

PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

Years copyediting: 18

Career: Cathleen Small started her editing career as an editorial assistant for a technical publisher. She worked in house for two years before launching her freelance editing business in 2001. She now edits for a number of different clients, including publishers, the state government, and independent authors. She also teaches editing for UC Berkeley Extension.

Specialties: Nonfiction publications

Bugbear: Text-speak in formal publications!

Reading for pleasure: Mysteries, character-driven fiction novels with unique, well-defined protagonists

Copy editor or copyeditor?: Depends whether I'm pairing it in a sentence with development editor or line editor!



GETTING STARTED

Q When did you know you wanted to be an editor?

A When I was a little girl reading the newspaper and picking out errors, my mom used to tell me I should be an editor. When it came time to choose a college major, I could hear her voice in my head, and I decided to follow her advice.

Q Where did you receive your copyediting training?

A I trained on the job at the first tech publisher I worked for.

Q How did you land your first copyediting job?

A I spammed a local tech publisher with my resume five times. They kept ignoring me, so I finally worked with a temp agency who placed with them. I got placed as an administrative assistant but told them I wanted to work my way up into editing. Within about two months, they had promoted me to editorial assistant and hired me full time.

IN-HOUSE AND FREELANCE COPYEDITING

Q What are the pros and cons of working in-house?

A Pros: steady paycheck, benefits.

Cons: You have to wear pants to work. (Kidding. Sort of. I really like working from home so that I can wear whatever I want!)

Q What advice would you give a budding copy editor who is keen to find an in-house position?

A Try every avenue to get in! Those jobs are hard to come by, and you never know what will get you in.

Q What steps did you take to grow your freelance business? What were some of the challenges you faced along the way?

A I started out with just one terrific client that gave me so much work I didn't bother looking for other clients. That blew up in my face when the publisher abruptly closed its doors, and I had to start from scratch. Looking for new clients took a while, but I finally built up a good client base. I now advise all new editors I talk to not to make the same mistake I did!

Q What tips can you give new freelance copy editors for building their client base?

A Network, network, network. And join some professional organizations. My best clients have come from both of those avenues.

Q What are some of the costs that must be taken into account when setting up a freelance business?

A Self-employment taxes are a killer if you're not expecting them! Also, getting health insurance can be very tricky and costly.

WORKING PRACTICES AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Q Can you describe your working method?

A I break a manuscript down into manageable chunks and set deadlines that I stick to without fail. I have found that if I try to edit for more than about five hours in a day, the quality of my work slips because my brain is too taxed. The same is true if I try to edit late at night, because I am not a night person. So I set an expectation for what I can finish editing in about five hours, and then I get to work.

Q What style guides, manuals, or other editing books are on your virtual and literal bookshelf?

A *The Copy-editor's Handbook* (A Einsohn), *Developmental Editing – A Handbook For Freelancers, Authors, and Publishers* (S Norton), *Microsoft Manual for Technical Publications* (I think that's the name of it!), and a proprietary style guide developed

by the state agency I work for.

Q How do you continue to develop professionally?

A I keep working in as many different areas as interest me. I've been doing more fiction editing, which is a fun challenge, although nonfiction is still my first love. The last training I went to was an in-house editing conference for the state agency I work for. It was useful for establishing consistency between my work and that of the other editors they contract to.

Q Besides Microsoft Word, what other software programs or technical skills are vital for new copy editors to learn?

A Acrobat. I find more and more clients want editing markups done on PDF these days.

Q What's your most embarrassing, funny, or horrifying copyediting story?

A I guess the funniest moment I remember was editing a dreadfully bad piece of self-published fiction. It was supposedly a mystery—not a very good one—with a love story woven in. There was an erotic scene where a main female character described entering the living room and seeing the male protagonist “lying naked, stretched out in front of the fire, his Chip and Dale physique glistening.” I had visions of big greasy chipmunks in sensual poses!

Q In your opinion, what are the challenges facing freelance copy editors today?

A Freelancers who are willing to work for very low rates, undercutting other editors. Then clients believe that all editors should work at those low rates—and they often don't realize that a more expensive editor can very often produce a much better end product. Freelancers who work for very low rates can really devalue the work of editors who have worked for years to build up a respectable business.

Q In your experience, what are the most common mistakes students make?

A The most common mistakes I see are with commas. There are so many little comma rules, some of which are flexible, that I see a lot of students struggle with commas.

Q What skills do new copy editors need that perhaps aren't taught on a copyediting course?

A There are some skills that I don't think can be taught—they just come with experience. Practice makes an editor more able to quickly pick out and fix errors, and practice makes an editor more able to accurately quote a fair rate that doesn't undercut the value of their work. We try to teach these skills in classes, but really, a lot of it is just practice!

Q What's the best piece of advice you have received that helped you become a good editor?

A That the most important rule of editing is to never do anything that will stop the reader.

THE FINAL WORD

Q What are your top three tips for copy editors who are just starting their

careers?

- A:
- i. Don't work for low pay just because you're new to the field. It's hard to bump your rates up later if you start low. A better approach, if you're really determined to work for low pay while building up your resume, is to quote clients a full rate and then offer a discount.
 - ii. Have faith in your ability! I see so many students who finish the courses and still worry that they aren't ready to take on real projects. Nine times out of ten, they are ready—they just lack confidence in their ability.
 - iii. Follow your gut feeling about projects. It's tempting to take anything that's offered when you're just starting, but if you get a bad feeling about a project, just move along. A bad project can suck up way too much of your time, leaving you less time for other, better projects.