Editing Terms - A Quick-Reference Guide

Editing is not one thing.

It is several different kinds of work, applied at different stages, for different purposes.

This guide defines the most commonly used editing terms and clarifies how they differ — so you can aim your efforts (and your budget) wisely.

Developmental Editing

Focus: story, structure, and substance

Addresses:

- plot
- character arcs
- pacing
- structure
- theme
- logic and continuity

Use this when: The story isn't fully working yet, even if the writing itself is strong.

Not this: Grammar fixing or polishing sentences.

Structural Editing

Focus: organization and flow

Addresses:

- scene purpose
- chapter order
- transitions
- narrative momentum

Use this when: The pieces exist, but the order or balance feels off.

Not this: Line-by-line rewriting.

Line Editing

Focus: how the writing sounds and feels

Addresses:

- **voice**
- **rhythm**
- **tone**
- **clarity at the sentence level**
- **emotional impact**

Use this when: The story works, but the prose needs refinement.

Not this: Basic grammar correction alone.

**** Sometimes referred to as Stylistic Editing.***

Copyediting

Focus: correctness and consistency

Addresses:

- grammar
- punctuation
- spelling
- word usage
- formatting
- adherence to a style sheet

Use this when: The structure and prose are settled.

Not this: Fixing plot or character problems.

Proofreading

Focus: final error detection

Addresses:

- typos
- missing words
- formatting glitches
- layout errors

Use this when: Everything else is finished and the manuscript is ready for publication.

Not this: Editing the story itself.

Commonly Confused Terms

Editing vs Revising

Revising changes content (adding, cutting, rearranging).
Editing refines what exists.
Revisions often happen because of editing — but they are not the same thing.

Line Editing vs Copyediting

Line editing improves how the prose reads.
Copyediting ensures it's technically correct.
One is about voice.
The other is about precision.

Proofreading vs Editing

Editing improves the manuscript.
Proofreading checks the finished version for errors.
Proofreading comes last. Always.

Beta Reading vs Editing

Beta readers give reader reactions and impressions.
Editors analyze and diagnose problems.
Both are useful. They serve different purposes.

Sensitivity Reading

Focus: awareness and accuracy
A sensitivity read reviews a manuscript for:

- harmful stereotypes
- cultural inaccuracies
- unexamined assumptions

It is not censorship.
It is an additional lens of clarity.

Why These Terms Matter

Knowing these distinctions helps you:

- avoid fixing the wrong problems
- edit in the right order
- hire the right kind of help
- communicate clearly with editors and readers
- save time, money, and frustration

Editing works best when you know what kind of work you're doing — and why.

It is important to note that there can be some overlap between the different types of editing. Developmental and Structural editing often occur simultaneously, as do Line editing and Copyediting.

Proofreading, however, always stands alone!