

[Working With Your Editor: Developmental Editing](#)

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Guest Post by Laura Portwood-Stacer, Manuscript Works

While writing an academic book can feel like a solitary experience, publishing a book is anything but. Although it will be the author's name that appears on the cover, many people will help that book come into existence. At the press, the creation of the book will be helped along by a team that consists of an acquiring editor and possibly some series editors, peer reviewers, production editors, designers, marketers, and more. I'm writing this post to tell authors about an additional teammate they might call upon to help their book ideas become a reality: a developmental editor.

A developmental editor is a professional who assists an author with "developing" their ideas and writings into a manuscript that will hit home with the author's target readers. As a self-employed developmental editor, I work with scholarly authors on big-picture matters of argument, structure, narrative, and style in their book manuscripts. I help writers refine these aspects of their projects so that their research takeaways can have the biggest impact with the audiences the scholar wants to reach. A prospective author may be at any point in the writing and publication process—just starting to think about a book idea, working up a book proposal to take to publishers, readying a manuscript for submission, or revising a manuscript for publication after it's been through peer review—when they seek the help of a developmental editor.

The benefit of working with an outside developmental editor is that the author is hiring a professional to give their manuscript sustained, undivided attention and provide practical solutions to any problems they may find.

An author may decide to enlist a developmental editor for a variety of reasons. They may have struggled to achieve the reception they were hoping for from publishers or they may want a confidence boost before they go out to make initial contact. They may be at a loss for trusted colleagues who can devote time to reading their drafts and giving honest, constructive feedback. They may already be working with a publisher but need more help than their in-house editor is prepared to give. Most acquiring editors do some developmental work, collaborating with authors to push their ideas in interesting directions and giving some feedback on structure and narrative. The benefit of working with an outside developmental editor is that the author is hiring a professional to give their manuscript sustained, undivided attention and provide practical solutions to any problems they may find. Acquisitions editors would love to give every one of their manuscripts such hands-on

attention, but the reality is that most just don't have the time to do so amidst the many other obligations that fall under their job description.

Independent developmental editors have become increasingly valuable with changes to the ecosystem of scholarly publishing. As university library budgets have been downsized, presses can no longer count on institutional standing orders for every research monograph they publish. Presses and authors are therefore thinking more about getting their books directly into the hands of readers via retail and other channels. This means their books have to hold strong appeal for readers and booksellers who make individual purchase and stocking decisions. In turn, this focus on reader appeal means that scholarly books, more than ever, have to be *readable*. The talent and skill to shape book manuscripts for readability is precisely the value that a developmental editor offers.

Many scholars want to use their writing not merely to check boxes on an annual review form but to reach outward to the audiences—both inside and outside of the academy—who can benefit in material ways from their research and insight.

In light of other (not unrelated) changes within academia, scholars today are also putting less faith in tenure, promotion, and other milestones of academic "success." Many scholars want to use their writing not merely to check boxes on an annual review form but to reach outward to the audiences—both inside and outside of the academy—who can benefit in material ways from their research and insight. Developmental editors can help authors shape their manuscripts to reach such readers and have such impact.

If you're an author who is considering working with a developmental editor, you might be wondering what people at your press will think of that. Will they think you're "cheating" by getting outside assistance with your work? Will working with an editor be seen as an admission that your writing is substandard? Let me reassure you on both points: no and no. Everyone who works in publishing understands and embraces the idea I led this post off with, that producing a quality book is a team effort. If presses had the resources, they'd give every manuscript the help of a developmental editor. An author who seeks the aid of an outside developmental editor shows themselves to be someone who can set ego aside to make their book the best it can be for readers, which is exactly the kind of author publishers want to work with.

Many developmental editors have ongoing professional relationships with their clients, dipping back into manuscripts at various stages of the writing and publishing process, so there really isn't a wrong time to make a connection with a developmental editor.

Some authors choose to work with a developmental editor before they approach acquiring editors—these authors are usually hoping to ensure that their idea makes sense as a book and that they know how to explain it in a way that will resonate with publishers. In later stages of the writing and publishing process, authors and acquisitions editors can work together to maximize the value of working with a developmental editor. Once you're talking to an acquisitions editor, you can ask them when in the process they think developmental editing would be most beneficial for your manuscript. If an acquiring editor likes your project but feels your writing is rough and your ideas might not come through as strongly as they could for peer reviewers and the press's editorial board, they might point you to a developmental editor early on, before they send your proposal out for review. If your acquiring editor thinks your essential idea and writing samples are likely to pass muster with peer reviewers, you might opt to schedule work with a developmental editor for after the reviews come in, so you can work with your developmental editor to incorporate the reviewers' advice and create a solid finished manuscript. If you hire a developmental editor to write up an editorial assessment that lays out potential revision plans for your manuscript, you can take this document back to your acquiring editor and see what course of action they think would be best for your book. Many developmental editors have ongoing professional relationships with their clients, dipping back into manuscripts at various stages of the writing and publishing process, so there really isn't a wrong time to make a connection with a developmental editor.

Whenever you decide to work with a developmental editor, you'll want to employ some best practices to find one who's right for you and your project. Ask around among colleagues who have written books like the one you aspire to write. Did they work with an editor they would recommend? Can your publisher point you to some appropriate candidates? Do some research on any potential editors you find. What experience do they bring to the table? Does it seem like their personality and expertise would mesh well with yours? They don't necessarily have to be a subject-matter expert at your level, but they should understand the norms and expectations in your field so they can help you make conscious choices about when you will follow the "rules" and where you will depart from them.

Once you've found a developmental editor who you think would be a good fit, reach out directly to find out more information. When are they available? What services do they offer and how much do they charge for them? How do they prefer to work with authors at your stage? Tell them about your project and see if they understand your vision. Do they give you a sense of confidence that they can help you achieve your goals? The number one reason for author-editor relations to go sour is misalignment of expectations, so make sure you're clear on what you need and that your developmental editor is clear on what they can provide before any work begins.

As in-demand professionals with specialized skills, the services of experienced developmental editors don't come cheaply, and unfortunately not every author has the means to access developmental editing. If you can't afford to hire a developmental editor yourself, you may be able to apply for university research funds or institutional grants to cover the cost. Some publishers offer financial support for outside help. For instance, Princeton University Press has set up [Global Equity Grants](#) that authors from underrepresented groups can apply toward developmental editing of their manuscripts under contract. You may also be able to negotiate an advance against royalties from your publisher which could be put toward developmental editing (bring this up before you accept an

offer from a press).

Having worked with hundreds of scholarly authors myself, I can assure you that those who make the investment in developmental editing will receive something priceless. A good developmental editor will empower and energize you to produce a manuscript that you and your publisher can be proud of for years to come.

Laura Portwood-Stacer is a developmental editor and publishing consultant at ManuscriptWorks.com. Her advice about academic publishing can be found in her [newsletter](#) and on Twitter [@lportwoodstacer](#). She regularly offers [courses on academic developmental editing](#), and her handbook on writing and pitching scholarly book proposals will be published by Princeton University Press in 2021.

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