

Critical differences between proofreading, copy editing, rewriting

 By [Tiffany Markman](#)

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As an editor/copywriter, the biggest thorn in my backside is the client who emails an 80-page document with the brief, 'Please have a look at this.' [I can visualise those of you who share my industry nodding your heads supportively.] So it's time I distinguished between these different skills and the different accompanying costs. Hopefully, this'll serve to a) enlighten the clients out there and b) help my fellow wordsmiths to clarify what clients get in return for what they pay.



As you'll agree, there's a preconception that proofreading, copy editing (sub editing or subbing) and rewriting are more or less the same thing, and that anyone with the vaguest grasp of English can peruse a hefty manuscript in 10 minutes, run a red pen through it for 15 , and present a totally reworked document in about half an hour. Sorry, chaps; it doesn't work like that.

1. Meet proofreading

Allow me to introduce Proofreading (alias: the perusal part). This is when we look for surface errors such as typos, spelling mistakes and blatant grammar errors and mark them on the text (or on-screen), for the client's attention, without necessarily changing anything. This enables the client to decide which of the changes s/he wants to apply - without having to thumb-suck what we've done to the original document. Incidentally, this is the cheapest of the three services and is often quoted for on a per-page or per-hour basis. Some suppliers even charge per word.

2. Meet copy editing

Next up is Copy Editing (alias: the running of the red pen). As part of this step, we first conduct a basic proof and then we go on to look for poor syntax, poor general structure, repetition, redundancy, contradiction or inconsistency. This is ideally done on-screen, so that we can use Microsoft's 'Track Changes' function or a similar device, like highlighting in colour, to a) make the changes for client and b) clearly illustrate what's been changed, for client's reference.

Understandably, copy editing costs more than proofing, because it takes about three times as long and includes a basic proof as well. Again, this tends to be billed for per page or per hour.

3. Meet rewriting

This, the biggest and most time-consuming part of an editor/writer's job, involves rewriting phrases, sentences, paragraphs or sections to achieve better flow, more coherence, clearer logic, more appropriate vocabulary or, if necessary, to add more meat to the bones of a skinny piece. As editors, we have to be extremely careful when we do this, for several reasons:

1. The original writer is often sensitive about his/her masterpiece and resistant to changes.
2. If it's already on the page, it's more or less gospel.

3. Editors are expected to be like ghosts - invisible - serving only to highlight the writer's work.
4. It's bad form to change tone, message or meaning; editors are supposed only to locate the needles in the haystack and polish them until they glow. No personality required, please.
5. We can't introduce our own ideas or opinions, especially without the writer's knowledge, because:
 - we may be adding information that has been consciously omitted;
 - we may be introducing mistakes; or
 - we may be making assumptions based on inadequate knowledge.

So it's a tricky business, rewriting, and it requires great skill matched with great restraint.

This final stage, because it encompasses both proofing and copy editing and because it can take six to 10 times as long as a basic proof (based on the practitioner's technique and experience) costs the most. It is usually quoted for on a per-hour or per-job basis.

4. A bit of added value

Here, just for fun, are a few of the editorial tips and techniques I present in my editing workshops. They should help you, whether you're the client or the supplier. Enjoy!

1. Most organisations have a style guide to which editors, subs and writers refer. It defines preferred language usage - such as a style for dates, numbers, names, titles, spelling, appropriate words, and so on. As an editor, make a point of compiling a style guide as you go. This way, you'll have a record of whether you decided to use e-mail or email, and you'll create a body of knowledge (based on your own preferences) to which you can refer.
2. Always go beyond using a spell-check, which doesn't know what you mean and won't pick up things like off vs of, read vs red, reign vs rain or, disastrously, public vs pubic.
3. Always double-check the last few paragraphs of a text. Your editorial brain knows it's approaching the last word and relaxes its vigilance with a drop in concentration. Don't let errors get through at the end.
4. Don't edit on-screen. Reading from monitors is actually 25% slower than reading from paper, so print out the text (with 1.5 line spacing and big margins) if you can and use a pen. It's old-fashioned, but it works.
5. Contractions can be essential to creating the right rhythm; don't think it's more appropriate or 'businessy' or mature to abstain from using them. Just as you use contractions when you speak because it's what your brain leads you to do, using them in writing (or allowing writers to do so) endows the words with a natural - and compelling - sense of flow.

ABOUT TIFFANY MARKMAN

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