

What Does a Developmental Editor Do?



Photos courtesy of K. Fogle Photography

There are several types of editors you'll meet while traveling the yellow brick road toward publishing your story. Like the tin man, lion, and scarecrow, each editor will offer you a different type of help and support as you're discovering your own power as a writer. For now, forget about the wizards and flying monkeys at Random House and Knopf. Just focus on the journey, step by step.

A **Developmental Editor**, also known as a Structural or Substantive Editor is the first person—other than your best friend, partner, or trusted beta reader—who should read your story. Developmental editing is collaborative. The author and editor talk about big-picture, global ideas and also look at whether major parts of the manuscript (Beginning Hook, Middle Build, Ending Payoff) and individual scenes obey the Five Commandments of Storytelling and work well together. You can work with a Developmental Editor in two ways:

1) **Early on, before you have a full manuscript.** At this point, the editor will talk with you on a regular basis to bring the germ of your idea along as you write. As Story Grid Editor Sophie Thomas explains, "When you already know the story you want to tell, but don't have the 65,000 specific words on paper you hire a developmental editor."

You and the editor will come up with questions and assignments week by week, which is often a big help for writers who find themselves mired in the creative goo of too many ideas, none of which are fully formed. If you're not sure of the *obligatory scenes and conventions* of your genre (or not even sure of your genre), the editor will explain those key elements and suggest some great books to inspire you. If you're slogging through the Middle Build, the editor can help you break it down into manageable, small sprints so it doesn't seem like an unwinnable marathon.

2) **After you've completed a first or second draft.** A Developmental Editor can also take a completed draft and help you step back far enough to see flaws in structure, character arcs, controlling ideas, and all the must-haves of a good story. This can be called a Manuscript Review, an Editorial Assessment, or in the case of Story Grid editors, a Diagnostic. In this situation, the editor will examine the patient (aka the manuscript) to make sure the vital signs are solid: Does the work fulfill the expectations a fan of Horror or Love Stories or Westerns?

In all cases, the mark of great editors is that they'll be able to provide concrete explanations of problems, discuss solutions, and suggest the best steps for you to follow to move to the next level in storytelling. They won't write or rewrite the work for you—that's your challenge and privilege. But they'll honestly assess the work and let you know how close you are to a solid, publishable work.

Developmental Editors are collaborators and coaches who love great stories and want to help you move to the next level as a writer.

Other Types of Editors & What They Do

An **Acquisitions Editor** works for a publishing company, finding and buying manuscripts that they believe will appeal to readers and sell well. In today's highly competitive marketplace, a writer generally must know a publishing gatekeeper, have an existing author platform, or demonstrate powerful "social proof," such as celebrity status, in order to reach an acquisitions editor.

A **Line Editor**, sometimes known as a Style or Content Editor, works through your manuscript sentence by sentence, after the big-picture issues are taken care of. She or he makes sure that the voice and style are consistent and suggests ways of improving both for easier and livelier reading. The line editor is focused on clarity, cutting unnecessary repetition and awkwardness, and looking for any problems in timelines or characters that the developmental editor might have missed. All this is done while making sure to keep the writer's unique voice intact.

A **Copy Editor** is almost the final defense against typos, bad grammar, incorrect spelling, and missing punctuation. This is the picky stage when some final fact-checking and footnote editing is done in a nonfiction book and stray bits of repetition and awkward phrasing are cut out in a novel. Sometimes a line edit and a copy edit can be done at the same time, if the draft has no major problems in style or content that need to be tackled.

A **Proofreader** gets to do the final polishing and buffing of the manuscript to make sure no spelling, grammar, usage, or punctuation mistakes have slipped by the copy editor. A proofreader looks at the book as formatted for print or digital publication to make sure the copy editor's suggestions made it to the final version and the pages are all tidy and numbered correctly, with no stray typos, missing words, or wrong fonts. The pressure is on proofreaders to get the book out with the fewest possible mistakes to distract or annoy readers!

