

THE FOUR STAGES OF THE EDITING PROCESS

A guide for non-fiction authors

Every book goes through multiple rounds of editing before it is ready to publish. Understanding what each stage involves – and what it is trying to achieve – helps you work more effectively with your editor and know what to expect at each point in the process.

1. EDITORIAL ASSESSMENT

An editorial assessment is usually the starting point, particularly if you are working with an editor for the first time or are unsure where your manuscript stands.

The editor reads your manuscript in full and produces a written report covering the overall strengths and weaknesses of the book. This is not a line edit: the editor is instead looking at the big picture:

- Is the argument clear?
- Does the structure hold?
- Is the voice consistent?
- Does each chapter – and the book as a whole – deliver on what it promises?

An editorial assessment gives you an honest, expert overview of what is working and what needs attention before you invest time in more detailed editing. Think of it as a health check – a clear-eyed view of where the manuscript is and what it needs to become the great book it can be.

2. DEVELOPMENTAL (OR STRUCTURAL) EDIT

Where an editorial assessment tells you what needs to change, a developmental edit goes deeper.

A developmental editor will work directly on the text – typically using the Track Changes and Comment functions in Word – suggesting cuts, restructuring sections, strengthening arguments and helping you sharpen your focus. For non-fiction, this often means looking closely at the logic of the book:

- Does each chapter earn its place?
- Does the argument build?
- Is the reader always clear about where they are and why it matters?

This is the most intensive stage of editing, and manuscripts can change substantially during the process.

3. COPY EDIT

A copy edit happens once the author and editor are satisfied with the shape and content of the book. It is a line-by-line pass through the manuscript, focused on accuracy, consistency and clarity at a sentence level.

A copy editor will correct grammatical errors, spelling mistakes and punctuation inconsistencies. They will also check for stylistic inconsistencies – for example, words or phrases used differently in different places, headings that don't follow the same format or references that are cited differently throughout – and may restructure sentences if the meaning is unclear or the flow is awkward.

A copy edit is not about changing what you are saying. It is about making sure you are saying it as clearly and consistently as possible.

4. PROOFREAD

Proofreading is the final stage, and it happens after the manuscript has been typeset – that is, laid out in its final designed format, ready for printing or digital publication.

At this point, the proofreader is looking for any errors that have crept in during the design process, such as text that has reflowed oddly, punctuation that has changed or words that have been dropped or duplicated. They will also catch any remaining spelling or punctuation errors that survived earlier rounds of editing and insert page or chapter references.

Ideally, proofreading should be done by a fresh pair of eyes – someone who has not been involved in the earlier editing stages and can read the text without assumptions about what it says. Substantive changes cannot be made at this stage as alterations are costly and disruptive to the layout.

*Not sure which stage of editing your manuscript needs?
If you would like an honest assessment of where your book is at, [get in touch](#).
I offer both editorial assessments and developmental edits.*