

[Working with Your Editor: Working with a Developmental Editor](#)

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A post from [Feeding the Elephant: A Forum for Scholarly Communications](#).

This week, we revisit a Working with Your Editor post by Michigan State University assistant professor of German and global studies Johanna Schuster-Craig, in which she describes her experience of working on her first scholarly monograph with a developmental editor. This piece was the second most visited piece from 2020, and we hope it proves useful for anyone considering getting help with their academic writing. --Eds.

Guest Post by [Johanna Schuster-Craig](#), Assistant Professor of German and Global Studies, Michigan State University

Learning how to "do" scholarship, for most of us, requires a long period of apprenticeship. I sought out the help of a developmental editor after the reappointment, promotion, and tenure guidelines in my department switched from favoring articles to requiring junior faculty to publish monographs. All the workshops on writing a book proposal, all the self-help books about how to publish an article in twelve weeks or how to write a lot while somehow still sleeping—I read them, but none of them could successfully demystify the publishing world. I had too little contact with anyone who works in the field. Working with a developmental editor who had had a career in academic publishing was an effective way to bridge that knowledge gap and also helped me find my voice as a writer.

Three things were critical for making this working relationship successful. First, the editor I worked with (Audra Wolfe at [The Outside Reader](#)) understood exactly which kinds of projects she was well-suited to advise and which ones were better outsourced to someone with different expertise. I work on a field of public policy in Germany called "integration politics." At its most fundamental, integration politics describes the incorporation of immigrants into all aspects of German cultural, economic, and political life. Integration politics is a transdisciplinary object and requires a transdisciplinary collection of methods. One of the first questions Audra asked me was how much literary analysis I intended to incorporate into my book. If this were primarily a work of literary critique, it would need to go to someone else. While I'm trained in German cultural studies, which focuses primarily on cultural production and discursive analysis, I also conduct ethnographic research and analyze political and media discourses in order to comment on German attitudes toward migration. I don't analyze literature or film. This mix turned out to be an excellent fit for Audra, who is a Cold War historian of science and technology.

I was trying to perform discursive analysis on parliamentary proceedings, and my writing was going through the same phase I see in graduate students working on MA theses: I was too close to the material to make a compelling narrative out of what I was reading, and the connections I was trying to make were unclear.

Second, to write the book I wanted to write, I needed to know something about historiography and dig deeply into the vast German-language historical scholarship about immigration. Working with an editor trained in history was a helpful way to learn new methods. If literary analysis is based on close reading, historiography requires distance in order to synthesize. Some of the first drafts I sent to Audra were awful! I was trying to perform discursive analysis on parliamentary proceedings, and my writing was going through the same phase I see in graduate students working on MA theses: I was too close to the material to make a compelling narrative out of what I was reading, and the connections I was trying to make were unclear. I sent Audra four drafts of a single chapter in succession, each draft coming back with the same commentary: if you are actually trying to do the project you've proposed, she'd say, this is not the way to do it. Draft 5 was successful. I had finally freed myself from the burden of adhering closely to the source material and was able to write what I was actually thinking. Her strong attention to structure and detailed marginalia with suggestions for recasting individual sentences or phrases was a tutorial in narrative, and has shaped the way I teach students how to write. There's no reason for us all to reinvent the wheel. I now just show my students how to fix a problem rather than talking around it and hoping they will magically fix it.

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Finally, Audra was open to engaging with whatever I sent her. At some point, I wrote an autobiographical preface that completely diverged from the chapter drafts in both tone and content. There are many reasons why this preface will not be part of my book, but Audra embraced the notion that scholars could experiment with new approaches and formats as an intrinsic part of the writing process. Sometimes she looked at full chapter drafts; sometimes I sent drafts of the book proposal; sometimes just two paragraphs that critically filled in a missing piece. After our conversations, I now feel like I know when to incorporate autobiographical elements into my scholarship and when to leave them out. I also notice when an idea or connection is missing in a text. This is incredibly helpful for exchanges with my writing buddy, or for commenting on other scholars' drafts. Even if I am unfamiliar with the source material, I now notice structural gaps and have become a better reader.

This skill is helpful as I receive more requests for peer review, and reflects how the benefits of developmental editing extend far beyond my own work. Facilitating access to developmental editing is a form of service to the profession: we produce better scholarship for our institutions, and can participate more productively in the peer review process, if we have experienced quality editing of our own work.

Developmental editing is not cheap. People have to make a living. Editors often charge between \$100 and \$150 per hour, and the difficult task of trying to figure out what writers are trying to communicate in a draft can require several hours of work per item, whether that is a chapter draft or a book proposal. New editors coming up may charge \$85 an hour, but may also lack experience and be working more slowly. Audra requires clients to mark their place in line by submitting materials in advance, and then often follows up on comments in track changes through in-person telephone calls to talk through questions. I was lucky that I had modest start-up funds to apply to editing, but I am now at the point where I will need to pay for these services out of my own pocket. The pricing is fair because this work is very difficult. I also felt like my editor was attentive and that my work improved markedly from this attention and curiosity. Something that continues to bother me about the tenure process is that the emphasis is on production and timing rather than on quality. First books are rushed to production, and there is truly no good reason why.

Too many scholars still do not think of themselves as writers and don't allow themselves to experiment with various writing styles and registers. A good developmental editor can intervene at a critical early stage for junior scholars by not only providing feedback on writing, but also by helping them to navigate the publishing industry or learn how to write for multiple publics.

Scholars in the humanities are often chided for incomprehensible and impenetrable writing styles. I think this critique is fair. So many of us were not trained to seek clarity in our writing. The way that the word "reductive" nearly became a curse word in graduate seminars reflects how intensely some disciplines mistake obfuscation for depth. Too many scholars still do not think of themselves as writers and don't allow themselves to experiment with various writing styles and registers. A good developmental editor can intervene at a critical early stage for junior scholars by not only providing feedback on writing, but also by helping them to navigate the publishing industry or learn how to write for multiple publics. By addressing structural weaknesses before manuscripts land on a publisher's desk, we can divide up the labor of thinking and writing in ways that are more efficient, thereby producing higher quality scholarship suitable for a broader audience. And isn't that what all scholars and publishers want? For somebody, anybody, to read what we write?

Johanna Schuster-Craig researches German integration politics and has published articles in *German Life & Letters*, *the German Studies Review*, *the German Quarterly*, *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* and is at work on a book about media scandals and the history of German integration

politics. Johanna has also written about German politics for theconversation.com.

Have something to say on this topic? Reply to this post or [email the Elephant](#) about writing for us. We welcome submissions from stakeholders on all sides of scholarly publishing.