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Embark Q&A

**Interviews with
Professional Copyeditors**

PROFESSIONAL PROFILE: Jennifer Maybin

Years copyediting: 30

Biography: I started as a proofreader many years ago and worked up to a position copyediting nursing reference books. From there, I branched out into medical editing and writing. I currently teach copyediting at UC San Diego Extension and also copyedit for publishers and websites.

Copyediting specialties: I specialize in nonfiction, medicine, nursing, drug therapy, health care reform, and business.

Professional links: www.editorinthewoods.com

Professional bugbear: Copyeditors who feel that absolute adherence to style manuals is the way to copyedit. (Copyediting is an art and a science. It is important to understand when and how to break the “rules” and to accept changing language norms. Railing against a change to the singular “they” does not preserve the integrity of the English language! Language evolves.)

Reading for pleasure: I love mysteries, especially Scottish mysteries. Currently I am on a reading roll with Peter May. Other favorite authors are V. S. Naipaul, Jamaica Kincaid, Anne Tyler, Charles Dickens, Chinua Achebe, Anita Shreve, Jhumpa Lahiri, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, Somerset Maugham, Thomas Hardy . . . I could go on and on. Another love is linguistics. I’m currently reading *Word by Word* by Kori Stamper.

Copy editor or copyeditor?: I prefer copyeditor as one word; however, I go with the flow of the style sheet I am given.



QUESTIONS

You provide a range of editorial services. What proportion of your work overall is copyediting?

The proportion of my work that is copyediting varies from year to year, depending on what I want to focus on. Sometimes medical writing takes up 75% of my time, with copyediting taking a backseat at 25%. But currently, I am not writing (except for myself) and am

spending 90% of my time copyediting, with 10% as a developmental editor. Once a copyeditor, however, always a copyeditor.

What do you enjoy about copyediting and why?

I prefer projects that need heavy copyediting because they are more challenging. I am less than enthused about documents that have 100+ references.

Despite being an English major and having a master's degree in English, I had much to learn to become a good copyeditor, and I still enjoy learning from teaching new copyeditors and from colleagues. Copyediting is fulfilling because I get to work with writers to polish their work.

What's your worst copyediting moment?

In keeping with my dislike of documents with 100+ references, I once missed a text callout for a reference in a medical document. Of course, it was one of the author's previously published works. I was fired on the spot by my client.

You are certified as an Editor in the Life Sciences. Why did you choose to specialize in science and health editing?

Quite truthfully, I fell into medical/science/health editing. My neighbor, who knew I was an editor, worked for a pharmaceutical company and asked me to proofread their work. I became interested in the topics; I also became a hypochondriac! My family and friends think I am a doctor and constantly ask my advice. I tell them I only play a doctor on paper. Health topics aimed at informing consumers are of interest to me because many healthcare providers have difficulty speaking non-medicalesse to patients.

How long does it take to get the certification, and what's involved?

The certification process takes years. The first requirement is that you have worked as an editor in the life sciences for several years. You must also provide references from clients or employers. I did not embark on the certification process until I had about 10 years of medical editing experience under my belt. I then studied the *AMA Style Manual*, the Council of Science Editors' *Scientific Style and Substance*, and the *Chicago Manual of Style* from cover to cover. A candidate must also know the rules that apply to marketing medical materials and to ethical issues in journal publishing. The certification requires passing a four-hour proctored exam. Although it is multiple choice, many of the questions are worded to make candidates choose the "best" edited version of a sentence. Each edited version is similar, so it's necessary to know grammar, syntax, and how order of clauses affects the meaning of a sentence. Other questions test knowledge of obscure terminology, abbreviations, and use of numbers; ethics; and FDA policies, to name a few.

What are some of the principles and practices of scientific editing that are taught in the certification program?

There is no single educational program that prepares a candidate for the certification exam. The candidate must know the styles of medical and scientific editing. Courses taught by the American Medical Writers Association or the Council of Science Editors are helpful. These are offered as self-study courses, webinars, and conference presentations.

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

AMA Manual of Style, CSE Scientific Style and Format, Chicago Manual of Style, medical dictionaries (such as Stedman's or Dorland's), and Merriam-Webster are all absolutely necessary. I use virtual versions so that I can access them wherever I am editing. My bookshelf also contains Carol Fisher Saller's *The Subversive Copy Editor*, Bill Walsh's *The Elephants of Style* and *Lapsing Into a Comma*, Edie Schwager's *Medical Usage and Abusage*, Tom Lang's *How to Report Statistics in Medicine*, and Bryan Garner's *The Chicago Guide to Grammar, Usage, and Punctuation*, among many, many others. I do not refer to Strunk & White.

What software programs do you regularly use to provide the editing services your clients?

I use a Mac but have a PC side of my Mac (which I created with VMWare). I use Microsoft Word, Adobe Pro, PerfectIt (on the PC side), InDesign, Evernote, PowerPoint, ShareFile, Google Docs, Dropbox, and Editor's Toolbox (again on the PC side). I have a WordPress website, and I use LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter as marketing tools.

What was the last professional development event you attended and how was it useful?

I took a diagramming sentences course at ACES, and it was fabulous. Diagramming sentences can help you identify misplaced/dangling modifiers, parallelism problems, and more. Plus it allows you to use the analytical side of your brain!

As a tutor of copyediting, what mistakes do you most often see students make?

I find that students with degrees in English, former English teachers, and people who say they can spot typos in the newspaper rarely understand what copyeditors actually do. This is not to say that they can't learn. The biggest mistakes students make include believing that a sentence cannot end with a preposition or start with a conjunction, and virtually anything having to do with restrictive/nonrestrictive clauses. Punctuation with quotation marks is also problematic, as is failure to look up words in the dictionary.

Can you tell if a student is going to make a great copyeditor? If so, how?

The students who will make great copyeditors ask a lot of questions in class so they can understand underlying grammar points. They do not resist creating style sheets, they follow directions, and they are resourceful--they look up answers to their own questions

What skills do new copyeditors need that aren't taught on copyediting courses?

Students need to know software, especially Word and PDFs. And if they don't know how to create a PDF, for example, they need to be resourceful enough to google it.

In the list of services you provide on your website you also include writing. What kind of writing do you do?

I have written medical-marketing copy and grant proposals for numerous medical education companies. I also write training materials for pharmaceutical companies and medical-education programs. I started out as a journalist, but that was many, many years ago, and I focused on feature articles as opposed to hard news. I have attempted writing short stories, but I need a developmental editor to help me with those!

Do you consider writing an essential service for an editor to provide? If so, why?

I do not consider writing to be an essential service for an editor to provide, although I would argue that all copyeditors are writers. Some clients are leery of hiring a writer who copyedits or a copyeditor who writes; they regard the two skills as mutually exclusive.

In your opinion, what are the challenges facing freelance copyeditors today?

Surviving feast or famine is the greatest difficulty. Specializing can help with this problem. Becoming known in a specialized area is even better. For instance, specialize in ophthalmology; few editors are experts in this area, so the work flows to them. Another difficulty may be isolation. I am an introvert, so working alone does not bother me, although I also maintain a robust virtual network of editing friends and colleagues. Keeping your finances and tax records in order is also difficult for many who freelance. I don't believe that finding work is difficult once you are established. Word of mouth is the greatest marketing tool.

AND FINALLY

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

1. **Develop and maintain a network** of copyeditor colleagues so that you have others to ask questions of and commiserate with.
2. **Don't think you know it all.** If you are at all unsure, look it up. And keep on top of changing language rules.
3. **Keep up with technology.** Electronic editing requires having the ability to edit in Word, on PDFs, online, in apps, and for devices such as smartphones and tablets. Knowing tech tools can help streamline your work.