PROOFREADING VS COPY-EDITING

Factsheet

sfep
society for editors and proofreaders

What kind of editorial work do you need? A text (printed matter or online content) may go through several rounds of preparation before it's presented to the world. If that work's done well, all the steps that go into making a text fit for publication become 'hidden' and readers just see the end result. So, you may not be sure what type of editorial work to ask for. You just want your text 'sorted', right?

This factsheet is a quick checklist of the core differences between traditional proofreading (what most clients ask for) and copy-editing.

> ❝ *Copy-editing and proofreading are both editing, which is wrestling with words; but proofreading is like wrestling in a broom cupboard.*❞
>
> GERARD M-F HILL

Does it actually matter what you call it? Perhaps not, and in the real world editorial work rarely falls neatly into one category or the other. But proofreaders and copy-editors usually undergo different training, have different skills and work on different stages of the text's journey. Copy-editing usually takes longer than proofreading and costs more. It therefore pays to find the right person for the tasks you need doing.

You can use this checklist as a starting point for negotiating a good brief for the job.

Proofreading is...

✅	❌
working on edited text in final layout	working on raw or draft text
essential errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation	changing your mind on spelling preferences
minor changes for sense	rephrasing to flow or sound better
all page elements consistent, placed correctly and style decisions applied	reordering or changing structure or layout
tables and illustrations consecutively numbered and placed correctly	adding in new text or illustrations
references and citations correctly formatted	accuracy of references and citations
index formatted consistently	checking index page numbers

Copy-editing is...

✅	❌
working on raw or draft text	working on text in final layout
spelling, punctuation and grammar errors	substantial rewriting
changes for flow, tone and intended readership	development of or planning the content
applying your house style or ensuring consistency in spellings, capital letters, date format, numbers, units …	preparing a comprehensive style guide for you or your organisation
marking up the structure for the designer (headings, boxed text, quotes, tables, etc.)	designing the layout or doing the typesetting
listing items that need permission to use	getting permissions (e.g. for quoted extracts)
formatting references and citations into chosen style	checking accuracy of references and citations
numbering tables, figures and illustrations; checking content against text and captions	producing artwork or graphics for you
querying obvious factual inaccuracy	research or fact-checking
flagging potential legal issues	solving defamatory or other legal issues
formatting index consistently	compiling index or checking page numbers

Want to know more?

Our website contains helpful information about editing and proofreading. Have a look at our FAQs:

What is proofreading?

What is copy-editing?

Need an editor or proofreader?

If you are looking for editorial help, you can also search for free in our

directory of skilled editorial professionals

sfep.org.uk/directory

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