Club Ed Conversations

The market for freelance editors

Jennifer Lawler answered questions about the market for freelance editors. The transcript has been edited for typos and clarity and to remove some of the “Hi, how are you?” conversation that happens in a live chat.

**Question:** *This chat was prompted by a question from Club Ed student Lee Hornbrook, who made some observations about how authors interested in querying traditional publishers can feel pressured by freelance editors who tell them they need their work edited before submitting it, and who asked, “Who is the market for freelance editors?”*

**Answer (Jennifer Lawler):** To address Lee’s observations about how authors interested in querying traditional publishers can feel pressured by freelance editors who tell them they need their work edited before submitting it, I would first say that I think it’s a bad idea for freelancers to pressure anyone to get editing.

For one thing, there are no guarantee in this business and the promise that pre-submission editing will improve one’s chances demonstrates a lack of understanding of how traditional publishing works.

Obviously it’s *possible*for pre-submission editing to help, but many factors go into whether a manuscript is accepted by an agent/traditional publisher and “Is it a good book?” is not the most important item on that list.

I’ve had a number of novels and nonfiction books published without pre-submission editing from another editor and I know many authors who can say the same thing. That doesn’t mean it isn’t worthwhile, just that it isn’t the Step 1 before submitting that some freelance editors say it is.

Certainly a good book editor can help an author improve their chances, but it is not required by any means. Most agents will suggest that authors get a few beta readers, and I think that’s a good idea as it helps the author hear from someone who is not themselves about how they experience the ms.

**Question (Sophie Playle):** *I agree with you here, that dev editing is not a Step 1 in getting published, and there are no guarantees in this business.*

*How do you think editors should position their developmental editing services?*

*Should outcomes, goals, etc. that aren’t manuscript-orientated (ie. publishing-orientated) be left out of the discussion? Should authors be left to make their own judgements on whether a dev edit is a good step for them and their ms and their own goals? What responsibilities do we have (if any) when involved in these discussions, or should we not be talking about these things at all?*

*Should the only discussed benefit/outcome of dev editing be “a better manuscript”?*

*All thoughts welcome.*

**Answer (JL):** Sophie, I think a discussion of author goals is absolutely important to a dev edit. If the author is seeking traditional publishing, I am likely to make some recommendations differently than if I know they are indie publishing or just writing for themselves.

This just came up in the memoir class I’m teaching. Getting a memoir traditionally published these days is extremely hard, and just a basic memoir about, say, addiction and recovery or disease and repercussions is unlikely to get any attention. An author writing such a memoir would need to know that and we could discuss angles that might make the book more appealing to publishers or dig out some other aspect of the author’s life to showcase in the memoir.

For an indie publishing author, we might still talk about ways to make the memoir stand out but I would be much less concerned about the competition and more concerned that the book fulfilled the author’s vision.

What I think is a mistake is to suggest that a freelance editor can guarantee any kind of outcome. I am always crystal clear about this with my authors who are seeking traditional publication. I’ve been a literary agent and an AE, and so I have some insight into the business that can be useful for my authors, but I don’t want anyone to ever get the impression that I said if they hired me they’d get published.

Most authors, whether indie authors or traditionally published, are never going to have huge amounts of success, if we define success as lots of sales and money coming in. For that reason I think it is important for them to enjoy the process of writing and revising and to focus on how to be a better writer versus setting goals that depend greatly on outside influences (luck, timing, etc.). But that doesn’t mean I think we should completely discount their external goals.

**Question (Sophia Playle):** *Are recommendations for authors seeking trad publishing always going to be based on knowledge of trends/what’s popular? Because both indie and trad publishing authors are going to want to publish a book that engages readers, which is therefore the same goal. When so much of trad publishing success feels as though it’s about luck (appealing to the right person at the right time, essentially), it feels difficult to know how to advise authors.*

**Answer (JL):** I try not to focus too much on trends because acquisitions editors [at traditional publishers] have already moved on from what’s popular now, so looking at the current marketplace doesn’t help; as a freelancer, I’ll always be behind the curve. So I think it’s wise to be aware of what’s going on in publishing but not obsessively so.

In my memoir example, I’m not trying to advocate for understanding trends so much as I’m trying to show how the overly saturated memoir market makes it difficult for memoirists to break in, and for someone without celebrity or original appeal (“I fought a grizzly bear and won!”) my recommendations will naturally take that into consideration.

Traditional publishing success is hugely dependent on luck and timing. I don’t think we talk about that enough. It isn’t a matter of “the cream rises to the top.” Not at all.

So that does make it difficult to know what to advise. That’s why, more and more, I’m advocating for authors to take enjoyment in the work and not pin all their hopes on outcomes they have little control over.

**Answer (Jake Nicholls):** I agree with all of this. I think it can be useful to frame developmental editing in this context as one route of many for learning more about craft and about how you could revise your particular manuscript. It’s not much different in that sense to paying for a creative writing course, for example. It’s never strictly *necessary* to spend money on learning more about writing, since there are so many free resources out there (including, as you mentioned, finding beta readers). But it can be a useful route for someone looking for a particular type of feedback.

**Answer (JL):** Jake, exactly! There is a limit to what you’re going to learn from a beta reader or a creative writing course. At some point it can be very helpful to have an editor (not just another writer) specifically commenting on your work; it can be what moves the author to a new level in their writing. I’ve hired dev editors for my work just because I wanted someone outside my own brain to help me see where I could improve.

I like the idea of “this is one route you can take, not the only route.”

**Question (Jake Nicholls):** *I have a question about being an editor in writers’ spaces. I’m unsure how to navigate certain online spaces when I’m there as a fellow writer AND as an editor. I guess my question is: do you think it’s best to keep your own (potential) writing circle completely separate from any kind of “active” mention of your editing business? (By which I mean anything other than having it linked in your profile, for example.)*

*Or is there a way to kind of integrate the two without coming off as a shameless marketeer?*

**Answer (JL):** Jake, this is a great question. What I have done is not overly emphasize my editing work but to answer editing related questions from a position of authority: “Janie, you asked if an editor can help you brainstorm solutions to your time crunch. In my work as a freelance editor, I typically consider that more of a coaching concern and not something I would typically talk about in an edit. Many editors are also coaches (I am), so it doesn’t hurt to ask if you can schedule a coaching session with your editor.”

I’m not selling myself though it is clear that if anyone wanted to contact me about my editing or coaching services they could.

In one of my long-time writing groups I am known as the person who knows a lot about traditional publishing, and I get most of my indie author clients from this group. And while I will post about Club Ed classes, etc. on LI and FB, I never do in that group. I don’t think anyone would mind and it’s not strictly forbidden, but it’s a kind of dividing line in my mind that I think helps me maintain balance.

If it specifically comes up (“Where can I find a class on learning DE skills?”) I will mention my classes in response but only if it comes up and generally I will also suggest other resources.

**Question (Sophie Playle):** *Slightly off-topic, but I’m now wondering what writing communities you’re members of, Jack and Jennifer?*

**Answer (Jake Nicholls):** I’ve recently joined some writing groups on Discord, so I’m just finding my feet in those at the moment and seeing how they go!

**Answer (JL):** Sophie, my main group is one called Freelance Success. It’s meant primarily for nonfiction writers, and that’s what I was when I joined twenty years ago.

Another group I was happily in for several years was for memoirists and fiction writers, sponsored by one of my English lit professors in college, now retired. I had to leave it when I moved to LA, and it is just about the only thing I miss about my former home!

The first group (a much larger one) has yielded clients but not the second group.

It can be really hard to find the right group! For me in both cases it was just luck: a friend of mine recommended Freelance Success, so I joined and it worked out; I ran into my old professor at a university event and he invited me to join his group.

I was a member of a RWA chapter (before they imploded) for a few years early in my romance writing days and that was worthwhile. Genre organizations can be a reasonable place to look.

**Question (JL):** *Lee’s question, “Who is the market for freelance dev editors?” is something I wanted to talk more about today.*

**Answer (JL):** In general, freelance book editors work for indie authors who are self-publishing and know they need editorial help in their endeavor and/or they work as freelancers for publishing companies.

For editors with traditional publishing experience, critiquing query letters and other submission documents (synopsis, book proposal, etc.) can be a market as these sales tools are difficult for authors to get right.

For the more than twenty years I’ve been a freelance editor, most of my work has come from publishing companies though I do work with a small handful of indie authors and with the occasional author who is seeking traditional publishing. Usually such an author comes to me after their work has been rejected multiple times and they want to regroup and find out what’s going wrong.

**Answer (Sophie Playle):** This is so interesting! My experience has been more split between indies wanting to make sure their book is decent and authors aiming to submit to agents/publishers.

**Question (Sophie Playle):** *I was under the impression that publishers wouldn’t hire developmental editors because they get SO many submissions, why would they invest time and money helping an author develop their manuscript when they can just take their pick of the slush pile? Or would these be authors who are already established? Either way, how does one get on a publisher’s radar as a developmental editor, and in what ways does the work differ from working directly with authors? I’d love to know more as I’ve never done dev editing work for a publisher.*

**Answer (JL):** Oh, yes, lots of dev editing work is available from publishers (and book packagers, who basically do all the editorial and design on some books for publishers, often but not always licensed content). I’ve worked with both.

Sometimes publishers subcontract all of their development to packagers and you can get the development work from the packager but sometimes publishers oversee the development themselves, farming it out to individual freelancers.

Acquisitions editors have so many demands on their time that few of them can do actual development. My For Dummies editor (back when I was writing those books) acquired over 200 titles a year. There is no way she could have done any development on any of them. All of the development was done by freelancers.

It is easier to get nonfiction development work from publishers because nonfiction is sold based on proposal, and while the publisher may love the book idea, the manuscript itself, when it’s turned in, may fall far short of their needs (this is extremely common).

Expert authors are not always good writers or know how to structure a book (versus just a long article). Experts also have real difficulty conceptualizing what an ordinary reader may or may not know about any particular topic.

For trade publishing (general publishing meant for general readers, like what you find in a bookstore), there’s definitely a need for people who can say to an author, “It’s seems to me that Step 1 would be to plan the treehouse before you buy the lumber, so I recommend adding a section here about finding or creating the treehouse specifications.”

But even for fiction there is developmental work available. Fiction is often sold on two- and three-book deals, where the first book is complete and acceptable at contract signing but the other books are just ideas. When they are submitted they are sometimes not ready for publication.

And publishers outside the Big 5 often don’t get the submission quality that the Big 5 publishers get and so they will invest more in development to bring authors along.

This kind of work can also shade into book doctoring and ghostwriting, but you should be paid a lot more for this efforts than for strictly dev editing.

I do teach a class on getting work from book publishers and packagers.

Regarding how the work is different: typically you don’t get a lot of lead time and the deadlines are tight. So, generally you’re not going to know six months in advance that a manuscript is coming in from Acme Publishing. They will usually check availability a month or two ahead of time. Then when the ms is ready, you might have a few weeks to do the edit, the author will have a few weeks to do their revision, you’ll have a week or two to make sure the revision is acceptable, and then you’ll pass it along to the CE.

So you have to have some flex in your schedule. If you keep not being able to take a project on because you’re already booked, the publishing company will just find someone else to work with–so it’s not the right fit for every editor. But if you develop a good relationship with a publisher/packager, you can get ongoing work for a long time (I’ve worked with some clients for years and years).

Given the tight deadlines, you have to adjust your expectations. So, with an indie author I might suggest that they explore rewriting the novel into third person or first (to solve whatever problems I’ve identified) or that they strengthen the central conflict in such a way that they will have to rewrite the second half of the ms.

An author can’t take on a revision of that magnitude in just a couple of weeks, especially since they’re probably also juggling a day job and/or other time commitments. So, even if I think the ms needs a complete overhaul, I will limit my recommendations to the kind of things that can be reasonably accomplished in a limited period: start with Chapter 4 instead of revising the first three chapters, eliminate a subplot instead of trying to make it connect better to the main plot, add a prologue to explain backstory instead of trying to figure out how to integrate it more effectively into the forward plot, etc.

**Question (Sophie Playle):** *Would you say, though, that generally the publisher work is better quality than the indie stuff, so often the quicker fixes are enough to bring the book up to scratch anyway? (This would be my general prediction.)*

**Answer (JL):** Yes, in general the work is of higher quality or it wouldn’t have been acquired in the first place. I tend to see a lot less of the usual beginner mistakes in the fiction I edit for publishers and often my work is just about helping the author patch up a few places where the story falls down, nothing major.

For nonfiction if the publisher likes the idea but doubts the author’s ability to deliver a good product, they will add a ghost or coauthor from the start and factor that cost into the budget for the book (and the advance the AU receives). But sometimes they’re taken by surprise and there’s a mad scramble at the last minute to fix a disaster. Sometimes the ship date has to be pushed back.

**Question (Livia Montana):** *Great conversation! I’m guessing book publishing companies and book packagers don’t work with new development editors/coaches? What would be the process to eventually be considered for that type of work?*

*p.s. – I have some internships & freelance work in the publishing world on my resume. (Magazines, kids educational publisher, literary organization, etc.) But it’s so long ago I doubt it would make a difference.*

**Answer (JL):** Livia, publishers and packagers do like to see publishing experience, but unlike getting a job, in freelancing the experience stays relevant. The main instrument we use to get work, the letter of introduction, can be written to elide over the fact that the work was done a long time ago.

Those who hire freelancers just want to make sure you know what you’re doing and the easiest way for them to tell is if other publishers/packagers have hired you.

The only challenge arises when the organizations have all folded but even that can be addressed by showing the professional development you’ve been doing in the meantime.

Also, just in terms of getting ready to pitch publishers and packagers, I would say that any kind of editorial work you can do for corporations of any kind helps. It just shows that you know what you’re doing.

The challenge is that most people doing the hiring at publishers/packagers aren’t going to think of indie authors as good judges of editorial talent so the fact that an editor might have fifty glowing testimonials from indie authors won’t make much of an impression on them. But if you’ve edited for an online magazine or anything like that, there is more of a sense that someone who knows what good editing is has hired you and therefore you must be a good editor.

It’s easier to get CE and proofreading work since these can be more easily tested, and there’s more freelance work of any kind available in nonfiction than in fiction (since so much more nonfiction than fiction is published).

For an LOI I would use testimonials from a supervising editor or business owner before testimonials from indie authors, unless the indie author is a well-known person.

**Answer (Mary Dalton):** [I’ve] been in and out of freelancing and publishing work for a long time before making it my “real job.” So a lot of my experience is a little ancient at this point. I have been able to land some work for a book packager, but the pay is just okay. It’s a newer company, and I suspect they are happy to work with less experienced editors so they can save a bit of overhead. I’m viewing it as a useful update to my experience to help get other work. Looking for younger companies might be a good place to start!

**Answer (JL):** Mary, this is a great point! It is going to be easier to get work from a newer publisher or packager than from Penguin Random House. Once you have that experience you can bridge to the better clients.

**Question (Patti Neufield):** *This is a terrific conversation so far. I’ve heard that I should try to get on a publisher’s freelance list by offering services in proofreading or copyediting first, and then work my way up to dev editing when they know me better. Is this right? Clearly these are different skill sets, but the advice came from my friend who owns two small pub companies, so now I’m left wondering how smart that is — or is not.*

**Answer (JL):** Patti, this is the advice I give people who are seeking to work with traditional publishers. They are different skills sets so if you don’t have CE or PR skills or don’t really care to do the work, then of course I wouldn’t go that route, but publishers look for publishing experience.

They are not likely to hire a freelance DE without experience working for a book publisher. But they can more easily test for PR and CE skills, so it is easier for them to take a risk in those areas.

**Question (Mary Dalton):** *I’m curious what experience folks here have had with social media marketing (talking more about things like an Instagram or Twitter profile and less about contributing to discussions in online writing or publishing groups). I see fellow editors who seem to be doing very well with that marketing angle… but then again, it’s hard to tell when someone is actually getting work from a certain social media platform and when they’re just skilled at having a bustling, impressive-looking profile. Are there platforms that have yielded real results for anyone here?*

**Answer (Sophia Playle):** Not me! I have had fairly large followings, but I’ve always found the interaction is surface-level and the bang for buck (in terms of time, money and effort spent on social media marketing) is not good. I even hired a social media content creator for six months and saw very little return. Generally, I feel social media can keep you on people’s radars, but I’ve not found it great for generating leads. I know other people have had much more success.

I think you genuinely need to be happy to spend a lot of time on social media, and this is where it doesn’t work for me because I find it quite draining and frustrating. I’d love to know where most people are getting their author-clients from? (So, not publishers.)

For me, it’s mostly a mixture of authors finding my website through Google or other editors recommending me.

**Answer (JL):** For me it is that writer’s group I mentioned before, but mostly word-of-mouth. I never found social media to be very helpful. I do use LI now for Club Ed but it is a reasonable match for Club Ed because people on LI are thinking about changing jobs/careers.

Thank you, everyone, for a great chat!