



The Plot Thickens: Editing in the Modern World

Abstract

This paper will explore the profession of editor and how to create a path to success in the field. Various branches of editing will be identified, as well as their basic job descriptions, level of education required and personal attributes that help prepare one for the occupation. In order to create a real-life snapshot of what a job in the editing field can look like, SPARK Publications was used as a working company resource. Melisa Graham, Communications Director at SPARK, was also interviewed for this paper and how the face of editing is keeping up with the times. Using valid online resources as well as primary sources, I will validate editing as a promising career path specifically suited to my passion and personality, that will continue to evolve with the changing and dynamic needs of consumers across the globe.

Keywords: editing, communication, publishing, media

In a writer's world, writing and editing go hand in hand. Many writers feel that if they are good at writing, they must also be good at editing. Fortunately, professional editors can take that pressure off the writer's shoulders, allowing them the freedom to focus on sharing their ideas with the world. This paper will focus on an editor's career path and what is involved in becoming a successful editor in the world of modern media. It will review employment statistics, education requirements, and how an editor might branch out as they grow in their profession. It will also identify key skills, strategies, and personality traits necessary to make it in the editing field, as well as cover the variety of editing jobs available in the current market.

Section I: Editor

The editing field is a fast-paced environment that is constantly evolving. The job description can change completely from one project to another, depending on the client's needs. Basic job requirements outlined by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics are to "plan, review, and revise content for publication" ("Occupational Outlook Handbook: Editors", 2020). While not inaccurate, this is a simplified outlook. There are several facets of editing to explore when considering a career as an editor. There is

field-specific work, such as in the areas of education, law, literature, or sales. Editing can be loyal to a genre—for example, fiction, creative writing, or technical writing. Editing can also change depending on what skill the writer lacks. This could translate into being a copyeditor, checking for and correcting grammatic mistakes. If the writer is a great storyteller but has trouble organizing their thoughts, they may request developmental editing, in which case that same editor would polish the writer's styling and rework their sentence structure to allow the ideas to really shine. If an editor is working on technical writing, it may involve fact checking and heavy research. Book editors may also help authors with design layout, finding an agent, publishing, and more. Acquisition editors read manuscripts and decide whether they have the potential to become popular books. Some editors wear all these hats at once, especially if they are working in a small publishing house or imprint, or they are contracting out their services as a freelance editor.

Many businesses who are involved in publication of any sort keep editors on staff to ensure their material is ready for public consumption. This includes printed newspapers and books, news channels with online publications, social media companies, non-profits, and more. The Hustle, a daily digital news publication that delivers a brief, entertaining overview of the latest in technology, world news and business to over a million subscribers, employs a team of top-notch editors. The company's mission statement is to, "Build a modern information company that has a direct relationship with 80M+ professionals in the US" ("We're Hiring | The Hustle", 2020). This would be impossible if their pieces were filled with erroneous information, overly verbose articles, or distracting grammatical errors. Instead, the writing is clear, concise and witty, keeping their readership—myself included--engaged.

An editor's schedule can range from the typical 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., to working unorthodox hours. Often, editors spend part of their workday in an office setting and part of it working from a remote location. Working hours depend on the clients' deadline and whether the editor is freelance or works directly for a company. In both scenarios, time management skills are paramount to doing the job well. Other soft skills necessary to be successful are attention to detail, critical thinking skills, effective communication, flexibility, consistency, teamwork, and people skills. Being a bibliophile is high on the list of necessary traits. In addition to these skills, I am uniquely suited to this career due to my type-A personality, love of the written word and an ability to offer constructive criticism in a gentle but persuasive manner. I'm also a sucker for a compelling story. I can assess new situations and create workable plans around a deadline. I work efficiently when multi-tasking under pressure, which is helpful when facilitating quick turnarounds on a project.

Hard skills required include a firm grasp on technology, use of Microsoft Word and Google Docs, and working knowledge of MLA, APA and Chicago styles of writing. Basic knowledge of Adobe design and publishing programs would be beneficial to a book editor who oversees layout and design. Depending on the client or employer, the required writing style may change. Style manuals can be found online, but experience using these styles will come from the writing courses taken while obtaining a degree. An online learning platform dedicated to personalized study plans and college guidance identifies communications, journalism and English as the three degrees that funnel students into position for editing careers ("Book Editor: Education Requirements and Career Information", 2019). Luckily, there are many networking opportunities available in the literary community, and they can often forge a path to internships or entry-level editing assistant positions. Freelance editing gigs found through online platforms like Upwork, Fiverr, and Thumbtack can be a legitimate way to build a portfolio of completed work that can be shown to a larger publishing house or corporate organization.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average editor's salary in 2019 was \$61,370¹, and a three percent decline in editing jobs is expected over the next decade due to a decrease in printed media ("Occupational Outlook Handbook: Editors", 2020). Despite that outlook, there will always be an exchange of written information, whether digital or in print. The myriad of companies who need competent editors to review their technical manuals, press releases, and publications ensure the long-term survival of the occupation. Though the face of publishing is changing, editors are here to stay.

Section II: SPARK Publications

Though editors can swap their focus from one type of project to another, I find book editing to be the most intriguing path within the editing field. SPARK Publications is an award-winning², custom book, magazine and catalogue publisher in Charlotte, NC, founded in 1998 by Fabi Presslar. Its offerings fall somewhere between the extensive services of traditional publishing houses and the simplicity of self-publishing, landing them in the hybrid publisher category. Spark Publications identifies their unique custom niche in each category, identifying their book publishing process with the statement:

SPARK Publications would like to introduce you to custom publishing. You may already be familiar with self-publishing, a lonely road that we don't recommend. With custom publishing, you are in control. We serve as your guide every step of

¹ None of the figures available from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics include self-employed editors.

² SPARK Publications has earned many awards, many of which can be viewed on the company's blog at <https://sparkpublications.com/blog/all-posts/awards/>.

the way, from writing and editing your manuscript to managing the print production to marketing your book. Our collaborative process helps you publish your book the entrepreneurial way ("How to Publish a Book | SPARK Publications", n.d.).

Hybrid publishing is taking off, as authors find the pricing model to be easier on their pockets while giving them more creative input in the process. SPARK Publications does not require authors to have agents, so it is more accessible to the modern freelance writing world. The company publishes mostly non-fiction books and magazines, typically working with clients focused on building a brand. Becoming a published author can help the writer reach a larger audience, opening doors for future speaking engagements and business opportunities. SPARK Publications offers a customized experience to each client that covers the creative process, manuscript review and editing services, cover design, publication, and distribution. They take pride in recognizing that "Each project is unique. So we listen, counsel, and plan before acting" ("SPARK Publications", n.d.).

SPARK Publications is family-owned and has seven full-time employees. The Communications Director at SPARK Publications estimates the company publishes "... over 4,000 magazines and catalog pages a year and independently publishes twelve books a year, plus a variety of design projects" (M. Graham, personal communication, May 1, 2020). The education preference for full-time employees is a bachelor's degree in a related field. When accepting applications, SPARK requests that applicants email a cover letter in their own personal voice along with their resume and a link to their professional portfolio ("Job Openings | SPARK Publications", n.d.). Graham told me that the company uses freelance editors when the need arises, requiring strong experience evidenced by their portfolio rather than a specific education level, and that staff often recommends the freelancers they work with to client publications, connecting them with long-term positions (M. Graham, personal communication, May 1, 2020). She also mentioned that SPARK Publications offers their full-time employees a benefits package that includes paid time off, professional development resources, and personal publishing assistance; informal benefits include flexible hours, a fully-stocked break room, and lunch on the company when the office is busy (M. Graham, personal communication, May 1, 2020).

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics cited the average salary in 2019 for editors employed in North Carolina as \$66,480, about \$5,000 higher than the national average ("Occupational Outlook Handbook: Editors", 2020). Freelance book editors who contract

their services have more control over both their earning potential and their schedule. As a freelance editor, it is beneficial to create relationships with more than one publishing house in order to create a consistent revenue stream. Though the job does not require manual labor, The College Foundation of North Carolina notes that the long hours behind a computer screen can cause eye strain or repetitive motion injuries (Corporation, 2020).

Section III: The Path to Success

There can be many tiers to an editing career, and it can thrive locally or globally. The Editor's Association of Canada points out that "Editors.... work in publishing, sales and marketing, manufacturing, government, law, education and many other fields. Editors can be specialists who...edit only scientific or medical documents, or they can be generalists who work on all kinds of content" ("So You Want to Be an Editor: Information about a career in editing | Editors Canada", 2020). As mentioned earlier, an editor will find more success in the job market if they first obtain at least a bachelor's degree in a related field, such as communication, journalism, or English.

A degree is required for most, but not all, editing opportunities. If one is attending college full time, this should take about four years to obtain. With part-time hours, it may take a bit longer. From personal experience, the most cost-effective option is to attend community college to gain an Associate in Arts (AA) and then transfer credits to a four-year college to complete a bachelor's degree. Apply for all possible financial aid grants and work closely with an advisor to ensure all classes will transfer. Each student's living situation is different, but in-state costs for tuition, fees, and books for a two-year associate degree at Rowan-Cabarrus Community College averages about \$6,088 without any financial aid ("Net Price Calculator | Financial Aid", 2020). UNCC's website offers an estimate of \$17,000 for two years of in-state tuition, fees, and book, also before factoring in any financial aid ("Undergraduate Cost of Attendance | Niner Central | UNC Charlotte", 2020). Using these numbers and in the absence of financial aid, the cost of a bachelor's degree would come to a little more than \$23,000.

Learn.org, a website dedicated to degree and career information, identifies entry-level editing positions as freelance editor, proofreading or copyeditor ("What Are Entry Level Jobs for an Editor?", 2020). Once experience is gained, editors can move into assistant editor positions, specialized editing roles, and on to management positions like Senior Editor or Editor-in-Chief. In each of these roles, it is important to begin building a portfolio of completed work right away. This is a great way to showcase personal skills and growth, and visually assures any potential employer or client that one is prepared

for the opportunity. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that in 2019, editors' salaries ranged from less than \$32,000 to over \$122,000 annually, with North Carolina's range between around \$28,500 and \$100,100 annually; the highest median pay in all areas was attributed to editors who handled technical or specialized projects ("Occupational Outlook Handbook: Editors", 2020).

If one plans to join a publishing house or other major company full time, there are no investment costs beyond travel to work and a good business wardrobe. Freelance editors need a home computer system or laptop with reliable wireless access, Microsoft Office, and Google's GSuite. Adobe Creative is a great tool if design or layout assistance will be offered to clients. Freelance editors should also be prepared for in-person, phone and video conferencing with clients.

Section IV: Communication is Key – An Informational Interview

I was able to connect with Melisa Graham, Communications Director and Editor at Spark Publications. During our phone call, Graham gave me invaluable insight into the editing field. Graduating from Duke University with degrees in English Literature and Religion, she spent her first years out of college working in Public Relations, and then transitioned to magazine editing; she currently works in design and production at an independent publishing firm.

Graham explained that her role can include coaching, transcription, developmental editing, cover design and layout, and final publication in digital and print formats. She found that customer service skills, adaptability and a good grasp of technology helped to propel her career; she also admitted that some authors in the custom publishing bubble need a bit of ego-stroking as they walk through the editing process and that she's still working on those skills. She believes editors should be familiar with all three writing style manuals, and that Adobe Creative is an important tool to have in an editing arsenal, but insists that Word is the best program to use while editing, praising its Red Lines tool. Graham mentioned that her desire to be an editor came from her love of words. She said simply, "I'm a word nerd" (M. Graham, personal communication, April 27, 2020). Like me, she fell in love with the idea of polishing an author's idea until it shines with their true intent. Her least favorite part of the job is distancing herself from emotional topics the writer may bring to the table. When I asked what factors are influencing the availability of editing jobs and why there may be a slight decline in the next few years, Graham replied:

The media industry hasn't fully adapted to online publications, circulation hasn't caught up. Lifestyle publications aren't as pretty online and not

many can pull off the look that a print magazine has...well, except maybe National Geographic. They've figured it out (M. Graham, personal communication, April 27, 2020).

She then pointed out that younger millennials are beginning to trend away from digital and back toward print for book and magazines, preferring to hold content in their hands rather than stare at a screen for two more hours of their day (M. Graham, personal communication, April 27, 2020).

When asked what made her choose to work for an independent publishing company rather than a larger publishing house focused on turning out best-sellers, she acknowledged the fascinating minds of independent writers, more flexible timelines, and a wider variety of editing projects. She laughed before stating, "The best-seller list is a racket. It's all about how much money you have to put into marketing, and less about the quality of the work" (M. Graham, personal communication, April 27, 2020). Graham typically chooses to work from 9:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. and saves the evening hours for family time; she works remotely when it is convenient for her but goes into the office a few times a week for meetings and team projects. She finds that the team atmosphere keeps her on track to set goals and reach deadlines. She defined the key aspects to my pursuit of an editing career as relationship-building, both formal and informal mentorship, creating a portfolio, and adapting my personal editing style to the writer I'm working with; she reinforced this by saying, "Styles are great, but when you're editing someone else's work, you need to relax.... A lot of intuition is involved. Adopt the style they request, just make sure your goal is to keep them consistent" (M. Graham, personal communication, April 27, 2020). In addition, she encouraged me to connect with the President of her company, Fabi Presslar, to speak further about my path towards an editing career and mentorship opportunities.

Section V: Looking Back

While researching a career in editing, I realized I only really knew about a small corner of the field. I learned that there are many different types of editors and that the more technical the material is, the more an editor can earn. The wide array of opportunities inside the market are much more complex than just "copyeditor" or "developmental editor", and a career does not have to be based solely on editing within one medium or genre. In fact, through reading and research, editors get to learn a little bit of quality information about a lot of topics.

I identified my preferred role to be in book editing. This position has a broader job description than I was previously aware of, but I am confident it would suit both my

personality and my skill set. Editors work flexible schedules, but need to be detail-oriented, good with deadlines and have a team player's approach to projects in order to find success in their careers. I share the necessary attributes and through previous job experience, find that my productivity increases when freedom is allowed within a gently structured environment. Growing up as a latchkey kid translated into a self-sufficient mentality in adulthood. When I create a budget, I stick to it. When I have a deadline, I meet it. Working in retail as a customer service associate for many years gave me patience and a practiced professionalism that rises to the challenge in the face of particularly difficult situations or personalities.

I look forward to developing my knowledge of the writing style manuals. I am also unfamiliar with the design aspect of editing and am eager to learn new skills in that area. Despite the possibility of a slight downturn in the field, I believe the role of editor would meet my needs and the needs of my family, as well as fulfill a local need for editing professionals through a career I am passionate about. Gaining experience through freelance work will assist me in building a portfolio and connecting with a mentor will aid me in setting goals while I earn my bachelor's degree in English. My biggest takeaways from everything I've learned are that formal style and the author's voice are equally important, and that an editor's first responsibility is to keep the spotlight focused solely on their client. Self-confident people with a true desire to help others will have no trouble fulfilling that duty. I also learned that in order to attract a quality employer or client, creating a portfolio made of material from freelance or entry-level experience is imperative. If the portfolio is comprised of digital content, Graham recommends the editor create a website and after obtaining permission from their clients, post no more than a twenty-page excerpt of each work in order to concisely highlight key skills (M. Graham, personal communication, April 27, 2020).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the career of editing holds many exciting opportunities, including the chance to build a business based on the aspiring editor's expertise. The best tools an editor can carry with them are relationship-building skills, grammatically correct editing, and a strong working knowledge of the three commonly used style manuals, Chicago, APA and MLA. It is also important that the editor be comfortable working with digital material and new technology, be a critical thinker with a creative thought process, and be adaptable to new assignments, new clients, and forward-thinking ideas. The future of editing may be mostly online content, or it may swing back to print. Either way, the need for impeccable editing will survive in virtually every field. To stay ahead of the curve, successful editors will need to be able to expand their offerings to include

coaching and design. All told, the information I uncovered while writing this essay gives me every confidence in the future of the editing field.

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Footnotes

1. None of the figures available from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics include self-employed editors.
2. SPARK Publications has earned many awards, many of which can be viewed on the company's blog at <https://sparkpublications.com/blog/all-posts/awards/>.

Appendix A

Informational Interview Form (to be completed and attached as an appendix to paper):

Informational Interview Form

Person Interviewed: Melisa Graham

Title or Occupation: Communications Director

Organization: SPARK Publications

Address or Web Site of Business: <https://sparkpublications.com/>

Phone Number or Email Address: 704-231-6502 mel@sparkpublications.com

Date of Interview: By phone on Monday, April 27, 2020 and follow up by email on Friday, May 1, 2020

Student Signature (electronic okay):

Appendix B

Career Essay Interview

Inbo
x



Rachel Daramanivong <daramom10@gmail.com>

1:28 PM (3
hours ago)

to mel

Mel,

Thank you so much for agreeing to speak with me about your role as Communications Director with SPARK Publications. It was helpful to learn more about what SPARK offers its clients as well as the environment Fabi Presslar has created for employees. I appreciate your insight into the editing field, including how it is evolving in the new generation of digital media. I believe my current personality traits correspond with those required to be a successful editor and look forward to gaining an English degree so that my technical proficiency matches my passion! My key takeaways from our chat were that adaptability and relationship-building are vital, connecting with a mentor can develop skills and provide direction, and a strong portfolio is a wonderful visual explanation of editing and design skill. I hope our professional paths cross again in the future! Thank you again!

Sincerely,

Rachel Daramanivong