



What is copy-editing?

A Daisy Editorial guide

*If you've written a non-fiction text to be published – for example a book or report, or content for your website – the next step is editing. This guide explains what happens during the main editing stage that most writers need – **copy-editing**. It will help you to understand what to expect during copy-editing, what a copy-editor will and won't do with your text and whether copy-editing is the right type of editing for your needs.*

Is your text ready for copy-editing?

'Editing' covers a wide range of tasks that get a text ready to publish in print or digitally. The copy-editing stage is for detailed and thorough editing, so you ideally want to do it only after you've stopped writing and arranging the content.

Tip: The term '**proofreading**' is commonly used to mean any type of editing of text, but in publishing proofreading means only the final quality check. Usually only minor changes are made at proof stage. If you need a check for grammar, spelling and punctuation, tone and flow or other language corrections, you need one of the earlier stages of editing.

See my [free guides](#) on the different types of editing and the publishing workflow to help you decide whether you're ready for copy-editing.

What is copy-editing?

Once you are happy with the overall structure, content and flow of your text it is ready for copy-editing. This is the main edit, aiming to help you publish a clear and consistent text that reads well, while maintaining your own voice and style, and that is ready for formatting or layout.

Typical copy-editing tasks include:

- Checking for errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation
- Ensuring consistency (for example of spellings, punctuation, use of capitals)
- Minor rewriting if needed to ensure that your text flows well, is logically ordered and is appropriate for your target readers
- Querying obvious or suspected factual errors or misleading information
- Flagging parts that are unclear or ambiguous or use jargon where plainer words might be better
- Checking that tables, charts and artwork correspond with what's written in the text, that they are in the correct place and that any captions are correct
- Checking that references, citations and notes are correctly ordered, that none are missing or not needed and that they're formatted correctly.

Consistency to help your readers

Many changes during copy-editing are made not because something is 'right' or 'wrong' but to make your text consistent. Inconsistencies can cause your readers to stumble over the meaning, or to wonder whether a difference is significant.

For example, you can spell some words such as recognise with an -i-s-e or -i-z-e ending. You may prefer to use capitals for job titles (the Managing Director), add stops after initials (Mrs J.W. Smith) and write dates in full (21st June 2022). But you could opt instead for no capitals for titles, no stops after initials and short-form dates. What matters is that you choose an option and use it throughout.

Your copy-editor will check that such style preferences are consistent and correct. If you don't have your own house style guide or preferences list the copy-editor will create a short style sheet that records these decisions.

Tip: Many of the 'rules' of grammar and spelling that were taught in the past are not hard-and-fast rules at all. Language and usage are always evolving. A copy-editor can guide you when it's a matter of choice.

Preparation for layout, typesetting or formatting

A copy-editor also prepares your text for the next stage of the **publishing workflow** (layout or formatting into its final output form) by marking up structural elements such as headings, tables, lists, boxed items, displayed quotes and image placeholders. This markup is not the actual design (what your final publication will look like). It simply identifies where each element begins and ends so that it's easy for your designer or typesetter to create the layout.

At copy-editing this usually means applying appropriate paragraph and character styles for the different elements of your text. Sometimes tags are used to mark the beginning (eg **[BOX]**) and end (**[/BOX]**) of an element.

The copy-editor should also remove or correct any unwanted formatting that can cause problems at layout, such as manual line breaks, multiple spaces, tabs used instead of proper indents, hyphens used as dashes, and so on.

What's not included in copy-editing?

While copy-editing goes a long way towards getting your document ready to publish, there are some important publishing tasks that a copy-editor will not usually do, unless of course you agree that your copy-editor will include them.

The following are not usually part of a copy-editor's remit:

- Developmental editing (planning or improving the basic content or outline)
- Substantial rewriting
- Cutting or expanding the word count
- Doing research for you or checking facts
- Checking the accuracy of or adding missing information in bibliographies and references (for example, author names and spellings, publication dates)
- Checking that all index entries refer to the correct page numbers
- Obtaining permissions for using images, quoted extracts, poems, lyrics and other copyrighted items
- Creating or amending artwork, graphics and charts
- Producing or designing the final layout
- Making substantial amendments, additions or rewrites after the copy-edited text is returned to you (but they will usually take in minor amendments).

Tasks that remain the responsibility of the writer or producer

- **Factual accuracy:** It is your responsibility as the writer to check all the facts, including measurements, dates, names, historical details and the like. However, your copy-editor may query or flag up any obvious or suspected errors (for example if you claim the Battle of Hastings was in 2066).
- **Potential legal issues:** You must also check for any potential legal issues in what you write and take legal advice if needed. For example, if you are writing a memoir about real people you will need to check you are not exposing yourself to risk of defamation or privacy claims.

Do you need help with editing?

Daisy Editorial can help get your text ready to publish. Get in touch for a free no-obligation quote for copy-editing, proofreading, formatting, and design and layout. If you need other services, I'll point you in the right direction.

margaret@daisyeditorial.co.uk

Get more free advice

See the [Daisy Editorial website](#) for more guides, tips and advice.