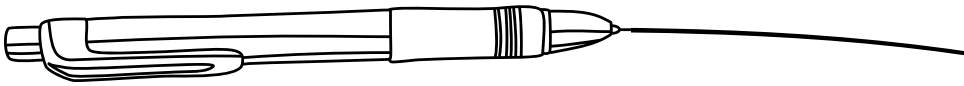
WRITER'S DIGEST

NOTES FROM THE MARGINS

WRITER'S DIGEST COLUMNS OF NONFICTION BOOK TOPICS



AMY JONES

NOTES FROM THE MARGINS

BY AMY JONES

Look at the requirements for any book proposal and you'll find a request for "comp titles." These are comparable and competitive books yours will stand next to in bookstores and on sell-sheets with publisher's sales teams. But what does that really mean? Who really uses them and why is there so much emphasis put on them? We'll cover all that and more and you'll quickly understand why so many people (myself included) have a love/hate relationship with comp titles.

WHAT ARE COMP TITLES?

First, note that it's "comp titles," not "comp title." More than one is always required. When I was acquiring books for Writer's Digest Books, our pub board (which approved new books for nearly a dozen imprints) required that acquisition editors provide at least six comp titles: three books from our own line (i.e., other WD titles in my case) and three books from other publishers. Other publishers may require more or fewer titles, but this is a good baseline and you'll see why later.

When using the word *comparable*, agents, acquisition editors, and sales folks take both content and production values into account. We consider the similarities and also note distinct differences between your proposed book and a published title in terms of the content and how the content is presented as it relates to writing style, inclusion of images/graphs/charts, etc., and organization. When it comes to production, we're looking at whether the books are/will be paperback or hardcover, the dimensions, the length, and the retail price.

When using the word *competitive*, we are thinking about books yours will be selling against both in terms of what bookstore buyers will be thinking of, and what consumers in those bookstores will be shopping for.

WHO COMP TITLES CAN HELP AND WHY

To really understand what comp titles are, you have to understand who uses them and more important, the ways in which they are used.

The first person who should make use of comp titles is **You**, if you plan to pitch your book to an agent or publisher. Knowing that legitimate comp titles exist for a book you plan to write *and sell* will help you establish (1) the focus of the book; (2) that there is a need for the book in the marketplace; and (3) ways to make your book stand out from the competition. When you include compelling comp titles in your proposal to an agent or editor, it also helps convince that person that you are well informed and up-to-date on the topic and the market for that topic.

Agents and Acquisition Editors also use comp titles as part of their consideration for whether a book has viable business potential. They might love the book for the writing or for the content, but they also have to know how to position the book in the marketplace so the publisher is willing to take the risk on all of the costs associated with producing the book. Ideally, agents and editors will be able to find a few books that are similar enough to yours in content and production, while still pointing out the gap between them that yours would fill.

But beyond their similarities, the agent or editor would also need to consider sales of the comp titles. A book might look great as a comp for content, but if it hasn't sold well, that doesn't exactly encourage a publisher to try something similar.

The Sales Team uses comp titles for a decidedly different purpose. When the sales reps visit buyers for bookstores or for book sections of big box stores, oftentimes they have to encourage a buyer to take a book over other new titles in that category, or to purchase a larger quantity. Part of that process is to position your book relative to other books that have done well for that store in a particular section. As with the agent and editor, the sales person will use a combination of "this is a similar topic as X book which your customers bought Y copies of."

Additionally, a **Buyer** might be convinced to take the book, but perhaps the sales person wants them to take a higher quantity from the initial print run. Knowing which books your title is like will help the sales rep offer up ideas for special displays or promotions that include your book along with a few comp titles. If a buyer can envision additional ways consumers will find your book in their store, they're more likely to take a higher quantity. Those displays you see at bookstores that say "If you liked _____, try _____!"—those are comp titles.

I mentioned earlier that I was required to provide at least six comp titles for each book I wanted to acquire, but what I didn't mention was that all of those had to be published in the past one to three years. Because sales reps use comp titles to sell books to buyers, buyers want to know that similar books have *recently* appealed to consumers. If a buyer only sees comps from seven years ago, that can be an indication that either the fad has passed or the market is saturated in that area.

THE CAVEATS

Given what you just read, you might imagine there are caveats and conditions and "what if" scenarios to nearly all of it. You would be right and that's what makes comp titles so challenging (and why I love them and hate them!). Here are just a few.

Perhaps you're writing in a truly niche market—publishers will have a different expectation of what's considered a successful seller than a more commercial market (that's why I deliberately haven't included sales ranges). Likewise, if a comp title is truly convincing in terms of content but hasn't sold well, the agent or editor can argue (internally at least) that your book will be *better* than the one that didn't sell. Perhaps there wasn't any marketing, or the title was bad, or the writing was bad, or any number of other things your book will improve upon.

There are also exceptions to the one to three years guideline. Some books in some markets have a long shelf life. They might be consistent high performers by well-known writers (think Stephen King's *On Writing* or Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*), but before you include those on your list, consider the fact that those books could be hard to compete against. The other exception to the time guideline would be books related to specific events, such as books celebrating the anniversary of something (like Woodstock) or about a current special event (think the 2020 presidential election). In those cases, it's OK to look to books about previous anniversaries or other less-current special events. Just make sure to have some newer titles too.

Finding comp titles might feel like a tedious, constraining exercise, but they do serve a purpose, or rather, multiple purposes. If you keep those in mind, finding them will become much easier and might even be fun. In the next Notes From the Margins column, we'll delve into just that: how you can find the most compelling comp titles for your proposal, and how and where agents and editors might select different comp titles. **WD**

Amy Jones is a senior editor of WD and the former managing content director of WD Books, North Light Books, and IMPACT Books. Find her on Twitter @AmyMJones_5.

NOTES FROM THE MARGINS

BY AMY JONES

Last issue, we talked about why many people, myself included, have a love/hate relationship with comp titles. But, because I knew they're important—and required—I needed to find a way to make looking for them more enjoyable as I worked on book pitches. So, I started to think of my search for the perfect comp titles as a scavenger hunt. I put myself in the shoes of the book's perfect reader and asked, what are they reading and what do they want to read but can't find? From there, it became a black hole of internet searches.

As an example, my most recent searches for comp titles were for Writer's Digest Books that I was going to pitch to the pub board. While all of them were books about writing, there are smaller parts of that niche—even smaller than simply separating books about fiction or nonfiction writing. Within fiction alone there are subcategories like writing characters, settings, short stories, plotting, and pacing—you get the idea. The same goes for nonfiction: writing personal essays, articles, and memoirs. And this doesn't even begin to address all of the different business-related aspects of these types of writing (queries, proposals, etc.) or getting inspired to write.

I tell you all this because next we're going to look at where you can find comp titles and as you do, it's important to remember to not just select the first books related to your topic that you find. You'll want to dig deeper and consider the more relevant sub-topics too.

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WHERE YOU CAN FIND COMP TITLES

Online

The low hanging fruit of internet searches is, like it or not, Amazon. The search functionality and the sheer volume of titles available make this site a quick and convenient resource for finding comp titles for even the most obscure topics. Here are a few of my best tips for looking for comp titles on Amazon.

You can start in one of two ways: looking up the title of a book in your category that you're familiar with already, or typing in a related search term and restricting the searches to books. Once you click on a specific book or title, scroll down until you see "Customers who viewed this item also viewed." There you'll see a list of titles that are related in some way. You'll need to search through them to see exactly how relevant they are, but once you find one, you can use the same method on that book. And thus, the internet black hole!

Once you've exhausted the "also viewed" selections, scroll down a little further to the product details. There, you'll see several links of categories where this book is listed.

Click on the links that are most relevant to your proposed book's topic and you'll find plenty of other potential comp titles.

Two caveats to searching on Amazon: 1) Be on the lookout for self-published titles. As I discussed in Part 1 in the last issue of WD, self-published books don't often make the best comp titles, though that is not a comment on their inherent value. 2) Be on the lookout for very old, out-of-print books. Comp titles need to be published within the past one to three years (with few exceptions).

Next, try the above tactics on bookstore websites as well. Their websites have similar functionalities and will also give you an idea of which books they carry in stores versus which ones are only available online.

Another option for online searches, though a bit more challenging, is the Library of Congress website (**catalog.loc.gov/vwebv/searchBrowse**). They keep a list of all the books published in the U.S. so you'll have to carefully narrow down your search in terms of publication date and subject type.

Real Life—Retail and Libraries

After you've exhausted your online searches, you might wonder why you should go to the bookstore or library to look for comp titles. This is about seeing how and where your book will fit in on the shelves. It will help you connect with the people who are selling, recommending, or helping people find your book. Librarians and booksellers know their stuff—if they can't give you a good feel for how or where their customers will search for a book on your topic, that could mean your potential publisher could have a difficult time selling your book to buyers for those stores or libraries.

After you've exhausted your online searches, you might wonder why you should go to the bookstore or library to search for comp titles. This is about seeing how or where your book will fit on the shelves.

If, however, the seller or librarian can direct you to a section, this is your opportunity to envision your book on the shelves. How full are these shelves? How are the other books packaged (hardcover or paperback, trim size, number of pages, price, etc.)? What kind of covers do they have? How are they appealing to readers with the copy on the front and back covers or the first few pages of the interior? "Look Inside" features are great on websites, but seeing the books in person can give you a more complete picture of how books like yours are made.

WHERE AGENTS AND EDITORS FIND COMP TITLES

Your online and in-person searches for the best comp titles will give the agent or editor a great starting point for how you position your book in the marketplace, but they won't take what you've provided and simply call it done. Instead, if they are intrigued by your proposal, they will conduct their own comp title searches before choosing to pitch your book to an editor or pub board.

Your searches likely won't be able to quantify how successful those books have been in terms of sales (rankings on websites can change daily or even hourly), so this is part of what your agent or editor will look for. They'll use a service available to industry professionals called NPD BookScan (formerly Nielson BookScan). This service tracks what books are sold each day, week, year, and since a book was released. It also offers current bestseller lists for specific categories.

Your agent or editor will look up the specific titles you've listed and see how well they've sold, then determine if they need to search for new comp titles that can better make the case for publishing your book. They'll also use their knowledge of the topic, particularly if they work for a more niche imprint, to select comp titles that could be more persuasive to a pub board or sales team.

Finding the right comp titles for your proposed book can be a somewhat time-consuming and challenging task, but in the long run it's a valuable exercise. It will help you solidify your target audience base and help you get to know how they search for and buy books, like the one you hope to get in their hands. And all of that information can help you persuade your potential agent or publisher that you and your book are in their best interest. **WD**

Amy Jones is a senior editor of WD and the former managing content director of WD Books, North Light Books, and IMPACT Books. Find her on Twitter @AmyMJones_5.

NOTES FROM THE MARGINS

BY AMY JONES

Identifying Your Book's Target Audience

For about two years before I became an editor, I was an English composition instructor for first-year college students. (I was not good at it.) During that time, one of the most important things I tried to drive home to the students was: Know your audience. Whenever, wherever, and whatever you are writing, knowing who your audience actually is vs. who you want it to be is crucial.

And that means, unfortunately, your book is not for everyone. But instead of fixating on that disappointing fact, let's focus on identifying your audience and what that means as you write your nonfiction book and the corresponding book proposal. (Meta lesson one: By saying "your nonfiction book," I'm identifying part of my audience as people writing nonfiction.)

BEFORE YOU START WRITING

It might seem odd to think about identifying your book's audience before you start writing it, but this can save you a lot of time and energy in the long run. If you have a seemingly brilliant idea for a book, knowing that there is an audience for it and who that audience is can not only provide motivation for you to continue writing, but it can also help you organize your book.

When writing a nonfiction book, it's common to write it because you think you have something to share—information to impart, stories to tell. And that's true—you should have something unique to say or a unique way of saying it. But, you aren't the most important part of your book; the reader is. Your reader needs to know why and how your book will help them solve a problem or enrich their lives. It's what keeps them interested and invested in your book. And that means you aren't writing for yourself, even if that's a lovely motivating sentiment we like to tell ourselves to keep our inner critic at bay. (Meta lesson two: Here I'm making the assumption that my readers are folks who want to sell their books. If you don't want to sell your book, you wouldn't need to read further or put together a book proposal.)

Knowing what your reader wants from your book will help you determine what information they need, when in the book they need it (i.e. what background information they might need first and therefore, an organizational strategy for your chapters), and most importantly, what you need to leave out.

If you know your target audience, you are more likely to know if, generally speaking, they have some existing knowledge about the topic or not. If they do have some background, you can more likely use industry terms without defining them or skip over certain basic information. Or, if you're writing to beginners, including a glossary or the nitty-gritty basics can be crucial. This can help you and your future publisher identify gaps in your table of contents.

Identifying what you need to leave out can be one of the most difficult parts of writing a book for another, more personal reason as well. Some of the authors I worked with struggled with this: coming to terms with the idea that a story or experience that was meaningful to them might not have relevance to their readers. They would spend time trying to rework the material to get it in and many, but not all, would eventually realize it's not meant for this book. Cliché as it is, it's called "killing your darlings" for a reason.

But don't throw those darlings away just yet! Save them all and you may just discover you've got another book in you for a different audience. Many of my authors did.

FOR YOUR NONFICTION BOOK PROPOSAL

As you put together your nonfiction book proposal, you'll want to get as specific as possible about your target audience. This will help your potential agent or editor make a compelling case for publication. But what kind of specifics should you include?

First, try to identify three sizeable, yet legitimate groups of people who might benefit from reading your book. Think about professional organizations, hobby groups, disciplines, age or other demographic groups, social media groups, etc. This might even include groups that you've created. For example, if you're thinking about writing an event planning book, don't just say "event planners" would be interested. Instead, identify specific event planning organizations and associations to which event planners might belong.

Once you've identified groups, try to find reputable sources for potential sizes of those groups. Sometimes, it'll be easy and the membership size will be listed on an organization's website. Other times, you might have to dig into newspaper articles or industry studies. Include a note if the group has seen sizeable growth in recent weeks/months/years because that can indicate momentum for a topic.

This is the New Perspectives issue, so I'll encourage you to get creative as you think about who might be interested in your book. Start with the low-hanging fruit (like in the example above) but then think about adjacent audiences. When *Fight Write* author Carla Hoch and I were working on that book's proposal, we identified mystery/thriller writers as a large target audience for that book. But we also listed writers of other genres like romance and YA because lovers quarrel and teenagers have schoolyard fights. Those scenes need to be just as realistic as the heroine's escape from her captor in a crime novel.

Some of the authors I worked with struggled with this: coming to terms with the idea that a story or experience that was meaningful to them might not have relevance to their readers.

Secondly, include information about how you are connected to these audiences. Are you part of a specific demographic included in your target audience? Are you a dues-paying member of a local or national chapter of a professional organization? Are you a leader, speaker, or instructor for one of these organizations? Do you have connections to leaders or others who can help spread the word about your book? You can probably guess that knowing who your target audience is begins the process of creating a marketing plan to sell your book.

Finally, identify *why* these people would want to read your book. This is what we call "evidence of need." What information are you going to provide that people know they want or need? Consider the following questions.

- Is the information you aim to provide only available in disparate places online, making it hard to find something comprehensive?
- Are most other books on the topic directed toward a different piece of the audience?
- Does your book present a new way of thinking for this group?
- How does your book fill a gap or solve a problem for this group?

All of this information is very practical and pragmatic sounding. But keep in mind how your genre will influence what you provide to readers. Nonfiction encompasses inspiration and humor and essay collections and more. So maybe what you're going to provide readers is something they *didn't* know they needed, like new ways to laugh about cats.

If you've been reading this column for a while, some of this talk about "filling a gap" or "solving a problem" might sound reminiscent of our conversations about comp titles (April and May/June). You're not wrong. Choosing comp titles and identifying your audience work together to provide a complete picture of the potential market for the book.

Just like any part of writing a book, identifying the potential audience can be a time-intensive task. And in some cases, it might yield disappointing results. But when you do find that sweet spot of a great idea and a captive audience, that's a book worth writing. **WD**

Amy Jones is editor-in-chief of WD.

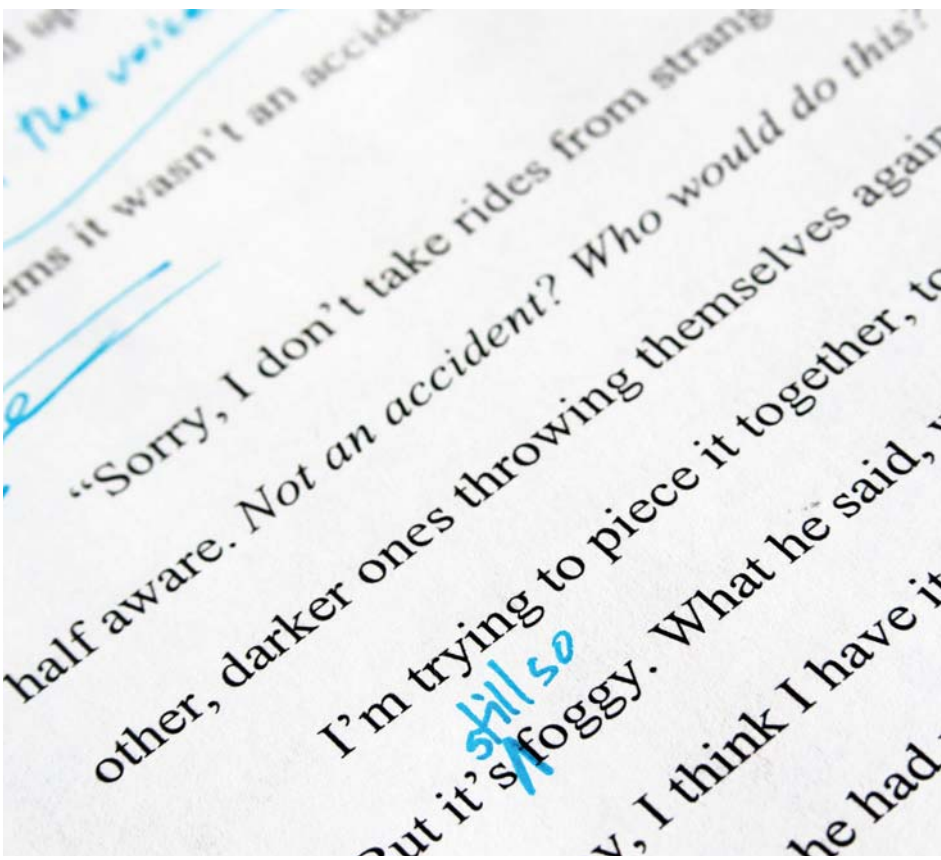
NOTES FROM THE MARGINS

BY AMY JONES

Welcome to Notes From the Margins, WD's new column about the traditional book publishing business. In this column, we'll consider the ins and outs of how books are made and what book editors really do all day. We'll cover topics such as comp titles, things your editor can and cannot fix, how long it takes to make a book once it's been acquired, and much more.

There's plenty I'll share based on my experiences with first-time authors, but of course, in true WD form, I want to hear from you. What do you want to know about working with an editor or publishing a book with a traditional publisher? Send your questions my way using the wdsubmissions@aimmedia.com email and use "Notes From the Margins" in the subject line.

Since this is The Beginnings Issue and the start of this column, let's talk about questions every first-time author should ask their editor at the beginning of their editorial relationship. Your editor might very well answer all these questions before you get a chance to ask them, but if one person acquired the book and another person will edit the book and another person worked with you on the contract, things may be overlooked. There's also the potential that your editor may assume you know something or forget to mention something in the fog of working on a dozen or more projects at once.



These are the four questions every first-time author should ask their editor.

1. ASK FOR THE AUTHOR'S GUIDE.

If this document wasn't given to you by your editor shortly after signing your contract, ask for it before asking anything else. The author's guide details the critical pieces of how to best work with your editor and depending on your publisher, the guide may be seven pages long or 27 pages long. It will tell you things like how to format your manuscript, how the publisher approaches fair use of copyrighted material, and requesting permission for reprinting previously published material. It may also, though not always, include contact information for other folks at the publishing house you can contact if you have questions not best suited for your editor, plus a tentative timeline for future parts of the editing process.

The key here is to read the author guide from front to back. It will likely address questions you wanted to ask, plus questions you didn't know you wanted the answers

to. And if you pay attention to the guidelines in the author's guide, particularly when it comes to formatting your manuscript and turning in files, your editor with thank you.

2. ASK ABOUT THE TIMELINE.

In your contract, you'll likely see a due date for turning in your complete manuscript, plus a clause stating the publisher will publish the book within *X* number of months after receiving and approving the manuscript. But what happens during those months and when? Ask your editor for a timeline of when you'll be required to review edits of the manuscript throughout the rest of the process and how long you'll be given to do that. The timeline he offers may be tentative, but it will give you an idea of how to manage your life beyond working on the book. If you normally plan a jam-packed family vacation during April but that will coincide with your first round of revisions, you might want to pick a different time to schedule that trip, or opt for a quiet cabin getaway where you can sit down with the manuscript and work for a few hours each morning.

You'll also want to know when the book is expected to be published, but a smart first-time author will ask two versions of this question: When will the book be in the warehouse, and when will it be published? The gap between these two dates allows the book to be shipped from the publisher's fulfillment warehouse to bookstores before it's available to the general public. Usually this is a period of waiting for authors, but if you have a special event or teaching gig that falls between those two dates, your publisher *might* be able to get copies early—but only with plenty of notice and if you ask politely.

It's great to talk about your book in advance of publication and while you work on the book. It creates excitement with your audience and builds your relationship with potential readers. And there's no better time to talk about your book than when a cover is revealed and when pre-ordering is available.

3. ASK WHEN WORK ON THE COVER WILL BEGIN AND WHEN PRE-ORDERING WILL BEGIN.

It's great to talk about your book in advance of publication and while you work on the book. It creates excitement with your audience and builds your relationship with potential readers. And there's no better time to talk about your book than when a cover is revealed and when pre-ordering is available. Getting an idea for when you'll be able to share a cover image and announce pre-orders may help you plan your blog posts and social media calendar.

A word of caution, though: Be prepared for the timeline to change on this. Creating a book cover is a long, complicated process with many participants who often have very strong opinions, so delays are inevitable.

4. ASK FOR THE HOUSE STYLE GUIDE.

A house style guide tells how pieces of the manuscript are written. It ensures that words, numbers, and punctuation are consistent throughout your book and the many other books an imprint produces. Most trade book publishers follow the Chicago Manual of Style but with slight deviations if the publisher or copy chief has opinions about things like the serial comma or using they/theirs/them as a singular pronoun, for example. The style guide notes those choices, plus how phrases common to the publisher's particular content ought to be written. For instance, the WD magazine style guide prefers that we not use the phrase "kid lit" but rather use "young adult" or the abbreviation "YA" but only after the first reference.

If you ask for the style guide, you don't need to try to follow it (though bonus points if you do!). But, it will help you understand some of the seemingly arbitrary changes your editor might make to your manuscript as she edits it.

One more quick tip about asking questions of your editor: You might be the kind of person who prefers to talk on the phone rather than email.

That's great! Personal connection makes for strong, lasting relationships. However, your editor might not have all the information you ask for at her fingertips if you call her unexpectedly. Send her an email noting the things you'd specifically like to talk about in a call. That way, she can have all the information prepared for you and the time you spend on the phone is put to good use. **WD**

Amy Jones is a senior editor of WD and the former managing content director of WD Books, North Light Books, and IMPACT Books. Find her on Twitter @AmyMJones_5.

NOTES FROM THE MARGINS

BY AMY JONES

Each week I do volunteer work at a local cat rescue. Cleaning the cat rooms and socializing the cats is a great way to decompress after a stressful day at the office. When the other volunteers found out I was a book editor, they asked if I would help them make a book about the shelter. It was a project that had long been on their list to raise awareness of and fundraise for the shelter, but they didn't know where to begin. When I said I'd help, the first thing I did was create a schedule for our process.

Although we are self-publishing the book, the schedule I created for our volunteer group was based entirely on the format of the schedule Writer's Digest Books, along with other nonfiction imprints under the same parent company, used to create its books. This breakdown will give you an idea of what you can expect if you've signed a contract with a traditional publisher, or you can use it as a guide to keep you on track if you need accountability as you work on self-publishing.

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MANUSCRIPT DUE DATES

When the contract is signed, it includes two manuscript due dates for the author. A partial MS is due **three to six months** after the contract is signed and the remaining/full MS is due another **three to six months** after the first deadline. These time frames are based on several factors: how much of the manuscript is already written, when we want the book to be published, and therefore how much wiggle room we have left for the remainder of the schedule. Essentially, start with the pub date you want, take the rest of the schedule into account, and that will show you how much time you have for this piece.

CONTENT EDIT

This is when the editor reads and edits the manuscript to see if it is a cohesive whole. Is it well-organized? Is there information missing? What needs to be revised to make it clearer for the reader? We aren't worried about grammar and punctuation at this point, especially if there are large-scale revisions that need to be made. Ideally an editor has about **two months** for this part of the process, though it can be done in less time if necessary. This is a good time to remind you that the editor is also working on many other books at different stages at the same time and these time periods all take that juggling act into account.

FIRST AUTHOR REVIEW

After the editor reviews the manuscript, she sends it back to the author

for revision. This time frame is a lot shorter than you'd expect—just about **two to three weeks**. This is why it behooves you to send the best possible version of your manuscript when it is first due. After that first due date, the process goes remarkably fast (and yet takes an incredibly long time from start to finish)!

COPYEDIT AND DESIGN

When the author returns the edited manuscript, the editor has a limited amount of time to review the changes before it goes on to copyedit—usually less than a week, in fact. While we're reviewing the edits, we are also pulling out examples of each type of text, called paragraph styles (heds, sample text, pull quotes, regular paragraphs, lists, etc.) for the designer. The entire manuscript then goes to the copy editor, who has **two weeks** to review the entire manuscript for sentence structure, grammar, and house style of the imprint. The designer gets the samples of each paragraph style and has about **one month** to create a template that matches the cover.

SECOND AUTHOR REVIEW

After the copyedit is completed, the author gets the entire manuscript again for **two weeks**. During this time they review the changes suggested by the copy editor. If the change makes sense, they accept it. If they disagree with a change, they add a comment explaining why.

DESIGN LAYOUT

The author sends their second review back to the editor, who then rectifies the changes requested by the copy editor and author. In instances where the copy editor and author disagree, the editor considers what will most benefit the reader's understanding. The manuscript is then laid out in InDesign using the template created by the designer. The editor or the designer might do this. This part of the process is allotted **three to four weeks** and can be a very time-intensive process depending on the number of graphs, charts, or images included.

EDIT REVIEW

After the book is designed, it goes to edit review for **three weeks**. For the first two weeks of this period the book is being proofread by two people, usually the editor and a proofreader who has never seen the book before. The editor can identify mistakes that were introduced during the design process based on their knowledge of the book and the proofreader is looking at the whole book with fresh eyes. During the third week of this period the editor makes the needed changes in the digital files.

FINAL DESIGN REVIEW

During the final design review, the designer has **one week** to correct any design issues and start preparing the files for the printer.

INDEXING AND FINAL AUTHOR REVIEW

During this time, the indexer has **one to two weeks** to create an index for the book. At the same time, the author gets to see the book in its nearly finished form. The author has the same amount of time to make minimal corrections but nothing that would impact the accuracy of the index.

FINAL EDIT REVIEW

The editor gets **one week** to review the book for errors one last time and to input the index and the remaining author changes.

After the final edit review, the files go to prepress and then on to the printer. Time frames for printing and delivery of the books vary wildly depending on where the printer is located and what kind of deal the publisher has arranged with the printer for printing timelines. It is often a matter of months to a finished product, though if you're doing a self-published title, you could have a printed copy of your book in as little as a week.

The book editing process is neat and orderly for a reason. Publishing books is an investment of time and money so it's important to get it right. That said, all of these time frames are flexible and can be adjusted, though it will impact the pub date. If a book is being "crashed in" to the schedule, meaning added in for a quicker release date, usually to take advantage of a cultural moment or special event, weeks and days are cut out from as many parts of the process as needed to get the files to the printer on time to make the specified pub date. On the other hand, if a book needs more revision, the pub date may be pushed out to allow more time for the author. This is all to say, book publishing is the exact opposite of chaos—until it's not. **WD**

Amy Jones is a senior editor of WD and the former managing content director of WD Books, North Light Books, and IMPACT Books. Find her on Twitter @AmyMJones_5.

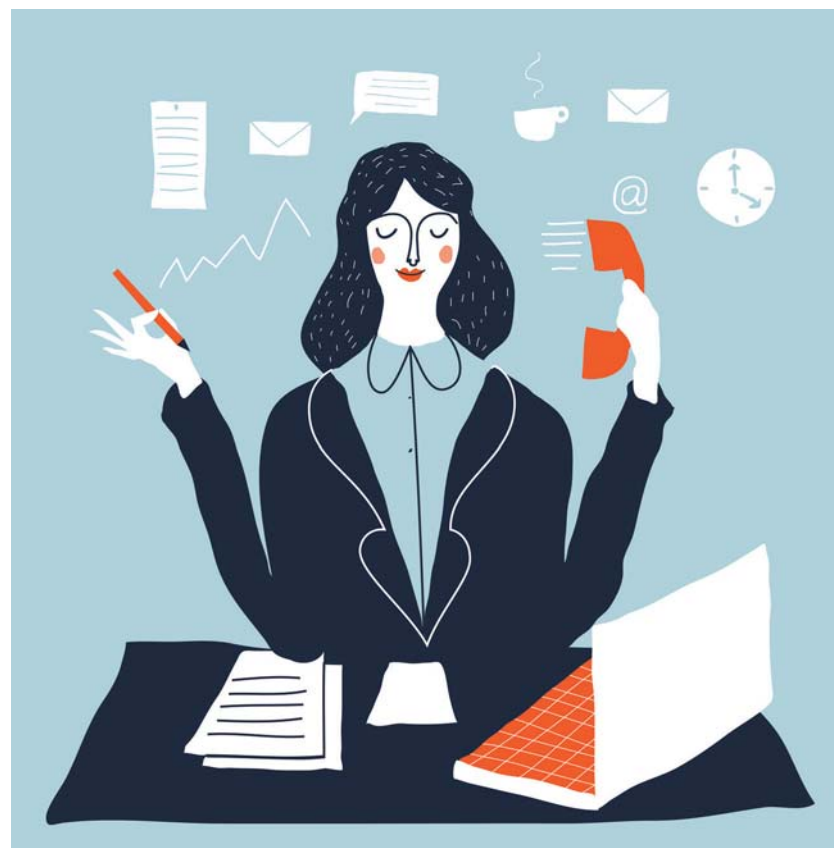
NOTES FROM THE MARGINS

BY AMY JONES

Here's my confession: Every morning when I open my email, I feel guilty. At the end of the day, when I close my email and turn off my computer, I feel guilty then, too. No matter how hard I try, I feel like I can never answer emails as quickly as I want to. I can't remember if I heard the following suggestion in a career class, or if my first managing editor shared it with me, but during my first job as an editor, I set a rule for myself to answer every email within 24 business hours. Years later, this is still my goal and not hitting it is the source of my guilt.

You've probably seen the guidelines on submission pages letting you know it'll be weeks or potentially even months before an agent or editor will reply to your book proposal. Why does it take them so long to get back to you? And once you are their author, why can it sometimes take days to get an email reply or even weeks to get edits back?

Even though the word *edit* is in the job title, there's an extraordinary amount of things that are not editing going on behind the scenes. Editing requires concentration and, for me at least, an uninterrupted block of time to focus on the project. If you've ever been curious about what an editor really does, here's an inside look.



1. **WRITING MARKETING COPY**—For each book an editor works on, they are asked to provide information written in a certain way for the sales team. Different publishing houses call these papers different things—some are called title information sheets, others call them one-sheets or sell sheets—but they contain basics about the book and author in order to educate the sales person about that title. The sales person can then use that information when talking to buyers at different book retailers. It often includes details about comp titles (including sales figures), bullet points about items of note relating to the book or author or why the book is being released at a particular time, a paragraph description of the book, an author bio, the author's social media, whether the author would be willing to do events, etc.
2. **WRITING MARKETING COPY, BUT DIFFERENT**—Yes, that's right. The first set of marketing copy won't work for all purposes; it has to be rewritten or adapted for other documents such as the catalogue for that season's books or a presentation in PowerPoint.

Because the audience and purpose for these documents vary from the sell sheets, some information may need to be omitted or rewritten.

Another version of copy that your editor will likely spend time writing is the back-panel copy, that text that appears on the back of the book or on the dust jacket or its online product listing. This is some of the most important copy your editor will write so there will be rounds of drafts and revisions circulated among the editorial and sales teams to make sure it's compelling, accurate to the finished book, and grammatically correct.

3. **WORKING WITH FREELANCERS**—For each book, your editor will work with a number of freelancers for things like copy editing, fact-checking, proofreading, indexing, illustrating, designing, and more. Although editors develop relationships with freelancers and create a stable of them to use on multiple projects, your editor isn't the only person the freelancer is working for. Finding someone who is available, explaining the project to them, negotiating a rate, and creating a contract all take time and often involves reaching out to several people. Multiply this by the eight to 12 books your editor is working on at any given time and things can get out of hand quickly. Then, after the freelancer is finished with the project, your editor has to check that the work is sound, implement the changes, and process or request payment for the freelancer.
4. **COVERS**—Before you get the chance to judge a book by its cover, many people at the publishing house have judged the book's cover and about a dozen (or three dozen!) previous versions. The meetings to decide titles and covers are both fun and brutal—and there are lots of them. Everyone from the editorial team to the sales team to management and the designers all weigh in, bringing their particular needs and concerns to the table—what they believe to be in the best interest of the book.
5. **MEETINGS**—Aside from cover and title meetings, there are myriad other meetings that occupy your editor's time. There are production schedule meetings to ensure each book is on time and if not, why not. There are meetings to look at sample pages of the layout of a book, particularly if the book involves images or illustrations. There are pub board meetings to discuss the acquisition of new books. Not to mention the division- or company-wide meetings that occur right when you have a hard deadline!
6. **BOOK-ADJACENT PROJECTS**—Depending on the type and size of your publisher, your editor may also be involved in book-adjacent projects. This includes things like posting content on websites or social media (or providing relevant information to the person who will post it) or helping to answer customer service questions that are more esoteric than the usual damaged book type requests. If your publisher does more than publish books, as was the case with Writer's Digest Books until last year, your editor might also help to plan conferences or virtual events, or connect writers to the organizers of the online education platform for that brand.

These are all things that take an editor's time away from the actual work of editing. And most of them, those pesky company meetings aside, are ultimately for the benefit of books like yours. But, there might be one additional reason it takes a while to get edits back to you. There have been times in the past when an author has returned their pages back to me in two days instead of two weeks, hoping that I'll also return them in two days. This will almost never happen.

Editing is like a scavenger hunt, or a hidden-picture puzzle, and sometimes you need to take a break and come back to it with fresh eyes to see what's missing or what needs to be fixed. If a book is fresh in my mind, I'm more likely to miss errors because my eyes skip over words since the text is familiar. If I work on another project for a few weeks, going back to the first project is like looking at it for the first time again.

Taking all of this into consideration though, your editor should still be responsive to you. I lament not always being able to reply in 24 hours, but I try to make it a rare occasion when it's longer than a few days. If you're actively working with the editor, don't hesitate to send a follow-up email after a few days. If it's a new pitch or proposal, heed the submission guidelines and wait a few weeks before following up. **WD**

Amy Jones is editor-in-chief of WD.

NOTES FROM THE MARGINS

BY AMY JONES

When I first started work in nonfiction book publishing, one thing surprised me more than anything else: What goes into choosing a nonfiction book title. I was (and still am) a more avid reader of fiction than nonfiction so my internalized knowledge was that book titles were aesthetically pleasing allusions to the story that would be made clear by reading the book. I quickly discovered this is not true of nonfiction.

Many authors I worked with on their nonfiction books were equally surprised that we, the publisher, didn't automatically defer to their title of choice because they too, preferred a beautiful instead of functional title. That was a hard conversation every time it happened. But nine times out of 10, those same authors were pleasantly surprised by the resulting sales of their book.

The purpose of sharing these tips is two-fold: 1) To prepare those of you hoping for traditional nonfiction publishing contracts with what to expect when it comes to working with your publisher on the title, or 2) To help those of you who opt for self-publishing choose more effective titles.

WORKING TOGETHER: TITLE AND SUBTITLE

For nonfiction books, the title includes a main title and a subtitle. Often, the main title is more creative or a bold statement to catch attention, and the subtitle does the heavy lifting of telling people what's in the book. Here are a few examples from Writer's Digest Books.

- *Fight Write: How to Write Believable Fight Scenes* by Carla Hoch
- *The Fire in Fiction: Purpose, Passion, and Techniques to Make Your Novel Great* by Donald Maass
- *The Byline Bible: Get Published in Five Weeks* by Susan Shapiro

In each of these, the main title (before the colon) is catchy and attention grabbing, while the subtitle (after the colon) offers more about what the book will teach readers. Without those subtitles, it's hard telling what those books are about.

Of course, there are exceptions in which the main title is catchy and tells what the book is without looking at the subtitle. *How to Write a Page-Turner* by Jordan Rosenfeld or *Mastering Plot Twists* by Jane K. Cleland are great examples.

STAKEHOLDERS

When we talk about titling a book with a traditional publisher, it's helpful to know exactly how many people are involved and more importantly, *why* they're involved.

1. **THE EDITOR**—The editor collects ideas from the author about what the title should be or not be. The editor also brings their own ideas about the title to the table. These two know more about the book than anyone else, but since authors are not typically invited to title meetings, the editor has to speak up when a suggestion doesn't accurately reflect the content of the book or is counter to the author's brand, while also negotiating what the publisher wants.
2. **SALES REPS**—Since these are the folks who sell books to the store

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buyers, they have insight into what those buyers are looking for and what has sold well previously. They know what terms or phrases might be overused and on the down swing, or what terms are trending up. Book titles aren't and shouldn't be totally decided by trends, but they do play a role.

3. **THE PUBLISHER**—This person might not know each specific book as well as the editor, but as the brand manager for the imprint, they have a stake in making sure the title fits within the larger collection of works, or if it doesn't, that there's a specific reason for it.
4. **THE DESIGNER**—While the designer might not care what the title ends up being from a content perspective, they have a stake in how the title appears on the cover. We always included the cover designer in our title meetings because they could weigh in on whether a title was getting too unwieldy to look decent, or if a certain arrangement of words would allow them to do something visually creative that could add to the cover appeal.

FACTORS CONSIDERED

I mentioned in the previous Notes From the Margins that title and cover design meetings were often long, intense conversations. When you combine all the stakeholders mentioned above with the considerations noted below, you'll see why. If you're planning to self-publish, your job is to act as each stakeholder above as you think about the following.

1. **THE CONTENT**—The first consideration is the content in the book. The title should be appealing (which is subjective), but it should also accurately reflect what's inside. For nonfiction, that means the thematic subject matter, but also the basic selling points. If you're writing a cookbook, the number and type of recipes is important, or perhaps that they take fewer than 30 minutes to make, or that they all have 10 ingredients or fewer. It's also important not to mislead readers by overinflating what's inside.
2. **OTHER BOOKS**—Another key factor is whether another book exists with this title. If a clever play on words is used, it's worth searching to see if someone else had the same idea. If so, regardless of whether it's on the same topic as yours, it's worth finding a new title. While titles can't be copyrighted, using the same one is poor form and doesn't help sales. Your book should be unique and memorable, not to be confused with another person's.
3. **INTERNET SEARCH RESULTS**—While searching for book titles, for nonfiction books it's useful to consider popular internet search terms related to your topic. If you're writing an instructional book about art journaling, simply using the word *journaling* in the title isn't going to be helpful because that will bring up results for all types of journaling. But if you use "art journaling" that narrows down the results a bit.

   This is also a good time to consider inadvertent search results. I was once in a title meeting for a book about body painting as an art form and the group came up with a clever play on words. When we typed in the title to see if it had been used before, the majority of the top results were pornographic. Not quite what we had intended and not where we wanted our book to be positioned.
4. **SALES**—If an imprint focuses on a particular type of nonfiction publishing, chances are they know if certain words, phrases, or titling tactics have been successful in the past. For example, Writer's Digest Books published a number of books of writing prompts and it was clear to see that those with a higher number of prompts listed in the title sold better than those with lower numbers. Not including a number wasn't even considered.
5. **PERSONAL PREFERENCE**—While the personal preference of an author is not always the first consideration for a publisher, it does factor into choosing a title. The author's name is on the book and they represent it in the world so they should be proud to stand next to it or have it on their website. Sometimes that means a compromise between publisher and author.

If you're self-publishing, you have the prerogative to ignore all factors except personal preference. But make sure to consider your goals and target audience before you do. **WD**

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