

Why Editing Takes Longer Than Reading

Editing a book involves much more than just reading it for typos.

That's because while reading the editor is also analyzing the material and consulting style guides, dictionaries, and myriad printed and Internet resources, all while corresponding with the author, composing queries within the manuscript, and perhaps formatting it or coding it for production. Often, an editor reads a book before or after the editing pass, just to see the forest distinctly from the trees.

Scope of work differs between copyediting, line editing, and developmental editing, so not all editors do the same things to every manuscript. In general, while reading they are constantly monitoring clarity, consistency, and structure, and responding to places where these elements raise questions. They are also compiling their observations on style sheets to be used by the author, or by proofreaders or production personnel down the line.

I do a lot of substantive (line) editing for novels, and here's my checklist:

- correcting spelling (especially compound words), punctuation, grammar, syntax
- checking spelling of every place name and proper noun
- checking historical events/dates/locations for accuracy
- reworking rough sentences or transitions
- flagging author style idiosyncrasies
- tracking consistency in character/place traits and event chronology
- querying unclear or technically dubious scene choreography and logistics
- suggesting areas of revision
- addressing story arc, character development and viewpoint, plot pacing, emotional impact, genre conventions
- tidying up formatting
- preparing style sheets that cover terms and conventions used in the manuscript, characters and relationships, setting details, and story timeline

When a book is part of a series, there's also a layer of cross-checking between volumes to keep things consistent between them. Here style sheets are crucial, enabling the editor to pick up where he/she left off when presented with Book 2(+) many months after handling the previous volume. Or else another editor can step in and move forward instead of reinventing the proverbial wheel.

In hours alone, editing work adds up to reading a book three—four—five times at a crawl. But it's all to make sure that everything is as shipshape as it can be, so the book has its best chance for success in a harshly competitive world.

—Carolyn Haley, DocuMania
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