

# The role of the editor in ELT materials development

**Karen White** and **Karen Spiller** describe the skills and qualities of a good editor.

**E**LT publishing houses across the world use a variety of job titles and descriptions for their editors, but the editor's role is fairly standard, irrespective of their title. These roles as described below, are specific to the ELT publishing industry, and don't necessarily reflect what happens in fiction, reference or children's publishing.

## ELT editorial roles

### Commissioning editor

Identifies publishing opportunities. Finds and briefs authors. Sets up contracts and payment schedules.

### Content editor

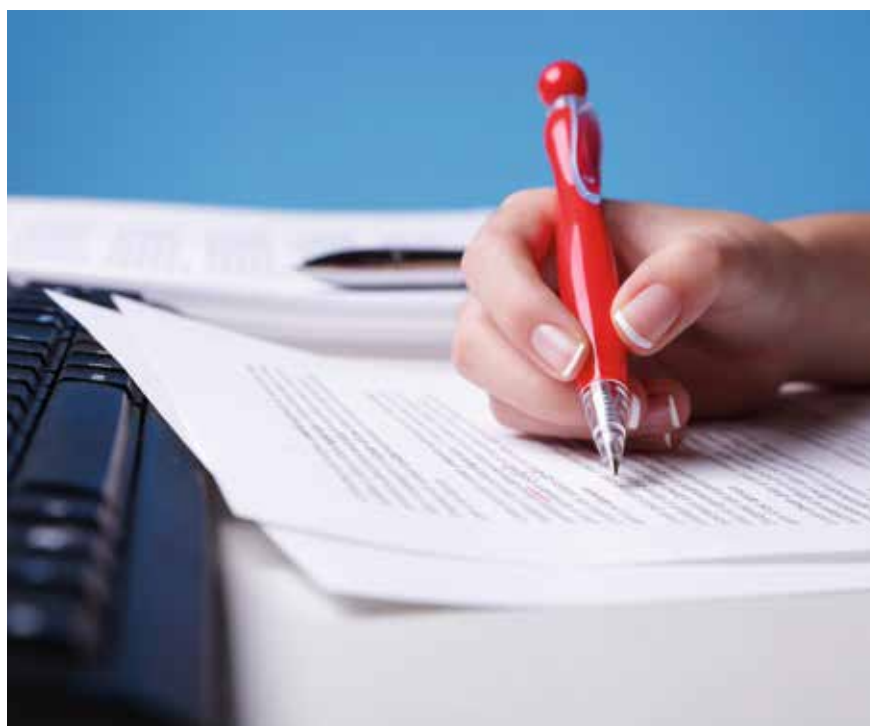
Takes the author's manuscript and works with them to shape it to match the brief, keeping things on schedule, budget and to standard.

### Copy editor

Ensures that the final manuscript is consistent and correct. Checks for typos, numbering, etc. May be asked to apply Word styles before handover to design. Compiles art briefs, audioscripts, permissions logs, etc.

### Proofreader

A proofreader checks for typos, inconsistencies, etc. Post-publication, a proofreader checks all components of a course against each other, checking all exercises, keys, scripts, etc.



## What does a content editor do?

We've chosen to focus on the role of the content editor here, because this is the area that requires the greatest consideration and involves personal judgement. You don't have to work in a publishing house to be a content editor – if you're writing material for your own classes, or for your school, or for self-publication, you can be your own editor to a certain extent. However, it is always worth asking an experienced editor, or a trusted

colleague, for their input before going live with any material.

### Before the writing starts

A content editor needs to:

- be clear about the market for the material, the concept, the USPs and the competition.
- give the author feedback on unit outlines. It's better to know as early on as possible whether a topic/text is going to be suitable or not. If the editor doesn't review these initial

ideas, the danger is that the author spends time working them up into fully-developed material only to find out that for one reason or another, the material is not appropriate.

- give the author guidance on the likelihood of being able to get permission to use any authentic material. Ideally the editor would be able to supply the author with a list of approved sources from the publisher. These sources will have been vetted both for the range of rights they're willing to give and also for the price they typically charge.
- provide a writing brief at the beginning of the project. Both editor and writer should understand that the brief will evolve as the project develops. The maxim 'the devil is in the detail' is very true of ELT publishing, and it often isn't until the author tries to write that particular lesson, that he or she realises that the grammar presentation format

hasn't been sufficiently defined, or the particular genre of critical thinking hasn't been established. This is particularly true of multi-level projects that are being written by different authors or author teams. This is increasingly the case these days and this makes the need for a detailed brief (which can then be amended or added to) even more important.

- spend enough time working on a prototype unit. It's a good idea to try to surface general issues at an early stage. The editor uses the prototype unit to establish the design (fonts, headings, layout, balance of artwork and text, etc), organisation of lessons within a unit (How many grammar lessons per unit? How are the skills divided up?, etc), all the 'content' decisions (see below), and rubrics.

**While working on the manuscript**

A content editor needs to answer the following questions:

- Do the activities work?
- Is the level right? (This is often a question of instinct and experience, but there are some corpora, such as the Cambridge English Vocabulary Profile, that categorise words by CEFR level. Most publishers use these corpora as general guidelines rather than hard and fast rules about what is or isn't permissible.)
- Is the material interesting for the target age group?
- Is the amount of material right? You need the right balance between text and artwork/photos to achieve the right look and feel for the market. You also need to ensure it will fit on the number of pages specified.
- Is the language in the texts/ audioscripts natural?
- Is there a good flow to the lesson?
- Is there enough controlled/freer practice?

**Each of the following reading and listening comprehension items is badly written in at least one way. Can you spot the problem(s) in each?**

1. **According to the text, honey bees are most active**
  - A. during the day.
  - B. in the morning.
  - C. late in the afternoon.
  - D. at night.
2. **Edmund complains that his sister**
  - A. can be very absent-minded.
  - B. spends very little time at home.
  - C. doesn't share his sense of humour.
  - D. frequently forgets and loses things.
3. **What is the speaker's view of violent films?**
  - A. He suspects they encourage violence in young people.
  - B. He doubts they have an effect on people's actions.
  - C. He feels that it is impossible to prove that there is a link between violent films and people's behaviour.
4. **Giles joined the gym in**
  - A. order to use the power-lifting facilities.
  - B. spite of the high cost of membership.
  - C. a street near his office.
  - D. an attempt to tone his muscles.
5. **What happened after a new manager was appointed at the restaurant?**
  - A. The quality of service improved.
  - B. The service became even worse.
  - C. The service was as poor as before.
  - D. The décor was modernized.
6. **According to the text, the biggest planet in the Solar System is**
  - A. Mars.
  - B. Mercury.
  - C. Jupiter.
  - D. Earth.
7. **Why did Natasha make an appointment at the dentist?**
  - A. to enquire about teeth whitening
  - B. to find out the cause of her toothache
  - C. to have a sight test
  - D. to have a check-up
8. **When talking about her job, Laura insists that she isn't dissatisfied with**
  - A. the salary she earns.
  - B. the amount of holiday she gets.
  - C. the amount of responsibility she is given.
  - D. the way she is treated by her manager.
9. **Pete wanted to buy a car which**
  - A. ran on diesel rather than petrol.
  - B. was reasonably spacious.
  - C. didn't cost too much.
  - D. was affordable and spacious.
10. **Why didn't Ed stay until the end of the party?**
  - A. He wasn't enjoying it.
  - B. He was tired.
  - C. He was feeling unwell.
  - D. To get up early the next morning.

- Are the tasks authentic?
- Is the grammar explained clearly and as simply as possible without being overgeneralised/incorrect?
- Do the activities practise what they're meant to be practising?
- Does the content (text/photos) contain any culturally inappropriate content?
- Are the activity types appropriate for the target age group? For example, is the student going to feel comfortable about answering the question / revealing information about him/herself?
- Is the balance of skills appropriate?
- Is the timing of the material right? Can a double-page spread be completed in a lesson or two, or will it take a week?
- Does the material progress from, say B1 to B1+, throughout the units?
- Is there any repetition of topics / language / skills that really should be avoided?

When all these issues have been addressed, the manuscript will be ready for the author to hand over to the editor for the final detailed checks before it goes into design and production. At this stage the editor should ...

- do every single activity again, checking the answers to every activity – are they easy to reference in the Teacher's Notes?
- check rubrics (instructions to students) are clear, consistent and meaningful.
- check all facts.
- check that all the required features (grammar boxes, useful language boxes, etc.) are present throughout and in the correct places.
- check that there isn't going to be any over- (or under-) matter.

Many editors move from editing into writing, and these days it's common to find the same person offering editorial and writing services. There's a clear crossover between the two functions. After all, if part of the editor's role is

### Key to task on p 16

1. A and D are opposites. One of them therefore must be right, which means that students don't need to look at the other two options, as they must be wrong. Or, the answer may be B or C, which means that A is also correct and therefore we have what's known as 'a double key' i.e. two correct answers.
2. A and D have the same meaning, which would result either in a double key, or students easily rejecting both answers.
3. C is significantly longer than the other two options. This is an issue not only for the reasons we mentioned earlier (space may be limited on the page, students shouldn't have to process such complicated sentences while listening), but also because it stands out as being longer than the other options. Quite often, though not always, this will suggest to students that it is the correct answer.
4. You should always finish the stem at a logical point, e.g. at the end of a clause. In A, B and D the stem has been cut off in the middle of a fixed expression.
5. The answer has to be A, B or C because the service either got better, got worse or stayed the same – there aren't any more options. Students will therefore discount D. (If D is also right, then there is a double key.)
6. Here, world knowledge comes into play and therefore students would not need to read the text to find the answer to the question. This would give an unfair advantage to those who already know the answer to the question. Or indeed it might unfairly disadvantage them if the text says something different.
7. In this item C is too obviously wrong. Even if the text says the opposite it would be considered unfair to trick students in this way and confound their predictions.
8. The stem contains a double negative *isn't dissatisfied*. We should avoid these, especially in a listening, as they are confusing and hard to process.
9. D includes options B and C. Even if Pete was looking for a car which was both affordable and spacious, B and C would also be correct, which would result in a 'triple key'.
10. D doesn't follow on grammatically or logically from the stem.

to measure an author's manuscript against best practice, then the editor too needs to be familiar with, for example, what constitutes a good multiple choice activity or a useful vocabulary activity. A good editor needs to be able to spot the mistakes/flaws and provide a solid explanation in their feedback to the author of what the problems are, why they're problematic, and make constructive suggestions for improvements.

Have a look at the task on page 16 from Caroline Krantz's *How To Write Reading And Listening Activities* (published by ELT Teacher 2 Writer). You can check your answers above.

### Conclusion

The editor's role can be summed up as helping an author produce better material that can be used successfully

in more classrooms. There are certain things that can be learned, but as in all jobs that require judgement, there is an element of needing to have a good instinct. Of course, excellent communication and interpersonal skills are essential requirements for the job.



**Karen Spiller** and **Karen White** are two of the co-founders of ELT Teacher 2 Writer. They both work freelance in the ELT publishing industry, providing editorial and consultancy services. ELT Teacher 2 Writer provides publishers with a database of writer profiles. It also publishes eBooks that train teachers to be writers.