

An editor writing for editors

Book review: *The editor's companion* (Janet Mackenzie)

The editor's companion

Janet Mackenzie

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Reviewed by Marion Boers

What a pleasure it was to read a book written by an editor for editors! Clear, concise writing, logical flow and no annoying grammatical flaws or editorial glitches. Janet Mackenzie's easy, informal style of writing also makes *The editor's companion* an easy read, despite the fact that it is packed with information and is a technical publication, after all.

As Mackenzie points out, editors come into the profession from all sorts of directions, but only rarely through the "front door" of formal training. As a result, many do not have a clear overview of the profession and the publishing process. This book is an excellent aid to filling that gap.

The editor's companion has clearly been written for the Australian market and much of the background information on the publishing industry and specific conditions relates to Australia and New Zealand. This does not detract from the book's value, however; there is still more than enough general information to stand readers from other countries in good stead in their professional lives.

Mackenzie accomplishes her task very thoroughly, considering all aspects of the editing profession – the book is well titled, as one will refer to it over and over again. She starts with the editor herself, looking at what an editor does and her place in the publishing industry. I found her section on "who's who in publishing" extremely useful – finally I have some idea of the difference (or not) between a commissioning editor, managing editor, copy-editor and desk editor. She then moves on to the publishing process, considering what it covers and related aspects. Here it was useful to see a breakdown of publishing into books (with various subdivisions and including amateur publishing – undertaken by a variety of organisations other than publishers as such – and e-books) and other publications like newspapers, government publishing, corporate publishing, periodicals and ephemera, and the Internet, CD-ROMs and multimedia publishing. This chapter also contains a concise overview of the production process, which will assist those editors who have no formal training in this regard to place their efforts in context.

The next chapter moves into the process itself, looking at the “bigger picture” of the editor’s work – liaising and negotiating with the publisher or commissioning editor and the author, defining the project, preparing an estimate, necessary project documentation and monitoring a project. Then follow chapters that deal with the nitty-gritty of the editing process. Here readers will find a wealth of advice on what to consider in substantive and copyediting, the important elements of language to be considered, how to deal with tables and illustrations, what is involved in proofreading, methods of editing, and so on.

A chapter on “working with documents and files” offers insight into the differences between hard-copy and soft-copy editing and also covers some important points relating to software and hardware. The final chapter is devoted to freelancing and here again there is an absolute wealth of advice and information on how to make the most of your independent status.

The editor’s companion is down-to-earth and offers thorough coverage of this profession. It may be especially useful to newcomers to the profession, but old hands will undoubtedly also learn from it. As I read, I found myself repeatedly nodding in agreement. To end off, here are a few quotes that drew me particularly:

“As an editor, when you correct a grammatical mistake or infelicity you must be able to explain why you have done so in the correct terminology. See the bibliography for books on usage and grammar that can help you refine your knowledge... Stick to first principles: the purpose of writing is communication; the purpose of editing is to improve communication by removing distractions.”

“Freelances who have a cosy relationship with a few established clients can lose touch with emerging trends in the industry. You are a knowledge worker, so thorough, current knowledge – of trends in language and writing, of changing technology and law – is a business asset. You need to devote a proportion (say, 3 or 4 per cent) of your annual income to updating and extending your skills.”

“Don’t become a pedant... When the mass of English speakers make up their minds [that something is becoming obsolete], a few valiant editors cannot halt the tide.”