



© *Ruth E. Thaler-Carter, Writer/Editor*

I can write about anything![®]

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Be a Better Writer or Editor

Writing

- *Read!* Books, magazines, newspapers, blogs, etc. The more you read, the more you recognize good and bad writing, and the better yours should become. Especially important when considering writing about a new topic.
- *Write!* The more you write, the more comfortable you'll be with writing and the less terrifying a blank page or screen will be. Not everything you write has to be for publication.
- Research the person/topic/organization you're writing about and make notes of key information — put the name(s) in a browser search; LinkedIn and Facebook; organizations in the appropriate profession or industry; etc. — before any interviewing.
- If freelancing, have a contract! Include scope (number of words), essential and number of sources to include, fee/rate, deadline, payment timing (on acceptance vs. publication), protection against scope creep, etc.
- Ask the client/colleague about any important details before interviewing and writing.
- Make an outline to organize ideas and story sequence.
- For interviews, send questions ahead of time, including a request to confirm correct name/title/affiliation/location and ending with something open-ended ("What else would you like me/our readers to know?").
- Set a false (early) deadline so you aren't rushing at the last second.
- Use spellcheck — but not autocorrect or grammar check.
- Write without self-editing — don't try to be perfect for your first draft.
- Some people can write the headline and/or lede paragraph first. Others need to write the story and then the headline, or the lede, after getting all the other info out and into a first draft.
- Edit/cut/reorganize.
- Read out loud to make sure it flows smoothly and you haven't left out any important words, especially "not."
- Set aside overnight for at least a few hours and reread before submitting.
- Try new genres to flex your creativity and add to skills. Different genres have different conventions or styles, and a new one can be a great way to add new character, depth or style to your writing voice.

Editing

- Goal = Enhance original while respecting/retaining author's voice; fix or note problems, but don't write, rewrite or make it yours — *although* depending on level (substantive, developmental, line, copy), could involve quite a lot of revision. Should not include fact-checking. Could include double-checking or reformatting references/citations.

(Proofreading — goal = Make sure edits have been incorporated; catch final, major errors before printing or posting.)

- Overall, take your time. Plan to do a thorough, careful edit and then a quick skim for anything missed. The skim or second pass can be with changes accepted or hidden.

- Ask the client what style guide they follow (*Chicago*, AP, APA, MLA, etc.) and don't accept the job if you aren't fluent in their preferred guide.

- Ask for any house- or publication-specific variations from the preferred style guide.

- Skim to assess quality, whether the document is ready for editing, likely amount of time that will be needed. Add a couple hours to the proposed timeframe (and fee, if freelancing).

- Ask to see sample pages **before** committing to a deadline (even if in-house) or rate; don't commit until you see the whole ms.

- Be sure to define a "page" or you're likely to cheat yourself of income and time. Standard page = 250 words/1,600 characters without spaces or punctuation/1,800 characters with. Check the word count and divide by 250.

- Include contract/agreement language against scope creep.

- Check with an institution for its guidelines on editing dissertations (don't take students' word for what's allowed); check with a journal on its style guide.

- For large projects and student projects, request an advance and payment in increments, rather than all at once at the end of the project.

- Your own material: Ask a colleague/friend/relative to read for egregious errors or problems.

- On paper: Mark between the lines or on/in the line itself (proofreader marks in margin closest to correction).

- In Word: Use Track Changes, and include a "clean" copy with changes accepted that might be easier for the colleague/client to review.

Open document and save with slightly different name — add a number, "Edit," your name or initial, "A" or "Original" to document name.

Stash an untouched original for future reference, just in case.

Save often!

Find out if client/colleague prefers changes in "balloons" in the side margin or at the bottom of the document.

If balloons, use Print Layout view. If at the bottom of the document, use Normal view. This also affects how changes look as you work, so try a couple test versions to see which you like best, if the client has no preference.

Find out if client/colleague prefers comments and queries to be made with the New Comment function or directly in the text; if in the text, whether highlighted (using Formatting Palette) or in bold, italic or a different colored "ink."

Use **Find-and-Replace** to change 2 spaces between sentences to 1 as first step;

repeat until it says it found no instances (some fonts/typefaces need an extra space or half-space before certain letters, but those design decisions usually aren't made in the editing stage).

Instead of changing the type size, use the Zoom option in the Toolbar to make the page look 150 or 200 percent larger for easier viewing and editing — changing the size of the lettering will affect the flow from one line or page to another, which may affect what you do or don't change. It's also easier to change the Page View than to remember to put the type size back to its original version.

If it's easier to read in double-spacing or space-and-a-half, use Command-All to highlight entire document, then click on Alignment and Spacing in the Formatting Palette of the Toolbox in the Toolbar, and click on either space-and-a-half or double-space option next to Line spacing. (Again, this will change number of pages/page numbers and might affect page flow.)

- Word will often do things that you may not want, such as setting margins and indents where you don't want them (especially in documents received from others); creating superscripts for “st,” “th,” “nt” and “nd”; and automatically inserting numbered, indented levels in lists.

- Word may not flag a newly created typo if you change an error that creates a new misspelling.

- To edit endnotes, move the notes to a separate Word file using Copy and Paste. To retain reference numbers and replace them with plain superscript, use **Jack Lyon's** NoteStripper. Try it for free at: <http://www.editorium.com>.

- Text pasted in from e-mail often contains nonbreaking spaces in addition to normal spaces. You can check for them by putting ^s in the Find box. If you use a macro to clean up authors' files, add a step that tells Word to look for ^s and replace it with a regular space.

When you cut-and-paste from e-mail or a website into Word, you usually get “hash marks” instead of curly quotes. To make them curly, you might have to put a space between the hash mark and the quoted material, then add the opening quote, then use the cursor to go back and delete the hash mark.

- If you don't want to number the title page in a Word document, insert a section break at the end of your first page (the title page). Click on Insert, page numbers, uncheck “Show number on first page.” Click on Format, page numbering, start at 0 (zero). The second page should have the page number “1.”

- In PDF: Try *not* to accept editing in this format. Ask the colleague/client for a Word or Google Docs version. PDFs should only be used for proofreading.

Resources

Sites

Grammarphobia, <http://www.grammarphobia.com>

Chicago Manual of Style Q&As,

http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/CMS_FAQ/new/new_questions01.html

“How to Learn a Style Guide in 10 Days,” Colleen Barry, Copy Curmudgeon,

<http://askcopycurmudgeon.com/resources/>

The Grammar Devotional: Daily Tips for Successful Writing from Grammar Girl, Mignon

Fogarty, www.grammar.quickanddirtytips.com

Proofreading strategies, http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_proof.html

Tools

Rich Adin's programs and style sheets, <https://www.editorium.com/EditTools/index.htm>

Jack Lyon's Editorium: a collection of macros and other time-saving tools,

www.editorium.com

PerfectIt from Daniel Heuman's Intelligent Editing, www.intelligentediting.com

Paul Beverley's macros, www.wordmacrotools.com or www.archivepub.co.uk

Publications

Anne Lamott, Stephen King, Theodore Bernstein, Strunk & White, Bill Walsh, etc.

The Paper It's Written On, by Karin Cather and Dick Margulis

The Copyeditor's Handbook: A Guide for Book Publishing and Corporate Communications, and

The Copyeditor's Workbook with Exercises and Answer Keys, originally by Amy Einsohn,

updated by Marilyn Schwartz and Erika Buky

Developmental Editing: A Handbook for Freelancers, Authors, and Publishers, Scott Norton

Self-Editing for Self-Publishers, Richard Bradbury

What Editors Do: Art, Craft & Business of Book Editing, Peter Ginna

The Subversive Copy Editor, by Carol Fisher Saller (www.subversivecopyeditor.com)

McGraw Hill's Proofreading Handbook, Laura Killen Anderson

Gregg's/Warriners/New Hart's Rules/Harbrace College Handbook

Organizations

St. Louis Writers Guild

St. Louis Publishers Association

National Writers Union

National Association of Independent Writers and Editors

Editorial Freelancers Association

ACES: The Society for Editing

American Medical Writers Association

Society for Technical Communication

International Association of Business Communicators