

# 3

## Looking at the Big Picture

### Manuscript Development

Does your manuscript keep a consistent tone throughout? Does your manuscript address its audience appropriately? Is your book organized in the most effective way? Developmental editing is one of the best ways to get the answers to these questions. Not every manuscript will need development, but those that do won't get very far without it.

Developmental editors—also called DEs, substantive editors, or content editors—are often the first professionals to read your manuscript. They help to shape the overall structure and content of a book. You may work with one as part of the traditional publishing route, or you may hire one on a freelance basis to make sure your manuscript is in the best possible condition before you begin the publication process.

If not every manuscript needs development, how do you know if yours does? First, read this chapter to find out what a DE can do for you. Then, if you think you don't need one, get a second opinion. Contact a freelance editor and ask for an evaluation. The cost for an evaluation ranges from free to a few hundred dollars, depending on how in-depth of an assessment you want, but it's worth it. If the evaluation indicates your manuscript

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Manuscript development can be an uncomfortable process. You need flexibility, good communication skills, and a thick skin to thrive.

needs development, don't ignore this recommendation. If you skip development now, head into the next stages of book production, and two months later uncover a big-picture problem like an unclear audience, you may find it's too late in the game to fix it, or else you'll be spending incredible amounts of time and money reworking your manuscript.

The Potholes for this chapter, defining your audience and attending to permissions, both relate to areas that, if skipped, can require major rewrites if problems are discovered later. When you take the appropriate steps up front, you can save yourself significant time, money, and heartache.

When figuring your publishing schedule, allow two to six months for manuscript development. If you are hiring someone yourself, you can expect to pay between \$45 and \$75 an hour, depending on the genre and complexity of the book. If you are using a freelance DE arranged through your publishing house, you may be asked to cover the charges out of your advance. Some publishers, however, have in-house developmental editors whose services you would not have to pay for. In these cases the acquisitions editor is usually less involved in manuscript development and focuses on signing new projects, while the DE handles the editing.

## WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT FROM YOUR DEVELOPMENTAL EDITOR

Developmental editors are concerned with the structure and content of your book. If your manuscript lacks focus, your DE will help you find the right direction to take (the "right" direction generally being the most marketable). This is where problems of inconsistent tone, an unclear audience, or an unidentified marketing niche often surface. Developmental editors perform many of the same editing tasks as an acquisitions editor, but unlike AEs, whose time is split between editing and the business side of publishing, DEs tend to be able to give you more personal attention. If you have hired a DE on a freelance basis, this is undoubtedly true. Either way, you will find that good DEs are friendly, organized,

and creative, an uncommon mix that makes them extremely valuable to your endeavor.

Although these editors are mostly a friendly bunch, when working with a DE, be prepared to be challenged. Your DE, generally speaking, won't dictate to you what the book has to be, but you may be asked to justify your position when there is disagreement. At all times, however, it should be a collaboration. In his essay "Developmental Editing" Paul D. McCarthy writes, "Successful collaboration allows the author to feel sustained and liberated by knowing that she doesn't have to bear the burden of creation, development, and refinement alone." While it can be a relief to be able to lean on another's expertise, at the time of editing, this so-called liberation by your DE may feel more like an attack. It helps to remember that you and your editor have the same goal: making the best book possible. When you consider your DE a part of your publishing *team*, you will be better able to accept his or her criticisms.

When you work with a developmental editor, flexibility and good communication are a must. Manuscript development can be uncomfortable. The effort you have put into your writing, the time you took to craft the manuscript the best you could—it is difficult to set those aside and let someone else, an outsider, take apart and piece back together your work. To help smooth the process, discuss your vision of the book with your DE and work together until you can agree on a plan of action. Be open-minded and seriously consider the feedback that you are getting. It is essential that you and your DE have common goals and vision for the book for development to succeed. "If the author does not embrace the plan with enthusiasm," explains Scott Norton in his book *Developmental Editing*, "there's no sense in attempting development." Should you have real reservations about the direction the DE is leading you and you feel your vision for the project is in danger, talk to your AE, if applicable. If this is someone you have hired, you may wish to find a new DE. Following the guidance in the sidebar "5 Steps to Hiring a Freelance Editor" later in this chapter can help you avoid this problem.

Once you and the DE agree on the direction your book should take, you can move to the next level of detail. The DE

will help you determine the best order and organization for the chapters, highlight places where the text may have digressed too far from the topic, and point out areas where more explanation is needed. If you are writing nonfiction, the chapter titles, headings, and subheads in the book may need to be rejuvenated, reworked, or eliminated. Artwork, sidebars, and any other special elements may also need to be created or placed throughout the manuscript. With fiction, common errors that DEs deal with include points of plot that don't lead anywhere, inconsistent characterization, or missed opportunities to bring out your main themes. Throughout the process the DE will help ensure that your intended audience is clear and that you have maintained an even tone in your writing.

### **Who Needs Beta Readers?**

If you have spent any time in the writing community in the past five to ten years, you have probably heard about beta readers. These are colleagues, acquaintances, and other writers who read your manuscript for free and give you feedback. They do not replace editors, but they are a very helpful addition to the manuscript development stage. It's possible that with good beta readers you could avoid the cost of a DE and head straight to copyediting.

The value of beta readers depends largely on whom you enlist for help. A good reader has some interest in your topic or genre, is an enthusiastic reader, and is not afraid to tell you the truth about your writing. Often, friends and family are not the best beta readers because they do not want to hurt your feelings. You need people who have enough distance from you that they feel free to tell you the hard truths. I recommend looking for a variety of people to help you—for example, readers who represent your target audience, those with very strong writing skills of their own, as well as someone who is coming to the book with no prior background in the subject. What you do with the feedback you get from your beta readers is up to you. I suggest neither fighting every criticism nor acquiescing to every change. Evaluate each recommendation and determine if it helps you to reach your goals for the book.

In manuscript development you are piecing together the big picture rather than focusing on grammar, word choice, and punctuation. Those smaller types of corrections will be made later in the process.

## WHAT YOUR DEVELOPMENTAL EDITOR EXPECTS FROM YOU

Most DEs will expect a certain level of trust and respect from you. They have an advantage that allows them to improve your manuscript in a way that you can't on your own, and much of this comes from not being emotionally tied to the writing, as you are. They will put in many hours of work on your project, but when they see your manuscript for the first time, they can spot the rough areas much more easily than you can. And because they have been doing this kind of work for a long time, they also will be able to provide some relatively easy solutions to those problems. In the case of your publishing house requiring you to work with a DE when you didn't think one was necessary, you will also have to put your trust in the acquisitions editor who set you on this path.

In addition to trust, timeliness is another trait DEs appreciate. Your DE will work hard to meet the agreed-on deadline for sending you the edited manuscript, and you should work similarly hard to return the reviewed manuscript by the due date you have agreed to. Meeting this deadline is important because your DE has other authors to accommodate as well. If you miss your deadline, your DE may need to put your book at the back of the pile when you do return the manuscript. For some authors, scheduling is flexible, but if you are trying to meet a certain publication date and you miss your deadlines, you cannot expect your DE to make up the time. So be realistic about your ability to finish the manuscript review, and communicate with your editor if you need more time.

When the DE and the author are able to agree on a vision for a new project, development can be a thrilling experience. For me as a DE, I love seeing a manuscript transform from one with gaps

and excesses into something whole and compelling. Helping an author to achieve the vision he or she had for the book is extremely rewarding. When there is a struggle at every turn, however, the quality of the end product is in doubt and the project loses its luster. But with a talented and engaged author, my suggestions are assessed, adapted, and implemented in the author's own voice and style, and the final manuscript is a point of pride for both of us.



ROADSIDE ASSISTANT

### **Kristina Blank Makansi**

*Developmental editor*

Kristina Blank Makansi is cofounder of Blank Slate Press, an award-winning small press in St. Louis, Missouri, and a partner in Treehouse Publishing Group, an author services company also located in St. Louis. She has edited both fiction and nonfiction and is also an author. Her historical fiction work, *Oracles of Delphi*, is in revisions, and she has written and is self-publishing *The Sowing*, the first in a New Adult science-fiction trilogy, cowritten with her two daughters.

#### **As a DE, what do you expect from your authors in regards to a good working relationship?**

A good working relationship can only exist if both editor and author are good listeners—even if the “listening” is done through e-mail. The author must be willing to listen and to refrain from the reflexive “yes, but . . .” comeback when challenged. The first thing I want to know is what the author is trying to accomplish with the particular work. I want to read the synopsis, the query/pitch, and the logline so I know up front what the author believes the story is about and what she has (or hopes she has) accomplished. I may be just one reader, but if something isn't working for me, then there is a good chance the author hasn't achieved her goal for the work. A good working relationship will allow me to be frank and to point out how and why I think the story doesn't work, without

the author taking it personally or dismissing the criticism because she is in love with the passage/concept/plot point, and so on.

A professional author must understand that suggested edits and pointed critiques are not personal attacks, and a professional editor must always strive to be helpful and to offer constructive feedback without being dismissive or rude.

### **What are some of the common mistakes you have seen?**

It may be cliché to cite the “show, don’t tell” issue, but it is a common problem. Another is too much backstory too soon—before the reader has had a chance to care about the characters in the first place. Many authors also fall back on dialogue to explain backstory or to tell the reader something that could be more powerfully shown a different way, say through a character’s action or even what the character doesn’t say. Also, a very common mistake is to think that describing what someone looks like tells the reader anything at all about who the person is. Physical description is helpful, but a story moves forward and a reader keeps turning the pages because of the characters’ motivations, not their age or hair color. Finally, authors all too often fall back on what’s easy—starting a book or chapter with a description of the weather, for instance. One writer I respect said once that if he read a chapter that started with a description of clouds, he damn well wanted those clouds to pick up the gun on the mantle and shoot the main character before the end of chapter one.

### **What advice do you have for new authors?**

Read. Read. And did I mention read? It is critical for authors not only to read books and short stories that are critically acclaimed but also to read works from other authors who write in their genre and who are at a similar stage in their professional publishing career.

I also recommend authors get to know other authors by attending, if possible, workshops and conferences or by connecting online. It’s a great idea to join a book club to discuss books with other readers (people who are not writers) as well as to join a writing group.

### What differences do you see between in-house and freelance development, in particular regarding the author's experience of it?

As publisher and editor of a small press and as an editor for an author services practice, I've edited both as an in-house editor and as a freelance editor. As a traditional in-house editor, I have a lot more say over the final manuscript. While I would never dream of being dictatorial over some changes, an in-house editor can choose to not go forward with a project if the author refuses to make certain changes to a manuscript. An in-house editor will take on a project not only because they have fallen in love with it but also because they have a particular vision for it. If the author refuses to make the changes necessary for the work to fit the editor's vision, then the project may very well end up dead in the water. While this may not happen very often, the publishing house and the editor have final say over the manuscript (and the title and the cover . . .).

In contrast, the freelance developmental editor's role is to help the author write the best manuscript the author can possibly write without imposing the editor's vision on it. As a freelance editor, I may *strongly advise* an author to make a particular change, but the author is free to ignore me. The author is the one with ultimate control of the project, and my job is to help him or her make the best editorial decisions possible within the framework of the goals for the project.

## THE PROCESS

The difference in the developmental editing process between traditional publishing and self-publishing is largely a matter of who is doing the hiring. It's possible that you could use a freelance DE before approaching a publishing house or that your publisher suggests you work with (and pay for) one before it accepts the manuscript. In those cases, your process will be more aligned with the self-publisher's. However, self-publishers have as much time in their schedules as they choose. Traditionally published

authors need to adhere to the schedules of their publishers. If you write fiction, plan to have the development done before you approach a publisher; fiction is rarely developed after it has been acquired.

## Traditional Publishing

As with most editor-author relationships, you may never meet your developmental editor in person. Instead, your communications will be via e-mail and the phone.

The process begins when your acquisitions editor hands the manuscript over to the developmental editor. You will most likely receive an e-mail from your DE introducing herself and setting out some scheduling information. Not much is required of you at this time except perhaps to approve the proposed schedule and set aside time to review the editing.

To start, your DE will read the entire manuscript, take notes, and then discuss with you the direction she thinks the book should take. Some major problems may be uncovered, such as an unclear audience or inconsistent tone, or it might be more a matter of spicing up the headings, reorganizing the chapters, and smoothing transitions. Either way, your DE will have suggestions and a vision for the book, and the two of you will need to come to a consensus on how to proceed.

After this initial discussion, your DE may return the manuscript and have you make the agreed-on changes based on her extensive notes and suggestions. This is particularly true if there is significant rewriting to be done, in which case your editor may offer guidance but leave it to you to figure out the details. In other instances, the DE will do most of the work herself before returning the manuscript via e-mail. What she can't fix, she will query for you to tackle. She will give you a deadline and ask you to confirm your availability. Be up front about whether or not you can meet this deadline. There is usually some leeway, but your DE will be planning her schedule around you, so rather than being optimistic, be realistic—and then meet your deadline.

As you work through the DE's changes and suggestions, try to address each query as fully as possible. If you don't like a suggested change, rather than simply reverting to what you had before, consider if there might be a third option that satisfies both of your concerns. Go through the manuscript carefully, and compile any questions for your DE so that you can address them systematically over the phone. You may find you go through this routine a few times—the editor makes suggestions, you make changes, the editor reviews those changes and suggests others, and so on. If the

### Inside Tip

Editing today is done electronically using the Track Changes function in Microsoft Word. If you aren't familiar with it already, get familiar with it now. It is extremely useful, but it can be overwhelming if you have never used it before, and you don't want to spend precious time learning a new program function when you should be revising your manuscript.

schedule is tight or the manuscript very long, you may be asked to return the manuscript a few chapters at a time so that the next step in the process, copyediting, can begin even while you iron out the kinks in later chapters.

It's important to note that different editors have different styles. If you are open to having your whole book taken apart and put back together, let your DE know that. If she gets the impression that you will fight every change, she may hold back, and then you are less likely to get the best possible product. That said, if your vision for the book is being significantly altered, speak up. The best editing is a collaborative approach in which the editor supports and guides you to improve the manuscript while maintaining your voice and achieving your agreed-on vision.

## Self-Publishing

Self-publishers looking for help developing their manuscript are tasked with hiring a developmental editor themselves (see the sidebar “5 Steps to Hiring a Freelance Editor”). Some authors seeking a traditional publisher will also hire a freelance DE to help them get their manuscript in shape before approaching agents and publishers. If you write fiction, this is probably you. The specific tasks of

the freelance DE versus an in-house DE are largely the same, but the responsibilities of the author change.

The two biggest differences are that the author has more control over the schedule and more control over the changes that are made. Whereas an in-house DE has the backing of the publisher for his vision for your book, in this case you are the publisher. Therefore, you have the final say on the direction your book takes. Your DE is there to give his opinion; what you do with it is up to you. If you have a good relationship, your DE will feel comfortable pushing back when there are issues he feels you are not considering fully. If you run roughshod over him, though, you will get the book you want, but it might not be the best or most marketable book possible. That responsibility of knowing whether yours or your DE's opinion is the right one is what makes self-publishing so challenging and so rewarding.

The process for developing nonfiction is covered in detail in the previous section, "Traditional Publishing," but the process for developing fiction is somewhat different. For one thing, fiction works are more likely to be developed in one shot rather than with the back and forth that is common with nonfiction. For another, the editor is less likely to do substantial rewriting and will instead ask pointed questions and offer guidance on revisions for you to execute. Although some freelance DEs may work with both fiction and nonfiction, for the best developmental editing of fiction, you may opt for an editor with a master of fine arts degree (MFA). These editors tend to have more experience with fiction than those without an MFA. This is particularly important for those writing literary fiction, where knowledge of literary theory may be helpful.

No matter the genre, developmental editing is a difficult task. For that reason, you will pay more for this service than for copy-editing. Consider it a question of value added. Much of the DE's time is spent conceptualizing and mulling over problems to find the best solution for your book. These skills are hard to come by and can make the difference between a book that sells and one that stalls.

## 5 Steps to Hiring a Freelance Editor

No matter what kind of editor you are hiring—developmental editor, copyeditor, or proofreader—the steps to finding the right one for you are virtually the same. A bad editor can do more harm than no editor, so do your homework before you hire someone.

- 1. Gather the names of editors who work on books in your field or genre.** If you know other writers who have worked with an editor, ask them for a referral. If you can't find someone through word of mouth, check the Internet for databases; the Editorial Freelancers Association ([www.the-efa.org](http://www.the-efa.org)), for example, has an expansive listing of various kinds of editors and other publishing professionals for hire. Also available to you are online sites such as oDesk.com, eLance.com, and others. These are good sources for finding lots of editors, but be sure to vet your editor before hiring. Because of the nature of these sites, where editors are bidding on your project to ensure you the lowest price possible, you are not assured of the highest quality.
- 2. Research your potential editor.** If the editor has a website, read it. Look for testimonials, client lists, and any other information that will tell you if this is the kind of person you want to work with. Be sure you are hiring a *book* editor with substantial experience in *book* editing, and not just an English major passing himself or herself off as an editor. What's the difference between an English major and an editor? Editors have been trained through an editing class or certificate program or through on-the-job experience in an editing position, and they know how to use the pertinent style guides and other tools of the industry. Unfortunately, there are a lot of frauds out there, so be thorough in your research.
- 3. Call or send an e-mail to your potential editor.** Tell the editor the working title of your book, briefly what it's about, the genre, the word count, and a little bit about yourself. If you have a deadline in mind, include that now. Also mention if you are planning to self-publish or find a traditional publisher (if you know). An editor is not an agent, so you do not need to include marketing information or a proposal unless requested. If your editor has met your criteria so far and seems open to your project, go to step 4.

**4. Ask for a quote, sample edit, and scheduling information.** A sample edit is five to ten pages from your manuscript that the editor marks up for free or for a nominal fee. This allows the editor to determine what level of editing you need—you may be in the market for copyediting, for example, but the editor thinks development is in order—and how long it will take. The sample edit allows you, the author, to see what kind of changes your manuscript is likely to receive. Use this to determine if you like the editor's style and whether it fits what you are looking for.

Note that a sample edit is not the same as a manuscript evaluation. A sample edit should be cheap or free; the editor is trying to get your business. Manuscript evaluations, which are much more in depth and involve reading and assessing your full manuscript, tend to run a few hundred dollars.

**5. Evaluate what you have learned and add the crucial element of personality.** When determining if this editor is *the one*, consider qualifications and scheduling as well as personal compatibility. Are you comfortable with this editor's qualifications? Did you like the changes you saw in the sample edit? Do you trust this person to give you the best edit possible? Do you communicate well? Editing can be emotionally challenging for writers. It helps if you have an editor who matches your personality.

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How do you know when manuscript development is complete? When your book has a firm beginning, middle, and end, with chapters in their appropriate places and chapter titles and headings (if any) appropriate for the topic and genre. When the manuscript has a consistent voice and a clear focus. When you know what you are trying to accomplish with your book, and this manuscript achieves those goals. When you have all these things in place you are ready for the next step in the process: copyediting!

## AVOIDING THE POT HOLE

## Define Your Audience



“My book is for everyone. I want everyone to read it.” Many a novice writer has responded this way when asked who the audience is for his or her book. Although that tactic may seem to offer the greatest appeal to agents and the widest possibility for sales, the truth is, your book is not for everyone. If you have written it that way, then you have some rewriting to do. Problems with audience manifest themselves as an uneven tone or a split focus in the book. Often, the book is trying to do too many things and, therefore, does none of them well. This is a common problem that arises during manuscript development, but it can be resolved early with the right planning on your part.

## ANALYZING YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE

“You can’t just think about what you’re selling; you must also think about what your potential readers are buying.” Michael Larsen, author of the bestselling book *How to Write a Book Proposal*, gives that advice when talking about how to create a great sales handle for your book. It’s excellent advice for making your book sound appealing to your potential readers, but to follow it you have to know who those potential readers are. A wide range of elements factor into how you define your target market, and they can be broken down into three main categories: the demographics of your readers; their sophistication as readers, which directly relates to the tone of your book; and the region in which you are selling. To assess these factors, you may have to do a little research into who makes up your audience. Investigating your audience can be a lot of fun, however, as it largely involves getting out there and mingling with the people who share your interests.



## Demographics: What Do Your Readers Look Like?

It sometimes seems crude to speak of people based on their demographics. Most of us like to think that we don't see race, age, ethnicity, or any other divisions. We are all humans, right? Unfortunately, when you are trying to reach an audience, it's not that simple. Rather than the melting pot analogy, human beings tend toward the birds of a feather analogy. And those birds of a feather tend to read the same books. So, when you describe the audience or market for your book, think about which groups—which demographics—you are writing for.

For those writers who have never considered this before, it may help to visualize the audience you would read your book to. If your book is for children, what age range do they fall into? How do they interact with the book? Is there a particular ethnicity or culture that you are trying to reach? If you are writing adult non-fiction, are your readers academics or average Joes? Are they older or younger, conservative or ready to dive into something new? Consider not only who will read your book but also who will buy it. Gift books, self-help books, and children's books may all be purchased by people other than your intended reader. You will need to balance this divide in your writing as well as your marketing.

Next, go to where your audience is. If you belong to an association based around your topic, take a look at the membership of that organization to determine who makes up your audience. These organizations are innumerable, covering nearly every topic and genre, from the Romance Writers of America to the American Association for Clinical Chemistry. If you don't belong to any such organization, consider joining one now. This is a great and fun way to get in touch with your target market and increase your marketing outlets. (Notice how the same elements that make your book stronger also make your author platform stronger? This is often the case.)

Think about the organization membership critically. What is the age range? What is the race makeup? What is the prevailing gender? What is the education level? Do the members seem to



have other likes and dislikes in common? Expand your research beyond physical meetings; virtual meet-ups and social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest can tell you even more about the people who read books on your topic. Also go to the bookstore or library and watch the people who browse your area. As you look around at your potential readers, use your eyes and ears, and be ready to adjust your preconceived notions.

If you're still having trouble outlining the demographics of your audience, the contrast of the next two examples might help. First, a biography of Derek Jeter. Who is going to be reading this book? As a Jeter enthusiast, you may think that everyone can learn something from Jeter's story. However, you have to decide whom you most want to reach with this particular book. Let's start with what age group you have in mind. If you are writing for ten-year-olds, the audience will be heavily tilted toward boys. If you're looking at an older audience, you have to consider that it's still sports, so more men than women will be interested, but you can't rule out women entirely. Women in general love memoirs, and the handsome Jeter has a special appeal. (This is made obvious by the fact that Pinterest has a whole search category for "shirtless Derek Jeter" items.) Other descriptors of your audience may include sports enthusiasts, particularly baseball fans; biography lovers; perhaps more African Americans than other baseball books might draw, as Jeter's father is African American; New Yorkers; and, of course, Yankees fans around the country. Note that defining your audience in this manner will not prevent the sixty-five-year-old Asian female hardcore baseball fanatic from buying your book, but she will not be the focus of your marketing campaign and will not directly affect how you write your book.

Now compare that audience analysis to that for a flaxseed cookbook. Who is the audience of this book? Cooks come in all shapes and sizes, but with a focus on flaxseed, this book will have a narrower audience than a general cookbook might have. Flaxseed is considered a health food, which tends to attract twenty-five- to sixty-five-year-old men and women interested in health and fitness, as well as other "foodies." Healthy eating trends can also be regional,



with the coasts being more trendy than the middle of the country. But don't let those assumptions be the end of your audience description. Attend cooking classes, shop at the "foodie" stores, and watch the people in bookstores who buy these kinds of cookbooks so that you can accurately define exactly whom your book is for. When you look closely, you may be surprised by the people you find.

An important consideration here is whether you are uncovering people of a demographic who have not been reached by what is currently on the market. If you have noticed that a lot of fifteen-year-old girls are interested in baseball novels, yet you can't find any books that fit that model, that may be a niche to be explored.

For those working with a developmental editor, he or she won't go to the bookstore with you but will be able to tell if you haven't done your homework. For example, a good DE will point out when your flaxseed cookbook manuscript switches focus from, say, a beginning cook to an experienced chef. Identifying the demographics of your audience and writing specifically for those people will make development go more smoothly and will ultimately save you time and money in the editing process.

## Region: Where in the World Does Your Audience Live?

How broad, geographically speaking, is the appeal of your topic? You may, once again, be tempted to say your book is for everyone, everywhere. For most new authors, however, that isn't true. So, be honest. Is the market for your book worldwide? In North America? The United States? The West? Nebraska? Omaha? A neighborhood in Omaha?

Being able to nail down the geographic location of your audience is important for two reasons. First, it can help you determine the breadth of your topic. For instance, if you are writing a book about Nebraska law and you know the law only in Nebraska, you don't want to get distracted by Iowa law or Kansas law. Focus on your expertise. With this niche you can pinpoint your marketing to get the most return on your investment. Conversely, if you are writing about Native Americans in Nebraska, you may see that



your topic overlaps with stories about other Native American tribes and that you could easily broaden your appeal to the surrounding states and even the West as a whole by including those other stories. Suddenly you have grown your audience fivefold and have many more outlets for marketing and sales. This could be a real boon. A word of caution, however: If you find your regional appeal is small, be careful not to manipulate your book into something bigger than you are capable of doing well simply to gain a larger audience. A good, targeted book has more value than a mediocre, wide-ranging book.

The second reason it's important to evaluate your regional appeal is that it can help you focus on the agents, publishers, and marketing outlets interested in your book. Every publisher and agent has areas of interest. When you know what region your audience lives in, you can research and approach those publishers and agents who deal specifically with that kind of book. You can also target specific bookstores, associations, museums, or other venues either to carry your book or to host a book signing or book talk. This way you are not wasting time on people and places that are not interested in your project.

To determine the geographic area for your audience, start with the part of the world where you live and where the story—whether fiction or nonfiction—takes place. Then move outward. Stop when you reach your best estimate of who will want to buy your book. If your book has a naturally small audience, embrace it. Remember, niche is good. As you do your research, you may find that your book is of interest nationwide, yet you may have a better return on investment with a narrower approach. Particularly if you're self-publishing, a smaller niche may work to your advantage.

### Tone: What Level of Sophistication Do Your Readers Have?

So, you know a little more about the demographics of your audience and where they live. Now you have to combine that with the tone you want to strike with your book. This factor has big implications for your writing style and how you will position your book



in the market. Age and education level of your intended readers will be the biggest drivers of what the right tone is.

Before we go any further, let's define *tone*. I use this term to describe the general attitude of your book. Is your writing friendly, technical, accessible, academic, confrontational, or humorous? Are you looking to pick a fight, teach a lesson, entertain, or engage your audience in a conversation? These questions are important because you will adjust your word choice, sentence structure, and even the title and the cover of your book to reflect the tone you choose. You may also approach different agents, publishers, or bookstores based on the sophistication of your writing and that of your audience. Furthermore, identifying the right tone for your audience ensures that you aren't marketing to laypeople a book full of technical or academic jargon, or a book full of slang to speakers of English as a second language.

Look again at our book on Derek Jeter. If we have set our audience at ten-year-olds, the tone of writing in this book will be less technical and more accessible, with shorter sentences and simpler terminology, than it would be for adult readers. It will have a lot of photos and sidebars to engage the younger reader and enliven the text, and it may have a variety of statistics at the back for diehard young fans. Conversely, if the book is for adults, we may choose a more complex tone: technical descriptions of Jeter's play, a confrontational look at his relationships outside of baseball, or an in-depth analysis of how he fits into the grand scheme of Yankees history. These writing-style decisions are based on the information you want to convey and what you know about your audience's sophistication as readers. By spending time with your target audience and reading other books aimed at your audience, you will discover what is and is not an appropriate tone for your book.

Do not underestimate the importance of determining the right tone. I have worked with several authors who struggled with their decision about how technical, how academic, or how casual their tone should be. Knowing your target audience and gearing your book's tone to appeal to that audience is something you need to do early on. Readers can tell when you have not quite settled on



a tone, and your book will suffer because of it. Revising for tone is doable, but the sooner you know the age and education level of your intended audience, the better you will do at keeping an even tone throughout your book. This is just one more area where you can save time and money in the editing process and give yourself an edge by planning your book ahead of writing it.

## DETERMINING THE AUDIENCE FOR A CHILDREN'S BOOK

In all my conversations with authors about audience, the ones who seem to have the most trouble are children's book authors. The problem most often is a matter of too wide an age range. Ages nine to twelve may be a reasonable grouping, as these kids have similar reading ability and relate to characters in a similar way. Ages zero to six, however, encompasses so many stages of development that it may not be possible for an author to write appropriately for all children in this demographic. Beyond just the writing style, book formats range dramatically for this age group. Consider that children up to age two are prone to putting books in their mouths. Before age three, traditional paper pages will be ripped out. That's why there are so many cardboard and soft plastic books for children ages zero to three years. Books for older children may also be read to the zero- to three-year-old group, but those kids are a secondary audience. To pinpoint your primary audience and to fine-tune your vision for your book, consider the following questions:

- ◆ How many words will be on each page?
- ◆ How many pages will the book be?
- ◆ What material should the pages be made out of?
- ◆ Is there a narrative or are the children learning new vocabulary?
- ◆ Are there even words at all?



You must analyze in very practical terms how your book is going to be used so that you know (1) what to include in it, (2) what format it will take, and (3) how you are going to sell it to agents, children, and parents. With this information you will also be able to locate the competition more easily, an extremely important step in formulating your business plan.

Another challenge children's book authors face is that parents as well as youngsters have to like the book. Bright colors and a pony might be enough to catch the eye of the child, but the purchaser may want more. That's why if your children's book is narrative in form, I recommend including a lesson or a moral. Doing so will make it more appealing to adults—the people who actually buy the book—and what's more, if you have the ear of a young person, why pass up that opportunity? Be a positive influence.



#### ROADSIDE ASSISTANT

**Tim Hill**

*Author and speaker*

Tim Hill is the author of the Joe the Crab children's book series and an accomplished speaker. His books include *Joe the Crab Takes a Walk*, *Joe the Crab Hunts for Shells*, and *Joe the Crab Goes for a Swim*.

#### **What was the hardest part about defining your audience?**

For me it was gauging not where my age group began but where it ended. It took a while, but I've deduced that my books top out for *most* children around age nine. Learning who the actual buyers of books for the target kids were and how and when to target them was difficult, too. The timing part is still difficult and is a work in progress for me.

#### **What did you do to help you solve these problems?**

One of the ways I figured this out was not solely by sales (though clearly that helps) but through the speaking events I've been



doing for a while now. After a few events, I could just see it and sense it. I could even figure it out by taking into account which grade semester they were in; by the early months of the fourth grade you can see a new stage of maturity in their reading begin to form and how they look at you differently. So the third grade was the beginning of the last span of their development that had a big enthusiasm for “Joe.”

Regarding the buyers, the obvious part is [targeting] moms, aunts, and grandmas. The not-so-obvious part is how to find them and when to target them. I found a bunch on Twitter, some on Facebook, and others through doing the “boutique” charity events. The holiday season is the best time to sell children’s books, and having a book signing/release party event is a great way to gain some attention. The speaking events at schools are where a lot of kids and therefore parents and teachers learn about me. Social media is key, and it’s hard to learn how to make it effective. But that’s where the target groups are to connect with.

### **What advice do you have for new authors?**

1. Take your time. Do it right, especially if it’s your first publication. Mind your reputation from the get-go.
2. Research and plan when you’re going to release your book and ensure that you get as much attention on it as possible, including planning an event to do so. Don’t let your newbie status deter you—make that work for you. It’s cool being a “new author,” actually.

You’ll have to get over yourself if you don’t like the spotlight on you for that singular book release event. If you want folks to know about your book, you’ve got to be at least a temporary extrovert. I know that’s not easy for authors, even counterintuitive for most of them. But stepping out for just a couple of hours could be very rewarding and even surprising to realize how much you know about your subject. At the same time, don’t be shocked if you sell only a couple of books at your first release party/book signing. (By



the way, don't call it a book signing. People *get* to go to a "release party" because of the air of exclusivity. You *have* to go to a book signing.)

### **What are your thoughts on dealing with rejection?**

It became clear fairly quickly that some of my adult writing friends didn't like my first children's book. They were very happy for me and sincere, but let's just say it was obvious they weren't genuinely impressed *enough* with my first offering. I'm one of those who would rather be told a brutal truth than be told something's great when it isn't and wonder. So I wish I'd had a little more opinion thrown my way—I figured it out anyway.

Nevertheless, rejection isn't fun. But, I experienced two things: (1) I quickly picked up suggestions and figured out ways to improve my first book, and (2) my target audience responded with almost nothing but positive feedback. The kids were diggin' it, and that's all that mattered to me. So an overhaul wasn't necessary.

Now, I have shored up that first book in various ways (and also the subsequent two): a little bit with the writing, some with the illustrations, some with the fonts, the author page, and other items here and there. So the journey's turned out pretty well over a couple of years now.

I'm now considering a hardback.

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Your target audience will directly affect not only how you craft your book but also how you market it. A developmental editor can be influential in achieving the tone and focus that your book needs to resonate with your readers. To define your audience well, you must get involved in the appropriate communities and have a discerning eye. When you look around at the other people interested in your topic, what do you see? Look critically and you will be able to both visualize and describe your target market. When you can do that, you can ensure that your manuscript is hitting the right note, from cover to cover.



## AVOIDING THE POTHOLE

## Attend to Permissions Early



Throughout manuscript development, you may be continuing your research to fill in any holes that the developmental editor or your beta readers have uncovered for you. As you do this, you will probably come across certain passages in other works that you want to excerpt. Do you need permission? That depends on a number of factors. Lucky for you there are guidelines and resources that you can use to help navigate this ocean of uncertainty. If you are working with a DE, he or she will be able to guide you as to which passages require permission; however, taking the lead in requesting permission as soon as you know you want to use an excerpt can save you several months of waiting.

Some of the more commonly accepted rules regarding copyright infringement concern the length of the excerpt, the importance of the excerpt to the whole of the original work, and the type of work you are preparing. Items that generally require permission include long excerpts of prose and *any* quotes from poetry or music. That's right—if you plan to have epigraphs or other excerpts from music or poetry, plan to seek permission, no matter the length.

The definition of a long excerpt of prose is up to interpretation and is mitigated by the other two factors: importance of the excerpt to the whole of the original work and the type of work you are preparing. Many people, including some of the major traditional publishers, consider any prose excerpt less than a hundred words fair use (i.e., not requiring permission). This assumes that the work you are quoting from is substantially longer than a hundred words. That guideline won't keep you from being sued, but it is a helpful benchmark. As to the type of work you are preparing, you may not need to obtain permission if you are using the excerpts as part of your analysis in an academic book. Most other works are held to the standards just mentioned.



Besides fair use, there is another time when you might not need permission. These are excerpts from works that fall into the so-called public domain. This means that the material is no longer protected under the laws of copyright and does not require permission. How do you know if your excerpt is from a work in the public domain? Briefly, works published before January 1, 1923, are now in the public domain. Works published after 1978 are protected for at least ninety-five years, possibly longer if the copyright has been renewed. And finally, works published between 1923 and 1978 may or may not be in the public domain; you will need to search the records of the Copyright Office to be certain. For that, you are encouraged to use a copyright attorney or a search firm. (Permissionsgroup.com is one such service with a good reputation.)

Securing permissions can take some time, possibly several months, so don't procrastinate. If you know that you want to use a particular excerpt or quote, determine if it requires permission and then get the ball rolling as soon as possible. You should also be prepared to pay a fee for the permission and for the possibility of your request being rejected. If your permission request is rejected, you must remove the material. If that means a major rewrite, you will want a significant amount of lead time so that you are not delaying publication. Fees can range from free to a thousand dollars or more; you may be able to negotiate with your publisher (if you have one) regarding who covers the expense.

To request permission, start by finding out who owns the copyright. If you are excerpting from a print source, the publisher's website may have a standard form and instructions for you to use. In general, these forms want to know exactly what material you are asking to quote, what your work is, how many copies will be printed, and where it will be distributed. If no form is provided, you can create your own. For all types of source material, be sure you are requesting permission from the right person or entity and that you know what kind of permission you need. For example, do you need print rights, electronic rights, or both? Do you need North America and Canada rights or world rights? Get the details worked out before you begin the process. (I won't get into all the



different kinds of rights and licenses, as it is too big of a topic for this book; for an in-depth discussion, I recommend chapter 4 of *The Chicago Manual of Style*.)

This may all sound very tiresome, but the reality is, it's more than possible to receive permission for a well-known quote in a timely manner and for a reasonable fee. I recall working on one book that quoted Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Want to Have Fun." The permission was for world rights and cost only a hundred dollars. In this case, and many other cases as well, it was more important to the copyright holder that permission be obtained than to get a lot of money for that use.

Your DE can help you determine what needs permission and what doesn't. However, he or she is not likely to get in the middle of the permissions process. That will be up to you. Get started early so that you are not faced with delays.



## Mapping Out Your Road to Success

Have a vision for your book that includes the audience, format, and tone.

Get involved with your target audience to learn as much as you can about them.

Keep the lines of communication open with your developmental editor.

Prepare to take your manuscript apart and put it back together in an even stronger form.