What Copyeditors Do

Copyeditors always serve the needs of three constituencies:

the author(s)—the person (or people) who wrote or compiled the
   manuscript
the publisher—the person or company that is paying the cost of
   producing the printed material
the readers—the people for whom the material is being produced

All these parties share one basic desire: an error-free publication. To that end, the copyeditor acts as the author's second pair of eyes, pointing out—and usually correcting—mechanical errors and inconsistencies; errors or infelicities of grammar, usage, and syntax; and errors or inconsistencies in content. If you like alliterative mnemonic devices, you can conceive of a copyeditor's chief concerns as comprising the "4 Cs"—clarity, coherency, consistency, and correctness—in service of the "Cardinal C": communication.

Certain projects require the copyeditor to serve as more than a second set of eyes. Heavier intervention may be needed, for example, when the author does not have native or near-native fluency in English, when the author is a professional or a technical expert writing for a lay audience, or when the author has not been careful in preparing the manuscript.

Sometimes, too, copyeditors find themselves juggling the conflicting needs and desires of their constituencies. For example, the author may feel that the manuscript requires no more than a quick read-through to correct a handful of typographical errors, while the publisher, believing that a firmer

hand would benefit the final product, instructs the copyeditor to prune verbose passages. Or a budget-conscious publisher may ask the copyeditor to attend to only the most egregious errors, while the author is hoping for a conscientious sentence-by-sentence polishing of the text.

Copyeditors who work for publishers are usually given general instructions about how light or heavy a hand the text is thought to need. But no one looks over the copyeditor's shoulder, giving detailed advice about how much or how little to do. Publishing professionals use the term *editorial judgment* to denote a copyeditor's intuition and instincts about when to intervene, when to leave well enough alone, and when to ask the author to rework a sentence or a paragraph. In addition to having a good eye and ear for language, copyeditors must develop a sixth sense about how much effort, and what kind of effort, to put into each project that crosses their desk.

In the pre-computer era, copyeditors used pencils or pens and marked their changes and questions on a typewritten manuscript. Today a few copyeditors still work on hard copy, but most sit at a computer and key in their work— a process variously called *on-screen editing, electronic manuscript (EMS) editing,* or *online editing.* Regardless of the medium, though, a copyeditor must read the document letter by letter, word by word, with excruciating care and attentiveness. In many ways, being a copyeditor is like sitting for an English exam that never ends: At every moment, your knowledge of spelling, grammar, punctuation, usage, syntax, and diction is being tested.

You're not expected to be perfect, though. Every copyeditor misses errors here and there. But do respect the four commandments of copyediting:

- Thou shalt not lose or damage part of a manuscript.
- Thou shalt not introduce an error into a text that is correct.
  (As in other areas of life, in copyediting an act of commission is more serious than an act of omission.)
- Thou shalt not inadvertently change the author's meaning.
- Thou shalt not miss a critical deadline.

PRINCIPAL TASKS

Copyediting is one step in the process by which a manuscript is turned into a final published product (e.g., a book, an annual corporate report, a newsletter, a PDF). Here, we will quickly survey the copyeditor's six principal tasks;

the procedures and conventions for executing these tasks are described in the chapters that follow.

1. MECHANICAL EDITING

The heart of copyediting consists of making a manuscript conform to an *editorial style* (also called *house style*). Editorial style includes

> spelling
> hyphenation
> capitalization
> punctuation
> treatment of numbers and numerals
> treatment of quotations
> use of abbreviations and acronyms
> use of italics and bold type
> treatment of special elements (headings, lists, tables, charts,
>   and graphs)
> format of footnotes or endnotes and other documentation

Mechanical editing comprises all editorial interventions made to ensure conformity to house style. There is nothing mechanical, however, about mechanical editing; it requires a sharp eye, a solid grasp of a wide range of conventions, and good judgment. The mistake most frequently made by novice copyeditors is to rewrite portions of a text (for better or for worse, depending on the copyeditor's writing skills) and to ignore such "minor details" as capitalization, punctuation, and hyphenation. Wrong! Whatever else you are asked to do, you are expected to repair any mechanical inconsistencies in the manuscript.

For an example of the differences purely mechanical editing can make in the look and feel—but not the meaning—of a document, compare these selections from articles that appeared on the same day in the *New York Times* and the *San Francisco Examiner.*

New York Times
February 22, 1987
TARGET QADDAFI
By Seymour M. Hersh

Eighteen American warplanes set out from Lakenheath Air Base in England last April 14 to begin a 14-hour, 5,400-mile round-trip flight to Tripoli, Libya. It is now clear that nine of those Air Force F-111's had an unprecedented peacetime mission. Their targets: Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi and his family. . . .

Since early 1981, the Central Intelligence Agency had been encouraging and abetting Libyan exile groups and foreign governments, especially those of Egypt and France, in their efforts to stage a coup d'état. . . . Now the supersonic Air Force F-111's were ordered to accomplish what the C.I.A. could not.

San Francisco Examiner
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Which is correct? (Or which is "more correct"?): American warplanes or U.S. warplanes? Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi or Col. Moammar Gadhafi? F-111's or F-111s? coup d'état or coup d'etat? C.I.A. or CIA? In each case, it is not a matter of correctness per se but of preference, and the sum total of such preferences constitutes an editorial style. A copyeditor's job is to ensure that the manuscript conforms to the publisher's editorial style; if the publisher does not have a house style, the copyeditor must make sure that the author has been consistent in selecting among acceptable variants.

At book publishing firms, scholarly journals, newspapers, and magazines, a house style is generated by having all copyeditors use the same dictionary and the same style manual (e.g., *The Chicago Manual of Style, Words into Type, The Associated Press Stylebook, Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*). In contrast, companies that produce documents, reports, brochures, catalogs, or newsletters but do not consider themselves to be bona fide publishers often rely on in-house style guides, on general lists of do's and don'ts, or on the judgments and preferences of copyeditors and editorial coordinators.[1]

1. I use the term *editorial coordinator* to denote the person who is supervising an in-house copyeditor or who is assigning work to a freelance copyeditor. In book publishing, this person's

2. CORRELATING PARTS

Unless the manuscript is very short and simple, the copyeditor must devote special attention to correlating the parts of the manuscript. Such tasks include

> verifying any cross-references that appear in the text
> checking the numbering of footnotes, endnotes, tables, and illustrations
> specifying the placement of tables and illustrations
> checking the content of the illustrations against the captions and against the text
> reading the list of illustrations against the illustrations and against the captions
> reading the table of contents against the manuscript
> reading the footnotes or endnotes against the bibliography

Some types of texts require special cross-checking. For example, in cookbooks the list of ingredients that precedes a recipe must be read against the recipe: Is every ingredient in the initial list used in the recipe? Does every ingredient used in the recipe appear in the list of ingredients? Similarly, when copyediting other kinds of how-to texts, one may need to check whether the list of equipment or parts matches the instructions.

3. LANGUAGE EDITING: GRAMMAR, USAGE, AND DICTION

Copyeditors also correct—or ask the author to correct—errors or lapses in grammar, syntax, usage, and diction. Ideally, copyeditors set right whatever is incorrect, unidiomatic, confusing, ambiguous, or inappropriate without attempting to impose their stylistic preferences or prejudices on the author.

The "rules" for language editing are far more subjective than those for mechanical editing. Most copyeditors come to trust a small set of usage books and then to rely on their own judgment when the books fail to illuminate a particular issue or offer conflicting recommendations. Indeed, the "correct" usage choice may vary from manuscript to manuscript, depending on the

title may be *managing editor, chief copyeditor, production editor*, or *project editor*. In other industries, the title begins with a modifier like *communications, pubs* (short for "publications"), or *documentation* and concludes with one of the following nouns: *manager, editor, specialist.*

publisher's house style, the conventions in the author's field, and the expectations of the intended audience.

A small example: Most copyeditors who work for academic presses and scholarly journals are taught to treat *data* as a plural noun: "The data for 1999 are not available." But copyeditors in corporate communications departments are often expected to treat *data* as a singular noun: "The data for 1999 is not available."[2] Moreover, a corporate copyeditor is likely to accept *1999* as an adjective and to favor contractions: "The 1999 data isn't available."

A second example: Between the 1960s and the late 1980s, many prominent usage experts denounced *hopefully* as a sentence adverb, and copyeditors were instructed to revise "Hopefully, the crisis will end soon" to read "It is to be hoped that the crisis will end soon." Almost all members of the anti-*hopefully* faction have since recanted, though some people, unaware that the battle has ended, continue what they believe to be the good fight.[3]

The history of the *hopefully* controversy serves as a reminder that there are fads and fashions, crotchets and crazes, in that cultural creation known as grammar. For copyeditors who work on corporate publications, a solid grasp of current fashion is usually sufficient. But an understanding of current conventions alone will not do for copyeditors who work on manuscripts written by scholars, professional writers, and other creative and literary authors. To succeed on these types of projects, the copyeditor needs to learn something about the history of usage controversies:

> [A copyeditor] should know the old and outmoded usages as well as those that are current, for not all authors have current ideas—some, indeed, seem bent upon perpetuating the most unreasonable regulations that were obsolescent fifty years ago. Yet too great stress upon rules—upon "correctness"—is per-

2. The origin of the controversy lies in the etymology of *data*, which is the plural form of *datum* in Latin but functions differently in English: "*data* occurs in two constructions: as a plural noun (like *earnings*), taking a plural verb and certain plural modifiers (such as *these, many, a few of*) but not cardinal numbers, and serving as a referent for plural pronouns (such as *they, them*); and as an abstract mass noun (like *information*), taking a singular verb and singular modifiers (such as *this, much, little*), and being referred to by a singular pronoun (*it*). Both of these constructions are standard" (*DEU*, s.v. "data").

3. For a history of the debate and its resolution in the United States, see *DEU*, s.v. "hopefully"; on the controversy in the United Kingdom, see *New Fowler's*, s.v. "sentence adverb." Surprisingly, the 2009 edition of *The Associated Press Stylebook* labels *hopefully* "wrong" when the desired meaning is "it is hoped."

ilous. If the worst disease in copyediting is arrogance [toward authors], the second worst is rigidity.[4]

In all these matters, then, copyeditors must strive to strike a balance between being overly permissive and overly pedantic. Copyeditors are expected to correct (or ask the author to correct) locutions that are likely to confuse, distract, or disturb readers, but copyeditors are not hired for the purpose of imposing their own taste and sense of style on the author. Thus when reading a manuscript, the copyeditor must ask, "Is this sentence acceptable as the author has written it?" The issue is *not* "If I were the writer, would I have written it some other way?"

4. CONTENT EDITING

Copyeditors are expected to call to the author's attention any internal inconsistencies or discrepancies in content as well as any structural and organizational problems. On some projects you may be asked to fix these kinds of problems by doing heavy editing or rewriting. More often, though, you will be instructed to point out the difficulty and ask the author to resolve it.

Copyeditors are not responsible for the factual correctness of a manuscript, but you are expected to offer a polite query about factual statements that you know to be incorrect.

> *Manuscript:* The documents arrived on February 29, 1985.
> *Copyeditor's query:* Please check date—1985 not a leap year.

> *Manuscript:* Along the Kentucky-Alabama border . . .
> *Copyeditor's query:* Please fix—Kentucky and Alabama are not contiguous.

> *Manuscript:* During the Vietnam War, the most divisive in American history, . . .
> *Copyeditor's query:* Accurate to imply that Vietnam was more divisive than the Civil War?

4. William Bridgwater, "Copyediting," in *Editors on Editing: An Inside View of What Editors Really Do*, rev. ed., edited by Gerald Gross (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 87.

If you have some knowledge of the subject matter, you may be able to catch an error that would go unquestioned by a copyeditor who is unfamiliar with the subject. Such catches will be greatly appreciated by the author, but only if you can identify the errors without posing dozens of extraneous questions about items that are correct.

Another misdeed you must guard against is inadvertently changing the author's meaning while you are repairing a grammatical error or tidying up a verbose passage. And it is never acceptable to alter the author's meaning simply because you disagree with the author or believe that the author could not have meant what he or she said. Whenever the content is unclear or confusing, the copyeditor's recourse is to point out the difficulty and ask the author to resolve it.

Most publishers also expect their copyeditors to help authors avoid sexism and other forms of biased language. In addition, copyeditors call the author's attention to any material (text or illustrations) that might form the basis for a lawsuit alleging libel, invasion of privacy, or obscenity.

5. PERMISSIONS

If the manuscript contains lengthy quotations from a published work that is still under copyright, the copyeditor is expected to remind the author to obtain permission to reprint the quotations. Permission is also needed to reprint tables, charts, graphs, and illustrations that have appeared in print. Copyright law and permissions rules also apply to works that appear on the Internet. Special rules pertain to the reproduction of unpublished materials (e.g., diaries, letters).

6. TYPECODING

Copyeditors may be asked to typecode the manuscript, that is, to identify those portions of the manuscript that are not regular running text. These pieces of text, called *elements,* include part and chapter numbers, titles, and subtitles; headings and subheadings; lists, extracts, and displayed equations; table numbers, titles, source lines, and footnotes; and figure numbers and figure captions.

Copyeditors working on hard copy are usually asked to pencil in the typecodes in the left margin of the manuscript. Copyeditors working on-screen may be asked to insert or verify typecodes that identify special elements.

WHAT COPYEDITORS DO NOT DO

Given that there is no consensus about how to spell *copyediting,*[5] it is not surprising that the meaning of the term is somewhat unsettled. In the world beyond book and journal publishing, *copyediting* is sometimes loosely applied to cover a range of editorial tasks. For clarity's sake, the following distinctions are worth preserving:

Copyeditors are not proofreaders. Although many copyeditors are good proofreaders, and all copyeditors are expected to catch typographical errors, copyediting and proofreading are two different functions. Copyeditors work on an author's manuscript and are concerned with imposing mechanical consistency; correcting infelicities of grammar, usage, and diction; and querying internal inconsistencies of fact or tone. Proofreaders, in contrast, are charged with correcting errors introduced during the typesetting, formatting, or file conversion of the final document and with identifying any serious errors that were not caught during copyediting.[6]

Copyeditors are not rewriters, ghost writers, or substantive editors. Although copyeditors are expected to make simple revisions to smooth awkward passages, copyeditors do not have license to rewrite a text line by line. Making such wholesale revisions to the text is called *substantive editing* or *content editing.*

Copyeditors are not developmental editors. Copyeditors are expected to query structural and organizational problems, but they are not expected to fix these problems. Reorganizing or restructuring a manuscript is called *developmental editing.*

Copyeditors are not publication designers. Copyeditors are expected to point out any item in the manuscript that may cause difficulties during production, for example, a table that seems too wide to fit on a typeset page. But copyeditors are not responsible for making decisions about the physical appearance of the publication. All physical specifications—typefaces, page

5. The closed forms (*copyedit, copyeditor, copyediting*) are recommended in *Chicago* 16 and are routinely used in book publishing, but newspapers are apt to employ *copy editors* who *copy edit. WIT* prefers *copy editor* (recognizing *copyeditor* as a variant) and *copy-edit. M-W Collegiate* shows *copy editor* and *copyedit.*

6. Some publishers skip the word-by-word proofreading stage when a manuscript has been typeset directly from copyedited files. The author is usually sent a set of proofs and encouraged to proofread them carefully, but at the publishing firm the proofs are simply spot-checked for gross formatting errors.

TABLE 1. Levels of Copyediting

	Light Copyediting	Medium Copyediting	Heavy Copyediting
Mechanical editing	Ensure consistency in all mechanical matters—spelling, capitalization, punctuation, hyphenation, abbreviations, format of lists, etc. Optional guideline: Allow deviations from house style if the author consistently uses acceptable variants.		
Correlating parts	Check contents page against chapters; check numbering of footnotes or endnotes, tables, and figures. Check alphabetization of bibliography or reference list; read footnote, endnote, or in-text citations against bibliography or reference list.		
Language editing	Correct all indisputable errors in grammar, syntax, and usage, but ignore any locution that is not an outright error. Point out paragraphs that seem egregiously wordy or convoluted, but do not revise. Ignore minor patches of wordiness, imprecise wording, and jargon. Ask for clarification of terms likely to be new to readers.	Correct all errors in grammar, syntax, and usage. Point out or revise any infelicities. Point out any patches that seem wordy or convoluted, and supply suggested revisions. Ask for or supply definitions of terms likely to be new to readers.	Correct all errors and infelicities in grammar, syntax, and usage. Rewrite any wordy or convoluted patch. Ask for or supply definitions of terms likely to be new to readers.
Content editing	Query factual inconsistencies and any statements that seem incorrect.	Query any facts that seem incorrect. Use desktop reference books to verify content. Query faulty organization and gaps in logic.	Verify and revise any facts that are incorrect. Query or fix faulty organization and gaps in logic.
Permissions	Note any text, tables, or illustrations that may require permission to reprint.		
Typecoding	Typecode all elements.		

layout, the formatting of tables, the typographical treatment of titles and headings, and so on—are set by the publication's designer or by someone wearing the designer's (not the copyeditor's) hat.

LEVELS OF COPYEDITING

If time and money were not an issue, copyeditors could linger over each sentence and paragraph in a manuscript until they were wholly satisfied with its clarity, coherency, consistency, and correctness—even with its beauty and elegance. But since time and money are always an issue, many book and corporate publishers use the terms *light, medium,* or *heavy* to let copyeditors know how to focus and prioritize their efforts.

A publisher's decision about the level of copyediting to request for a given project is based on

the quality of the author's writing
the intended audience
the schedule and budget for editing and publication
the author's reputation, attitude toward editing, and work schedule
the size of the final print run
the importance of the publication to the publisher

In the best of all possible worlds, decisions about the level of copyediting would be based solely on an assessment of the quality of the writing and the needs of the intended audience. But in many cases, financial considerations and deadline pressures win out: "This manuscript is poorly written, but our budget allows for only light copyediting" or "This manuscript would benefit from a heavier hand, but the author has many pressing commitments and won't have time to read through a heavily edited manuscript, so let's go for light editing."

There are no universal definitions for light, medium, and heavy copyediting, but you won't be too far off target if you follow the guidelines presented in table 1. You could even show these guidelines to your editorial coordinator and ask which statements best match his or her expectations for your work.

In addition, before beginning to copyedit, you should ask the following kinds of questions:

Audience

- Who is the primary audience for this text?
- How much are readers expected to know about the subject?
- How will readers "use" the publication? Will it be pleasure reading or professional reading? Is it a reference guide or a skim-once-and-throw-away document? Will most readers read the piece straight through, from start to finish, or will they consult sections of it from time to time?

Text

- How long is the text?
- What physical form is the text in?
    - *For hard-copy editing:* Is the text double-spaced? (Single-spaced text is difficult to copyedit unless only a sprinkling of commas is required.) How many words are on a page? How legible is the font? Are all four margins at least one inch?
    - *For on-screen editing:* What word processing program did the author use? Has the publisher converted the author's files into another program or format?
- How will the copyedited manuscript be processed?
    - *For hard-copy editing:* Will the entire document be rekeyed, or will someone be inputting only the changes? (If the latter, the copyeditor must use a brightly colored pencil or pen for marking, so that the inputter can easily spot all the changes.)
    - *For on-screen editing:* Is the copyeditor to supply redlined files (i.e., files that show insertions and deletions) or clean files (i.e., files that contain only the copyedited text)? Is the copyeditor expected to code elements or special characters (e.g., letters that carry diacritic marks, foreign alphabets)?
- Does the manuscript contain material other than straight running text (e.g., tables, footnotes or endnotes, bibliography, photos, graphs)? How much of each kind?
- Are there legible photocopies of all art?

Type of editing

- What level of copyediting is being requested: light, medium, or heavy?

- Is that request based on scheduling or budget constraints?
- Has the person making the request read the entire manuscript or skimmed only parts of it?
- How many hours or dollars have been budgeted for the copyediting?
- Is the copyeditor expected to substantially cut the text?
- Is the copyeditor expected to check the math in the tables? to verify bibliographical citations?
- Are there any important design constraints or preferences: limits on the amount of art, size of tables, number of heading levels? use of special characters (foreign alphabets, math symbols, musical notation)? footnotes or endnotes?

Editorial style

- What is the preferred style manual? the preferred dictionary?
- Is there an in-house style guide, tipsheet, or checklist of editorial preferences? (A sample checklist is presented on pages 421–29.)
- Are there earlier editions or comparable texts that should be consulted? Is this piece part of a series?

Author

- Who is the author? Is the author a novice or a veteran writer?
- Has the author seen a sample edit?
- Has the author been told what kind of (or level of) editing to expect?

Administrative details

- To whom should the copyeditor direct questions that arise during editing?
- What is the deadline for completion of the editing? How firm is it?

THE EDITORIAL PROCESS

Once you have a sense of the assignment, the next step is to inventory the materials you have been given and ascertain that the materials are complete. Make a list of items that seem to be missing, and track them down immediately. If you are copyediting on hard copy, make sure you have

all the pages (numbered in sequence)
copies of any tables, charts, or illustrations