

Short Story/Fiction Editing
GenCon 2005 - Sue Cook (editor)
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This workshop was not for "writers" but for potential editors. As a result, the focus was on what the job of editing covers, where you can get jobs as an editor, how interaction with the author works, and the process of handling slush/submissions.

Sue Cook has been working in the gaming industry as an editor for years and now has her own small press. Her husband is a published author (a very busy one) and she's done work for everything from game design and short story mags like Amazing Stories to anthologies and novels. I've gone to some of Sue's workshops in the past and they've always been very good.

The thing is, Sue is very organized. She gives out handouts, covers a lot of information, answers questions, and (in this workshop) even passed out a 10 page short story for us to read and do a base level edit feedback on. The workshop was two hours long and I would be hard pressed to get all the notes plus the handout information (much less the stuff from the short story) put down here.

However, given that so many of us in fandom "beta" for one another (and wonder what someone wants out of a beta) I thought I might share some of the information. Personally, I want a beta to act as an "editor." High level input if something just doesn't work but mostly I am looking for a copyeditor: proofreading, grammar correction, and a "if you could expand this or do something about this here" comment when needed are all I'm looking for. When I send something for beta, unless I think the story isn't working, I want more detail oriented input for publication fixes. I also want them in writing, not verbally, and am perfectly capable of reading comments in a document. If you feel you need to "clarify" your corrections, you are not the editor for me.

So, here are notes from Sue Cooks Editing workshop - Gencon 2005

Suggested Reference Materials:

The Chicago Manual of Style, 15th Ed.

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th Ed.

Words into Type, 3rd Ed.

Revising Prose, 4th Ed.

Prentice Hall Handbook for Writers, 12th Ed.

The first three on this list are considered industry standards for WotC and elsewhere. Words into Type is a bit more readable and if someone deviates from Chicago Manual of Style they will use the convention in Words into Type. Also Sue suggests that you know something about libel law and gives the two following links as starting points:

Libel Law in the United States by Steven Pressman:

<http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/press/press08.htm>

Libel Law Has Bark, and Bite by Matt Friedman

<http://www.wired.com/news/politics/0,1283,19894,00.html>

Supplies no editor should be without:

Red pens, small post-it notes to flag galley pages, a copy stand, and a lap desk.

Job Leads: Sue gave us the information for Green Ronin Publishing. Chris Pramas is the owner and he's in need of freelance editors. He looks for style, clarity, command of grammar, and knowledge of both D-20 systems and game system being written about. They largely do game tie-in blurbs and game system books for RPGs.

Notes:

In the gaming industry, unlike other areas, editors rarely interface with the writer. The lead editor for the game system book works with the game designers and lays out the manual then decides where they need art and "color" to expand on the system/world/game. They have specific word count requirements and/or other things that they need in this kind of copy (must include example of how a spell is used or a weapon is used by game characters, must be in a specific game location, etc) and will ask a writer to come up with something. It might be a new writer they are testing out for later work or someone that's worked on the game system in the past. In these cases the lead editor tosses you the copy and says, "clean this up, hack off part it needs to be shorter, blahblahblah," and that's what you do. You do not call the author to fix the copy or make sure the changes are OK with them. You fix it and forget it. As a result, game editors often make fiction authors very unhappy because they tend to change copy without thinking about author intent and disregard the feelings of the fiction writer for their work.

Sue spends about the first half hour of the workshop talking about how to interface with your author. She focuses on respect for craft, being careful (during the first high level overview edit) not to stomp on the author by bleeding all over the page, and how to approach the initial interview/suggestion phase of editing.

The fiction process of editing takes at least two, and sometimes three, rounds of editing before being sent to the proofreader for final checks prior to laydown of copy to press. Until the author gives the "final proof" OK you should be letting them make changes to copy themselves. NY houses and large publishers still tend to work in hard copy instead of from electronic files with Word and Change Tracking turned on whereas game companies are all completely electronic.

Sue then jumps back for a while and discusses how to find an author once you have been told you are assigned as a lead editor or given the task of putting together an anthology for a game tie-in. These are the two major ways to get an author:

Open Call: put a notice in a trade mag and wait for the fallout

Phone Call: to a regular contributor (either for color copy or previous stories) to see if they are interested in doing the job.

Before you can do an open call or a phone call you need to know exactly what you want. Here is what you will need to know before this happens:

~~Do you want a treatment/story pitch or the actual story?

~~How long does the story need to be?

~~Are there specific requirements for the anthology (must all stories be about Amazons from Omicron Persius 5? Must all stories be about a super hero but no gender specification? Are all stories to take place in the SW universe but NOT be about a main SW character from the movies?)

~~What is the story deadline? (When will you have to have it in time to edit it up and get it into the book by the publish date?)

~~How much are you going to pay (per word, per line, per story).

~~When will the author be paid? (On print? On acceptance?)

~~For that matter, when do YOU get paid? (On acceptance of work is best and NOT on publish.)

~~What rights are you buying from the author? (First north American, electronic, etc)

Sue then mentions that as an editor there are different kinds of editing and that they pay differently. Copyedit and proofreading are the two major types of editing. You get between 400 and 700 for a novel of between 80 and 100k words for copy editing. If you are doing proof work you will be paid per hour and not per job. Figure out what the going rates are at the major houses and adjust your price accordingly when giving quotes for work. It takes Sue about 20 hours to do a novel for a base copyedit of grammar, spelling, proper noun continuity (name spellings and such). It could take you up to 40 depending on your level and you should time yourself doing a couple of books to determine how long it will take you. She also tells you to learn how to use the track changes function in Word if you don't already know how to do so and you plan on working for electronic publishers.

To get editing jobs you can send in a resume and it will float around for a while but the best way to get an "in" at a house is to come to events like Gencon and meet people. You can hand them a resume and talk to them. You might not get a call for a couple of years but when they need someone they will remember you first instead of someone else. Also, you can meet authors at conventions and they sometimes know people that need editors.

Now we get back to the job of editing in substance.

1) If it is in your slush pile and not requested look for immediate reasons to toss/reject it. These include not conforming to house format guidelines, spelling or grammar problems in the first pages, not using correct font sizes, or being incorrectly spaced. If the story is too many pages or words, chuck it out. If the synop or cover letter tells you that it touches on topics your house is not interested in, doesn't publish, or has "flagger" words (some places don't want to publish

things with rape, magic, insert your word here because of social reasons while others have just gotten a reputation thanks to three books in a row being by angry white women and thus they say no more female characters that are feminists for at least four years no matter how good the story.)

2) If the story conforms to guidelines or was requested do a first rough read of the book/ story with a notebook beside you. Write down your first impressions of the story and characters. Do NOT write this on the copy if you have a hard copy. You never know if someone is going to get the copy back. The last thing an author needs to see in the margins of return copy is something like, "Yadda, yadda, wow this is going on forever when will she get to the point!"

Things to note in the first read:

~Overall strengths and weaknesses

~Pace (too fast, too slow, uneven)

~Overarching style problems (too much alliteration, not enough mix up of sentence length, etc)

~voice or dialogue/dialect problems

~Over use of passive voice

~Lost or dropped characters

~Unanswered story questions or dropped plot threads

3) Once you've noted the problems and strengths of the story, get your notes together and get ready to email/call/write the author about the story. Be sure to give positive notes first before launching into any problems or high level suggestions to clean up the work. If there are MANY problems (say you have an established author and the story is already accepted but it really SUCKS or has MAJOR structural problems etc) then you may want to get the top four big issues addressed and then plan on doing a 2nd high level edit before it goes to proof. At any rate, get your ducks in a row with some positive feedback and concrete ways to spin the problems (You don't like character X at all so you say, "I really liked Character Y and Character Z but their sidekick seems a touch flat/didn't really seem to have a purpose. Perhaps they need a bit of tweaking. Does that character have to be a mechanic/ex-boyfriend/combatative/insert what annoys you here, or would you consider reworking him/her into someone a bit less abrasive/confusing/purposeless?" Or even, "I wanted to know more about Character X, perhaps you could enhance that character's roll a bit by making them insert something assessable or positive here?"

4) Once you get the structural and large things done it's time to copy edit. Copywriters fix most of these problems (typos, spelling errors, minor comma splice problems unless they are part of the writer's style) for the author and then a "proof" is made of the copy text. That proof will be sent to you, as editor, to look over. At this stage you get out the red pen and bleed on the copy. Sue says to get a notebook and create a word list as you go of proper names/nouns and special spellings to ensure that the first instance of a word (Like a name Leia) will be spelled the same in every subsequent instance. Also make notes of physical details mentioned for characters to ensure that Joe that has black hair and blue eyes at the start of the story doesn't end up with red hair and green eyes at the end.

5) Once you've done the bleed, you should also send a copy to the author to ensure that the copywriter didn't accidentally change anything that shouldn't have been changed. When you and the author are satisfied it then goes to press.

At this point, Sue pulled out a short story for us to read and do a "high level" edit on. She wanted us to come up with positives so we would talk to the author/email/call them and discuss changes to the story so it could be included in a specific anthology. We then worked as a group after 20 min of reading to identify the creative and positive things about the story as well as the major problems. She asked us to consider the following:

Is it wordy?

Is it repetitive and redundant?

How's the pacing?

Does the dialogue sound real?

How much does the author use passive voice?

Does the story sacrifice action for a theme?

Is the story all action and no theme?

Does it show you a scene or tell you a scene?

Does the story leave unanswered questions?

She gave us a handout with additional information to help us identify these things.

Again, Sue covers a lot in this workshop and this is just the tip of it. It can be distilled down into this:

If you are an editor you have the power in the author/editor relationship. Your author is a creative person with emotions and thinks of stories as their children/creations. They will not, by nature, want to change anything you have in your possession. You need to be kind, empathetic, and understanding. You need to give a positive for every negative if you are going to actually print something. You also need to be very clear. People can't meet expectations that are not clearly spelled out. If you want someone to stop abusing ellipsis dots tell them to stop abusing ellipsis dots, pull out your reference to explain proper ellipsis use, and then give an example from a page and paragraph where it was used incorrectly in the text. Then show how the sentence should have been done with a comma or whatnot. Don't be rude about it but do be clear and complete.

In order to know how sensitive your author is to feedback, and what kind they are receptive to, it is usually best to call or email to introduce yourself and to clarify the ground rules for both you and the author. Ask if the copy of the work is yours to keep. Ask if you may write on it. Ask if the individual wants high level feedback, characterization feedback, grammar corrections and whatnot. When asking these questions you will not only find out if the person is insecure and gets upset about someone wanting to change parts of story or character but you also find out if they have specific style conventions (such as using italic for internal thought or a habit of using

em dash or semicolons for something as a "style" issue). Most authors will say, "Oh I'll take all the feedback I can get!" but will be upset later by what you return to them if you do not make it clear what kind of feedback you intend to send. For your sanity and that of the author be sure to define the relationship from the start.

Finally, find out about your author. Are they related to your boss? Are they the biggest selling author at the house? Do they work with lots of industry people or have a big name that you don't know in another genre? Do they write under other names you might know? This information can keep you from screwing up and offending someone and, thus, losing your job.

In the context of beta, this is also good advice. Is your author a BNF? Are they a friend of a friend? Are they a relative or friend of yours? What kind of feedback are they wanting with regard to style, characterization, spelling, punctuation, etc? Do they want it with "track changes" or with stuff inserted in color-coded text for comments and corrections (my personal preference is to use blue for feedback, questions, and comments, and red for grammar corrections, typo pointers, and other such things).

I think everyone who writes or does a beta should go to a workshop like this and Sue is one of the best so if you ever get a chance to go to Gencon I suggest signing up for her stuff.