

Think outside the book: Freelancing beyond the book publishing world

By *Cynthia Williams*

Options for freelance copyediting vary widely. We can offer our services not only to book publishers, but also to hospitals, ad agencies, nonprofits, research firms, department store catalogs, individuals, businesses, service firms — so many potential clients!

I work primarily with social science research consulting firms and nonprofits in the good-governance world. These organizations are often funded through work for large foundations and government contracts. For these clients, I edit products such as fact sheets, briefs, reports (annual reports and those conveying study results), grant proposals and public-facing awareness-raising products.

While some aspects of editing are transferrable no matter the job, working with non-book-publisher organizations can sometimes require different tools. Here are some tips on getting jobs with such clients and what it is like to work with these organizations.

Pitching. As with all freelancing, much of this work comes via word of mouth — for instance, a current client refers you to a colleague or mentions you on an e-mail discussion list. Even then, however, you'll need to follow up with a message that builds trust with the prospective client and signals to them that you are capable of editing the types of products they disseminate. There is also promise in cold calls or e-mails, since the number of small and large firms working in social science (or “program evaluation” in some contexts) and good governance seems to be growing.

Most importantly, the organizations want an editor who can call them out when they aren't explaining things well enough, are inconsistent, or just need to tighten their prose or organize it better — in addition to checking grammar, spelling, punctuation and everything else under the scope of copyediting.

Generally, these organizations are familiar with the process of being edited and the importance of having an

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editor to review their materials. Sometimes, however, they may not know exactly what they want. The point of contact may not know the difference between copyediting and proofreading. In those instances, it helps to have an outline of the level of services you provide and details of what you include at each level.

Scheduling. Here lies the biggest difference between working with non-publisher organizations and working with book publishers. Deadlines can be tight. Ideally, such a client will reach out to you a week or two in advance to check if you are available for a project. My clients usually have an idea of how many hours the project will take.

This time estimate is often related to their budget for the project but also signals to me how heavy the editing should be. That is, if the point of contact estimates five hours for a 45-page report, I confirm that they are looking

for a very light edit. Or if the point of contact estimates two hours for a 20-page report, the point of contact will let me know that seven of the pages contain tables that only need to be checked in certain places.

Such scheduling often means my calendar isn't full months in advance regarding these projects. However, a weeklong job is often worth the same as a monthlong book project — and that makes the stress worth it.

Styles. As with book publishers, most of these organizations will share their style guides before you start working on their projects. In addition to reading the style guide thoroughly, I find it helpful to create a separate file with notes on the guide. The organization's style guide may cover formatting or punctuation preferences, but these may be discussed, say, on pages 3, 7 and 8 of the guide. In this separate file, I include all formatting notes in one place, so I can quickly go through a checklist to review the document for these requirements.

During the actual editing, I make sure to read on behalf of the reader. Many who work in social science research or good governance have advanced degrees, which equip them to delve into complex issues or use advanced analytical software. The receivers of their work are college-educated laypersons expecting a plain language explanation of a study or social issue.

If I have to read something three times to try to understand it, I will insert a comment with a suggestion of what I think the author is trying to

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Beyond the book, continued

say and note that the original is a bit hard to follow. Also, while many of my clients request that I edit to reduce the passive voice, it can't always be avoided. In these contexts, my clients may be trying to soften the blow of disappointing news in study results.

One of the most-important lessons I've learned in working with these organizations is that my work has more value when I let go of my own compulsions. For example, if my client uses "kick-off" consistently throughout a report and Merriam-Webster instructs me to use "kickoff," I'm not making my client's life any easier by changing all instances. Upon review, my client will have to stop at each of these changes and decide whether they want to accept or reject the change — and they may have a tight deadline to meet.

In working with organizations, the final products may not always be so. Often after my review, a team leader

will go through my changes. I hardly ever get to see what they've accepted or rejected, and I never go through a back-and-forth with the client to get to a "clean" file. This is both advantageous and not.

It's advantageous if the client likes your work and you've built a rapport with them so you both know what to expect. It can be disadvantageous if you've edited too heavily or too lightly, and you don't get subsequent jobs because the client is too busy to discuss tweaking to meet their expectations.

Working outside book publishing can be a great way to supplement book-publishing income or fill in gaps between longer projects. It also suffices as a freelancer's main income. The clients often have their own style guides and work on faster deadlines, with shorter notice, but the work can be rewarding — both in pay and the content to which you are exposed. ■

Scams, continued

services, but some messages continue to go out under the Cartesius name. If you get one, just delete it.

A semi-coherent message is not necessarily from a scammer — for some legitimate clients, English is not a first language — but it's possible to develop a radar for probably scams. (If you aren't sure about a request, ask colleagues via the EFA discussion list.) One aspect to check is whether the apparent client has sent different chapters of a book to different editors for editing samples.

Indications of an attempted editorial scam include:

- Appears to have been sent to multiple recipients
- Includes attachments
- Language is clunky or incoherent
- Sets unrealistically tight deadline
- Sender name isn't clear
- Doesn't indicate how the sender found you ■