



The role and purpose of the editorial profession

The CIEP sees the purpose of the editorial profession as helping to make text accurate, clear, readable and fit for its intended audience so that it achieves its objective. But what, exactly, does that mean and how do editorial professionals go about achieving that purpose?

This fact sheet aims to break down what we mean by accuracy, clarity, readability and the extent to which a piece of text can achieve its objectives, and the role of editorial professionals in that process.

The goal of writing

Let's start by thinking about the goal of writing. Each piece of text has a purpose or goal – that is, a reason it is created. For example, the author of a piece of text might be writing to:

- educate readers
- inform readers
- entertain readers
- persuade readers.

Or they might just be writing as a way of expressing themselves and sharing their personal stories, experiences and opinions with their audience.

Whatever the goal, a text doesn't necessarily need to be written perfectly to achieve its aim. No text is perfect, and what constitutes an error can be subjective. Depending on the target audience and the channel that the text is being shared through, readers may not even recognise all of the errors.

However, to increase the chances of a piece of text achieving its goal, it should be free enough of errors to make its meaning clear and be written in a way that makes it accessible to the target audience, in line with the author's intentions. In the case of non-fiction texts especially, the accuracy of the text is also vital.

Readers will stop reading if there are too many recognisable errors, reducing the chance that the text – and its author(s) – will achieve its overall goal. In the case of non-fiction, errors in a text can inhibit comprehension and understanding, as well as trust in both the accuracy and honesty of information provided in the text and the author(s) who produced it. In the case of fiction, elements that impact readability include sentence structure, word choice and the overall shape of a story, along with objective errors (be they spelling, punctuation or grammar mistakes, or discrepancies in a character's name) – all of which can take a reader out of the story and make it less enjoyable to read.

Various researchers have studied the impact of errors in a text on readers' perceptions of the author. One group found that readers' trust in posts on a health forum decreased with each typo they came across. Another group identified a similar loss of trust towards a brand when consumers identified typographical errors on that brand's website.¹

The job of an editorial professional is to work with authors of any piece of text to make sure they achieve their objectives through clear, accurate, deliberate writing that is suitable for their intended audience.

¹ HJ Witchel et al., 'Spelling errors in brief computer-mediated texts implicitly lead to linearly additive penalties in trustworthiness', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.873844>; B Müller, C Martin-Lacroux and A Lacroux, "What a pity, there are so many errors!" What mistakes really matter to consumers?, in *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 48 (2019), <https://proceedings.emac-online.org/pdfs/A2019-9344.pdf>.

The goal of editorial work

The term 'editorial work' generally refers to the practice of editing and/or proofreading a piece of text, and there are many variants of this practice. Editing, for example, might involve copyediting, line editing or developmental editing. There are also distinct differences between editing and proofreading, with editing taking place before the end of the writing process, when there is still plenty of scope for changes to be made, and proofreading being the final quality check to correct errors before the text is published or shared.

Each variant of editorial work has distinct goals, although the overall goal is always to ensure the text is clear, concise, consistent, correct, coherent, complete, credible and compelling, and ultimately achieves its goal. For example:

- A novel's goal is to entertain readers. It will tell a story that is free of distracting errors that remove readers from the story. The plot should be well structured and paced and the story well told, with believable characters, authentic dialogue and effectively paced scenes.
- The goal of a report of survey results is to inform readers and sometimes to persuade them to a specific course of action. The report should be organised in a way that builds a coherent story of the survey results, shares the highlights without getting bogged down in every question's results and builds a cohesive argument if it seeks to be persuasive. The results shared should be clearly explained and put into context for the reader.

Editorial professionals accomplish these goals by:

- correcting errors in the mechanics of writing (grammar, usage, spelling etc) to clarify meaning
- adjusting the writing voice to be consistent and appropriate for the author's style, the text and the reader (including, for example, making adjustments to diction – the choice of words – and syntax – the arrangement of words)

- correcting inconsistencies of style (eg between UK and US English spelling), continuity (eg between a character's name, description or personality traits) or cross-referencing (eg between an image and its caption)
- ensuring the reader understands the meaning intended by the author
- advising the author if any of the language or ideas in the text might be seen by some readers as offensive, inappropriate or provocative
- raising a query with the author when needed (eg when something is unclear, when there's a possible factual error or when something seems to be missing).



Editorial standards

Editorial professionals are expected to display and work to high editorial standards, protecting the reputation and credibility of both their profession and the authors and clients they work with. High editorial standards mean that editorial professionals:

- do the best work they can, according to relevant editorial standards and the context of the project
- are honest about flaws in the work
- are willing to ask questions about the text, especially if they don't understand something
- understand the need for and learn the skills necessary to perform an edit or proofread
- understand how changing a text can change the way a reader receives it
- avoid over-intervention and exercise their judgement in knowing when to make a change to a piece of text or when to leave well enough alone
- maintain their awareness of sensitive or offensive words or phrases so they can support their authors and clients in making informed decisions about the language they use in their texts
- use professional resources, like dictionaries and style guides, to resolve errors and ensure they understand a rule (if you don't know, look it up; if you think you know, look it up; if there is any element of doubt, look it up)
- understand how technology can assist them in their work and learn how to use it properly
- understand the limitations of technology, and are willing and able to explain those limitations to authors, supervisors or clients.

In turn, high editorial standards result in:

- the reader being able to trust the text (and trust the author) in terms of accuracy of information, facts etc
- a smooth and enjoyable reading experience, helping readers to avoid stumbling over badly worded sentences or being pulled out of the story
- helping the text achieve its goals (eg to buy a story or to sell products) increased reputation and credibility for the author.

For the overall publishing process, high editorial standards can make later stages run more smoothly, saving time and money. They also mean higher-quality writing, resulting in a higher-quality final product. And the higher the quality of the final product, the more likely it will be to achieve its goal.

The CIEP and its members are committed to editorial excellence and championing the editorial profession and editorial standards. For more information, visit ciep.uk/.

Written by the CIEP Learning and Professional Development Committee. Thanks to CIEP members for sharing their knowledge.

The Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading (CIEP) is a non-profit body promoting excellence in English-language editing. We set and demonstrate editorial standards, and we are a community, training hub and support network for editorial professionals – the people who work to make text accurate, clear and fit for purpose.



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