

Why You -- Yes, You Who Aced English -- Need an Editor

Excerpted from the *Frugal Editor: Put Your Best Book Forward to Avoid Humiliation and Ensure Success*

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(www.HowToDoItFrugally.com)

"Publishers -- even traditional publishers -- do not want to edit anymore; they want to print a 99.9 percent finished product directly from the author. It's a cost-cutting thing. Many publishers can't afford to give your book that attention they once did." ~ Leora Krygier, twice-published literary author reviewed in the likes of Newsweek and featured on Connie Martinson Talks Books.

Just as I was finishing the *Frugal Editor: Put Your Best Book Forward to Avoid Humiliation and Ensure Success*, Poets & Writers published Peter Selfin's "Confessions of a Cranky Lit-Mag Editor." It was a kind of mini-rant on how authors influence editors negatively with minor (and not-so-minor) errors. He tells of one author who informs him in her cover letter that she has published three stories in the *New Yorker* and then "blunders into her essay with 'Growing up, there were two types of food in my family.'" He says it "reads like very sloppy editing" and goes on to reject the piece. (By the way, one of my readers with a master's degree could not identify the error here. If you can't, you will be able to by the time you've finished the section in the *Frugal Editor* where I talk about dangling participles. If you can't wait, use the index to find *dangling participles* to research this serious grammatical error now.)

The lesson here for all of us is that attention to detail and craft counts, and that even experienced writers can flub an opportunity if they don't pay attention to that last great step toward publishing, a good edit. Any author who had recently refreshed her understanding of participles by reading the *Frugal Editor* would not have dangled hers. At least, not that conspicuously.

Perfection is not possible. Even Editor Selfin admits he overlooks a mistake or two if the writer's voice captures his interest. With better editing we can guard against humiliation and in the process increase our chances for publication.

Leading a horse to water and other all-wet ideas about editing

In the *Frugal Book Promoter* I talk about branding. In that book, I felt a need to convince authors that *sales*, *marketing* and *promotion* are not dirty words, that we are participating in these disciplines every day when we brush our teeth and choose the proper clothing for whatever occasions loom on that day's calendar.

I don't need to convince most authors to be cautious about errors. There are so many writers who are so uptight about a typo creeping into their copy that their fear contributes to nightmares or at least to writer's block. Thus, the *Frugal Editor: Put Your Best Book Forward to Avoid Humiliation and Ensure Success* is an easy sell.

Where my job becomes difficult is in convincing writers that they need an editor--a real editor, an editor with credentials--before they begin to submit. Because I am also *Frugal*, I recognize that my tendency to avoid spending money for something that will probably be done by someone else anyway may well exist in other writers.

I know that many writers will nod their heads and then attempt the publishing process without an editor, even though they may have had the best intentions when they were agreeing with me.

I am also aware (because I hang out with writers of all kinds) that authors fear the sharp pencil point of an editor. These are usually new writers who are convinced that an editor will make their work into something other than what it is or will change it beyond recognition. I want to assure these writers that a good editor won't do that. A good editor will help a writer find her voice, remain true to it and still move the manuscript from a rough rock to a polished gemstone.

I agree that it is no fun to encounter unexpected flaws in one's book. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have written a book on editing. However, mistakes in a writer's query letters, cover letters and book proposals can be more deadly than those in a manuscript. It is in these documents that editing failures can doom your entire book to failure. You and the quality of your book idea will be judged on these first contacts with agents, publishers, editors, and producers as surely as you would be judged at a board meeting if you left rats' nests in your hair that morning.

In the *Frugal Editor* I approach the editing process of every document as if it were a manuscript. It is easier to edit the much shorter introductions (queries, cover letters and proposals) that are being sent to the people who have the power to accept or reject your work, but the processes used are approximately the same. It is only a matter of degree between a full manuscript and your one-page query letter. So adapt the guidelines I give you accordingly. You, and only you, know where your strengths and weaknesses lie. You will know where to abbreviate or eliminate steps for these shorties, and for more intricate efforts (say an academic thesis) you may want to expand on the processes I suggest.

You probably already know that gremlins--very clever guys bent on your destruction--are at work during the entire publishing process. You fight them with a vengeance, with every ounce of writing craft and publishing knowledge that exists in your body. If, however, a typo or grammar error slips through the careful net you cast for them, please don't lose any sleep. It will happen to every writer somewhere along his or her career path. Instead, be patient with yourself. And while you're at it, if you see an error in

someone else's work, give the writer (and the publisher!) the benefit of the doubt. It's all about Karma. We're all fighting the same gremlins here.

Many mistakenly use the word *editing* synonymously with finding typos. I worry that the *Frugal Editor* may contribute to that notion because it does not address essential elements of the writing craft like character development, setting or structure. Those are topics of their own. Reworking these aspects of writing really constitutes revision, not editing. Many complete books cover each of them thoroughly. For me to attempt to stipulate everything a polished manuscript needs would be impossible in one book. To cover revision topics briefly and then abandon the writer to struggle with incomplete understanding would not be in her or his best interest. Therefore, I merely mention that your final draft should take these writing fundamentals into consideration because I can't assume that all authors will have undertaken revision before they move into editing. So, please, before you begin your editing process, review the larger elements of your craft. Experienced writers can approach this with the expectation that they may need only to fine-tune one or two elements of their books, but even minor learning curves are journeys worth taking. Suggested reading for things like the niceties of dialogue (*Writing Dialogue* by Tom Chiarella), are included in the appendixes.

I include some grammar guidelines. You can tell these are not meant to be complete. I chose them because they are mistakes that many experienced writers (and editors) miss. I threw in a few of the ones that most writers understand but inadvertently make because when a writer does let them creep into her work, they are more noxious to my editing sensibility than the average error. I expect that when I mention some you already know, it will remind you not to backslide. It may even prompt you to check your references for more advanced information on those subjects.

I want you to learn from the *Frugal Editor* just as I learned from writing it, but I'd also like you to enjoy the editing challenge, the process itself. Pretend the task before you is a puzzle. It's work. It's detail-oriented work. But it can be fun. When you're done, please still hire an editor, especially if you are self- or subsidy-publishing. *The Frugal Editor* will tell you how to find a great editor, one that will work for the betterment of your book.

Carolyn Howard-Johnson is an instructor for UCLA Extension's world-renowned Writers' Program and was awarded Woman of the Year in Arts and Entertainment by members of the California Legislature. *The Frugal Editor* is second in the HowToDoltFrugally series (www.HowToDoltFrugally.com) after *The Frugal Book Promoter: How to Do What Your Publisher Won't*, USA Book News' Best Professional Book and winner of the Irwin Award. Learn more at www.HowToDoltFrugally.com