



Becoming an Editor

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“Have you ever thought of becoming an editor?” asked a friend from church. I had not, to be honest, but I loved the thought. Having recently completed an MA in English Literature, I began imagining myself discovering new authors and editing manuscripts into masterpieces.

That’s not what I said, however, a week later as I interviewed for an editorial position in a Christian publishing house in Delhi, India. Instead, I spoke of my qualifications and love for books. More than a decade and a half later, I can still say that that is a good place to start on the way to becoming an effective editor. Here are some steps you can take in this same journey:

Develop strong language skills. Since this particular organization published theological and liturgical books mainly in English, my advanced degree in the language proved useful. There were times when I found the theology and doctrine of some manuscripts challenging, and the format of prayer books confusing, but I did not struggle with the mechanics of editing.

Know your mission. One of the first assignments I was given was to evaluate a stack of manuscripts for publishing. Most of these were unsolicited manuscripts from

new authors; others were proposals from current authors.

I spent a couple of hours a day reviewing manuscripts and proposals and making meticulous summaries of each one.

Finally, one afternoon, the editorial committee asked me to give my evaluations. I explained the length, content, format, title, language, and background of each manuscript. Then the publishing secretary asked me, “Which one would you like to see published?”

I excitedly pulled out a work of fiction and went on to wholeheartedly promote it. After patiently listening to me, the secretary asked me to explain the mission and the objectives of the organization. I was puzzled—what did choosing manuscripts have to do with the strategic direction of an organization? I learned that day that even though we were Christian publishers, we did not publish Christian fiction.

Understand your organization’s mission and goals so that you can make informed choices.

Respect your authors. A few months into my training, I realized that I liked editing; I liked fixing other people’s mistakes; and I liked using red ballpoint pens to make corrections.

One day after editing a particularly difficult manuscript I went back and made substantive changes—rewriting and overwriting. Everything made sense freshly corrected, but when I sat down with the

author a week later, I could not decipher my own red marks! I quickly switched to pencils with erasers.

Current word processing and editing software permit highlighting and notes in margin that allow the author to see the changes I have made.

Respect the author and his or her work. List out the positive aspects of the manuscript, appreciate the hours of work put into it, and then identify the areas that require change. Communication is key. Write, call, or email, keeping the author informed of major editorial changes and house style decisions.

Be open to criticism. Learn to accept suggestions to improve your work. At one point in my editing career, I was assigned to work with an author who also happened to be the retired general secretary of the organization. I was apprehensive before meeting him, and then he completely altered my carefully designed book outline. At first I was crushed, but I saw the wisdom in the

suggestions he had made as the chapters began to arrive.

Practice good time management. Among all my incorrect notions about editing, the one I had to get rid off the fastest was the belief that I could spend endless hours refining a manuscript. Because underlying all publishing procedures—such as acquisitions, editing, design, budgets, production, marketing and promotion—are deadlines. Procrastination in the editing stage can delay the entire publishing schedule. Maintain a calendar where you can schedule all tasks and keep the workflow smooth.

Keep growing. There are books and Web sites that can help you. As your skills improve, your confidence in editing will grow. More importantly, the quality of your product will improve. Becoming an editor requires skill and effort, but the reward is seeing a life touched by a work you have edited.

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