

Chapter 1

Reading as a Job? Oh, Yes

In This Chapter

- ▶ Recognizing your qualifications to proofread and copyedit
 - ▶ Setting aside some outdated images
 - ▶ Discovering some truths about copyediting and proofreading
 - ▶ Considering which career path to pursue
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So you picked up this book to discover how to become a copyeditor or proofreader? I've got some news: You're probably already pretty good at it. You've been training for this career path since you first picked up A B C blocks in nursery school. Let me guess: You're the person everyone begs to review their résumés . . . college applications . . . term papers . . . doctoral theses.

Any time you improve upon someone else's writing, you take on the tasks of a copyeditor or proofreader. If you share your skills, helping people by word-smithing for them and providing them with a better finished product, you're already working in this field. The question is, are you getting paid for it? If not, I offer lots of advice in this book for turning your skills into paychecks. But let's not put the cart before the horse. Here's a little (true) tale for you.

I was bursting with pride when my friend Kevin called me on my lunch break many years ago. I had just landed my first freelance proofreading job through a temp agency, and my head was awash with the possibilities that lay ahead of me: an extra paycheck, potentially interesting material I could read in my spare time, and a flexible schedule that would allow me to have a social life. I told Kevin all about the job, adding that I had just proofread a piece for a major advertising firm.

"That's scary," he said.

I tried to reassure Kevin. “It’s not scary at all. You just have to read a little more slowly than normal and keep in mind . . .”

“Actually,” he interrupted, “I don’t mean scary that way. I mean that, here’s this big agency that feels it’s so important that whatever-it-is-they-sent-you is correct, they don’t trust their own people with it. So they decide it’s worth it to pay an ‘expert’ to proof it for them . . . and then it goes to *you*, who always misspells my last name. That’s scary.”

Hm. For a moment, I agreed with him.

But what I didn’t know then was that almost all proofreaders start out as I did — with little more than an interest in reading, access to a dictionary, and a few short lessons on style, grammar, and how to make proofer’s marks. See, I didn’t have to be a phenomenal speller; I just had to be able to look up words I was unfamiliar with. If I was unsure about grammar, I just had to know which reference guide to check. (And in all fairness, that guy’s last name was really hard to spell. It had, like, four consonants in a row.)

It soon became clear to me that I was doing just fine. And looking back, I realize that I did so without the kind of guidance I include in this book. So if you take nothing else away from reading this text (which I sincerely hope isn’t the case), know that you are indeed qualified to review the writing of others. And believe me, the more you do it, the better (and faster) you will be.

As for me, knowing that I can impart information to you that will put you way ahead of where I was when I began my proofreading career makes me so proud I could pretty much, well, burst.

Debunking Some Myths

Maybe you’re carrying around some archaic images in your skull about what copyediting and proofreading entail. If you assume that taking this career path means you’ll be wearing nerdy glasses while forever flipping through dusty grammar tomes and making nice white sheets of paper bleed with the markings from your red or blue pencil, think again. The resources you turn to for advice on grammar, spelling, and usage are just as likely to be Web sites as reference books. (See the resource listings in Chapter 14 and Appendix C if you want proof.) And depending on your employer, you may make all your contributions via keyboard instead of red or blue pencil (as I discuss in detail in Chapter 17).

So put your nerdy glasses away (unless you really like them, in which case, who am I to judge?). The world of professional words is full of infectiously cool creative types — writers, editors, designers, and artists. We’re movers

and shakers with creative ideas and (almost always) a true love of reading, which means we're pretty fascinating to talk to at parties.

Here are some other myths to strike:



- ✓ **Copyeditors and proofreaders have to be students of literature and English, classically trained by Ivy League professors.** Even if there were a million bucks in it for me, I don't think I could diagram a sentence. And reciting Shakespeare? Let's just say my exposure to good ol' William has more to do with Kenneth Branagh than I care to admit. Really. Or, um, verily.

You don't need to know every nuance of the English language to be a copyeditor or proofreader. It helps to be an avid reader, but it doesn't matter if you fall asleep at night reading Norton anthologies or copies of *Sports Illustrated*.

- ✓ **If you read for money, you'll never enjoy reading again.** The running joke among copyeditors is that if anyone ever buys us a book, there better be some cash tucked into the table of contents or we're not going to bother reading it.

For me, it's definitely a bonus that nowadays most of what I read is on someone else's dime. Still, there's no better thrill than putting my feet up and settling into a suspense thriller — without having to scour for errors. Chefs still enjoy tasty meals. Lifeguards still enjoy swimming. I still enjoy reading.

If reading is pleasurable to you now, it always will be. And I encourage you to pursue jobs that allow you to read the types of materials you find most interesting; don't assume that in order to preserve your love for romance novels you'd better focus your professional efforts on scientific journals, for example. Stick with your passions, and chances are that you'll be inspired to do great work (which will lead to you getting even more jobs). See Chapters 2 and 3 for some ideas of how to fine-tune your career goals.

- ✓ **All that reading will destroy your eyes and your back.** If you choose to copyedit or proofread, you won't be reading in the dim confines of a monastic cave. You'll be reading the way you normally do — as if you're perusing the morning newspaper or your favorite Web site. The difference is that you'll be a bit more focused on the content.

In Chapter 17, I offer lots of tips for keeping your eyes, back, and other parts healthy while doing these jobs. The harder part is keeping your brain from experiencing overload while you process hundreds of bits of information on each page!

Getting a True Picture of the Professions

So copyediting and proofreading don't require an Ivy League degree, won't destroy your love of reading, and shouldn't cause your body to deteriorate. In place of these myths, allow me to offer some truths that may help you develop a better idea of what to expect from either profession:

- ✓ **You can't pick copyeditors or proofreaders out of a crowd.** They're people just like you and me. Some are full-time wordsmiths, and some are stay-at-home moms and dads fitting jobs in between the kids' naps. (If you're the stay-at-home type, be sure to check out Chapters 19 and 20 for tips on constructing a freelance career.) Some make copyediting or proofreading their sole profession, and some use their language skills to supplement an unsteady (or steadily low) income.

If there's one thing that is true about copyeditors and proofreaders across the board, it's that they are all fantastically beautiful and charming. And funny.

- ✓ **Opportunities abound.** As literacy rates and the global population grow, so grow the markets for proofreaders and copyeditors. If the job opportunities available in the United States aren't quite vast enough, you can always market yourself to firms in countries with significant English-speaking populations. A lot of people across the globe speak English as their first language. (I could tell you how many today, but that population explosion would keep proving me wrong.)



Here's another reason you should have no trouble finding work as a copyeditor or proofreader: the World Wide Web. Before the Web came along, there were already lots of words being printed every day that needed to be copyedited and proofread. But with Web content thrown into that mix of (constantly changing) written communication, the possibilities for someone with your skills are limitless. Who knows? You could become the official copyeditor or proofreader of a Web site just by spotting an error and sending a friendly e-mail with your résumé attached (see Chapter 3 for ideas).

- ✓ **You get a paid education from either profession.** Tell me if this advice sounds familiar: "Get a good education so you can get a good job!" That was my dad, the proponent of higher education. Well, we editorial types have good jobs that give us *great* educations.

My job as a copyeditor and proofreader is to get educated — oftentimes, with information I never would have happened upon in a library or bookstore. Whether you want to work with books, newspapers, Web sites, magazines, corporate reports, advertising copy, or bubblegum wrappers, I can pretty much promise that you'll be introduced to information you never knew existed.

- ✓ **Your career can be as mobile as you need it to be.** If you're looking for full-time employment that comes with an office (or at least a cubby), mobility may not matter much to you. But if you're given to roam, you're considering the right professions.

Copyediting and proofreading can be done from anywhere in the world. If you freelance, or if you work for a company that allows telecommuting, you can work from your bedroom, on an airplane, or at the beach — no one will care as long as the job gets done well and on time. To make this happen, you may need to invest in a quality laptop computer; see Chapter 17 for my thoughts about what to look for in that piece of essential equipment.



Even if mobility isn't your key concern right now, the skills you develop as a copyeditor or proofreader can help you get work wherever you may wander during your lifetime. These days, few of us stay put for decades on end, so investing the effort in a career with this kind of portability makes a whole lot of sense.

- ✓ **Your hours can be as flexible as you need them to be.** Again, you may prefer (or need) a full-time schedule that comes equipped with health benefits and the other perks of a salaried position. But if you prefer (or need) a flexible work schedule, you definitely want to check out Chapters 19 and 20 where I discuss how to build a freelance career.

How flexible is flexible? Well, it's 1:22 a.m. right now, and my home office (which happens to be a few steps from my bed) is open. As a freelancer, you can copyedit or proofread at 9 a.m. or 3 a.m. — the person giving you the assignment doesn't care as long as you meet the deadline.



And another key perk of this flexibility is that you can say yes to as many or as few jobs as you can handle at any one time. If you've got other obligations that will demand a great deal of time in certain weeks or months, you have complete freedom to keep your copyediting or proofreading schedule clear during that time period. As long as you deliver quality work (on time), your contacts should be happy to hear from you when your schedule lightens and you're available to accept assignments again.

- ✓ **If writing is your ultimate goal, copyediting and proofreading can carry you closer to it.** Reading published work — or about-to-be-published work — can help you develop your own writing skills. Obviously, you could just read these pieces on your own and gain the same benefits. But why not get paid to do so? Besides, as I explain in Chapters 4 and 8, the process of copyediting or proofreading requires digesting text in ways that are atypical of a pleasure read. When you're hired to help make a publication as perfect as it can be, you pay some serious attention to every word on the page.

And if the on-the-job writing education isn't enough of a perk, the networking opportunities are another selling point. I wouldn't encourage you to try to sell yourself as a writer as soon as you finish the first proofreading job for a new employer, but over time, as you prove how adept you are at wielding a pronoun, you may be able to identify writing opportunities that fit your skills.

✓ **You'll have lots of fun stuff to talk about at your next class reunion.**

When you bump into an old acquaintance and he asks what you've been up to, won't it be fun to rattle off the latest books, magazines, or Web sites you've worked on? This line of work makes for good conversation. Don't be surprised if people ask you how they can get into it too.

So . . . Are You a Copyeditor or Proofreader?

Even a trained eye can mistake a copyeditor for a proofreader or a proofreader for a copyeditor — they know the same marks, they carry the same tools, and they even kinda look the same. What's the difference, then?

Distinguishing between the two

The skills that a proofreader needs are probably the same ones that led you to pick up this book. You're the person who can't keep from crying out at errant apostrophes, right? And I think I heard your scream in the Italian restaurant a few weeks back — something along the lines of "How could they forget the *h* in spaghetti, for heaven's sake!" And then there's that pesky issue of which witch is which. *Nobody* gets that right but you. A proofreader examines text, discovers what's wrong, and fixes it.

A copyeditor is like a proofreader who has gone to grad school. Well, metaphorical grad school.



Here's the simplest difference between the two positions: The copyeditor gets his mitts on the text first. That's because he has responsibilities that go beyond the proofreader's. He pays close attention to grammar, punctuation, usage, and spelling, of course, but he also is charged with ensuring the consistency of voice, chronology, and fact. Plus, he checks every fact, every name, every Web site referenced to make sure the reader is getting accurate information. And he keeps meticulous notes the whole time (in a document called the *style sheet*, which I discuss in detail in Chapter 15) so he can make sure that the writing on page 203 reflects the same decisions as the writing on page 14.

Yup, good writing requires making a *lot* of decisions. Writers make them, publishers make them, production editors (whom I introduce in Chapter 2) make them, and copyeditors usually get to make them too. (At the very least, copyeditors can *query* authors and editors — ask questions and make suggestions — to highlight potential problems and suggest solutions. I spend some quality time discussing the fine art of the query in Chapter 4.) Proofreaders generally don't make a lot of decisions; their job is to make sure that every decision documented on a style sheet (or in a publisher's house style documentation — see Chapter 14) is implemented on every page of the document.

Choosing where to focus your energies

I began as a proofreader, so it's my humble opinion that the best path is the one that starts at proofreading. If you're getting into these fields because you adore reading, proofreading gives you exactly what you want: the chance to cozy up with (you hope) good writing and help to make it even better. Plus, you get to examine exactly what the copyeditor did before you got the text. If you're observant (and I know you are), you can pick up a lot of new skills that way and prepare for a future career in copyediting, if that's your goal.

But hey, if copyediting is where you want to begin, don't let me stop you. Maybe you'd go mad if you couldn't influence the bigger picture of how a book or article or annual report is put together. Maybe you've already had enough proofreading experience (paid or unpaid) to know that you're ready to dig deeper into how writing is crafted.



Want some really great news? If you want to do both jobs, you can. You may have a slightly harder time doing so in a full-time position than in a freelance capacity, but the possibility exists either way. For full-time work, you may want to focus your search on smaller organizations whose staff members may be expected to fill multiple functions during the publishing process. If freelancing is your aim, the only person who decides whether you accept a proofreading job or a copyediting job is you.

Whichever path you choose to start down, I offer lots of info in Parts II and III of this book to get you going. And I strongly encourage you to read chapters in both parts even if you're confident that you're going to search for only one type of job. If copyediting is your thing, you definitely need to know proofreading marks and the types of errors you'll be correcting — information I detail in Part III. And if proofreading is your destination, you can certainly benefit from understanding what a copyeditor does. (The more you understand about that job, the better the chance that you'll avoid overstepping your bounds by questioning decisions made before you get the text.)

Preparing to Invest Yourself

This is a reference book. I don't expect that you'll read every word (I know, you're not proofreading it); I do expect that you'll turn back to certain chapters and the appendixes as you begin to establish yourself in the publishing world.

Here's something else I expect: When you get a copyediting or proofreading job (or multiple jobs, if you're freelancing), you'll discover that your employer does things just a bit differently than what I describe here. Maybe even a lot differently. The challenge of writing a book like this is that I can't possibly prepare you for every scenario; you have to do the work of adapting the information I offer to your specific work situation.



If you're looking for a hard-and-fast truth about copyediting and proofreading that won't change from job to job, here it is: To succeed in these professions, you must be persistent and patient. When you're searching for work, persistence and patience definitely pay off; you can't let rejections deter you from your goal. And when you're on the job, those attributes are crucial as well.

I'd like to promise that when you start getting paid to copyedit or proofread you'll never again have to work on documents as horrid as your college roommate's term papers. But I can't make that promise. Once in a while (I hope not too often), you're bound to find yourself staring at a manuscript or computer screen filled with text that makes absolutely no sense — and not because it's tackling a subject like quantum physics. The good news is that, as a copyeditor or proofreader, your job isn't to rewrite that gobbledygook. Your job is to politely point out its deficiencies (see Chapter 4 for wording suggestions) and nudge it as far toward publishable status as you can.

In this scenario, persistence and patience will see you through. Your best option is to try to wow the person who hired you by identifying (and, if possible, correcting) as many errors and sources of confusion as possible. If you can accomplish that while working on a truly problematic piece, I can say with confidence that you'll be rewarded with much more fun assignments as time goes by.