures that a torn sleeve stays torn in the right shape, in the right place between takes on different days.

In stage performances, somebody tracks logistics, like whether the male dancer is physically capable of lifting the ballerina over his head; whether a soloist is positioned in front of the orchestra instead of behind it (or the strings aren't hidden by the brass); whether the actor who entered stage left then exits stage right, or is still in view but forgotten when the scene changes.

And in art studios all over, someone besides the painter stands across the room evaluating a work's composition and visual impact, or points out the burrs still left on a statue after the sculptor has finished chiseling and polishing.

In other words, an editor is that second pair of eyes always needed in order to achieve perspective and completion. Those eyes serve as both mirror and camera, allowing artists to see themselves and their work from angles not otherwise possible. In a mirror, you can't see what you truly look like because the image is reversed; and in a photograph, you see your real appearance through an objective lens—as well yourself from behind, from the side, in motion, close up, far away.

Artists are too close to their work to see it from another's viewpoint. The only way to experience the difference is to park your work in a drawer for a decade, until you've completely forgotten what you created and your state of mind while you were creating it. Ten years later, when you revisit the thing, you'll get a whopping shock!

Writers can skip that delay by engaging a professional viewer. That person looks at the work with a dispassionate eye, seeing it fresh, as would the reader. An editor is a beta reader with the knowledge to spot whatever a writer might overlook and convey it in terms of literary craft. This allows the author to adjust the text and present it in best final form.

Some editors describe their role as being the tactful friend who reminds you that your fly is unzipped, or who brushes the white dog hair off your black blazer, just before you mount the podium for a speech. Whatever way one defines the editor-writer relationship, it boils down to a symbiosis.

An editor's mission is to help writers bring their stories to their desired audience clearly and seamlessly, so that readers can immerse themselves in the writer's vision without distraction.

Editors who understand this help make the process stimulating and rewarding. The occasional editor who doesn't understand this can make the process intimidating and painful—a contest of wills, or too focused on rules. The rules of craft do matter, even in fiction: Craft is what enables the clarity and seamlessness that readers demand. But the writer's voice is what draws and retains those readers, so sometimes rules must be bent.

Together, author and editor blend their skills for the benefit of the reader in a mutually supportive dyad.

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

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