The Business of Editing

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Effective and Efficient Ways to Think, Work, and Prosper

Richard H. Adin

Edited and with a Foreword by
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DEDICATIONS

Everyone has someone they love and who has shown great patience as projects like this one are brought to fruition. Thus, we make these dedications:

To my true better half, Carolyn, my wife, who shows her love for me every day. Also to our grandchildren, Azra and Ziva, who, young though they are, bring me true joy and remind me how wonderful life truly is. Perhaps someday they will read this book and think I was a literary giant. *—Richard H. Adin*

To my beloved husband "Wayne-the-Wonderful," who couldn't be more supportive of my work; and to my respected colleagues Rich Adin and Jack Lyon, who made my year by asking me to be involved with this book. *—Ruth E. Thaler-Carter*

To my wonderful and supportive clients and customers all over the world. *—Jack M. Lyon*

Contents

FOREWORD

Welcome to a definitive perspective on the nature of editing as a calling and as a business. The essays in this book originally appeared as posts on Richard H. Adin's *An American Editor* blog. They have been grouped and resequenced by topic rather than original date of publication, so you may notice a few inconsistencies in references to the author's years in the field. (Those who are interested in the original publication dates will find them on the blog.) The essays have been edited primarily for consistency and to make the new sequence smooth and logical for the reader, whether a blog subscriber or a new reader of this important voice in the profession of editing and the notion of editing as a business.

To continue the conversation by following An American Editor, go to:

http://americaneditor.wordpress.com/

This compilation will prove valuable to new and established editors who are committed to both editorial quality and business success.

–Ruth E. Thaler-Carter and Jack M. Lyon

PREFACE

At one time, editing was a respected profession. It attracted some of the brightest minds, even some who are still celebrated today, such as the famed Maxwell Perkins and Bennett Cerf. But today, editing is viewed differently.

With the rise of self-publishing, the need for professional editors is ever greater, but it is those who most need the services of a professional editor who are least likely to obtain those services. Instead, many authors believe that they can do as good a job as a professional editor themselves, or that crowd-editing is just as good, or that no editing is really needed. The excuses and reasons for not hiring a professional editor are as myriad as the authors.

When families ran the publishing houses, there was great pride in quality production. With the demise of the family-run publishing houses, the idea of editorial quality being the number-one task has declined. Even in the traditional spheres in which editors have worked, the value of editing is being undermined. As the accountants take over the decision-making process, editing, because it provides a hidden value, is among the first services to be cut. This worries me greatly, as it does many of my colleagues.

This sea change in the profession of editing is one of the topics addressed in this book, which is a compilation of essays from my blog, *An American Editor* (www.americaneditor.wordpress.com). The essays discuss the business aspects of freelancing, which, traditionally, is a weakness of freelancers. The essays cover a broad gamut of topics, but each topic is important to succeeding as a freelancer. The idea is to help you become both business-savvy and editing-savvy so you can succeed in this ever-changing world of editing.

What you have before you is the fruit of work done by Ruth E. Thaler-Carter and Jack Lyon. My belief was that the essays were already available on the blog, so there was no need for the book. Ruth and Jack thought otherwise and hounded me until I finally said, "If you want to do a book, go to it. It's your baby, you birth it." And so they did. Perhaps they are right and such a book is needed. Certainly, it is easier to find an appropriate essay. Both Jack and Ruth did a wonderful job sorting and editing my blog essays.

Of course, a book like this is of little value if you cannot find the material you are looking for easily. Consequently, the indexing job—a masterpiece of indexing—done by Sue Nedrow (www.nedrowindexing.com) is greatly appreciated and a wonderful resource. Finding high-quality indexers is difficult, but Sue is an example of such an indexer.

I hope you find this book valuable. If you have any suggestions for future topics that you would like to see in a book or on the *An American Editor* blog, be sure to drop a note to me in care of Waking Lion Press (editor@wakinglionpress.com).

—Richard H. Adin, An American Editor

Five Key Resources

Many essays in *The Business of Editing* mention three software programs that increase a freelancer's productivity and efficiency. For more information about these programs, see:

- **EditTools** (www.wordsnSync.com)
- **Editor's Toolkit Plus** (www.editorium.com)
- **PerfectIt** (www.intelligentediting.com)

Each of these programs is available for individual purchase at the listed websites. They are also available as a single package, called **Editor's Toolkit Ultimate**, at a significant discount. For information and ordering as a combined package, visit:

wordsnsync.com/editors-toolkit.php

A fourth, very valuable, resource is the Communication Central conference for freelancers, which is held every year in the fall. Information about upcoming conferences is available at:

www.communication-central.com

Another key resource is the consulting services that are available from Richard H. Adin, Jack M. Lyon, and Ruth E. Thaler-Carter. If you or your company are interested in private consultations with one or more of us, please e-mail consulting@communication-central.com.

Part I

Roles

"If *you* don't believe you are the greatest, who will?"

—Richard H. Adin, An American Editor

One of the many challenging aspects of being a freelance—or even in-house—editor is establishing your role in the profession, the industry, and the interaction with authors or clients. The essays in this section explore this important element of the business of editing, starting with a look at what it means to be an editor and progressing to how editors relate to both clients and projects.

1

What is Editing?

Have you ever wondered what editing really is? Or about what course of study is best for preparing for an editing career?

The practical answer to the latter is that it doesn't matter what you study because education is valuable and broadening; experience matters more. But when backed to the wall, my answer, unlike that of many of my colleagues, is that the best courses of study are philosophy and law.

The reason is because of what editing is. Editing is the art of language compromise, not the art of strict structure application. I suppose a little context would be helpful.

The matter arose in a discussion on LinkedIn in which I suggested philosophy as the best course of study and another member suggested linguistics. Linguistics is a wonderful field and certainly of great interest to editors, but it is a structural field. True, it wonders about word origins as well as how words are used, but its focus is the structure and lineage of language.

Philosophy and law, on the other hand, focus not on structure but on how to think. Both are "argumentative" fields—Does a god exist? If I don't see you, do you really exist? What is my place in society? What role should/does X play in social affairs?—that require thinking about all sides of a question. The difference, I think, between the philosophy-trained thinker and the linguistics-trained thinker is the difference between the average chess player and the chess champion. We all can learn to play chess and even to play it well; few of us, however, can master the advanced thinking techniques required to be a grandmaster.

(Before I stray too far afield, let me reiterate that all education is good and all education can prepare a person for the intellectual challenges of editing. What we are discussing is the hierarchy.)

Much of editing is structure-oriented, such as checking or correcting grammar and spelling, and coding manuscript. Structure is mechanical and can be self-taught or picked up in a couple of courses on, for example, grammar. I grant that it is the rare person who develops that same depth and breadth of knowledge about the structural issues via self-learning or a couple of entry-level courses as would be obtained from the rigors of a university major in linguistics, but how much is really needed for editing, especially as editing is the art of language compromise, not the art of strict structure application?

Over my 30 years as an editor, what I have most realized about some of my editor colleagues is that they are very capable of applying the "rules" of language. Where they are weak, and what I think often distinguishes the good, competent editor from the great editor, is that they are unable to "think" about what they are editing. They are unable to grasp a broader picture by, for example, putting themselves in the shoes of a variety of readers or by analyzing a text from multiple angles. To use another metaphor, most editors are like professional baseball players in that they are the better, more professional, more able players from the pool of would-be professional players, but are not the superstars who are an even more finite group. Baseball fans recall Willie Mays, for example, but how many of his teammates on the 1954 World Series team do we remember?

It is this "thinking" ability that I believe philosophy and law teach but that linguistics and other study disciplines do not. Linguistics will teach us how to ascertain the origins of all the variations of "god," but not to think about what "god" means in the context of the manuscript and as being conveyed to the variety of hoped-for readers of the published manuscript. Linguistics doesn't really teach the art of communication as much as it teaches the science of communication, but editing is (or should be, I think) more concerned with the art than the science.

I am not suggesting that the science of editing is unimportant. Knowing what punctuation to use where and when is very important in making sure that the author's meaning is correctly understood (using Lynne Truss's famous example, is it "eats shoots and leaves" or "eats, shoots,

and leaves"?). Knowing whether the right word is being used to convey the intended meaning is equally important, as is choosing among the homophones (does the author mean *to, too,* or *two*?). And good editors do these tasks well and correctly. For the most part, I suspect, this is the job for which most editors are hired. And this is the job for which most education prepares us.

Yet there can be more to editing than just those tasks. And, for many of us, when we suggest rewriting a sentence or a paragraph or reordering paragraphs or chapters, we are embarking on that additional path. As we gain experience, we begin to think differently about language and its use. I know that the editing I did 30 years ago is not as good as the editing I do today; those intervening years have taught me many things and exposed me to many new ways of looking at language. The more I read and learn, the better editor I become.

But even 30 years ago, I had the advantage of having been trained to think analytically. That is the legacy of a philosophy and law education: It is not *what* to think, but *how* to think. What I think about is of little importance to philosophy; the methodology of thinking about it is important.

Editing is a combination of structure and philosophy; it is not one without the other. The more accomplished one is as an editor, the more skilled one is at both prongs. Most of us begin our editing careers strong in one prong but not the other, and we build strength in both prongs as we gain experience. But if asked what is the best course of study for a wannabe editor, my answer is philosophy or law because it is learning how to think that is hardest to master.

Once we have mastered how to think about language, we learn that editing is more the art of language compromise and less the science of applying rules.

2

Finding a Professional Editor: The Needle in the Haystack Problem

On one of the ebook lists of which I am a member, an author asked: How does one find a *professional* editor? On the surface, this doesn't seem like too big a problem, but dig deeper and one realizes that this can be a gargantuan task, like finding a needle in a haystack. After all, there are hundreds of thousands of people calling themselves professional editors, but there is no governing body that issues editorial licenses after proof of minimal competency.

The issue really comes down to how one defines *professional* when speaking of editors—and how we present ourselves in that sense.

In other essays, I have suggested some of the things that separate the professional from the amateur editor. The problem is at least twofold: (a) An author can't easily verify that the editor really owns and knowledgeably uses these resources, and (b) Owning the right tools doesn't turn a person into a professional.

The definition of professional also turns on what the editor is expected to do. A professional copyeditor is not necessarily a professional developmental editor nor vice-versa. Different skills and resources are needed.

As you can see, the problem of defining *professional* and then finding a professional editor is just that—a problem! I am not sure there is an easy or sure way to solve it.

One suggestion that many editors make is to ask about books (or articles or journals or whatever is appropriate) that the person has worked on in the past. The idea is that someone who has already edited 200 fantasy novels would be a professional editor of fantasy novels. I'm

not sure that is sufficient. My own experience—I've been editing medical books for 26 years—tells me that all that it proves is that I have edited books, not how well I have edited them, and how well I have edited them is the true crux of the matter. I think past work is one criterion, but what do you do with the brilliant young editor who is just starting out? We all had to start at zero at some point in our careers.

There is something else to note about the past projects list. If a person copyedits only short journal articles, it is possible that their list would be thousands of titles long and, thus, impressive by sheer weight of numbers, especially compared to the person who edits primarily long tomes and, thus, can do fewer projects over the same timeframe. I know this because most of my work is on books that are 5,000 manuscript pages or longer, and it isn't possible to complete such long projects in the same length of time as a 150-manuscript-page project.

Another suggestion was years of experience doing the particular type of work. I admit that I like this criterion better than the past project criterion for a lot of reasons, but the primary one is that it would be difficult to sustain a livelihood as an editor over the course of many years if you didn't have at least minimal competency. This is even more impressive if the person has a couple of long-term clients. But, alas, this, too, is insufficient to separate the professional from the professional-wannabe.

A third suggestion that is often heard is to ask for references. But how telling are they? You have to trust the person giving the reference and have to assume that the person knows the difference between quality and nonquality work. A glowing reference may be because the work went smoothly and was finished on time and on budget, rather than because the work was of exceptional quality—even if the person giving the reference believes it was for superior quality work. There can be a chasm between belief and fact.

A fourth suggestion has been to ask for samples. This raises a host of problems and also doesn't really answer the question. Among the problems it raises are whether the editor has the right to share the work with you. I treat all of my clients' work as confidential and would not share it with anyone without written permission; after all, isn't that how you would want me to treat your work? But a more important problem is determining whose work you are really seeing. If you are

being shown or referred to the final version, you do not know what improvements to the manuscript were made by whom, even if you can compare the originally submitted manuscript with the final version. And viewing a copy of the manuscript that shows tracked changes doesn't really indicate a lot, either. If it is the first go-round, the editing will be rougher than the final go-round; if it is the final go-round, you will have missed the important intermediate steps that brought the manuscript to this point and not know whether it reached this plateau through the editor's efforts or despite the editor's efforts.

Of course, there is one final problem with this last suggestion: You really can't evaluate an editor's work without knowing what limitations were placed on the editor by the client or the client's approach to having someone edit their work. I can't tell you how many times in my 26 years I have had authors tell me my job is only to code the manuscript for typesetting, not to make corrections or suggestions.

I could go on for many more paragraphs and I would still be no closer to solving the original puzzle: How does one find a *professional* editor, that needle in the haystack? Perhaps together we can find a viable answer by addressing these questions:

1. How would you find a *professional* editor?
2. How would you define *professional*?
3. How would you evaluate an editor's work?

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This index was professionally prepared by Sue Nedrow (www.nedrowindexing.com), who is available for all your indexing needs.