

Manuscript Under the Microscope: Copyediting

by Susan VanHecke

Hey, you sold that manuscript! Congratulations!

So now what?

Welcome to the editorial process, where your manuscript will be honed and polished to its greatest shining potential, most likely with help from a copyeditor. But what, exactly, does a copyeditor do?

Once you and your editor have ironed out the big-picture components of your story—plot and character development, structure, pacing—most likely through a few rounds of revision, your manuscript heads to copyediting. Here the focus on your text goes from wide-angle to close-up. The copyeditor puts your manuscript under the microscope, correcting errors, querying questionable passages, and preparing a style sheet, a record of editorial choices that's used throughout the production process to keep everyone on the same, well, page.

Through several reads, the copyeditor will scour your manuscript word for word, sussing out errors and inconsistencies. He or she will correct faulty spelling, grammar, punctuation, and usage and ensure consistency in spelling, hyphenation, numerals, fonts, and capitalization. The copyeditor will track continuity of plot, setting, and character, keep on top of chronology, and fact-check people, places, and events for accuracy. He or she may also eliminate wordiness and clichéd writing, smooth out transitions, and revise sentences for flow and readability.

Whenever the copyeditor comes across a confusing or possibly incorrect passage in your manuscript, he or she will flag it with a query. Just like it sounds, the query is the copyeditor's question to you on behalf of your reader. If a phrase, sentence, paragraph, or turn of events doesn't seem to make sense, instead of revising the passage directly, the copyeditor will ask about it in a query, leaving the tweaking up to you. The helpful copyeditor will often suggest a possible revision in the query.

The copyeditor will also format the manuscript to comport with the publisher's in-house style guide. The style guide is a compilation of editorial preferences specific to that publisher. For example, some publishers like signs, labels, and words on T-shirts to be set in SMALL CAPS. Others prefer ALL CAPS. Or Initial Caps. Or "Initial Caps with Quotation Marks."

example a.

example b.

Sidebar images courtesy Susan VanHecke

To keep track of all editorial decisions made while working on a manuscript, the copyeditor will create a style sheet. This document lists character names and info, unusual words not in the dictionary, treatment of words and numbers, story timeline, and other issues specific to the manuscript. This helps all those working with the text at the publishing house—editors, copyeditors, proofreaders—keep things consistent. That way, green-eyed Tasha Clark of 212 Erie Place who turned fifteen on page 6 doesn't become brown-eyed sixteen-year-old Sasha Clarke of 221 Erie Court on page 206.

When the copyeditor is finished, your manuscript will be returned to your editor, who might add more comments before forwarding it to you. A copyedited manuscript often looks like example a., edited in Word using Track Changes. Or sometimes it looks like example b., edited on hard copy, queries in margins or on Post-its.

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To Market

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PUBLISHER ALERT!

CALIFORNIA COLDBLOOD BOOKS

californiacoldblood.com

California Coldblood Books is a small publishing house dedicated to science-fiction, fantasy, and speculative writing that publishes YA and MG titles in addition to their adult titles. California Coldblood is an imprint of Rare Bird Books with global distribution through Publishers Group West. Robert J. Peterson founded CCB in 2014. He's also the company's head of acquisitions, art director, lead editor, typesetter, and webmaster. His friends call him Bob. Normally, California Coldblood accepts submissions only from agents or through trusted referrals. However, SCBWI members mentioning this listing may query!

Please put "SCBWI Referral" in the subject line of the query email.

😍 **INBOX LOVE:** "I would love to see an impeccably researched high fantasy that draws on mythological or historical structures other than the usual Tolkienian mix of western Europe and Norse/Greek/Ovid."

😞 **INBOX LOATHING:** "I'm not so much looking for thrillers in the James Patterson mold. (Though he's great.)"

California Coldblood [Catalog](#) and [Submission Guidelines](#)

TUMBLEHOME LEARNING

tumblehomelearning.com

Tumblehome Learning (THL) was formed in 2010 by a group of dedicated STEM activists, writers, and software and curriculum developers. Their mission is to help kids imagine

themselves as young scientists and engineers. Their award-winning books for kids, ages eight and up, all have a science angle—whether the story be a mystery or an adventure. Each book comes with hands-on activity pages and links to online activities. THL welcomes K-12 STEM submissions from both first-time and experienced authors. Submission instructions are found on their website and must be carefully followed.

😍 **INBOX LOVE:** "We would love to see exciting middle-grade fiction or nonfiction with an inspiring science theme."

😞 **INBOX LOATHING:** "We would loathe seeing sloppy science, poorly edited pieces, or talking animals."

Tumblehome Learning [Catalog](#) and [Submission Guidelines](#) **H**

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An author can, understandably, feel overwhelmed by the copyeditor's corrections and queries. All those marks! Don't freak—the copyeditor's working in the author's best interest. However, your book is, of course, yours—so don't think you must accept every correction or revision if you don't agree with it. There's a magic word in copyediting: *stet*. It means "go back to the original." The author can override any of the copyeditor's marks with that simple word (though the editor may disagree and discuss with the author why).

Remember, the copyeditor's always got the author's back. Your copyeditor's mission is to help make your book its absolute best. Once all the issues spotted in copyediting are addressed and resolved, your manuscript will be ready to move to production, continuing its transformation from words tapped out on your computer to that gorgeous book in your readers' hands. **H**



Susan is a professional copyeditor and, writing as Susan Wood, award-winning author of *ESQUIVEL!* *SPACE-AGE SOUND ARTIST* (Charlesbridge), *AMERICAN GOTHIC: THE LIFE OF GRANT WOOD* (Abrams), and the forthcoming *ELIZABETH WARREN: NEVERTHELESS, SHE PERSISTED* (Abrams). She lives in Norfolk, Virginia. Find her online at

SusanWoodBooks.com, SusanVanHeckeEditorial.com, and [@SusanWoodBooks](https://twitter.com/SusanWoodBooks). (Photo: dback)

Illustration: BRIAN MARTIN, www.bmmartinart.com

The Copyeditor's Toolbox

In trade (mainstream) book publishing, these are every copyeditor's go-to resources:

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th ed.

Chicago Manual of Style, 16th or 17th ed.

Words into Type, 3rd ed.

Garner's Modern American Usage, 3rd ed.

