

EMBARK EDITORIAL AGENCY

Your copyediting
career starts here.

**The Embark Q&A: Interviews with
Professional Copyeditors**

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**Number of years professional
copyediting:** 6

Professional highlights: Production editor
(PE) at Wiley & Sons 2009-2012; PE at
HarperCollins 2012-2014; full-time
freelance 2014-present

Specialisms: Primarily fiction, some
nonfiction and cookbooks

Bugbear: Repetitive phrasing or repeated
vocabulary

Reading for pleasure: Literary fiction and sci-fi

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1. GETTING STARTED

Where did you receive your copyediting training?

I learned copyediting mostly by watching others. My first publishing job was as a production assistant at Wiley & Sons, a trade nonfiction company. I helped production editors there review copyeditors' and proofreaders' work, which gave me a great overview of how different editors did their jobs. Soon after, I took copyediting and proofreading courses at NYU's School of Continuing and Professional Studies, which gave me a structured foundation to put what I'd seen into practice.

How did you land your first paid copyediting job?

When I first started working in publishing, I joined a networking group in New York called Young to Publishing. Through that group, I met people in managing editorial

departments at other houses, including one who worked for Penguin. She sent me their copyediting test, the department was happy with my performance, and I landed my first freelance gig!

What were the career stepping stones to becoming a freelance copyeditor?

I started taking on freelance projects while I was still working in-house at a publisher, with the aim of building up a clientele before going full-time freelance. For two or three years, I was taking freelance projects once or twice a month, working in the evenings or on weekends. By the time I was ready to set out on my own, I had a number of clients who would seek me out regularly, as well as my former coworkers, providing a stable inflow of work.

2. IN-HOUSE COPYEDITING

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

I definitely benefited from working in-house *before* going freelance. First of all, many of my former coworkers have become my clients; they know my work ethic and that I'm familiar with what needs to be done for particular types of projects. Other pros include, of course, a stable income and benefits, which are hugely important on the practical side. And I think the best intangible was having a built-in network of colleagues and, often, friends - an invaluable resource.

But working in-house also means having less autonomy. You don't get to set your own schedule or choose your own projects. Geography plays a huge part as well - you may have to face a gruelling commute that robs you of precious free time, or need to relocate to reach the shrinking pool of companies that offer in-house positions.

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

My experience comes from the book-publishing world, where there aren't too many houses that still use full-time in-house copyeditors. But working as a production editor in the managing editorial department (called the production department at some houses) is a great way to exercise copyediting skills, along with proofreading and project management. Starting out as an assistant in one of these departments, you can learn several different aspects of the book-publishing world through observation and experience. Plus, you'll be working with the people who hire freelancers, who will definitely be handy to know later! Working in-house in general will provide you with great resources: your colleagues, with whom you can share experience, debate ambiguous points, and lean on for expertise.

Why did you decide to leave a salaried position to become freelance?

I left my salaried job when my husband and I moved back to our home state of California. Though I initially considered looking for another salaried position, the network I had built while back in New York actually made it feasible for me to translate freelancing into my full-time job.

3. FREELANCING***What do you enjoy most about freelancing?***

The “free” part! I love being able to work wherever I like and turn down projects I don't think I'll enjoy. There's no office dress code or meetings to attend. Not having to commute is another big bonus.

What's the most challenging thing about freelancing and why?

For me, the greatest challenge lies in knowing my own limits and letting myself say no when I need to. The reality of freelance work is that the future is uncertain; work offers seem to come in waves, and not necessarily when you need them to. It's tempting to try to take on as much as possible just to avoid the possibility of not having work sometime in the future—but that's a fast way to burn yourself out. And if you take on too much and miss a deadline, that certainly won't help your long-term prospects, as you may have just lost yourself a repeat customer. I've had to figure out through trial and error (and a few all-nighters) how much I can reasonably take on while keeping myself sane and happy.

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

Technology and space are the biggest concerns for getting started. A reliable computer that you're comfortable working on is a must, of course, as is high-speed internet. A printer/scanner could be needed too, if you do any work on paper; and then there's software such as Office, and perhaps Adobe or an invoice management program as well. Subscriptions to references like the Chicago Manual of Style and Merriam-Webster Online will cost a small fee each year, and if you subscribe to a periodical like the *New York Times*, that's a monthly charge that can add up.

In terms of workspace, freelancers have the freedom to work where they choose, but that can also incur costs - if you find you need a desk and a comfortable desk chair in order to work effectively, those items will be up to you to cover (thank God for Craigslist). Or, like me, you may find yourself shelling out for coffee every day in order to give yourself a change of scenery and society by working from your local cafe.

A more hidden cost is simply the unbillable time you must invest to make your business run. There are invoices to be drawn up, emails to respond to, receipts to log for tax time, trips to the store or post office, etc., which will all draw from the time and energy you'd like to be spending on paid projects (or your personal life).

4. WORKING PRACTICES AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Can you describe your working method? Do you have set way of working on manuscripts?

I always do two passes of a copyediting project: an intensive, thorough first pass, which includes building the style sheet, doing any fact-checking, and line editing; and a second pass to ensure consistency and continuity, as well as catch any stragglers I missed the first time through.

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

My stalwarts are the good old Chicago Manual and Merriam-Webster's Collegiate; I use both digitally. Amy Einsohn's *Copyeditor's Handbook* is still a great resource, and I've also got a copy of *Recipes into Type* on my shelf for my occasional cookbook projects, though it's quite dated by this point. I also maintain a *New York Times* digital subscription, which is great for fact-checking anything historical.

Besides knowing how to edit Microsoft Word manuscripts, what tech skills should new copyeditors make an effort to learn?

In the book world, knowing how to use style macros and code text in Word is a valuable skill - many houses have their own proprietary coding systems, but if you make the effort to learn them you'll be a great resource to project managers and will find yourself in demand.

Adobe markup tools are also quite useful if you are also exploring proofreading or working at all with material that has already been typeset, especially if you're based geographically far from your client.

Do you network with other editors? If so, how and why?

I endeavor to stay in contact with other editors I've worked with over the years. Since I don't have the traditional pool of coworkers that I can yell a question at over my shoulder, chatting with other freelancers as well as my clients keeps me up to date on new developments in the field and keeps my mind open. I'm not part of a formal professional group, so for me networking mostly consists of dropping a line every so often to check in informally.

In your opinion, how is the copyediting profession changing? What might be the challenges facing freelance copyeditors in the future?

There are huge (and often overdue) changes going on in the world of book publishing right now, and that is certainly trickling down to copyeditors in this industry. First, there's been the shift from in-house copyeditors to freelance and from paper to digital, which has opened up opportunities for freelancers in this space. It's still quite difficult to get a foot in the door with book publishers, however, if you don't have previous experience or know someone there.

I think digital culture is presenting an interesting new challenge for copyeditors, in that language can change so much more quickly online than it can in print. Copyeditors (and publishers) need to stay apprised of new slang, usage, and technical terminology when Merriam-Webster and style manuals can't keep up.

5. THE FINAL WORD

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

1. BE FLEXIBLE. Don't anchor yourself to one type of project, one style guide, or one client. When you get a chance to try something new, take it! Having multifaceted experience makes you valuable to clients, gives you more options to choose from, and grants you more security in the long run.

2. KEEP COMMUNICATION OPEN. Especially if you work by yourself, it's important to stay in conversation with other copyeditors as well as with your clients. Other copyeditors can not only help you get perspective on thorny technical problems that might have you going in circles but they also provide the all-important sense that someone else out there knows what your career is like. And I always advocate checking in with clients to gauge their preferences, so you can best provide them with what they're looking for in an edit. Maintaining a good relationship with editors and other hirers also helps them remember you the next time they have a project to assign.

3. PLAN AHEAD. The freedom you get as a freelancer comes with a great deal of responsibility. Organization is key. You'll have to carefully manage not only your workload and your time but also your finances, making sure you have enough set aside to get you through potential future doldrums (and don't forget about those quarterly estimated tax payments!). The best thing you can do for yourself is to develop healthy organizational habits for both your money and your time—leaving room to reward yourself when you meet your goals.