

PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

Name: Maggie Trapp

Number of years professional copyediting: 10+

Freelance or employee: Both

Specialisms: Travel and law

Professional bugbear: Errant apostrophes



1. EMBARKING ON A CAREER

Q: How did you embark on a career in copyediting?

A: By chance, really. I was an English major as an undergrad, so I was always interested in writing and reading. After finishing my BA, I spent a year teaching American literature in Poland. When I got back to the States, I knew I wanted to go to grad school, but in the meantime I needed to work. My year abroad and my English degree made me a good fit for a job opening on my campus. The *Berkeley Guides*, a budget travel guide series aimed at college students, was just setting up shop, and I was hired to co-edit the Eastern Europe guide as well as to copyedit many of the other guides. I found I really loved the work. It was a great job, and after I started grad school in English the next year I kept on copyediting for the *Berkeley Guides* as well as other publications. I found that freelance editing dovetailed nicely with my academic research and my graduate teaching.

Q: How did your career develop?

A: While in grad school at Berkeley, I made a lot of job connections in the Bay Area. Many of my more far-sighted Berkeley friends opted not for grad school like me; instead, they were joining all kinds of dot-com startups, which were a new thing then. Consequently, I had a lot of connections with new travel and arts startups, and I was able to develop a full roster of clients through connections and word of mouth.

Q: What was the most important thing you learned as a new copyeditor?

A: It came as something of a shock to me that the *Chicago Manual of Style* changes over time. I was proud of how much of it I had internalized early on, but when new

editions came out I realized I'd have to realign my cocky sense of knowing it all. It's nice to be humbled, and CMS can certainly do that.

Q: What was your most difficult editing job and why?

A: Proofreading at the law firm started to take its toll. I can read dense, jargon-filled paragraphs for hours (I'm trained as an academic, after all!), but reading legalese was more like reading a foreign language for me. It was a tough slog.

Q: What do you still find challenging about copyediting?

A: It's easy for me to sit for hours poring over something. I have to remind myself to get up, to get a new perspective. Getting up and taking a break always improves my work, but for some reason I can't get myself to do this easily.

2. FREELANCING

Q: How long have you been a freelance copyeditor and why did you decide to go freelance?

A: I was a freelance copyeditor in the Bay Area for about eight years, and then I worked for two years as a full-time legal proofreader at a law firm in San Francisco. Now I teach copyediting and writing.

Q: What kinds of tools do you use for marketing your freelance services?

A: When I was freelancing the most, it was all word of mouth and client referrals. Those were heady, crazy, pre-dot-com-bust days in San Francisco, and there was almost more work to be done than editors to do it.

Q: Have you ever freelanced for a self-published author? If so, what are the pitfalls of working with such clients that copyeditors should be aware of?

A: I haven't worked in this setting, but I've talked with others who have. I hear that without formal guidelines or clear expectations, it's easy to become a development editor, managing editor, and copy editor all at the same time. Unless you establish clear job parameters from the start, I hear that these kinds of jobs can easily become all consuming.

Q: What are the keys to a successful freelance copyediting career?

A: Lots of contacts and referrals—in a word, networking. And, be persnickety without shame. You really need to love details, minutiae, and the seemingly trivial. Nothing is too small for checking or verifying!

Q: What professional associations are you a member of and why?

A: The Northwest Independent Editors Guild, because I live in Seattle now and like to keep up with what's new here, and the American Copy Editors Society because I like to go to the annual conference.

3. WORKING PRACTICES

Q: *What reference resources do you find most useful to your work?*

A: I'm still very much a *Chicago Manual of Style* and *Merriam-Webster* fan. I use these two books all the time, even in my own writing. I actually enjoy thumbing through *M-W* rather than looking things up online. When I have the physical book in front of me, I can always get happily swept up in finding new words or word variations.

Q: *Describe your working method – do you have a set way of working on manuscripts?*

A: I read a manuscript once quickly, only making a few corrections or notes, and then I read it through very slowly and painstakingly once or twice more, making my corrections. I try to reserve enough time then to be able to put it aside for a day or two. This last part is so important for me. No matter how careful I feel I've been, if I can see a piece after not seeing it for many hours, even days, I inevitably find things I hadn't noticed before.

Q: *How do you keep up with the latest usage trends?*

A: I read lots of websites and blogs on writing and grammar, and I rely on my network of wordy, nerdy friends on Facebook to steer me toward even more articles.

Q: *What is your advice for editing muddled and poorly expressed concepts while preserving the author's intent and voice in the finished piece?*

A: This is something I encounter more often as a teacher of writing than as an editor, and I've developed a way to help students that I think translates to my work as an editor. I try to repeat back to the writer what I think she means ("I read you saying here that ..., is that what you meant to say?"). I include these kinds of questions in queries to authors when I'm editing particularly strained prose. This gives the writer a chance to see how what she's trying to say is or isn't coming through, and hopefully we can then go from there.

Q: *As a writer of fiction, how do you feel about being edited? Do you work with one particular copyeditor? What should copyeditors consider when working with fiction writers?*

A: I love being edited! I really enjoy seeing things in my writing that I hadn't seen before, including mistakes and infelicities. The copyeditor who most recently edited a story of mine was great. Her queries were very measured and confident in tone, and she suggested some really good changes.

I prefer a steady, even assertive voice in an editor rather than someone who ends every query with "OK?" or "Sound good?" I trust that the editor knows what needs to be done, and I appreciated this copyeditor's capabilities and confidence. I did disagree with her on one point, and I told her as much in a response to her query. It was nice to have this kind of informed, respectful exchange.

So, editors of fiction, I'd say: Don't be overly bashful! Make the changes you think are right. Have the courage of your convictions. (But then of course you need to take some classes or peruse *CMS* and develop your convictions first!) I realize it's slightly problematic when you're editing fiction, though, because part (or most) of the appeal of fiction is the imaginative, which can't easily be corralled into "correct" forms. I once wrote a story where I had a narrator muse with longing about how so many birds mate for life. An editor quipped, "Actually, that's a myth. Most birds don't mate for life." But, my narrator wasn't level headed or rational. I wanted to intentionally make her seem sort of dreamy and misguided. It occurred to me that, rather than be irritated that an editor wanted to correct this one fact in the story, I should see this as indicative of my character not having been developed clearly enough. So, even if editing fiction can be tricky, it will always benefit the writer to be shown possible gaps or unintended readings.

4. THE FINAL WORD

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

A:

1. Volunteer, intern, or do pro bono work for a bit to make some connections and get a feel for the work.
2. Establish clear expectations before you take a job.
3. Go to a conference or take a class and meet other likeminded people.