

CHAPTER 1

What skills are required?

First of all, you don't need to be brilliant with words but a flair for their correct use is important. You'll be expected to have a good 'command' of the English language, be able to spell correctly, and have an eye for detail. (Can you see, for example, what is 'wrong' with the punctuation in this sentence?). If you haven't seen it, the only thing 'wrong' with it is that there's no need for a full point – a full stop (US: period) – at the very end. The punctuation is complete within the parentheses (the round brackets). It's a grammatically correct sentence beginning with a capital letter. Thus the extra full point (there is one in the 'body' of the question mark) amounts to double punctuation. In this sentence, the full point is placed outside the parentheses (for example).

This is just one instance of a rule that can be learnt along with a host of others, all of them basic to editing skills, but they are rules that you can learn quickly and easily, and with practice scarcely even notice as you correct them.

Human error plays its part in the process. The author who wrote/typed the manuscript (i.e. typescript) is not always infallible; the copy-editor who edits the typescript

will probably miss a few, if less obvious, errors; the typesetter inputting the text via computer, which will make up the page proofs, will undoubtedly, sometimes disastrously, press the wrong keys, forget certain items, misread one figure for another, mistakenly insert additional keystrokes, make the page ‘depth’ too short or too long, and generally leave a number of errors (even with computer typesetting), which the proofreader must find and correct, with something like vigilance and skill. (Note that in some respects this is an old-fashioned way of considering book production because, apart from offerings from a few die-hard eccentrics, nearly all MSS today are typescripts, and the copy-editor will do the copy-editing on screen. As the typesetter does not actually ‘re-type’, no further errors should be introduced at this stage.) When the page proofs have been corrected for the final time, the pages will be bound and the book published.

Apart from this human error, computers used in publishing do suffer sporadic glitches, and a sharp-eyed proofreader will be needed to pick up these errors. Spellcheckers are a great help but they have their limitations.

If you’re going to work as a freelance, you’ll need a certain amount of self-discipline. (Generally, the word is ‘freelance’ in the UK but ‘freelancer’ in the US. Either can be used.) You have to decide to work the hours that suit you best. Also, most publishing houses have to work to tight schedules. If a subject or author is popular, or publication is timed to coincide with an important event (such as the Christmas ‘list’ or the start of the school term), deadlines have to be met. You may be asked to return the proofs by a certain date, sometimes far sooner than the usual time allowed, which is about three to four weeks. However, you will typically be asked if you have