

Editing for the Nonprofessional Editor

by Sarah, November 2009

Everybody at Newfangled has a superpower. Mine is baking pies:



But if I were going to choose something a little more practical (which goes against the point of a superpower), I would point to my secret identity as a grammar nerd. Before coming to Newfangled, I majored in English, taught freshman composition, and tutored in a writing center. Working at a place where a lot of writing takes place, I end up doing a fair amount of editing. Chris has recently provided a lot of good [advice](#) on [professional writing](#); this is my take on another side of the process.

The common understanding of what English majors do tends to involve a lot of punctuation--"Uh-oh! I better watch my grammar!" was a popular comment when I used to introduce myself as a writing teacher. I do happen to be a punctuation fan, but that kind of stuff was actually a very minor part of any of my previous roles; instead, the writing program where I taught focused on upper-level concerns like introducing students to college-level work and teaching them how to revise their writing. One of the things we stressed was that what many students thought of as editing--checking the commas, basically--was just the last, and in some ways the least important, stage of a bigger process.

Not every piece of professional writing you do will involve the same steps I used to put my freshmen through. But there are three general stages of revision that will probably come into play in some form for most of the writing you do. They can be characterized as:

1. Editing

At this stage, the focus should be on the big picture. What are you really saying? How are you engaging your audience? How is your piece structured? Until you've got that kind of stuff figured out, it's not worth getting too hung up on the commas.

2. Copyediting

Once you've got the ideas in place and structured the way you want them, you can start focusing more on the wording. Your draft will probably have some unclear patches where you weren't sure what you wanted to say until after you had said it; now that you know, this is the time to clean it up.

3. Proofreading

Here's the part where you make sure everything is ready for presentation. Run spellcheck (but don't assume it knows everything), and yes, clean up those commas.

If you find yourself asked to help a colleague with some writing--good for you! You must have gotten a reputation as a grammar nerd yourself. In that case, one of the most important things I would recommend (especially if it's the first time this person has enlisted you as an

editor) is taking some time up front to find out where in the revision process your writer is. Whereas all the students in my composition classes were supposed to be on the same trajectory, real-world writers may seek out help at any stage, and that can determine what editing approach will be effective. If it's early on, and your colleague is trying to use you as a sounding board for ideas, there's not much point going through and fixing the spelling; the words are likely to change several times anyway. In that situation, it may be more helpful for you to ask questions that help focus the argument, or point out places where an idea could be developed more. On the other hand, sometimes the last-minute comma check is exactly what's needed; in those cases, making structural suggestions may just cause frustration about issues there isn't really time to address.

The editing I do at Newfangled falls at all points of this range. Most frequently, I'll get a question along the lines of "How does this sentence look?". I'll say, "Looks good!" or "Take out the comma," and that's that.



Less frequently but more consistently, I edit [the Newfangled newsletter](#) each month before it goes to

press. Several factors make this process different than a one-off sentence or paragraph correction:

- I'm working with an entire document rather than just an isolated section. Seeing the big picture gives me the chance to make general structural suggestions or get a better sense of the overall tone.
- I get the draft a little in advance of the publish date, which makes it possible to address those kinds of upper-level issues when needed. There's time to sit down and talk through any points that are unclear.
- I'm working with [the same writer](#) every month, which has allowed me to develop a sense of what kinds of feedback will be useful. For instance, the introduction is often one of the last things written (which is a very common writing strategy and is generally the approach I would recommend), so it's usually a key topic of discussion.

Because my background is in teaching rather than commercial editing, the editing style I've learned focuses heavily on getting people to develop and express their own ideas. One of my tendencies as an editor is therefore to want the writer to do the rewriting, rather than swooping in with a red pen and doing it all myself. The earlier in the revision process, the stronger that tendency is. If I find an idea unclear, I'll usually ask questions about it that lead to a discussion about ways the writer can clarify; if the wording is unclear in a certain spot, I'll write out an alternate wording or two but leave it up to the writer to choose which to use; if I see a misspelling or punctuation error, I'll usually just take care of it. Again, how appropriate this hands-off style is depends on the situation. I like that it allows authors to retain a sense of intellectual ownership over their writing and to know the final product still feels like their voice. (Ending up with a document that doesn't sound like me is one of the things I want to avoid when getting my own writing edited.) On the other hand, it would probably be good for me to develop more comfort with just jumping in and taking care of everything when the situation calls for it.

What about you--do you collaborate on writing, either as an author or an editor? If you seek out editing for your writing, what kinds of responses do you find helpful? If you tend to be the one doing the editing, how do you approach the situation?