The editor in context

EDITING FOR PUBLICATION is a little-known occupation. The common impression is that it consists of correcting grammar and punctuation, which it does, but the job has many other aspects that make it endlessly absorbing. If you are suited to it, editing is the best fun you can have at a desk.

What makes a good editor? Editors share a defining characteristic: they love ideas and words and books. In a world of increasing specialisation, most are generalists. Reflecting the female domination of the book industry, most of them are women.

Two contradictory stereotypes prevail. One is the Jackie Onassis type, who has languorous lunches with celebrity authors and swans about with the literati at the best parties. The other is the eagle-eyed, anal-retentive, obsessive frump who flays inoffensive manuscripts with her punitive pencil. In fact, editors who fit either of these stereotypes don’t get far. Editors have been compared to midwives, surgeons and even chameleons, but the most apt simile is inorganic: ‘Good editors may be likened to those crystal-clear prisms which form a vital part of a pair of binoculars. They are not there to alter the view or change the scene, but to make it clearer and closer.’

Editorial skills

The profession of editing rejects all but paragons with an extraordinary array of virtues:

- Communication skills: Editors are articulate and communicate lucidly in writing; they can write in various registers and styles and take on the voice of an author.
- Social skills: Editors are tactful, patient, flexible, good at negotiating and have respect for others’ views.
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- **Cognitive skills**: Editors are good at abstract, inductive, critical thinking; they quickly identify the essence of a piece of writing and grasp underlying concepts and themes.

- **Reading skills**: Editors use many strategies to gain meaning from text, such as skimming, skipping and parsing.

- **Imagination and initiative**: Editors perceive how to transform raw text into an effective publication by imagining the reader’s needs. They are resourceful in solving problems and finding information.

- **Concentration, perseverance, attention to detail**: Editors engage with complex written material for days or weeks at a time. They are methodical and meticulous, performing tedious, repetitive tasks with painstaking care.

- **Managerial and administrative skills**: Editors are good at organising, prioritising, and meeting deadlines. They keep track of numerous multi-stage projects over extended periods.

- **Team players**: Editors collaborate well, and they expect the author or the publishing team to take credit for their work.

To some extent editing is a state of mind, poised between attachment and detachment. On the one hand, you care enough about the work to want to do it well. On the other, you usually have little control over the project – purpose, design, resources – so you must let go of it and not feel that any defects or failures diminish you personally. On some jobs, all you can do is turn garbage into mediocrity; to put it another way, you can’t polish a turd. The editor’s position is summed up in the old saying ‘All care and no responsibility’: you do your work diligently, but the overall responsibility for the outcome belongs to the publishing team.

Some editors are so self-effacing that they claim their work is invisible. It is true that non-experts might not see how the effect is achieved, but the appeal of a well-edited publication is as evident as that of a well-tended garden or a well-prepared meal.

**Applying editorial skills**

For centuries editors have played an unacknowledged role in improving written expression. Jane Austen’s reputation rests on her polished, epigrammatic style, but study of her handwritten manuscripts suggests that her natural style was untidy and ‘counter-grammatical’. The delicate precision is apparently the work of her editor, William Gifford.²

Editorial practice is not confined to professional editors. Many job descriptions require ‘effective written communication skills’. Our highly literate society rewards those who can use language well to explain, instruct, persuade or entertain.

Every writer is to some extent an editor and needs to understand the principles explained here, whether the output is a fantasy novel or a letter to the newspaper. The same applies to communications that are not publications in the traditional sense. Teachers preparing handouts and business people giving presentations must
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consider structure and language, integrate words with artwork, and tailor their material to the needs of the audience.

Enlightened executives and officials know that errors in details such as spelling will diminish their organisation’s credibility and enrage some of their customers. Moreover, clear writing can deliver enormous savings in time and money. According to a report in *The Age*:

The Tax Office has placed an ad in the public service *Gazette* seeking a ‘clear expression adviser’. For a mere $90,000, the adviser will try to translate the tax boys’ jabbering jargon into English. This follows repeated switchboard meltdowns after mailouts, with baffled taxpayers wanting to know what the hell they are talking about.

In Britain, the Campaign for Plain English estimates that ‘sloppy letter-writing alone costs . . . about £6000 million a year, as a result of mistakes, inefficiency and lost business’.

The chapters that follow draw most of their examples from books, but the principles can – indeed, should – be applied to any print or screen publication, small or large. Editing adds value by providing clarity and precision in all forms of written expression: pamphlets and brochures, research papers and technical reports, submissions and tenders, parliamentary statutes and government regulations, forms and questionnaires, instruction manuals, catalogues, legal documents, product information, fact sheets.

The book industry

Although editors work in many sectors, the book industry is the origin and the core of the profession, so we will survey it briefly.

In Australia today, the publishing world is in a state of commercial and technological upheaval that bewilders those who try to earn their living in it. In circumstances of chaos, the long view is often calming. Hindsight shows us that the trends in publishing that disturb us today – the commercialisation of mass culture, the rat race of galloping technology, the increasing domination of multinational conglomerates – are merely the latest chapters in a long-running thriller.

We can confidently say, however, that books are changing and the trade isn’t what it used to be.

Book publishing is one of Australia’s most important cultural industries in terms of output, employment and earnings. Books seem to have outdone films in resisting cultural imperialism, and newspapers and magazines in resisting ownership concentration. According to the most recent figures, in 2007/08 about 1000 commercial publishers between them published almost 10,000 new titles and they earned sales revenue of $1.7 billion and sold 180 million individual books. This looks promising but the profile is asymmetrical: 90 per cent of these titles sold fewer than 120 copies and half of them sold fewer than six. A similar profile applies
1 The editor in context

to the companies themselves: the largest ten firms account for more than half of all sales, with a long tail of medium-size and small players. 5

Historically Melbourne was the centre of the Australian publishing industry and it is still the home of literary and educational publishing. Its designation in 2008 as a UNESCO City of Literature recognised the breadth and depth of its literary culture, which is underpinned by the Wheeler Centre for Books, Writing and Ideas. 6

Australian trade (general) publishers include subsidiaries of global firms like HarperCollins (owned by News Corporation), Penguin (owned by Pearson), Random House (owned by Bertelsman) and Pan Macmillan. The last decade has seen independent companies taking the competition up to the majors and achieving visibility and strong sales. Locally owned independents include Allen & Unwin and Hardie Grant along with smaller firms like Text Publishing, Scribe Publications, Black Inc., Murdoch Books, Fremantle Press and Wakefield Press. Specialist firms include Lonely Planet and CSIRO Publishing. Children’s literature, from picture books to young adult fiction, is a strong sector among trade publishers and several firms specialise in it. Publishers of Indigenous writing – Magabala Books (Broome), Institute of Aboriginal Development Press (Alice Springs) and Aboriginal Studies Press (Canberra) – though small are culturally significant.

Educational publishing accounts for about 40 per cent of all titles and many an editor relies on textbooks to put food on the table. The development of learning resources is costly, and the pay-off is slow because it takes time to gain course adoptions. Thus major firms with deep pockets dominate the educational sector, including Pearson Education, Cengage Learning and McGraw-Hill. The introduction of a national curriculum will result in fewer titles and longer print runs. The university presses – including Melbourne, Oxford, Cambridge, New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia – publish non-fiction trade titles as well as scholarly and reference works, and the latter two also have strong reputations in fiction and poetry.

The peak industry body, the Australian Publishers Association, represents book, journal and electronic publishers. Its website has news of the industry and useful links. Other important organisations include the Institute of Professional Editors, the Australian Society of Authors, the Fellowship of Australian Writers, the nascent Writing Australia, the Australian and New Zealand Society of Indexers, the Children’s Book Council of Australia and the Australian Society for Technical Communication, as well as the Literature Board of the Australia Council and state arts ministries, editors societies and writers centres. 7

A female industry

Unlike most Australian industries, book publishing is women’s business. It employs about 5000 people, of whom almost two-thirds are female. 8 Among editors, the ratio is nearer nine to one. As is usually the case, though, men are over-represented in decision-making positions.
The role of women in Australian publishing has been overlooked. As one researcher points out: ‘despite some notable exceptions, the history of the book in Australia largely omits women. This has resulted in significant gender biases and distortions in the mainstream history of Australian print culture.’

It is said that the majority of readers, especially of fiction, are female.

The numerical dominance of women in the industry probably depresses pay rates. In 2007/08 the average salary for employees of major publishers was $67,000 p.a., which is better than average pay for the arts but far short of salaries in information media and professional services. The qualifications of new employees do not reflect the proliferation of courses in editing and publishing: about half hold a graduate diploma or certificate (but not from a specialised publishing program), and almost one-quarter have only a Year 12 certificate.

The position of authors

Australian authors feel fragile, besieged by the bean counters and neglected by an ignorant public. It is true that publishers have abdicated their role of fostering authors’ skills, but there have been compensating developments. Government patronage of writers has increased in recent decades, with the establishment of the Australia Council and the Public Lending Right. More than a dozen writers centres, together with literary competitions, awards, grants and writers festivals, offer support and exposure, and creative writing courses flourish in adult education, universities and TAFE. Most of our major authors of both fiction and educational books are Australian residents and some of them make a reasonable living from their work, though authors who achieve international success are often lost to local publishers.

Trends

If we take the long view, some trends in publishing are positive. Domination by overseas interests has not impoverished our culture or diminished the national conversation: we are reading a lot more Australian books than we were a few decades ago.

Although sales of Australian titles have skyrocketed, some see this vigour as unhealthy. They would prefer to see fewer books of better quality, arguing that good books get lost among the dross. Certainly many books are undercooked or even half-baked, but we have to maintain perspective: in the Victorian era, for instance, people read a lot of trash as well as Darwin and Dickens. (You should see the books my grandparents received as school prizes in the 1890s.)

With regard to trade books, Michael Heyward of Text Publishing sees Australia as

an ample market that is desperately short of publishers and editors. There are many more writers in Australia worthy of publication than skilled people to publish them, to guide their careers . . . We publish fewer books per capita than we should. We have too few publishing lists. We sell fewer rights than we should . . . The market is waiting for us to surprise it.
1 The editor in context

The major challenge for Australian trade publishers has always been the difficulty of achieving economies of scale in a relatively small local market, though they have never explained how publishing thrives in New Zealand and Ireland with their much smaller populations. Australian publishers have generally spread their risks by combining imports with local production. Growth in recent years has tended to come from an increase in imports as a strong Australian dollar makes them cheaper and at the same time discourages exports; imports also have the advantage of avoiding GST.\(^\text{12}\)

In a new development the local branches of global companies are distributing books published by the independents, which benefits both: larger volumes help to pay for the majors’ computerised supply systems while providing the independents with previously unimaginable availability and sales. Henry Rosenbloom of Scribe Publications has described the change as establishing ‘a new ecology’ in Australian book publishing.\(^\text{13}\)

In both trade and educational publishing, prospective markets and opportunities for growth are seen in global rather than national or regional terms. New Zealand and Oceania, once the major destinations for exports, have been overtaken by the United States and Asia. Even very small publishers sell overseas; Spinifex Press, for instance, sells its titles worldwide by means of translations, co-publications and e-books.\(^\text{14}\) Global exposure cuts both ways, as Lonely Planet found when sales of travel books plunged after September 11, 2001. It is no surprise to find publishers agreeing that competition from other media, especially online, is now the major challenge facing the industry.

Responsibility for the environment is another major concern. Many publishers have taken steps to reduce their carbon footprints by reducing their energy use. In print production they are using non-toxic inks and paper that is recycled or sustainably produced.

In a new trend, the Australian publishing industry is becoming reflective and undergoing academic scrutiny. \(^\text{15}\) A recently completed bibliography itemises sixty-three Australian-originated higher degree theses on book publishing, the book trade and related topics, together with twelve higher degree research projects currently in progress in Australia.

There are many pressures on Australian book publishing – changes in intellectual property rights, the digital transformation of knowledge, shifts in reading habits and methods. So far the industry has proved vigorous and resilient. It’s encouraging to hear that young readers are keen: ‘Many Australian children’s publishers say the local industry is basking in a golden age, prompted by “book-hungry kids” and hard-won recognition that children’s books are worthy cultural investments.’\(^\text{16}\)

Who’s who in publishing

The job description ‘editor’ arose in the book industry, but editorial skills are in demand for all kinds of written communication. Once upon a time, stenographers
routinely corrected their bosses’ grammar and improved their expression. Now that everyone does their own typing, many corporate and government bodies are employing editors to add value to information and ensure that their communications are literate and effective.

Editors’ workplaces are so varied that it is difficult to generalise about the personnel, but it is usually possible to distinguish a triad of editor, author and publisher. Figure 1.1 shows the typical responsibilities in a large firm. Positions with dotted lines are usually outsourced to other businesses or consultants.
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Small firms may also outsource editing, graphic design, typesetting and electronic production.

Editor
In many situations the editor manages the publication project, doing everything from drawing up the project plan to organising the launch. Large publishing houses usually split the editorial role, and although the job titles are confusing the division is usually much the same. The commissioning editor (acquisitions editor, managing editor, publisher) takes the management role: developing the concept with the author, negotiating the contract, writing the publishing proposal, drawing up the budget, assembling the publishing team and supervising production. The editor (copyeditor, line editor, desk editor) does the grunt work, as described in the following chapters.

Author
The author of a publication may be one person, or several people, or a committee of some sort. In educational, corporate and government publishing an individual may prepare a draft that is then reworked by others and approved by a committee.

Sometimes the author does very little of the actual writing. Anthologies, collections and reference works may have many contributors, and one or two individuals take overall responsibility for the content. For a historical diary or an edition of a classic literary work, the volume editor (co-ordinating editor, academic editor) plays the role of the author. Books such as celebrity autobiographies are often ghost-written, and well-known academics lend their names to textbooks on which underlings have done the bulk of the work.

In this book the term ‘author’ means the person who has the responsibility for authorial decisions during the publication process. However the term is defined, the editor must always respect the author’s moral rights and the integrity of the work.

I have referred to the author with feminine pronouns throughout.

Publisher
The publisher is likewise difficult to characterise. The simplest case is that of editors working in house in the book industry, where the publisher is their employer; the publishing decisions are made by the commissioning editor and ratified by senior management. For freelance editors, the publisher is usually the client. In the case of self-published works, of course, the publisher is also the author. In corporate and government publishing, the media unit or the public relations department plays the publisher’s role.

In essence, the publisher is the person who controls the budget and schedule, and thus determines the nature and quality of the publication.
Colleagues
The editor’s colleagues are designers, typesetters, indexers and proofreaders, and some projects may also include picture researchers, permissions editors, photographers, illustrators and cartographers. For screen publications there are web designers, information architects, content managers and many others. The job descriptions are slippery: on some projects the editor not only edits but also does the proofreading, page layout and indexing, or a desktop publisher may do both the design and the typesetting. Publishing houses usually outsource most of these tasks, and even in-house editors may regularly work with colleagues they have never laid eyes on.

The reader
Lurking unseen among these various characters is the most important of all, the whole purpose of the publication – the reader. The editor holds the image of the target readers constantly in mind and shapes the content and form of the publication to fit their needs.

I have referred to the reader with masculine pronouns throughout.

Portrait of a profession

The doctrine of economic rationalism has dominated all business enterprises for some time, but publishers are beginning to realise what they have lost in sacrificing editorial standards to the bottom line. In 2003 Peter Donoughue, then managing director of John Wiley & Sons Australia, sounded a warning:

At a time when celebrities can’t write, corporations lie, actors can’t sing, journalists run agendas, politicians deceive, and institutions are cowed, we need editors with high standards to produce text readers can trust. At a time of insecurity, a time characterised by the misuse of language, those of us professionally engaged in the business of information need courage to confront misinformation, hype, cant, cliché and spin.

More than ever, we need editors committed to quality and excellence. Such editors have always been underrated in the publishing industry. Large and critically important parts of the editorial function have been outsourced for decades. We publishers have decided we don’t own that function, just as we don’t own the composition or printing functions. But it has always seemed to me that we are an impoverished industry because of it. Our standards, as publishers, have been lowered. Our regard for quality, for the quality of the text itself, is off our radar screen. The less we pay for editing the better. That’s all we care about. The hope for quality therefore rests with editors themselves.18

Editors have been working on this challenge for some time.
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The Institute of Professional Editors

The idea of a national organisation of editors was first mooted in 1979; when raised again at a meeting of Victorian editors in 1983 it was received ‘with what might best be described as wistful pessimism’. Three years later the president of The Editors, Sydney, commented, ‘I do not think we will ever become a satellite of our colleagues in Melbourne. The Melburnians drink more at their meetings than we do.’ Nevertheless the profession was expanding and the need for a national body intensified.¹⁹

Each state and Canberra has its own independent society of editors, the oldest of which, the Victorian society, was founded in 1970. The first moves towards federation came in 1998 with the creation of the Council of Australian Societies of Editors, an informal body comprising the presidents of the societies. CASE laid a sound foundation for the national organisation, despite an early disappointment when a national magazine, The Australian Editor, foundered after only two issues. CASE went on to develop Australian Standards for Editing Practice and an accreditation scheme, both described below. It also started a program of biennial national conferences hosted by the state societies in turn; these are a continuing success, providing a focus for national connections and scholarly reflection on professional matters.

After ten years of informal co-operation CASE metamorphosed into a not-for-profit public company, the Institute of Professional Editors. IPEd’s constitution was approved by its members, the societies of editors, and it is funded largely by a levy on their subscriptions. The IPEd Council, which consists of a delegate from each society, meets once or twice a year and holds teleconferences between meetings. It employs a part-time secretary. As well as administering the accreditation scheme, IPEd undertakes national initiatives such as promotion, professional development and mentoring. It advocates for the profession through its representation on bodies such as the Book Industry Strategy Group and makes submissions to government on matters of concern. With the Fellowship of Australian Writers it administers the annual Barbara Ramsden Award for excellence in editing.

Many volunteers have devoted their time to IPEd and its programs with no motive other than the advancement of their profession; their selfless contributions have overcome the problems of distance and disparity, transforming wistful pessimism into energy and purpose. It is impossible to quantify IPEd’s achievements, but all the societies report a healthy growth in numbers over the last few years. IPEd and the societies have websites (see Select Bibliography), and the societies’ newsletters, with many articles of interest, are available online.

Australian Standards for Editing Practice

Australian Standards for Editing Practice is the foundation of the profession. It is innovative – in fact, a world first – as a comprehensive statement of the power of editing to add value to information and to clarify communication. By codifying